

Seventy-third session
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Update on the operations of UNHCR in West and Central Africa

A. Situational analysis

Overview

The operational environment in the West and Central Africa region was marked by persisting instability and armed conflict, but also significant opportunities and advancements towards protection and solutions. Most important among these were: key legislative changes; the successful implementation of the Comprehensive Solutions Strategy for Ivorian refugees, and the cessation of their refugee status; facilitated access to naturalization for several protracted refugee groups; and commitments expressed in the Yaoundé Declaration on Solutions in the Context of Forced Displacement related to the Central African Republic Crisis, which was adopted in April 2022.

By end of June 2022, the number of persons of concern to UNHCR in the region had reached 12.7 million, over 1 million more than the previous year. The majority (7.2 million) were internally displaced persons. In Burkina Faso, according to the latest available government figures (as of 30th April), the number of internally displaced persons rose by 14 per cent, reaching 1.5 million.

The region hosted 1.6 million refugees and an equivalent number of stateless persons or persons at risk of becoming stateless. Over 87 per cent of refugees in the region were hosted in Chad, Cameroon and Niger, while 77 per cent originated from the Central African Republic, Nigeria and Sudan.

Unresolved crises continued to push more people from their homes. A steady influx from the Darfur region of Sudan saw the arrival of some 11,600 new Sudanese refugees into eastern Chad, which was already hosting some 385,000 Sudanese refugees. The impact of the crisis in the central Sahel was felt in the coastal countries, which received some 5,500 asylum-seekers from Burkina Faso as of end of June. As a result, emergency preparedness and response measures were strengthened in Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. Overall, the number of refugees in the region increased by 125,000. Of these, some 56,000 went to Chad, while Cameroon and Niger received 40,000 new refugees respectively.

Unmet needs, protracted displacement and limited opportunities for solutions continued to push small numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons into onward movements towards coastal countries, North Africa and Europe. In Chad, food insecurity fuelled movements to Libya and Niger, as more people sought alternatives to limited livelihood prospects in the refugee camps.

The impact of climate change and the ripple effects of the war in Ukraine were also felt by refugees, internally displaced persons and host communities. In June 2022, the Government of Chad declared a national food and nutrition emergency as a consequence of its worst lean

season (the period between harvests that lasts from May to August) in a decade. This was also exacerbated by the sharp rise in food and fuel prices linked to the Ukraine crisis. In the Central African Republic, fuel shortages began to impinge on the ability of humanitarian actors, including UNHCR and its partners, to reach some areas affected by displacement.

Situational updates

Central African Republic

The situation remained protracted with more than 1.3 million people from the Central African Republic, or over 25 per cent of the country's population, displaced. This number included more than 610,265 internally displaced persons and over 737,000 refugees living in neighbouring countries.

While fighting between government forces and non-State armed groups continued in some parts of the country, other areas under government control witnessed returns of internally displaced persons and refugees. Since April 2017, UNHCR has assisted the return of over 31,200 refugees to the Central African Republic, nearly 5,000 of whom returned thus far in 2022. Another 30,000 refugees in neighbouring countries expressed an interest to return home.

In April 2022, UNHCR and the Government of Cameroon co-hosted a regional ministerial conference on solutions. This led to the adoption of the Yaoundé Declaration on Solutions in the Context of Forced Displacement related to the Central African Republic Crisis, signed by Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Congo (Republic of), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and the Sudan. The Declaration provides a harmonized regional framework for the achievement of solutions and foresees the establishment of a regional mechanism to mobilize all relevant stakeholders at local, regional and global levels.

Far North Cameroon

Renewed inter-communal clashes in Cameroon's Far North Region in December 2021 displaced some 36,000 people within the country and forced an estimated 45,000 across the border to Chad. UNHCR declared a level-2 emergency for Chad for the refugee response, alongside a level-1 emergency that had been declared earlier for the response to the internal displacement situation in Cameroon. The situation in the Far North Region has since then stabilized, allowing for the spontaneous return of approximately 12,600 internally displaced persons and refugees.

