

**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner’s Programme**

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**Update on UNHCR’s operations in West and Central
Africa**

A. Situational overview

Overview and main issues

By the end of December 2020, there were some 10.9 million persons of concern to UNHCR across 19 countries in West and Central Africa. This figure included 6.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 1.3 million refugees, in addition to returnees, stateless persons, asylum-seekers and others of concern to the organization. The total number of persons of concern in the subregion increased by 1.7 million from the previous year, mainly due to over 1.4 million new IDPs. The majority of refugees originated from the Central African Republic (424,000), Sudan (370,000), Nigeria (305,000), Mali (81,000) and Cameroon (65,000).

Armed conflict, terrorism and civil unrest continued to trigger forced population displacement. The environment remained severely constrained for humanitarian workers, as non-State armed groups intensified their activities across the subregion. Some areas that had been previously accessible were no longer considered safe. In some situations, armed escorts were introduced by governments to assure the security of humanitarian workers. In Burkina Faso, the initiation of United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) flights operated by the World Food Programme (WFP) reopened access to areas, such as Djibo, and improved the delivery of protection and assistance.

The new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic hampered UNHCR’s activities, prompting innovation, adaptation and reprioritization. Resource mobilization was also scaled up to support national responses to the pandemic and the inclusion of persons of concern. New opportunities emerged to strengthen partnerships with an array of actors, including regional financial institutions.

UNHCR supported the construction of over 50 isolation and quarantine centres and the rehabilitation or construction of 60 health facilities, including in Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria and Senegal. In addition, UNHCR helped train over 500 community health workers and 200 health professionals, among them medical doctors and nurses in various countries hosting large numbers of refugees in the subregion. UNHCR equally contributed to the rehabilitation and equipping of 30 COVID-19 treatment centres, including in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Nigeria and Togo. Equipment included ambulances, oxygen concentrators and respirators, as well as relevant medicines and other commodities. In Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria, UNHCR supported the surveillance and alert systems established by the health authorities, including by providing logistical support for emergency response teams.

The pandemic set back many of the gains made by refugees to achieve self-reliance and develop livelihoods. Refugees were disproportionately impacted by the socioeconomic consequences of lockdowns and ensuing recession. Many, particularly in urban areas, reverted to UNHCR for

assistance. The organization continued to advocate the inclusion of refugees and IDPs in national response plans, including for the COVID-19 vaccine. Further advocacy was undertaken with development actors and financial institutions to support the inclusion of refugees in development plans and access to services and loan suspensions. UNHCR also worked with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations to ensure the inclusion of refugees in livelihood initiatives.

While schools in most countries remained open during part of the year, numerous challenges were encountered in refugee hosting areas, including physical distancing in overcrowded classrooms and the lack of access to water and sanitary infrastructure. School attendance decreased for a number of reasons, such as fears of the parents related to the spread of COVID-19, as well as children being taken out of school to work or to enter into early marriages to support the family economy, while lack of access to distance learning programmes further hindered education. Insecurity also hampered education, with almost 4,000 schools closed in conflict-affected areas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

Main displacement situations

The situation in the Sahel remained concerning, as demonstrated by the total number of forcibly displaced persons in the central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), which reached 2 million by the end of 2020. Contingency plans were updated in the countries already impacted or likely to be impacted by the Sahel situation, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Mali and the coastal countries Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. In order to ensure implementation of the Bamako Declaration and its conclusions, the Bamako Process was launched in October 2020, with the participation of the G5 Sahel countries¹.

By the end of 2020, there were a total of 3.2 million forcibly displaced persons (some 2.9 million IDPs and 304,600 refugees) in the Lake Chad Basin. Despite persistent humanitarian challenges, UNHCR renewed efforts to find durable solutions to address forced displacement in the area. In light of the protracted nature of the situation, UNHCR adopted a solutions-centered approach, with an emphasis on civil registration, documentation, resilience and self-reliance. Emergency response to emerging humanitarian needs was maintained.

