Overview of the refugee situation in Africa

**Background paper for the high-level segment of the
65th session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme on
"Enhancing International Cooperation, Solidarity, Local Capacities and Humanitarian
Action for Refugees in Africa"**

Geneva, 29 - 30 September 2014

As background to the high-level segment of the 65th session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, this paper identifies the key features, trends and challenges of the refugee situation in Africa today.

Even as the number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Africa has steadily increased in recent years, the region today maintains a resilient architecture for asylum and an enduring ethic of solidarity towards persons forced to seek safety from their homes. Whether in protracted asylum or only recently forcibly displaced, refugees continue to rely upon the region's tradition of hospitality and generosity – a tradition that is manifested in the maintenance of open borders, the provision of essential protection, and the grant of asylum typically through *prima facie* recognition.

At the same time, progress toward durable solutions, though meaningful in a handful of situations, has been impeded in others, leaving lives in limbo and, in some situations, seeing second, if not third, generations born into displacement. The eruption of new emergencies and escalation of others have not only severely strained humanitarian response capacities at the national and international levels, but also put further progress toward solutions at risk. In view of the profound humanitarian needs and insufficient progress toward solutions, as well as in the interest of regional peace and stability, it is hoped that the high-level segment will galvanize support to more effectively address forced displacement on the African continent, including identifying measures for enhanced solidarity and burden-sharing.

OVERVIEW

Of the approximately 43 million people of concern to UNHCR at the end of 2013, nearly one-third were in Africa, with 13 million in the sub-Saharan region and over 400,000 in northern Africa.[1] Within this population, the majority – 7.7 million, or 57 per cent – were internally displaced.[2] Refugees accounted for 3.4 million, while the stateless population in Africa stood at an estimated 721,000, based upon countries with reliable data.

Main countries of origin of refugees in Africa in 2013

- CAR — 7%
- Côte d'Ivoire — 3%
- DRC — 15%
- Eritrea — 9%
- Mali — 5%
- Rwanda — 3%
- Somalia — 33%
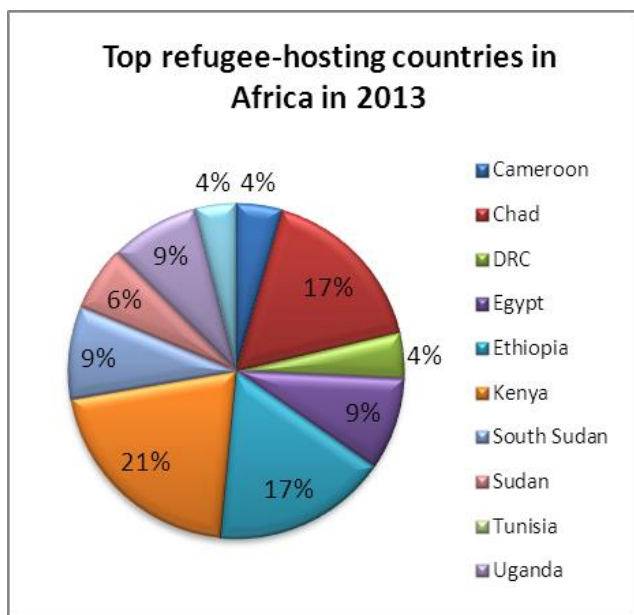- South Sudan — 3%
- Sudan — 19%
- Western Sahara — 3%

Among refugees, over 2.9 million were in sub-Saharan Africa, with approximately 400,000 in northern Africa. As reflected in **Figure 1**, the most significant populations of refugees as of 31 December 2013 were Somalis (1.1 million),

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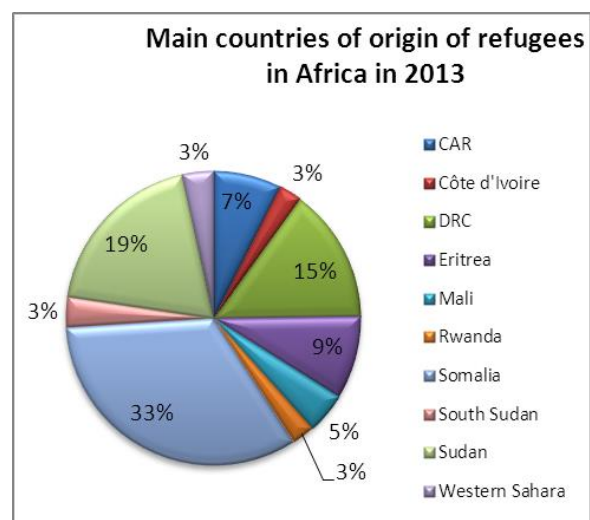
[1] Statistical data have been drawn from publicly available UNHCR documents, including *Global Trends 2013* and *UNHCR Statistical Yearbook*.
[2] This number reflects IDPs protected or assisted by UNHCR.

