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**Update on UNHCR’s operations in West and Central
Africa****A. Situational context**

At the end of 2021, there were 11.9 million persons of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in West and Central Africa, including 7.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 1.5 million refugees and asylum-seekers, in addition to returnees and stateless persons. The number of persons of concern increased by 1 million in 2021, mainly due to 800,000 new IDPs in the region.

Insecurity, terrorism and violence remained the key drivers of forced displacement, and the activities of non-State armed groups in the central Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin and the Central African Republic continued to threaten lives and hamper humanitarian access. The negative effects of climate change were increasingly visible across the region, and tensions over resources – especially water – fuelled violence in some locations. This led to further displacement, as demonstrated by the emergency at the border of Cameroon and Chad at the end of 2021 and the movement of herdsman fleeing from north-western Nigeria into the Maradi region of Niger.

Political instability also impacted the region, especially the Sahel. A coup in January 2022 removed the President of Burkina Faso, and a coup attempt took place in Guinea-Bissau in February 2022. Meanwhile, Chad, Guinea and Mali are facing political transitions.

The recurrent crises throughout the region and the growing difficulties with humanitarian access highlight the need to prioritize localization to ensure a more sustainable response, as recommended during the regional consultations with non-governmental organizations in the second half of 2021.

With respect to solutions, the naturalization process in Guinea-Bissau concluded in October 2021. Furthermore, UNHCR recommended the cessation of refugee status for Ivorians by the end of June 2022. Ahead of the deadline, UNHCR called for States hosting Ivorian refugees to facilitate voluntary repatriation, reintegration, the acquisition of permanent residency or naturalization for those wishing to remain in their host countries. As of mid-February 2022, countries are yet to invoke the cessation clause.

Situational updates

The number of refugees and IDPs in the Sahel rose sharply to 4.3 million in 2021. Over half (2.6 million) were internally displaced with more than 1.5 million in Burkina Faso. In November 2021, incursions by non-State armed groups in Goudoubo camp forced more than 2,600 Malian refugee families to vacate the area. The population is now hosted in settlements around Dori, as agreed by the Government. Humanitarian access in Burkina Faso remained constrained, and UNHCR increasingly relied on the United Nations Humanitarian Air

Service to reach affected populations. Patterns of displacement in the Sahel demonstrated a trend towards people seeking safety in urban areas, while the conflict also spread southwards to Benin and Côte d’Ivoire. Resources were reallocated to recruit a Senior Risk Advisor for the Sahel response, given the challenging operational context.

In the Lake Chad Basin, more than 3 million IDPs and over 327,000 refugees were displaced across Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria by the end of 2021, due to violence by non-State armed groups. In Nigeria, a further 830,000 people were internally displaced in the north-western (450,000) and north-central (380,000) parts of the country as a result of attacks and banditry by criminal groups. Meanwhile, 91,000 Nigerians fled from north-western Nigeria to the Maradi (80,000) and Tahoua (11,000) regions in Niger. UNHCR provided humanitarian assistance to address the urgent needs, while pursuing durable solutions in line with the Territorial Action Plans developed by the Lake Chad Basin Governors’ Forum.

As of 31 October 2021, approximately 1.4 million people from the Central African Republic were uprooted from their homes, including over 735,000 registered refugees in Cameroon (333,000), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (222,000), Chad (121,000), the Sudan (28,000), the Congo (29,000) and South Sudan (2,400). In addition, according to the Population Movement Commission of the Central African Republic, some 664,000 people remained internally displaced.

In December 2021, intercommunal clashes in the Far North Region of Cameroon forced nearly 100,000 people to flee their homes. By the end of January 2022, the Government of Cameroon estimated that more than 35,000 people were internally displaced in its Far North Region. Some 44,000 refugees had been pre-registered in Chad, where UNHCR launched an immediate emergency response in support of the Government to address the pressing needs, including protection, shelter and core relief items. Intercommunal clashes in the Darfur region of the Sudan also drove more than 4,500 Sudanese into eastern Chad, where 370,000 Sudanese refugees had been living, many for nearly two decades.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Voluntary repatriation and reintegration

In West and Central Africa, UNHCR organized the repatriation of 33,479 refugees in 2021, most notably to Côte d’Ivoire (22,445) and the Central African Republic (5,583). The repatriation of more than 3,800 Nigerian refugees was facilitated in the framework of the tripartite agreement between the Governments of Cameroon and Nigeria with UNHCR. In 2022, UNHCR will endeavour to conclude a tripartite agreement on returns from Niger to Nigeria. All UNHCR-assisted repatriation movements were implemented in line with the sanitary protocols established to prevent the spread the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). UNHCR also carried out post-return monitoring and community-level engagement to support the sustainable reintegration of returnees. In addition to refugees, over 53,000 IDPs returned to their places of origin in Cameroon, the Central African Republic and Nigeria.