In addition to over 600,000 refugees from the Central African Republic that were already in neighbouring countries, some 100,000² persons fled to Cameroon, Chad, the Congo (Republic of) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Meanwhile, the number of IDPs rose by some 100,000³ from over 600,000.

Following intercommunal incidents in West Darfur in Sudan in December 2020 and January 2021, Chad received some 4,300 new refugees in the eastern province of Ouaddai. These refugees are hosted in the Kouchaguine-Moura camp, where the Government of Chad, UNHCR and partners are providing protection and assistance, following their transfer from the border area.

In Côte d'Ivoire, fear of violence linked to the presidential elections in October 2020 led to the new outflow of approximately 29,300 individuals, some 6,400 of whom were already biometrically registered in Liberia. This brought the total number of refugees from Côte d'Ivoire in the region to nearly 50,700 (mainly in Ghana, Guinea and Liberia). UNHCR's response to the new influx has included registration and documentation, the enrolment of children in schools, the provision of core relief items and shelter for the most vulnerable. Sociopolitical tensions that

¹ The G5 Sahel is an institutional framework for the coordination of regional cooperation in development policies and security matters in West Africa. It involves the five Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

² This figure is according to Government statistics, as of end January 2021.

³ This figure is according to statistics from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, as of end January 2021.

rose during the electoral period have since diminished significantly and opened up opportunities for the return of the displaced.

B. Achieving the global strategic priorities

Voluntary repatriation

In 2020, before border closures due to COVID-19 and prior to the presidential elections in the Central African Republic and Côte d’Ivoire which prompted suspension of voluntary repatriation activities towards both countries, almost 5,000 Central African refugees and 330 refugees from Côte d’Ivoire were able to return home. In Côte d’Ivoire, the situation has been improving with dialogue initiated after the elections. Discussions are ongoing to revive the road map for the implementation of comprehensive solutions for Ivorian refugees that was adopted at the end of 2018. The revitalized roadmap is expected to include new Ivorian refugees.

In Nigeria, some 11,500 refugees returned spontaneously (without UNHCR assistance) to the north-eastern part of the country. In August 2020, the Borno State Government announced a plan to organize the return of IDPs to 12 municipalities across the State. This led to the return of some 12,000 IDPs to the town of Baga by October 2020.

Local integration and alternative stay arrangements

In Niger, work to ensure the socioeconomic integration of refugees into national systems, including education and health, continued to be supported by the World Bank through the International Development Association (IDA-18) sub-window for host communities and refugees. The multi-year plan is expected to benefit some 160,000 refugees through the promotion of livelihood opportunities and strengthening of basic public services in refugee-hosting areas. By the end of 2020, five-year residency permits for nearly 2,000 Liberian refugees were renewed in Ghana, providing them with the opportunity to work legally in the country. In Chad, the “out of camp” approach was maintained, and all new refugees were integrated into host villages. The goal is to transform 30 per cent of the refugee camps into villages by 2024, facilitating more inclusive socioeconomic integration, increasing access to livelihoods and economic opportunities, improving infrastructure and enhancing cohesion.

Similar efforts are equally underway to support the integration of IDPs, especially when return to their places of origin is not foreseeable. For example, in parts of Borno State in North East Nigeria, UNHCR is advocating for the transformation of the existing return strategy into a solutions strategy.

Resettlement

Faced with unprecedented challenges, UNHCR operations adapted rapidly to ensure continuity of resettlement activities in the subregion in 2020. After physical and logistical adjustments, remote interviews were rolled out across critical resettlement operations. This allowed for the continued processing of vulnerable cases, while observing COVID-19 prevention measures and maintaining robust standards of integrity. Operations reinforced messaging and counselling activities, particularly for refugees who had been adversely affected by departure delays. Despite the significant challenges of the pandemic, compounded in some countries by a volatile security situation, almost 1000 vulnerable refugees in the subregion were able to depart for resettlement in 2020.

Promoting a favourable protection environment

A new asylum law was adopted in Chad in 2020 aimed at strengthening the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers. It will also guide the establishment of an efficient national asylum system, being pursued under the Asylum Capacity Support Group mechanism, and a fair refugee status determination process.

