

Update on UNHCR's operations in West and Central Africa

A. Situational context

Overview

By the end of December 2019, there were 7.2 million persons of concern to UNHCR in West and Central Africa, spanning 21 countries, which represents an increase of 45 per cent over the previous year. This figure included 1.3 million refugees and 4.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). The increase was mainly due to the number of IDPs in Burkina Faso, which has grown 12-fold over the past year. Nigeria continued to have the highest number of IDPs in the region, reaching nearly 2.2 million by the end of 2019. This number was slightly higher than in 2018 owing to ongoing instability in Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina States. The majority of refugees in West and Central Africa originated from four countries: Central African Republic (394,000), Sudan (337,000), Nigeria (244,000) and Mali (84,000).

Protection space for persons of concern to UNHCR continued to improve in West and Central Africa, including through further ratification of relevant legal instruments and their domestication. Cooperation with regional institutions, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), was also reinforced.

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted UNHCR's work in the region, prompting adaption and reprioritization of its activities and mobilization of resources to support the response of governments to include persons of concern. Quarantine and travel restrictions reduced staff movements and impacted implementation of key activities.

Main displacement situations

The situation in the central Sahel, including in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, has rapidly deteriorated. In Burkina Faso, the number of IDPs reached 1 million by August 2020, and thousands of people sought refuge in neighbouring countries, namely Mali (18,000) and Niger (3,800). Instability and security incidents in the central Sahel have begun to impact the coastal States of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. UNHCR launched a [Sahel strategy](#) in early 2020 to respond to the multifaceted challenges in the Sahel, building among others on the regional dialogue on protection and solutions held in Bamako in September 2019 and the Bamako ministerial declaration adopted in Geneva in October 2019. The Office is working with States and other stakeholders on these initiatives.

In the Lake Chad Basin, instability and violent attacks by extremist groups had forced nearly 300,000 refugees across borders by July 2020, while over 2.7 million people were internally displaced in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. Despite some spontaneous returns of Nigerian refugees, the situation was not conducive for UNHCR to promote voluntary repatriation.

Notwithstanding the progress made towards peace in the Central African Republic, the situation remained volatile. As of August 2020, some 659,000 people remained internally displaced, while a significant number of Central African refugees remained in Cameroon (300,000), Chad (95,000), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (172,000), the Republic of

the Congo (21,000) and Sudan (20,000). As of 30 June 2020, nearly 18,000 Central African refugees had returned home since 2018.

UNHCR continued to work with governments across the region and beyond to address the phenomenon of mixed movements towards the central and western Mediterranean. While 835 refugees were evacuated from Libya to Niger in 2019 through the emergency transit mechanism (ETM), evacuations have almost ceased in 2020 as a result of COVID-19.

In Cameroon, the volatile situation in the south and north-west regions displaced more than 50,000 Cameroonians into neighbouring Nigeria, while hundreds of thousands were internally displaced. UNHCR has strengthened its protection capacity to address the challenges faced by IDPs and is advocating adequate resources to assist the Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria.

B. Achieving the global strategic priorities

Voluntary repatriation

Though facilitated returns were largely suspended due to border closures in 2020, spontaneous returns occurred. Nearly 3,200 Malians returned from Burkina Faso due to insecurity in that country, while some 29,000 Nigerians returned from Cameroon, Chad and Niger. In the Lake Chad Basin, the Nigerian Government allowed approximately 300 Nigerians to return home despite the border closure, while observing health and sanitation measures related to COVID-19. UNHCR is coordinating efforts in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria to help identify areas of spontaneous return and trends which would allow for a better response to this development. Despite COVID-19 challenges, UNHCR safely repatriated over 2,000 Malian refugees from Burkina Faso who had expressed their desire to return following increasing violence in refugee-hosting areas.

With the reopening of borders, facilitated returns are resuming in the region with COVID-19-related health measures in place. Returns to the Central African Republic are expected to resume shortly, with 10,000 persons to be repatriated from neighbouring countries by the end of 2020. While some 63 Ivorian refugees returned from Guinea to Côte d'Ivoire in September, many Ivorian refugees remain undecided about returning home and await the outcome of the upcoming elections before making a decision.

Local integration

In Guinea-Bissau, an information campaign is underway to reach the remaining 2,000 refugees yet to be naturalized following the Government's 2017 decision to naturalize refugees living in a protracted situation (mainly Senegalese).

Resettlement

A total of 385 individuals had departed for resettlement countries before travel was suspended in March 2020 due to COVID-19. Adjustments were then made to conduct remote interviews of applicants, allowing ongoing resettlement submissions and planned departures to take place. By the end of July 2020, the region had submitted 1,117 refugees for resettlement. Vulnerable cases were prioritized in the face of an increasingly restrictive environment. Complementary pathways were also expanded. For example, partnerships with educational institutions and partners in France and the region led to third-country tertiary education opportunities for refugees in Chad and Niger. In 2021, some 105,000 individuals from the region are projected to be in need of resettlement.

Promoting a favourable protection environment

UNHCR has been providing support and advice to the governments of Chad, Guinea-Bissau and Niger in strengthening or developing their respective asylum laws. UNHCR and ECOWAS are also working together on promoting the creation of regional asylum space. This follows the decision of ECOWAS member States to issue biometric identity cards to ECOWAS citizens, which will facilitate freedom of movement, residency permits, proof of identity and other purposes among member States.

Support for the domestication of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention) remains a priority for UNHCR. Niger is the only country in the region with a national law for the protection and assistance of IDPs.

Mixed movements

The regional mixed migration working group led by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is being revitalized with UNHCR's support. The group will focus on its contribution to the inter-regional dialogue on mixed movements (Khartoum and Rabat). UNHCR developed a guidance note on the protection of victims of trafficking. The note aims to further support national asylum authorities in their efforts to prevent trafficking and protect victims. UNHCR and IOM also updated their standard operating procedures on identification, referral and protection in relation to mixed movements in Mali.

Statelessness

Studies on statelessness have been completed in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. In Niger, a partial study conducted in the Diffa region is being complemented by a national one. The studies will contribute to understanding the causes and risks of statelessness, and provide profiles of the affected populations. The study in Côte d'Ivoire revealed that some 1.6 million persons are stateless or at risk of statelessness, a figure much higher than the earlier estimate of 700,000.

As pledged during the high-level segment on statelessness at the seventieth session of the Executive Committee in 2019, Côte d'Ivoire adopted the first statelessness determination procedure on the continent in August 2020, which will significantly contribute to improve the protection of stateless persons in the country.

Internally displaced persons

In 2020, UNHCR has focused on reinforcing its inter-agency coordination role and fostering partnerships to ensure protection is at the centre of humanitarian and development responses to internal displacement in the region. In this vein, the regional protection working group was revitalized to support national-level protection clusters with: advocacy; coordination between countries; and the regional Inter-Agency Standing Committee; visibility through data-driven analysis; and the sharing of best practices. The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is co-chairing the group.

UNHCR continues to strengthen its cluster leadership (protection, shelter/non-food items and camp coordination and camp management (CCCM)) and engagement in response to internal displacement. Looking ahead, and taking into account the increasing number of IDPs in the region, additional resources will be required in 2021 to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable are addressed.

Protection monitoring

UNHCR, in partnership with the DRC, is spearheading Project 21, a region-wide protection monitoring system being piloted in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The system was developed and is being implemented in consultation with 30 actors at the regional and national level. Adapted to the COVID-19 situation, this cross-border project aims to provide an evidence-based understanding of the protection environment and identify risks and needs to help protection actors align their interventions, conduct regional advocacy and coordinate activities. The three-month pilot phase will be followed by a review to prepare for broader implementation in the region. The findings and analysis will be shared in a monthly snapshot and a quarterly report.

Operationalization of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)

Of the 48 pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 towards the West and Central Africa region, 29 pledges are already in the implementation stage. Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad and Niger, which are major hosting countries, have been receiving World Bank funding through IDA18 projects, benefiting both refugee and host communities. Within

the framework of the COVID-19 response, UNHCR has also been working closely with the African Development Bank on implementing a two-year \$19-million project targeting five countries in the region (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger). In order to enhance refugee self-reliance, UNHCR continues to work with relevant stakeholders to improve laws and policies that foster access to land and employment, and facilitate freedom of movement. Successful examples of this include land provided to refugees in Liberia and Niger for accommodation and agriculture. Expanding access to third-country solutions for refugees and supporting conditions conducive for return in safety and dignity in countries of origin are also priorities for UNHCR.

C. Financial information

The 2020 budget approved for the West and Central Africa region by the Executive Committee in 2019 amounted to \$555.7 million. By August 2020, it had increased by \$109.3 million to \$665 million. The budget includes \$59.7 million to scale up protection and assistance activities in the Sahel and \$69.2 million allocated to the COVID-19 response.

Financial requirements for the region stand at \$665 million. As at the end of August 2020, these needs were 50 per cent funded, after taking into consideration the preliminary allocations of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.