Sudanese (650,000), Congolese from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (500,000), Eritreans (308,000), refugees from Western Sahara (116,000) and South Sudanese (115,000).

Top refugee-hosting countries in Africa in 2013

The top refugee-hosting countries (**Figure 2**) were Kenya (hosting 530,000 refugees), Ethiopia (434,000), Chad (430,000), South Sudan (230,000), Egypt (230,000) and Uganda (220,000).

While the 3.4 million refugees in Africa today are less than half the numbers seen in the 1990s, this figure should be considered in light of developments since the start of this century. In particular, the total number of persons of concern to the Office, including IDPs, stateless persons and others, was stable in the first five years of the century, fluctuating near 5 million. (**Figure 3** below). With a near doubling later in 2005, it remained just above 10 million for another five years, growing in recent years to today's peak of 13.3 million.
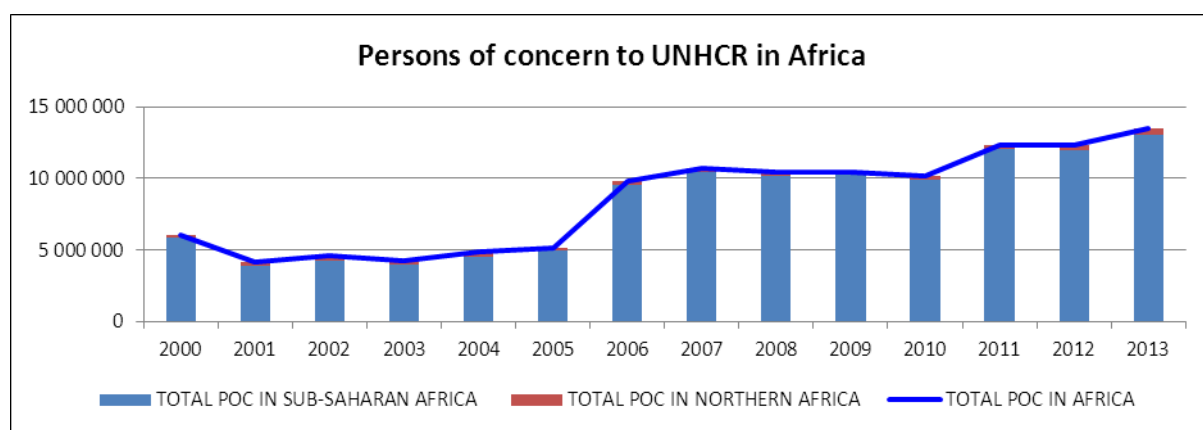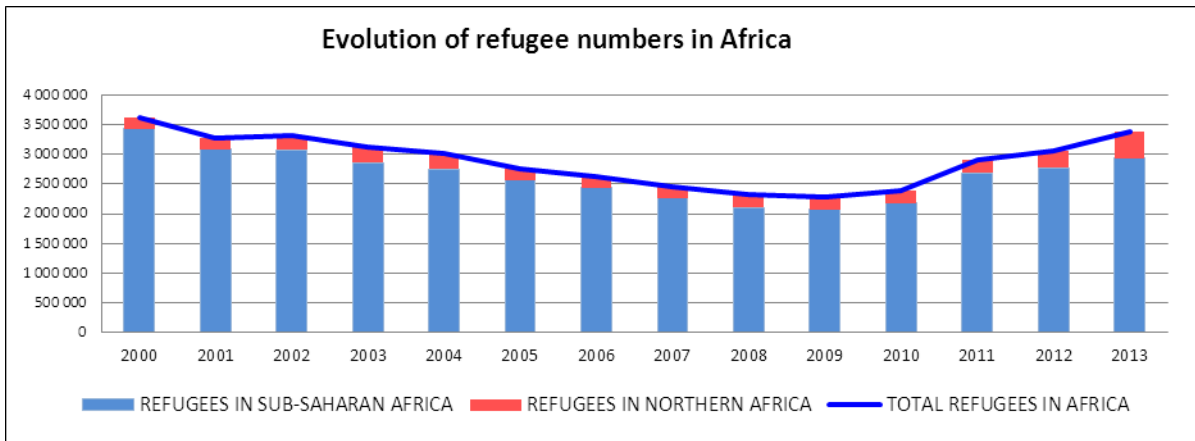

Persons of concern to UNHCR in Africa

Figure 4 (below, page 3) reflects a gradual but steady decline in refugee numbers from 2000 that continued until 2009. This was principally due the large-scale returns of Angolan, Burundian, Congolese (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Liberian, Sierra Leonean and Sudanese refugees to their countries of origin, as well as an absence of new, large-scale refugee displacements. This positive trend revered with the escalation of fighting in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo beginning in 2008. Since that time, Africa has experienced substantial annual increases in refugee numbers.