Local integration and naturalization

UNHCR supported the Government of Guinea-Bissau with the naturalization of all remaining refugees (approximately 7,000) and the provision of identify cards. Some 50 Mauritanian refugees were granted Senegalese citizenship, and more than 280 applications are being processed with UNHCR’s support.

Resettlement and complementary pathways

In 2021, there were 1,197 resettlement departures from West and Central Africa, out of 1,748 cases submitted, including 125 emergency submissions. Another 116 refugees

departed through complementary pathways, including 95 through humanitarian corridors from Niger to Italy, 12 through family reunification and 9 through education pathways.

Improving asylum systems, and reducing and preventing statelessness

In November 2021, UNHCR held a technical retreat with the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to discuss new areas of strategic collaboration and develop a joint action plan to better improve refugees' access to national judicial systems. UNHCR also advised the Government of Côte d'Ivoire in the development of an asylum law, which is pending review at the ministerial level. UNHCR will provide legal and technical support for similar initiatives in Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Senegal.

The Bureau further partnered with ECOWAS and the Economic Community of Central African States to develop a regional model law that allows for the establishment of statelessness determination procedures and facilitates the protection of and solutions for stateless persons. Initial discussions on the draft were held during a regional meeting of statelessness experts in Lomé, Togo in November 2021. The model law is expected to be finalized and formally adopted at the ministerial level in 2022, allowing for harmonized procedures across the region.

Response to situations of internal displacement

UNHCR continues to enhance its response in support of more than 7.2 million IDPs in West and Central Africa, including at the policy level. This includes efforts to promote domestication of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Mali and Nigeria. In Cameroon, UNHCR will also work with the authorities on a draft bill on protection and assistance for IDPs. UNHCR also aims to deploy dedicated Information Management Officers in all IDP operations in the region, as recommended by the regional deep dive exercise to review the organization's leadership in the IDP clusters.

Fair protection process and documentation

UNHCR is supporting governments to strengthen national registration systems and is rolling out its biometric identity management system in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Nigeria. In Burkina Faso, UNHCR supported the provision of over 47,000 civil identity documents, targeting both displaced populations and host community members, bringing the total number of documents issued to over 400,000 since 2017.

Protection monitoring

UNHCR co-leads implementation of Project 21, a regional inter-agency protection monitoring system. The initiative, which started in the central Sahel in 2020 and was expanded to Chad in 2021, aims to harmonize data collection from protection monitoring by establishing a unified framework and sharing data with relevant stakeholders for joint analysis and programming.

Mixed movements

In 2021, departures from West Africa increased, with at least three incidents at sea reported off the coast of Senegal between August and November 2021. Community-based [identification and referral mechanisms along key routes](#) were strengthened. In Burkina Faso, for example, 6,000 persons on the move were identified and over 1,300 referred to protection services between June and December 2021.

While IDPs in Burkina Faso and Niger headed towards Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, over 23,000 arrivals in Europe were via the north-west African maritime route. Côte d'Ivoire and

Guinea were the main countries of origin for those arriving in Italy along the central Mediterranean route.

Gender-based violence

UNHCR has made significant technical and financial investments across the region to address gender-based violence, including in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic and Mali through the [Safe from the Start Initiative](#). In 2021, UNHCR and partners assisted more than 8,000 survivors of gender-based violence. Specialized case management services were provided, including referrals in the medical, psychosocial, legal and safety areas, and survivors received cash-based assistance, dignity kits and other types of material support. In the Central African Republic, a dedicated hotline was established to easily connect survivors with services, which helped reach those in remote locations. UNHCR also engaged in prevention and risk mitigation activities, including workshops on mainstreaming gender-based violence risk mitigation.

Education

UNHCR increased support to ministries of education to improve access for displaced children and youth, and to mitigate the impact of insecurity-related school closures. As of January 2022, some 140 classrooms were built or rehabilitated, and over 640 schools were supported through water, sanitation and hygiene interventions. Over 2,500 teachers were trained, while 20,000 children received school kits. Education-related cash assistance also assisted some 10,500 children, and over 1,000 refugees received higher education scholarships.