Lake Chad Basin

In the Lake Chad Basin, almost 3 million internally displaced persons and 340,000 refugees are dispersed across Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria due to violence by non-State armed groups. In Nigeria, some 830,000 people are internally displaced in the northwest and in the central part of the country as a result of attacks by non-State armed groups. Since mid-2019 to end of June 2022, some 91,000 Nigerians have fled from northwest Nigeria to the regions of Maradi and Tahoua in Niger, including around 30,300 new arrivals since January 2022.

The Central Sahel

By end of June 2022, the Central Sahel was host to some 4.9 million forcibly displaced persons in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Burkina Faso experienced one of the fastest-growing displacement crises in the world, with the number of internally displaced persons reaching 1.5 million by the end of April, according to the latest available government figures. The number of Burkinabe refugees continued to rise, with more than 45,000 fleeing to Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, the Niger and Togo.

Regular attacks by armed groups against villages and civilians forced thousands to flee. This was particularly the case in Burkina Faso, where in early June, non-State armed groups massacred 86 people and forced 34,000 to flee. In addition, counter-insurgency operations

sometimes led to human rights violations perpetrated against civilians and caused further forced displacement.

The Central Sahel was not spared from the growing food crisis, which was worsened by climate change and the presence of armed groups who targeted granaries and crops. Towns and villages were sometimes besieged, and roads, bridges and transport and telecommunication infrastructure were destroyed, hampering the delivery of aid and protection services.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2022 plan

Assistance

Between January and July 2022, UNHCR assistance and protection reached over 3.4 million persons across the region, including through \$18.7 million in cash-based interventions. UNHCR prioritized emergency assistance to newly displaced persons and groups with specific needs, while in parallel pursuing self-reliance interventions and solutions. The response was increasingly delivered by local partners, whose interventions contributed to improved humanitarian access.

Protection

UNHCR advocacy and support led to long-awaited legislative changes in several countries of the region. In Senegal, after more than a decade of discussions, a 1968 asylum law was revised in April 2022, as the parliament adopted a new legal framework to regulate the status of refugees and stateless persons. The new law strengthens the national asylum system, including by ensuring the right to appeal first-instance decisions, securing the right to family reunification for refugees and establishing a protection regime for stateless persons in the country.

In June 2022, Côte d'Ivoire adopted the country's first draft asylum law before introducing it to parliament. In Benin, the Council of Ministers adopted a draft bill on asylum, which was set to reform the 1975 legal framework.

On actions for the prevention of statelessness, the President of Liberia signed the Aliens and Nationality Law in August 2022, which granted women the same right as men to confer nationality to their children.

There was further progress towards the domestication of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) in Cameroon, Chad and Mali, with draft legislations currently under review by the respective Governments. UNHCR supported the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) multi-stakeholder workshop held in Ghana in July 2022. The workshop led to the adoption of a common roadmap for the full ratification and domestication of the Kampala Convention. In March 2022, Nigeria launched a national policy on internally displaced persons and welcomed the support of UNHCR in drafting an executive bill for the domestication of the Kampala Convention. In Burkina Faso, a roadmap for the domestication of the Kampala Convention was also adopted.

In July 2022, UNHCR and the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice signed a new memorandum of understanding, foreseeing the possibility for UNHCR to present its expert opinion to the court.

Gender-based violence remained a significant protection concern in both emergency and protracted refugee situations in the region. UNHCR pursued efforts to scale up its programmes to improve access to and the quality of services to prevent and address gender-based violence.

Delivering through complementary and innovative modalities since January 2022, a project in the Central African Republic documented and assisted some 1,790 incidents of gender-based violence in an in-person “listening centre” and received some 1,050 calls seeking remote support for survivors, medical referrals and information about its services. In Chad, multiple communication channels reached over 20,000 people and continued to be used to raise awareness about gender-based violence. In addition, men-only gender-based violence prevention committees were established, sensitizing communities to the issue in refugee camps and sites in Chad. In Burkina Faso, UNHCR and its partners facilitated access to income-generating activities for some 320 survivors of gender-based violence and women at-risk, and provided material assistance to around 970 others in order to strengthen self-reliance, meet essential needs and reduce dependence on external assistance.