Evolution of refugee numbers in Africa

REFUGEES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA   REFUGEES IN NORTHERN AFRICA   TOTAL REFUGEES IN AFRICA

The most significant new refugee and IDP displacements have stemmed from the crises in the Central African Republic, Mali, Nigeria South Sudan, as well as the Syrian conflict, which has led to 163,000 refugees seeking asylum in northern Africa. The crisis that accompanied the overthrow of the government in the Central African Republic by the SELEKA rebel movement in March 2013, and the subsequent surge in ethno-religious violence, displaced 490,000 people internally, while another 181,000 fled across borders into Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo (see **Figure 5**). Meanwhile the Boko Haram insurgency in the Nigerian Federal States of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe has resulted in an estimated 650,000 IDPs and some 50,000 refugees who have fled to Cameroon, Chad and Niger.
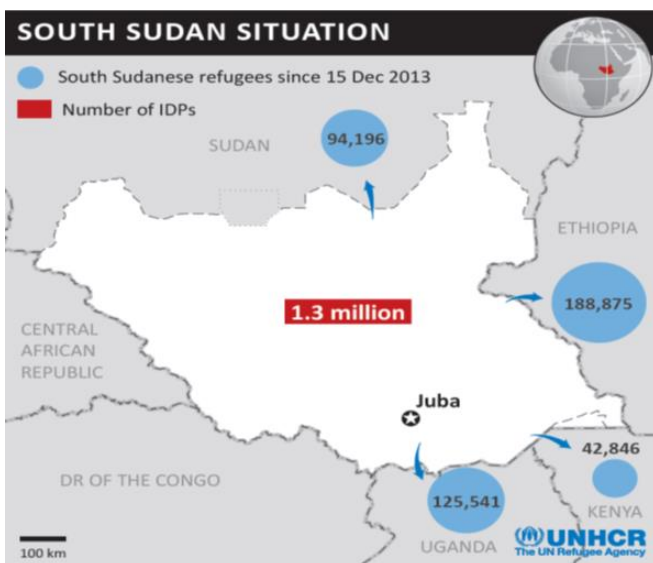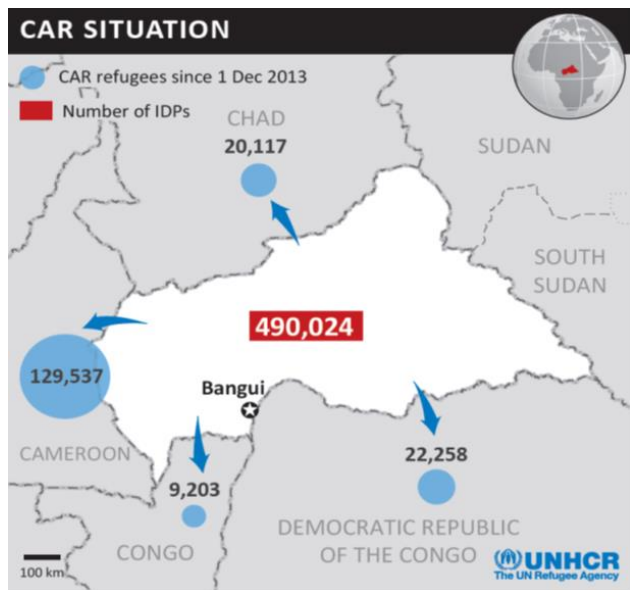
Since December 2013, nearly half a million new South Sudanese refugees sought protection in Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda (see **Figure 6**). This influx has resulted in Ethiopia becoming the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, sheltering nearly 630,000 refugees as of 31 July 2014. Meanwhile, the full impact on displacement of the Ebola crisis in West Africa, which has already led to a halt of the repatriation of Ivorian refugees from Liberia, remains to be seen.

