

## **Update on UNHCR's operations in southern Africa**

### **A. Situational context**

The southern Africa region comprises nearly 9.5 million persons of concern. This includes some 6.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and close to 1.1 million refugees and asylum-seekers. It also includes nearly 2 million IDP returnees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Over 81 per cent of persons of concern in the region come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Since mid-2019, an increase in violence in the eastern part of the country has seen the number of IDPs rise to nearly 6 million, making the Democratic Republic of the Congo one of the largest IDP situations globally and the largest in sub-Saharan Africa. The largest population of refugees and asylum-seekers in the region also originates from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with some 922,000 Congolese hosted in 20 African countries.

In the provinces of Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, over 1 million people were displaced in the last six months alone. UNHCR declared an internal level-3 emergency for these provinces in November 2019 that led to the activation of emergency procedures and helped expedite access to additional human, material and financial resources. More recently, violence and new displacement have been reported in the Kasai region. Alongside these emergencies, an Ebola outbreak was declared on 1 June 2020 in Equateur Province, and there are concerns that COVID-19 may spread in the same area. Humanitarian access remained a challenge due to insecurity and was compounded by movement restrictions and preventive measures linked to COVID-19.

To address the regional dimension, UNHCR continues to lead the coordination of the inter-agency Regional Refugee Response Plan for the Democratic Republic of the Congo situation. The response plan aims to provide protection and assistance to the most vulnerable, bolster livelihood opportunities and, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees, support the needs of host populations and strengthen peaceful coexistence. The relevant requirements are also reflected in the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 and UNHCR's coronavirus emergency appeal.

The internal conflict in north-eastern Mozambique, affecting the Cabo Delgado Province, has also given rise to concern. The crisis, which began in October 2017, has deteriorated and caused large-scale forced displacement. By September 2020, nearly 310,000 people had been uprooted and forced to seek safety in other provinces. The country is still recovering from tropical cyclones Idai and Kenneth in March and April 2019, which affected some 2.2 million people and significantly reduced the capacity of local communities to respond to the ongoing internal displacement situation. The Government of Mozambique has asked humanitarian organizations, including UNHCR, to help address the needs of IDPs and host communities in the country. Through the existing IDP cluster system in Mozambique, UNHCR leads the protection cluster at the national level and co-leads with the Government the protection cluster in Cabo Delgado Province. In light of recent developments, UNHCR declared an internal level-2 emergency for Mozambique in August 2020, with a view to reinforcing the protection response. This declaration will remain in force for an initial period of six months.

Mixed flows of refugees, asylum-seekers and economic migrants, coming from over 90 countries of origin, pose additional challenges in the region. Many national migration systems are overwhelmed and ill-equipped to deal with mixed flows, leaving thousands of people in legal limbo. Refugee status determination systems face backlogs and UNHCR is relied upon for technical and financial support. As a result of these backlogs, asylum claims can take months and even years to process.

The World Food Programme (WFP) provides both direct and cash-based food assistance in the region, though food shortfalls for refugees remain a recurrent problem. Funding shortfalls in many operations have resulted in reduced food rations, affecting close to 485,000 refugees.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted refugee protection and solutions in the region, relatively low numbers of persons of concern are known to have contracted the virus. The health crisis has, however, had a negative socioeconomic impact on persons of concern and their host communities. In some cases, refugees who had previously been self-sufficient turned to UNHCR for assistance, desperate for food and cash money to pay their rent. As elsewhere, COVID-19 has exacerbated poverty, the consequences of natural disasters and drought, food shortages, weak social protection schemes, and the vulnerability of individuals with pre-existing health conditions, such as HIV/AIDS.

UNHCR has committed to “stay and deliver”, ramping up preparedness measures in health and sanitation and awareness-raising, and increasing direct assistance to refugees, IDPs and host communities. Innovative approaches have emerged to reach persons of concern, including remote protection assistance, distance education and community mobilization around COVID-19 prevention. By mid-September 2020, UNHCR had provided more than 255,000 individuals with non-medical face masks, 383,000 individuals with soap, over 27,000 individuals with cash support, and more than 12,000 children and youths with home-based learning.

## **B. Achieving the global strategic priorities**

At the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019, the southern Africa region demonstrated significant political will and commitment in support of the Global Compact on Refugees. There were 87 pledges from the region, 69 of which were made by States and 18 by non-governmental actors. State pledges included supporting the integration of refugees and former refugees, ensuring registration and access to identity cards, providing agricultural land and work permits, enrolling refugees in higher education, and strengthening asylum procedures and legal frameworks. Furthermore, States submitted pledges related to the eradication of statelessness during the high-level segment of the seventieth session of the Executive Committee in 2019.

However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic hampered progress in some areas, as States necessarily focused their attention on public health preparedness and economic recovery packages. At the same time, the Global Compact on Refugees provided an essential framework for advocating the inclusion of persons of concern in social programmes and national response plans in the context of COVID-19 and garnering the necessary partnerships to support these efforts.