With the objective of reforming the institutional and normative asylum system in Niger, a new technical committee has been established. An adequate reception system will be put in place, allowing for proper registration and documentation of asylum-seekers and refugees, while providing multifaceted support to address their basic needs. The reform will ease the access of asylum-seekers and refugees to the national reception system throughout the country, especially in Agadez. It will also lead to the digitalization of the activities of the National Eligibility Commission. With this, asylum-seekers would easily be able to obtain updates on the processing of their asylum claims.

Mixed movements

The majority of the displaced who originate from West and Central Africa stay within the subregion. However, host communities are overstretched and governments, faced with their own domestic development challenges, struggle to provide basic services and livelihood opportunities. Furthermore, growing insecurity, combined with the lack of healthcare and educational opportunities, as well as the absence of solutions, often leads to secondary movements within the subregion and sometimes onwards towards northern Africa and Europe, despite the risks this entails. Difficulties accessing registration, long waiting periods for refugee status determination interviews and lack of legal documents constitute other reasons for secondary movements.

Secondary movements of refugees and IDPs within the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin are common due to insecurity within host communities. In Mali, protection and border monitoring suggests that some armed groups are becoming increasingly involved in the smuggling and trafficking of persons, however it is not yet clear to what extent this has affected refugees and migrants. UNHCR continues to work in collaboration with partners to identify and refer those in need of international protection.

Statelessness

Efforts to address statelessness in the subregion continued to bear tangible results, including with respect to data collection, legal reforms and research. In September 2020, Côte d'Ivoire became the first African country to establish statelessness determination procedures in law. This will allow stateless individuals to access the rights enshrined in the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons. The final report from the statelessness mapping exercise in Côte d'Ivoire revealed that the number of persons affected by statelessness or who were at immediate risk of being affected, stood at over 1.6 million. At the end of 2020, the second edition of the statelessness and nationality course for French speaking practitioners was organized jointly by the Catholic University for Central Africa and UNHCR in Yaoundé, Cameroon. A total of 60 trainees from 30 countries participated in the virtual course, which was taught principally by trainers from across Africa. This annual training helps stimulate interest on statelessness among academics and ensures that the legal reforms needed to prevent statelessness are backed by thorough research.

In 2020, the Governments of Nigeria and Sierra Leone adopted national action plans to address statelessness. In Mali, recommendations from the final report of the study on statelessness, published in December 2020, will help update the country's national action plan.

In December 2020, a regional roadmap for the implementation of the pledges made at the high-level segment on statelessness, during the seventieth session of the Executive Committee, and the Global Refugee Forum was adopted during a stocktaking event convened by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) and UNHCR.

Internally displaced persons

The West and Central Africa region currently hosts some 6.4 million IDPs, representing a 25 per cent increase compared to the beginning of 2019 and mainly due to a surge in displacement in

the central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger). Other major drivers of internal displacement in the region were the crisis in the Lake Chad Basin and the continued instability in Cameroon and the Central African Republic. In Chad alone, 200,000 people were newly displaced internally.

Those who wished to return were often unable to do so due to continued instability and were often forced to keep moving. Escalating violence has now driven more than 1 million people from their homes in Burkina Faso. Attacks by armed groups in the north and east of the country have forced people to move multiple times, and numbers are still on the rise.

In the Lake Chad Basin, the conflict exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, destroyed livelihoods and dismantled social protection safety nets. These factors increased the exposure of many young girls and women to sexual exploitation and abuse, sexual enslavement and other serious human rights violations, particularly in Nigeria.

In the Central African Republic, the improvement in the security situation in certain areas and the signing of a peace agreement in February 2019, have enabled some IDPs to return home. However, many more have not been able to reach their places of origin due to insecurity. Several challenges remain on the political, security, development and humanitarian fronts, particularly after the recent episode of violence around the presidential elections.

In response to the situation in the central Sahel, UNHCR and partners provided some 115,000 people with essential healthcare services and almost 14,000 people (including children, parents and primary caregivers) with mental health and psychosocial support. Around 13,400 households found to be most vulnerable and affected by COVID-19 were provided with livelihoods support. In addition, around 106,300 persons of concern received shelter support and some 10,300 households were provided with core relief items and multi-purpose cash grants, while over 850,000 people benefited from protection services.