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RESPONDING TO REFUGEE NEEDS

Critical as they are, the emergencies identified above are only one part of the picture of forced displacement in Africa. They are unfolding alongside protracted displacement crises, other situations in which solutions are being carried forward, and yet others in which refugees are moving alongside migrants motivated by other concerns, including economic. Despite the diversity of contexts, extreme vulnerability and human suffering remain the abiding images of the internal and cross-border displacement in Africa today. The exoduses from Somalia in 2011 and more recently from the Central African Republic and South Sudan experienced some of the worst global acute malnutrition and severe acute malnutrition rates of recent years, leading to the deaths of refugees who could not be saved following weeks of walking without adequate food or water to reach safety.

Refugees' basic assistance needs are substantial, including shelter, food, water, sanitation, health, education and community development, as well as access to opportunities for livelihoods and self-reliance. It is only through partnership – among host countries, donors, UNHCR, sister UN agencies, civil society as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – that, collectively, it has been possible to save the lives of most newly arriving refugees and to stabilize their situations.

Recently, the adequacy, timeliness and predictability of food availability for refugees have come under increased pressure. In at least 50 sites in nine African countries, WFP was forced to cut food rations up to 60 per cent, affecting 800,000 refugees. As of mid-June 2014, one-third of refugees relying on food assistance had been affected, with most experiencing over 50 per cent cut in their rations.

This picture – one of needs being met to some essential degree while critical gaps persist – is accurate for most other essential refugee needs in both emergency and continuing or protracted situations. Thus, while emergency shelters are provided to the refugees within a short time of arrival, most camps across the continent are characterized by degraded plastic sheets, tents and shacks, and non-food items are not sufficiently available for regular distribution. While refugees are badly exposed to the elements even under normal circumstances, they are particularly vulnerable to the extreme weather conditions, such as the storms and flooding now affecting the newly-arrived South Sudanese refugees in the Gambella region of Ethiopia. Such a situation is even worse where it is not possible to secure land for camps or settlements, so that the refugees remain for months in reception or transit facilities.

Emergency response operations strive to address not only immediate survival needs, but also the social, economic and community development needs of refugees. Yet in situations where limited resources must be prioritized for live-saving interventions, many refugee children do not have access to basic education, let alone secondary or tertiary education. This limited access, as well as high dropout rates, contributes to serious protection problems, including early and forced marriage, unplanned pregnancies, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), child labour and exploitation, and forced recruitment armed groups or criminal gangs. The existence youth without meaningful prospects for their future is thus another prevailing feature in many refugee situations in Africa.

THE STATE OF PROTECTION

The Africa region has, for the most part, a well-established and predictable legal, policy and administrative architecture for asylum and refugee protection. Many States have acceded to all or some of the international refugee and statelessness conventions as well the regional refugee and IDP conventions. National refugee legislation has been adopted or is in the process of being developed, as in Morocco and Tunisia.

A fundamental requisite for refugee protection is ensuring the capacity of all governments to manage and coordinate all aspects of refugee response and protection. While most governments have established institutions to deal with refugees, the functions and responsibilities discharged vary considerably, from government authorities with a comprehensive mandate including reception,

protection management, assistance and programmatic coordination, to those entrusted with broad coordination functions but no major role in protection delivery or operational management. Especially in the latter case, the national refugee institutions are not configured as part of the regular national civil service, are often seriously understaffed, and lack capacity to perform the critical functions of reception, registration, documentation and data management.

Among the most persistent protection problems are SGBV, as well as human trafficking and smuggling of persons occurring in the context of mixed migratory flows. Refugee women and children are disproportionately affected by SGBV, with girls and adolescents, single heads of households, and people with disabilities particularly at risk. The high number of unaccompanied or separated children in existing and new refugee situations accentuates these concerns.

Additional concerns relate to preserving and ensuring the civilian character of refugee camps and facilities. Refugees have ben been at risk in some situations when armed organizations have exerted influence, including through recruitment. In some cases, governments have responded strongly and deployed law enforcement, security and even military forces, which have proven critical in restoring an environment of safety and protection for all, especially where they have worked with the refugee and host communities and humanitarian agencies. In other cases, however, the attention of governments, UNHCR and other actors remains vital to redress these threats, including by identifying sites farther from borders and in curtailing the presence of armed groups.

The rights of refugees have been jeopardized through instances of *refoulement*, wrongful arrests and detention, sometimes in the course of actions to address national security concerns. Though relations among refugees and their hosts have traditionally been hospitable, tensions over shared resources can lead to other protection risks. There have been a number of instances of discrimination, demonizing, stereotyping as criminals and terrorists, and xenophobia, suggesting a need for efforts to promote peaceful co-existence between refugees and their host communities.