### **The search for durable solutions**

#### *Voluntary repatriation*

Thus far in 2020, a total of 1,686 refugees have voluntarily returned home: 283 from Botswana to Zimbabwe; 322 from Angola to the Democratic Republic of the Congo; 427 from the Republic of the Congo to the Central African Republic; and 654 from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Congo (Republic of) and Rwanda.

Due to the closure of borders aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19, UNHCR suspended all voluntary repatriation operations in March 2020. As borders re-open, and assuming the conditions are conducive for return, voluntary repatriation operations will resume.

Consultations with affected countries regarding the voluntary repatriation of refugees and asylum-seekers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo continue. The Government of Namibia has asked the Government of Burundi and UNHCR to facilitate the return of some 1,000 Burundian refugees residing in Osire refugee camp, and discussions are ongoing in this regard.

#### *Local integration*

The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the implementation of many of the pledges related to local integration which were made at the Global Refugee Forum. However, some progress with respect to integration has been made – for example in the Republic of the Congo, where refugees are being included in a social safety net project funded by the World Bank.

In Zambia, efforts towards the local integration of former Angolan and Rwandan refugees continue through support for self-reliance and socioeconomic inclusion, while assistance is ongoing to those individuals with specific needs. Zambia has also integrated schools and health facilities across refugee settlements into national systems and provided teachers and medical personnel to support these schools and health facilities. In Zimbabwe, a scheme aimed at expanding self-reliance opportunities through agricultural activities is being supported with funds from the African Development Bank. In Namibia, some 2,400 Angolan refugees are receiving help to acquire permanent residency; about 1,800 refugees have already obtained their residence permits.

In 2021, settlement approaches, with refugees living side by side with host communities, will be implemented in Malawi and Mozambique, and further developed in Zambia.

### *Resettlement*

Resettlement in the southern Africa region has been severely constrained, having decreased from 4,700 places in 2019 to about 1,500 in 2020. UNHCR is currently mapping the possibilities for the region, in line with the three-year strategy on resettlement and complementary pathways (2019-2021). It is also designing strategies for complementary pathways, including family reunification, educational opportunities, employment opportunities, humanitarian pathways and private sponsorships.

### **Promoting a favourable protection environment**

In South Africa, UNHCR and the Government developed a plan to address the backlog of some 150,000 individuals in the refugee status determination appeal process. Malawi has recognized certain groups of asylum-seekers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo on a prima facie basis. The Republic of the Congo has also adopted a law on asylum, which spells out the criteria for eligibility for refugee status and guarantees recognized refugees protection throughout its territory.

UNHCR is strengthening partnerships with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and other regional organizations. This work aims to harmonize refugee and asylum management standards, address mixed movements, combat statelessness and build disaster-risk resilience and approaches to climate-induced displacement.

In line with UNHCR's objective of doubling cash-based interventions (CBIs) in Africa, many operations are on track to making this a reality. In Angola, Malawi, South Africa and Zambia, UNHCR is now implementing CBIs as part of its regular programming and, where feasible, replacing food and core relief items with cash assistance. The remaining countries in the region have committed to providing cash for basic needs under the "graduation approach", an initiative which helps support the poorest refugees by enhancing food security and sustainable livelihoods. In the context of COVID-19, UNHCR has been increasing CBIs in urban contexts, while advocating refugee inclusion in government social safety nets.

### **Mixed movements**

UNHCR and SADC established a joint action plan to strengthen support for SADC member States through technical expertise and help ensure regional alignment in managing the response to mixed movements. The joint action plan (2020-2024) was endorsed by the SADC Public Security Sub-Committee in June 2020. Furthermore, in line with UNHCR's strategy to address mixed movements in Africa, UNHCR is implementing a joint project with the International Labour Organization, the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The 4-year project will support SADC countries in strengthening institutional mechanisms for migration management, which includes putting in place protection frameworks for vulnerable individuals, including those in need of international protection.

### **Statelessness**

Positive strides have been made in the region towards ending statelessness, albeit with progress slowed by COVID-19. In October 2019, Angola acceded to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. The Congo (Republic of), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Namibia and Zambia have taken decisive steps towards accession to the statelessness conventions. Further, the Congo (Republic of) and Eswatini have adopted national action plans to end statelessness that provide for nationality law

reform. Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Namibia and Zambia have national plans awaiting formal endorsement by the respective governments. In view of the favourable political context, UNHCR will redouble its efforts to strengthen and promote legal and administrative frameworks that prevent statelessness and ensure access to relevant documentation for persons of concern.

### **C. Financial information**

In October 2019, the Executive Committee approved a budget of \$301.2 million for the southern Africa region for 2020. As at the end of August 2020, the total budget amounted to \$324.4 million. The budget is currently 49 per cent funded. Budget increases for the region included \$31.2 million for the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and \$2 million in response to the internal conflict impacting north-eastern Mozambique.

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