Under the Safe from the Start initiative, UNHCR ensured dedicated support to combat gender-based violence, including through the deployment of expert staff to all emergencies affecting the region.

Ongoing armed conflict, growing insecurity, restricted humanitarian access, floods and the remote locations of refugee hosting areas, made it increasingly challenging to reach persons of concern. Information and feedback mechanisms were difficult to access and prevented the voices of affected populations from being heard. To address this, UNHCR used digital technology as a protection tool in Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali and the Niger, and implemented an initiative that aimed to develop two-way communication tools through connectivity.

UNHCR supported governments in the region to improve access to protective and quality education for forcibly displaced children and youth, including through appropriate vocational training opportunities, the rehabilitation of infrastructure, teacher training, school kits and individual cash assistance. For example, UNHCR entered into an agreement with the non-profit organization BioForce, which opened a regional centre in the Niger to train refugees and internally displaced persons on the management of humanitarian operations, facilitating their integration into the humanitarian workforce.

Solutions

Benin, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali and Togo officially invoked the cessation clause for Ivorian refugees, which came into effect at the end of June 2022, following the successful implementation of the Comprehensive Solution Strategy for Ivorian refugees. More than 316,000 refugees had been voluntarily repatriated since 2011, including more than 21,000 since the beginning of 2022. Exemption to the cessation procedures with the required protection safeguards was made available for those who remained in need of international protection. The Governments of Ghana and Liberia agreed to provide residency permits at no or low cost to former Ivorian refugees wishing to remain in their host country. These strong political commitments constituted best practices on which UNHCR will build to find solutions for other protracted displacement situations in the region and beyond.

With support from the World Bank, the Government of Cameroon issued for the first-time refugee identity cards to more than 5,000 refugees. With more funding, the Government would be targeting a total of 218,000 refugees.

The Government of Gabon pursued solutions for refugees by processing residency permits, and requests for naturalization of some 200 eligible refugees were successfully processed. The Government also agreed to issue regional Central African Economic and Monetary Community biometric passports and gave eligible refugees access to the national medical insurance scheme and the social guarantee fund. In Guinea-Bissau, the naturalization of some 800 refugees was completed in March 2022, bringing the total naturalized to over 6,180. Mali and Senegal have also begun increasingly facilitating access to citizenship for refugees.

In August 2022, UNHCR and the Economic Community of Central African States signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at establishing a cooperation framework towards enhancing regional protection and solutions in the central African region.

In the first half of 2022, the cases of some 1,340 individuals from the region were submitted for resettlement, a 92 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2021. The lifting of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) restrictions allowed more than 1,040 refugees to depart for resettlement, a 72 per cent increase over the previous year. The refugees were mainly resettled to Canada, France and the United States of America. In July, a new memorandum of understanding for the emergency transit mechanism was signed between the Niger and UNHCR, allowing evacuations from Libya to resume. Integrity safeguards and processes were strengthened, as well as the dedicated staff capacity.

Some 1,250 refugees applied to undergraduate and post-graduate education opportunities in France, Germany and Italy. Meanwhile, both the UNHCR operation in Ghana and the Senegal Multi-Country Office received a 3-year funding grant from Canada to support the recruitment of staff dedicated to the Canadian economic mobility programme.

C. Financial information

The 2022 budget approved by the Executive Committee at its seventy-second plenary session amounted to \$824.3 million. In 2022, a supplementary budget of \$59.6 million was approved for the response to the Far North Region of Cameroon situation. Financial requirements for the region stood at \$884.1 million. As of the end of July 2022, these needs were only 22 per cent funded, with \$192.2 million in funds available, taking into consideration the preliminary allocations of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions. This level was a stark decrease from the 47 per cent funding level reached at the same period in 2021.