UNHCR and its protection partners remain active in advocacy, capacity and institution-building, and other activities to enhance protection, with an overriding objective of securing refugees' rights and enhancing their ability to care for themselves and their families. A positive development has been action by a number of States to permit refugees to live in and work in urban settings, whether in line with official "out of camp" policies, as in Ethiopia, or in practice, as in Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Egypt, Libya, Namibia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda among others. Morocco has granted mandate refugees residence permits that facilitate their access to national services such as health and education. Some governments have also admitted refugees to national institutions of higher learning and provided scholarships.

In other situations, the requirement to reside in camps is being enforced at pain of arrest, prosecution and even immigration removal for refugees and asylum-seekers refugees found outside without valid permits. UNHCR recognizes that political, security, and even operational realities may sometimes necessitate encampment. At the same time, the Office is discussing with relevant governments the tangible advantages of out of camp strategies and how the concerns driving reliance on camps may be addressed in alternative ways.

The protection challenges posed by mixed refugee and migratory movements are an increasing concern, especially given the often tragic consequences for those who embark on the dangerous sea or land voyages which many do not survive. States in Africa have increasingly recognized the need for a collaborative international response to mixed movements from the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region to the southern part of the continent and, conversely, from the sub-Saharan region to Europe transiting through North Africa. The understanding is that that the refugee protection and migration management systems are not adequately suited to respond to this phenomenon, although positive developments have been seen in affected countries including Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia. In this respect, UNHCR continues its support to curb human trafficking and smuggling of people in the East and Horn of Africa region, where Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan are implementing national plans to respond to the problem.

DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Due to their heightened visibility, emergencies attract the greater part of attention and resources, with comparatively less available to support the pursuit of solutions. There are situations in Africa today where solutions could be realized, but which are stalled principally for lack of financial resources.

Nonetheless, efforts to secure lasting and sustainable solutions for refugees in Africa continue, and in 2013, some 168,000 refugees were able to return to their country of origin. Although these numbers are below the large return movements that took place in the early 2000s, as illustrated in **Figure 7** below, significant returns took place to Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Equateur Province) Mali, Somalia and Sudan. Initially proceeding at a brisk pace, the return of Ivorian refugees has been suspended due to the Ebola epidemic and security incidents in western Cote d'Ivoire. Local integration is continuing to be pursued in the respective countries of asylum for those who have elected to stay.
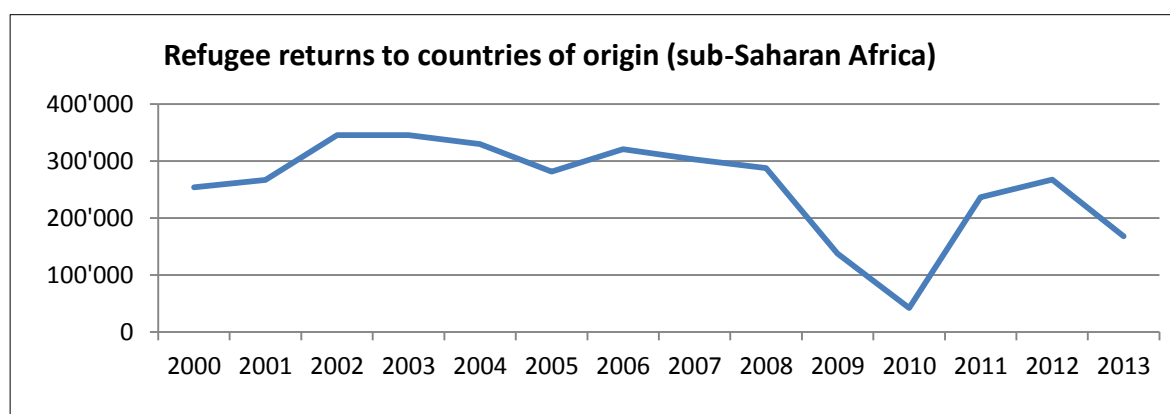
Several other efforts are being pursued in the respective country operations. At regional level, the Office is continuing to follow-up on comprehensive solutions strategies or initiatives for Angolan, Burundi, Eritrean, Liberian, Somali and Rwandese refugees. The Global Initiative on Somali Refugees, launched by the High Commissioner three years ago, is among these. The most recent phase of the Initiative was a Ministerial Conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in August this year, at which the six "core States" (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda and Yemen) adopted the *Addis Ababa Commitment Towards Somali Refugees*. The document elaborates key undertakings to sustain asylum and protection for Somali refugees, create conditions that will enable safe, dignified and sustainable return to Somalia, and make available or expand transformative opportunities for the refugees. An international conference on the Initiative is foreseen in 2015.

The last component of the strategy for Liberian refugees, which focused on local integration in the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria, were finalized with the delivery of over 5,580 passports to former refugees. Meanwhile, some 3,650 Rwandese have already returned home thus far in 2014, the majority from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with smaller numbers from Burundi, Kenya, the Republic of Congo and Uganda. Burkina Faso, Burundi, Niger, the Republic of Congo, Togo, Senegal, and Zambia have invoked the cessation of refugee status as provided for in the strategy. There are still 80,000 Rwandan refugees in the region, and other countries have started implementing activities related to the cessation of refugee status, even where not yet formally invoked.

A July 2014 tripartite agreement among Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and UNHCR paves the way for voluntary repatriation of some of the 30,000 remaining Angolan former refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Local integration for former Angolan refugees – principally through special immigration permits allowing individuals to remain under non-refugee arrangements – is farthest advanced in Namibia, South Africa and Zambia. In Zambia, up to 10,000 former Angolan

refugees will be locally integrated in this manner, with access to land for settlement and agriculture. South Africa, as well, has issued some 2,500 special immigration permits to former Angolan refugees, while in Namibia, 1,700 are awaiting completion of a similar process.

The return home of 37,000 former Burundian refugees remaining in Mtabila camp in Tanzania in late 2012 was a key advancement in the implementation of the comprehensive strategy for Burundian refugees. The naturalization of another 162,000 Burundians as Tanzanian citizens is awaiting completion.

In eastern Sudan, the local integration programme for Eritrean refugees continues with the intention of fully integrating the provision of services to refugees within mainstream programmes implemented by national and local authorities. Meanwhile Benin's issuance of 10-year residence permits to 4,000 mainly Togolese refugees has now allowed UNHCR to reduce its country presence and cover remaining responsibilities from its Regional Representation for West Africa.

Resettlement remains an essential protection tool for the most vulnerable refugees and a burden-sharing mechanism in the search for durable solutions. A record 28,452 submissions were made in 2013, an 81 per cent increase over 2012. In the first half of 2014, 12,733 submissions were made, mainly from Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. These include submissions pursuant to the on-going programme to resettle 50,000 Congolese (Democratic Republic of the Congo) refugees. Since 2012, 25 per cent of the target has been reached.

Departures have not kept pace with submissions, but did increase notably in 2013, to 14,858. In the first half of 2014, there have been 8, 677 departures. Though important, these numbers are quite modest relative to the number of refugees on the continent. UNHCR continues to advocate for more resettlement places, both for the protection of individuals in need and as complementary solutions for protracted caseloads.

HOST COMMUNITIES

Host communities are often the first and primary responders, particularly in the initial phases of a refugee influx when national authorities or international actors have not yet arrived. Where social services and natural resources, already constrained, are put under additional pressure, this can engender frustration or hostility among the local community. Accordingly, UNHCR's programmes for the benefit of refugees, particularly in health and education, are often implemented to benefit and strengthen the capacities of host communities as well.

Despite these efforts, the impact of refugees' presence has not been systematically addressed, even by refugee programmes with remedial components, such as reforestation. In recent years, UNHCR has increasingly advocated for the inclusion of refugee-affected host communities in broader programming efforts that are sustainable and properly integrated into national or regional development strategies. The Office is also interested in efforts to better understand and reflect the contributions of host governments and host communities and to illustrate their experience and good practices.

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

As reflected in **Figure** 8 below, between 2000 and 2005, the number of IDPs of concern to UNHCR in Africa was consistently below 2 million.

Evolution of IDP numbers in Africa
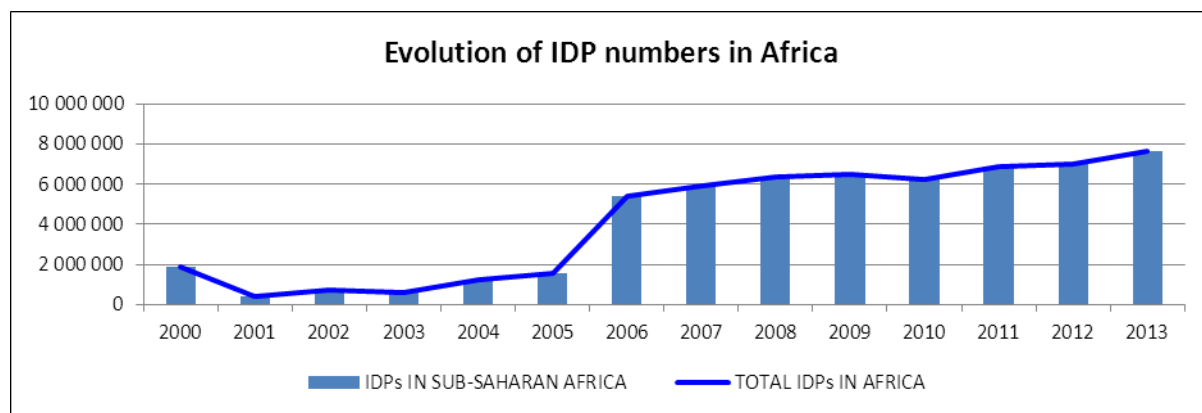
Since 2005, the number of IDPs of concern to UNHCR in Africa has more than tripled, and today stands at 7.7 million. In many situations, the Office leads one or more clusters and works with partners to develop and implement protection and solutions strategies. **Figure 9** identifies the main IDP-hosting countries in Africa.
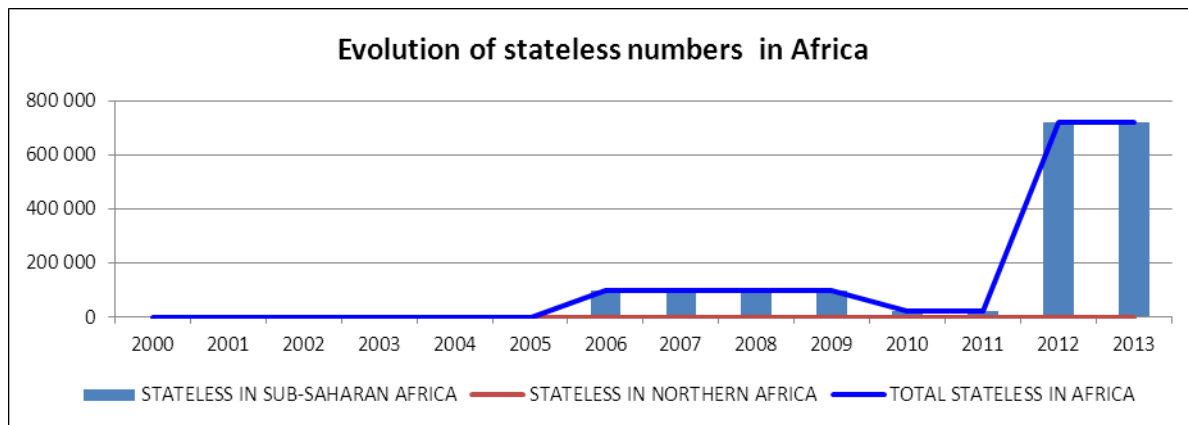
Main IDP-hosting countries in Africa in 2013
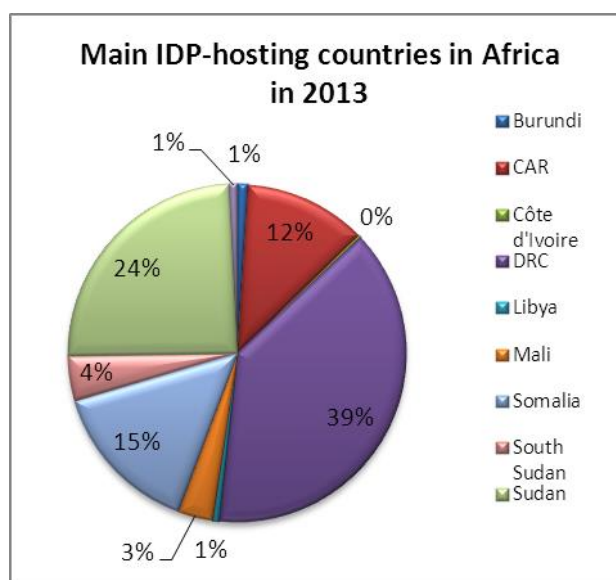
STATELESSNESS

Twenty African States are parties to the 1954 Statelessness Convention[3] and 14 are parties to the 1961 Convention.[4] The protection of stateless persons and the prevention and reduction of statelessness hinges on the ability to identify stateless persons or situations of statelessness. Despite this, most States globally, including in Africa, do not yet have policies or mechanisms supporting the identification and measurement of stateless populations. UNHCR's estimate of 10 million stateless people worldwide encompasses 3.5 million people in the 64 countries for which there are reliable statistics.