The implementation of the 2019 “Policy on UNHCR’s engagement in situations of internal displacement” (IDP policy) is expected to help address critical needs, particularly in operations where there is a surge in internal displacement. The IDP policy also aims to further engage States to work towards durable solutions and allocate additional resources towards protracted IDP situations.

Protection monitoring

By the end of 2020, the number of active partners involved in “Protection 21” (P21), a harmonized regional protection monitoring system, had risen from two (UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC)), to eight. Likewise, the number of countries increased from three pilot phase countries (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) to five, with the addition of Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia. The project is currently being set up in Chad and Nigeria.

The P21 system has facilitated transborder protection situation analysis and the identification of trends for the central Sahel countries. Monitoring shows that 50 per cent of the region’s population movements consist of new displacements and arrivals, followed by 29 per cent of returns to areas or origin. Gender-based violence issues affecting women include early/forced marriages (21 per cent), physical violence (15 per cent) and female genital mutilation (FGM) (12 per cent), among others. Significant challenges affecting children in the region include forced labour (32 per cent) and forced marriages (21 per cent), combined with a lack of access to education. Over 50 per cent of children surveyed during the monitoring period were not attending school.

Prevention and response to gender-based violence

The humanitarian situation and the pandemic have led to a significant increase in the prevalence of gender-based violence, which remains one of the main protection challenges. Out of 10

countries with the world's highest prevalence of child marriage, six⁴ are found in the region. In line with its regional protection strategy for the Sahel, as well as its new policy against gender-based violence, UNHCR has increased programming to address this phenomenon across the subregion. Safety audits and assessments have been conducted, and mobile clinics have been set up, providing services to over 2,000 survivors. During the pandemic, UNHCR adapted its interventions to address gender-based violence through a number of initiatives, such as remote services with the use of phones and WhatsApp, and by strengthening innovative community-led prevention activities related to child marriage, FGM and sexual and domestic violence. UNHCR also increased its collaboration with community radio stations.

Education

Since the closure of schools in March 2020 due to COVID-19, UNHCR has supported ministries of education in the region to enable forcibly displaced children and youth to access education. Distance learning programmes were quickly developed and implemented, reaching over 100,000 refugee, IDP and host community children. In addition, crucial support was delivered to allow the reopening of schools and resumption of classes in a safe environment. UNHCR constructed or rehabilitated over 80 classrooms in the Sahel region, while some 380 schools were supported with water, sanitation and hygiene interventions. Around 2,000 teachers were trained to ensure safe practices upon the resumption of classes. The return to school was also supported through targeted actions, such as back to school campaigns and community messaging, grants and cash-based interventions, transportation allowances, and in-kind support, including the distribution of school kits.

Operationalization of the Global Compact on Refugees

In December 2020, a stocktaking event was organized in follow-up to the pledges made for the subregion at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF). Of the 55 pledges made at the GRF in December 2019 relating to West and Central Africa, 20 are in their initial stage of implementation, 32 are well in progress and 3 are fulfilled. In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, collaboration with development actors was enhanced, with emphasis on the central Sahel, Lake Chad Basin and Central African Republic situations. Within the framework of the COVID-19 response, UNHCR also partnered with the African Development Bank to provide support to countries of the G5-Sahel.

C. Financial information

The budget approved for the West and Central Africa Region in October 2020 by the Executive Committee amounted to \$555.7 million. By the end of 2020, it had increased by \$109.3 million to \$665 million and included supplementary budgets of \$59.7 million to scale up protection and assistance activities in the Sahel and \$69.2 million for the COVID-19 response.

Furthermore, appropriations of \$7 million were transferred from the emergency reserve to help countries mount initial emergency responses in Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Liberia.

The total financial requirements for 2021 stand at \$724.7 million, which includes \$69.4 million to address the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on persons of concern to UNHCR.

⁴ These countries include Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria.