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Emergency preparedness and response

Summary

This paper outlines the progress and achievements made by UNHCR and its partners in emergency preparedness and response in 2019. It presents updates on emergency preparedness and delivery of protection and assistance in emergencies, including capacity development, policy implementation and supply management. It also outlines actions taken to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It briefly describes the challenging environment in which UNHCR responds to emergencies, and sets out opportunities and priorities moving forward.

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I. Introduction

1. Emergency preparedness and response is one of five organizational priorities contained in the High Commissioner's strategic directions for 2017 to 2021. In 2019, UNHCR continued to bolster its impact in this area by ensuring strong teamwork both within the organization and with key partners. At the same time, UNHCR worked to ensure that immediate protection and assistance needs of displaced people were met, while also focusing on solutions from the onset of an emergency.

2. UNHCR continued to provide timely, field-oriented emergency support, including the mobilization of human resources (through emergency deployments) and material resources (enabled by the global stockpile of core relief items and other critical goods). This work was led by the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS) in close cooperation with emergency operations, regional bureaux and other divisions. UNHCR also facilitated coordination arrangements as outlined by the policy for declared emergencies, such as the management of emergency cells, undertaking joint senior level missions and closely engaging with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Emergency Directors Group.

3. UNHCR's "Policy on emergency preparedness and response" (issued in 2017) was revised in 2019 to ensure its alignment with the IASC "Humanitarian system-wide scale-up" protocols, including the automatic expiration of emergency declarations after six months. The revision also comprised amendments to the provisions on mandatory requirements for declared emergencies, criteria for level-1 emergencies and updated references.

4. At the end of 2019, UNHCR finalized a new emergency preparedness tool for situations affecting internally displaced persons (IDPs). The "Preparedness package for IDP emergencies" (PPIE) affirms that UNHCR will engage more consistently, predictably and sustainably in situations of internal displacement, in both its coordination and operational roles, and that it will take effective action to prepare for displacement emergencies.

5. Humanitarian personnel work in increasingly dangerous and complex operational environments. Many emergency situations in 2019 were again characterized by violence, civil unrest, criminality and disregard for civilian life, which in some cases led to the obstruction of protection and assistance. UNHCR continued to work closely with the national and local authorities in the countries in which it operates to ensure the safety, security and well-being of affected populations, as well as UNHCR and partner staff.

6. In 2020, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has acutely impacted the lives of refugees, stateless people, the internally displaced, other persons of concern to UNHCR, as well as front-line field and health workers. UNHCR has accordingly intensified its emergency preparedness and response efforts to provide vital protection, assistance and other essential services, as well as its mitigation measures to prevent the disease from spreading.

II. Strengthening emergency preparedness and response

7. In 2019, 22 operations reported facing a high risk of a new or escalated refugee and/or IDP situation, using UNHCR's High Alert List for Emergency Preparedness (HALEP) tool.¹ Preparedness levels varied, with a number of high-risk operations self-assessing that they were reasonably or partially prepared for an emergency, and the others requesting additional support. With regard to the latter, gaps included staffing capacity, the need for joint decision-making with host governments on measures to be taken, and limited technical capacity such as support for site planning and cash assistance.

8. UNHCR actively participated in the IASC Early Warning, Early Action and Readiness Working Group. The group produced bi-annual reports in May and

¹ HALEP is a global repository of information on UNHCR's preparedness by country operation for situations at high risk of displacement. It provides outlook analysis on existing or developing situations of concern that may escalate.

November 2019, identifying 15 countries at very high and high risk of a humanitarian crisis and in need of further attention by the Emergency Directors Group for enhanced support in prevention, mitigation and preparedness.

9. UNHCR continued to strengthen its Senior Corporate Emergency Roster in 2019 to boost its leadership and coordination capacities. Improvements included a revised training curriculum, with the participation of roster members in the field simulation of the Workshop on Emergency Management.

10. Following the operational review of UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement, the Office took measures to strengthen its preparedness and response to IDP crises. As a result, its Emergency Management Team was reinforced with qualified first responders dedicated to IDP emergencies, and resources were allocated in the second half of 2019 to develop the PPIE.

II. Delivery of emergency responses

A. Standby capacity and emergency deployments

11. UNHCR prioritizes the rapid mobilization and timely deployment of emergency teams to multiple emergencies, which play a critical role in the quality and impact of responses. In 2019, the majority of staff were deployed to Africa, followed by the Americas and Asia and the Pacific. In total, 51 country operations were reinforced by internal and external emergency deployments. The highest number of deployments were to Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mexico, Mozambique and South Sudan.

12. During 2019, 269 staff were deployed, reflecting a modest decrease compared to 2018 as large-scale emergencies stabilized. Of this number, 167 deployments (62 per cent) were sourced from UNHCR's internal rosters and resources and 102 external deployments (38 per cent) from external emergency standby partners. In addition, DESS's Emergency Management Team, comprised of 8 members, provided emergency management and coordination to country operations over the course of more than 3,000 days on mission. To address an enduring capacity gap in the area of information management (IM), three frame agreements were signed with iMMAP, REACH and CANADEM for the provision of IM support services.

13. The recorded annual in-kind contribution by the emergency standby partners to UNHCR was nearly \$7 million. In 2019, UNHCR signed three standby agreements, including a new partnership agreement with the Danish Emergency Management Agency (DEMA) and updated agreements with existing partners, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) and Irish Aid. UNHCR also signed memorandums of understanding foreseeing cooperation on emergency response with the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters (EMERCOM) and with the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) of Turkey.

B. Capacity development

14. To enhance the quality, effectiveness and impact of its emergency preparedness and response actions, UNHCR facilitated training and developed operational guidance and tools. In 2019, emergency trainings, such as the Workshop on Emergency Management, the Senior Emergency Leadership Programme and situational emergency trainings, were provided to some 370 UNHCR, government and partner staff. In addition, UNHCR continued to update the online Emergency Handbook available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French and Spanish.

15. In 2019, Germany, Norway and Senegal further provided training facilities and technical support to UNHCR's emergency training programmes. Japan contributed financially to the management and operations of UNHCR's Regional Centre for Emergency

Preparedness (eCentre) in Bangkok. This enabled the eCentre to successfully train over 150 government and humanitarian personnel with a geographic focus on the Asia and Pacific region. Pursuant to UNHCR's regionalization and decentralization change initiative, the eCentre will henceforth report directly to the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific.

C. Policy implementation

16. In accordance with its "Policy on emergency preparedness and response", UNHCR declared new level-2 and level-3 emergencies in eight countries in 2019, including five IDP responses and three refugee responses. These new emergency declarations boosted support and resources in Burkina Faso, Costa Rica, Iraq and Niger, where level-2 emergency declarations were activated, as well as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and three countries affected by Tropical Cyclone Idai (Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe), for which a level-3 emergency was declared. In addition, throughout 2019, 35 countries were covered by emergency declarations activated in prior years.

17. In line with the revised policy and with the stabilization of several situations, a number of emergencies were also deactivated in 2019 to ensure that the limited emergency resources were redirected to where they were most urgently needed.

D. Supply management

18. With its timely, cost-effective support in responding to new and ongoing emergencies in 2019, UNHCR dispatched \$30 million-worth of emergency core relief items from seven global stockpiles to 23 emergency-affected countries. The countries that received the most assistance were the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen. Global stockpiles were used during eight emergency airlifts, fulfilling 122 requests. In addition to the existing global stockpiles in Accra, Amman, Copenhagen, Douala, Dubai, Nairobi and Kampala, work began on a new stockpile in Panama City.

19. By merging the procurement, supply and logistics teams, UNHCR developed a responsive, agile service that enabled more integrated decision-making. This was especially important given UNHCR's decentralized structures, as well as an increase in procurement requests from \$1.1 billion to \$1.14 billion in 2019.

E. COVID-19 response

20. As the world faced unprecedented challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the High Commissioner declared a global level-2 emergency on 25 March 2020 in line with the emergency policy, while the IASC "System-wide scale-up protocols adapted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic" were endorsed on 17 April 2020. This allowed UNHCR to scale up and adapt its life-saving protection and assistance activities across all regions, prepare and respond to the pandemic across operations worldwide in a coordinated manner, and address the needs of the most vulnerable in close collaboration with governments, partners and persons of concern.

21. UNHCR galvanized support across divisions in its COVID-19 preparedness and response efforts, including through the following actions, the Office:

- identified high-risk countries in need of stepped-up preparedness support using clear prioritization criteria and provided this support as required;
- assisted in the procurement of critical medical items and personal protective equipment (amounting to over \$101.2 million as of early September 2020), and their delivery to country operations despite global shortages and the near-collapse of global transport links;
- participated in and supported the creation of the United Nations Supply Task Force to streamline and expedite joint procurement, where possible, of common pandemic-related supplies; and

- continued to offer human resources support where possible through UNHCR's Emergency Response Team roster, despite limitations on travel and border crossings during the crisis.

IV. Risks and challenges

22. The most salient operational risks and challenges that may impede UNHCR from fully achieving its priorities in 2020 include:

- an exponential rise in the number of people in need of emergency assistance due to the loss of livelihoods in economies affected by COVID-19;
- multi-hazard crises in an environment of decreased mobility of aid workers and persons of concern to UNHCR;
- limited humanitarian access to people in need of international protection and assistance, often in remote and dangerous areas;
- obstacles in global surge systems in times of travel restrictions due to the epidemiological spread; and
- inadequate financial, material and human resources to support the response to worsening crises and protracted situations which, if left to fester, could provoke future emergencies.

V. Opportunities and priorities

23. UNHCR's overarching aim is to ensure that its operations are effectively prepared to respond to potential, actual or escalating humanitarian emergencies. To do so most effectively, the organization is aligning its emergency preparedness and response, as well as its security and supply structures with the regionalization and decentralization process, including by supporting the regional bureaux to build their capacity in these areas.

24. In this regard, the following opportunities and priorities were identified. To shape its future work, UNHCR will:

- seek strengthened partnerships with other United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations in emergency preparedness and response efforts, including continued engagement in the IASC Emergency Directors Group and other relevant inter-agency groups;
- support the country operations, and States' efforts to bolster COVID-19 mitigation measures;
- pre-position and deliver COVID-19 personal protective equipment and medical items for a timely response against the pandemic in refugee and IDP operations;
- support the regional bureaux and operations to ensure preparedness, as well as rapid and predictable responses at the outset of a new emergency; and
- identify and establish new emergency partnerships at the regional and local levels.

25. In order to optimize these opportunities and achieve its priorities, UNHCR continues to count on the support of States, particularly the members of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme.