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[3] Algeria, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Swaziland, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.
[4] Benin, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Swaziland, Tunisia.

Improved data coverage is gradually enabling more accurate numbers. The sharp rise reflected in **Figure 10** for the year 2011 illustrates these efforts to improve data collection, particularly in Côte d'Ivoire where statistics have been officially published. As a result, the estimated 700,000 stateless persons in the country are now registered as persons of concern to UNHCR. In cooperation with governments, initiatives are underway in Chad, South Sudan and Sudan to build knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon and to mitigate the risks of statelessness.

Evolution of stateless numbers in Africa

STATELESS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA — STATELESS IN NORTHERN AFRICA — TOTAL STATELESS IN AFRICA

NATIONAL CAPACITIES FOR REFUGEE MANAGEMENT

UNHCR is not only concerned with its own capacity for refugee response and management, but is equally committed to build national capacities. As far as governments are concerned, areas targeted for capacity building focus on the fundamentals of refugee response, including reception, registration and documentation, and refugee status determination, as well as the establishment of camps and settlements, provision of material assistance and security.

Likewise, UNHCR works closely with NGO partners to strengthen their refugee response capacity. In Africa, UNHCR works with 219 NGOs: 132 national and 87 international. (See **Figure 11**)

NGOs bring special skills and expertise, as well as local knowledge that are essential for an effective response. In some situations, security factors make the presence of international actors difficult, if not impossible, adding to the importance of strong local partnerships. For this reason, UNHCR increasingly prioritized support for its national NGO partners. In 2007, it established a task force involving some 60 national NGOs across Africa to facilitate their interaction with the Office on an array

Comparison of national and international NGO partners in Africa

National NGOs 60%
International NGOs 40%

of questions, including training needs. UNHCR offers multi-faceted training through a global initiative aimed at strengthening the capacity of national NGO partners in emergency response and sustainable partnership. Several NGOs in Africa have been targeted for this training. Further strengthening cooperation with national NGOs remains a priority.
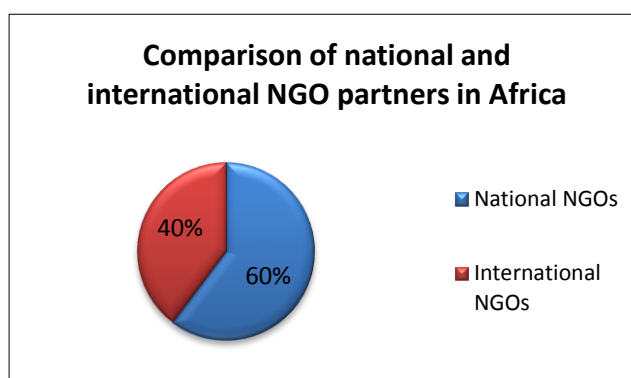
FUNDING FOR REFUGEE PROGRAMMES

With the number of new emergencies multiplying and long-standing situations failing to be resolved, the needs of populations of concern and corresponding financial requirements have grown

substantially. In just five years -- from 2009 when budgetary requirements for UNHCR's operations in sub-Saharan Africa were approximately $817 million – budgetary requirements have more than tripled, standing at $2.6 billion as of September 2014. Yet funding received has covered less than one-half of requirements: in 2014, some $1.09 billion has been made available to date.

The resulting gap has a significant impact on the scope and quality of the assistance provided to refugees. Securing funding for programmes beyond lifesaving activities, including needs in protracted operations and work to enable solutions, is a major challenge. Even for the emergencies in Africa, there are critical gaps. While the support of donors is gratefully acknowledged, the serious funding gap brings into question the integrity and sustainability of key protection, assistance and solutions efforts across the region.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how the refugee challenge in Africa has changed over the last 15 years. While progress has been achieved in many areas, acute suffering inflicted by displacement continues on a large-scale. Even when an organized, internationally-supported emergency response has been mounted, the unavailability of solutions and restricted funding for refugee programmes prolong the suffering and lead to tensions with host communities. The resilience of the asylum system and the principles of hospitality and solidarity widely demonstrated across countries in the region must be nourished and sustained by international solidarity and burden-sharing, as well as social and economic development in both countries of origin and asylum. At the same time, determined efforts are needed to mitigate the causes of conflict forcing people to seek safety in the first place, and to resolve the obstacles preventing those in exile from returning home.

UNHCR / Geneva / 23 September 2014