Socioeconomic inclusion and cash-based interventions

To ensure access to basic needs and services and socioeconomic inclusion, UNHCR is expanding cash-based interventions, particularly for food, shelter and non-food items. More than \$19.3 million was distributed to refugees throughout the region in 2021. UNHCR continues to work with financial service providers, governments and development partners to include refugees more systematically in national social protection schemes.

Climate action

Most refugees and IDPs in the region live with host communities, where social tensions can occur over scarce resources and environmental degradation. More than 148,000 refugees, IDPs and host community members were sensitized on best practices related to climate change and the environment, and efforts were made to introduce environmentally sustainable responses for shelter, water and sanitation, and livelihoods. This included solarizing boreholes and promoting alternative energy sources to firewood.

COVID-19 mainstreaming

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact the region, particularly with respect to strained health systems in displacement areas. All countries in West and Central Africa have included refugees in their national vaccination plans, though vaccination shortages and hesitancy continue to be major obstacles. As of 31 January 2022, over 36,000 refugees had received a first dose of the COVID-19 vaccination, and 16,000¹ were fully vaccinated. In coordination with national authorities and partners, UNHCR continued to support governments with communications and sensitization activities to encourage persons of concern to be vaccinated.

¹ The data only includes the number of refugees who disclosed their vaccination status.

UNHCR, G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) and the African Development Bank partnered to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This initiative provided training to 1,300 health-care workers, supplies for national health facilities and hygiene kits to 12,540 households. Some 650 latrines and 72 water points were also constructed. More than 20,000 households received agricultural support, and 7,300 households had food assistance.

Global Compact on Refugees and strategic partnerships

The Global Compact on Refugees continues to guide UNHCR's work in West and Central Africa. As of December 2021, out of the 146 pledges made for the region at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum and 2021 High-Level Officials Meeting, 32 pledges are in progress, 6 are fulfilled and 2 are in the planning stage. In Cameroon, the World Bank is fully funding an initiative to improve access to health care for refugees and host communities alike.

UNHCR closely collaborates with the African Union, ECOWAS and the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel to promote coordinated approaches to regional issues. These partnerships play a key role in the development of the Abuja action statement focused on the Lake Chad Basin, the Bamako process and the comprehensive solutions strategy for Ivorian refugees. UNHCR's partnership with the Economic Community of Central African States will also be critical to mobilizing support towards addressing protection needs and finding lasting solutions for refugees and IDPs in central Africa.

Evaluations

Global evaluations on child protection, voluntary repatriation, and the Sahel response were conducted in the region in 2021, and the results will help operations adapt their programming accordingly. A regional evaluation on UNHCR's maternal and newborn refugee healthcare project that covers Cameroon, Chad and Niger found that neonatal mortality rates reduced by more than 25 per cent with training for health workers, at-home care and post-natal skin-to-skin contact.

C. Plans for 2022 and financial information

In 2022, UNHCR will continue focusing on solutions, including facilitating repatriation for Ivorians and securing local integration for those who wish to remain in their host countries following the cessation of their refugee status. Reducing protection risks for refugees and asylum-seekers in the context of mixed movements in the region also remains a priority, and UNHCR, partners and local networks will continue to monitor key routes in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger to improve access to services and better collect and disseminate key data and findings.

With respect to education, UNHCR will further strengthen the reception and teaching capacity of schools in the region and expand educational opportunities, including distance-learning, accelerated education programmes and flexible vocational training. The Office will also prioritize inclusivity and support for students with specific needs.

In 2022, UNHCR will support the roll-out of policy guidance and improve programming to prevent gender-based violence. Operations in the region also plan to mainstream environmental measures, in line with UNHCR's strategic framework for climate action.

An expert and ministerial meeting to adopt an ECOWAS plan of action for the Global Compact on Refugees is scheduled to take place in 2022, while a ministerial meeting in Cameroon is expected to charter a path to solutions for refugees and IDPs from the Central African Republic.

The financial requirements of \$727.7 million for the West and Central Africa region in 2021 was 61 per cent funded by the end of the year.

As of January 2022, financial requirements for the region stood at \$884.1 million, with an increase of \$59.6 million for the supplementary budget for the Cameroon-Chad emergency through June 2022.

As of 25 January 2022, some 5 per cent of the region's 2022 financial requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.
