

Update on UNHCR's operations in southern Africa

A. Situational context including new developments

Southern Africa is currently home to some 9.7 million persons of concern. This includes almost 6.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), mainly in the Congo (Republic of), the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique and Zimbabwe; 1.1 million refugees and asylum-seekers; and an estimated 2.1 million IDP returnees¹. More than two-thirds of those displaced in the region are from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with some 962,000 hosted in 20 African countries. The situation is further complicated by the impact of climate change and natural disasters, which have caused loss of life, livelihoods and property, and created setbacks on the path to development.

In May 2021, the eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano, close to the humanitarian hub of Goma, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, left an estimated 30,000 individuals homeless. The displacement resulting from the eruption happened against a backdrop of an already grave humanitarian situation in North Kivu, where there were nearly 2 million IDPs. As part of the joint United Nations relief efforts, UNHCR is responding to immediate protection and assistance needs, and is working with the authorities to conduct biometric registration. Also in May, fresh outbreaks of fighting in the north-east provinces of Ituri and North Kivu led to the Government declaring an *état de siège*.

UNHCR continues to lead the coordination of the inter-agency regional refugee response plan for the Democratic Republic of the Congo situation. The plan aims to provide protection and assistance to the most vulnerable, bolster livelihood opportunities and support the needs of host populations, and strengthen peaceful coexistence, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR).

Conflict in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province has escalated since October 2017, forcing more than 732,000 people from their homes as of April 2021. There are reports of widespread human rights abuses, and access to some areas is limited due to insecurity. The escalating violence compounds challenges arising from under-development and climate shocks, and the country is still recovering from tropical cyclones Idai and Kenneth in 2019. UNHCR and partners have adapted their humanitarian operations to the COVID-19 context, to address the immediate needs of IDPs and host communities in northern Mozambique and seek durable solutions for refugees in the country. The level-2 emergency announced by UNHCR ended on 19 May.

Violence in the Central African Republic following the December 2020 elections led to 213,000 people becoming internally displaced and some 128,500 seeking asylum in several countries, including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (73,645) and the Congo (Republic of) (5,803) as of June 2021. Biometric registration is being carried out in both countries in order to facilitate protection and assistance effectively, according to the needs.

Southern Africa continues to experience mixed flows of persons fleeing conflict, persecution and natural disasters, combined with economic migrants from over 90 countries. Despite asylum-seekers making up only a small proportion of those crossing borders in the region, many national asylum systems are overwhelmed, causing backlogs in asylum claims and implications for the reception of asylum-seekers.

¹ This figure is provided by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

As of end July, there have been 3.26 million reported cases of COVID-19 across the 16 countries in the region. The socio-economic impact of the pandemic is devastating, with poverty and food insecurity on the rise and previously self-sufficient refugees and asylum-seekers approaching UNHCR for direct assistance as the pandemic protracts.

Refugees and asylum-seekers have been included in national response plans across the region, although health systems are under acute pressure and there are serious gaps in access to testing in refugee-hosting areas, especially in the Congo (Republic of), Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique. Vaccination programmes include persons of concern to UNHCR, although the rollout is slow across the region due to gaps in supply, vaccine hesitancy and weak national vaccine delivery systems. A total of 4,326 persons of concern are reported to have received a first dose, and 443 had received the second dose as of end July. Figures mainly reflect vaccination in camps and settlements, as it is challenging to track vaccination in urban areas.

Throughout the pandemic, UNHCR has supported national health responses in the region by providing medical equipment and supplies to health facilities, supporting some 71 government facilities and 35 facilities in refugee camps and settlements. Interventions in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) have also remained a priority as a preventive measure. Since the pandemic began, UNHCR has reached 2.8 million persons of concern through risk communication activities and provided soap to 2.2 million. With the support of UNHCR, displaced communities across the region have played an active role in raising awareness about preventing the spread of COVID-19 and combating vaccine hesitancy.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Favourable protection environment

The political will expressed by countries in the region at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum is evident as many progress towards realizing their pledges, despite the additional challenges posed by the pandemic.

To support ratification of the refugee conventions and other key international and regional instruments, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and UNHCR established a five-year joint action plan (2020-2024). The plan also aims to strengthen research, harmonize processes and support the development of appropriate policies on asylum, internal displacement and statelessness.

Progress has been made towards strengthening asylum systems in several countries, although systems and processes are predominantly overwhelmed. In the Congo (Republic of), a national asylum law is under consideration by the Parliament, while Seychelles and Zimbabwe have requested technical support to draft national legal asylum frameworks. Comoros has expressed its intention to ratify the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.

Important steps have also been made towards protecting IDPs. Mozambique adopted a national policy on IDPs in line with the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) in August 2021, and the Congo (Republic of) is in the process of drafting similar legislation. UNHCR is supporting these domestication processes. The Governments of the Congo (Republic of) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are also making preparations for the targeted registration of internally displaced populations with the support of UNHCR.

Following reports of the forced return of 10,000 Mozambicans seeking refuge, a Joint Communiqué by the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, the Special Rapporteur on refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in Africa and UNHCR was issued on 15 July. The three parties appealed for those fleeing the conflict in Cabo Delgado to have access to territory and asylum. Smaller scale incidents related to access to territory were reported in Madagascar and Zambia.

Progress towards the eradication of statelessness has been made in almost every country in the region. The Congo (Republic of), Democratic Republic of the Congo, Namibia and Zambia are moving towards accession to the statelessness conventions, and Lesotho,

Madagascar and Namibia are in the process of reforming their legal nationality frameworks. Botswana submitted four new pledges, and the Republic of the Congo is issuing civil registration documents to those identified as undocumented during the 2019 census. Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe are including statelessness questions in their population censuses. Legal aid was provided to some 8,000 persons in Madagascar, Mozambique and South Africa to support access to documentation or to confirm nationality, and approximately 500 people had their nationalities confirmed. The Pan-African Parliament is reviewing a draft model law on nationality and statelessness.

Fair protection process and documentation

Registration rates returned to pre-pandemic levels in most States in the region, including birth registration. Positive developments include the Government of Malawi agreeing to amend its national registration legislation to include refugees, and Mauritius and UNHCR having agreed on standard operating procedures to prevent refoulement and facilitate refugee status determination and solutions. In South Africa, a four-year plan to address the backlog of 150,000 cases pending in the appeal process began in March.

Within mixed flows, people are at times subjected to human rights violations including extortion, abandonment and physical and sexual violence. In collaboration with States and regional bodies, UNHCR is working to ensure better protection for affected populations, including support to the development of the SADC Disaster Displacement Strategy, which aims to address the root causes of mixed flows, and prevent protection incidents. In Zimbabwe, alternatives to detention have been incorporated into the referral mechanism for asylum-seekers and refugees. Border monitoring visits are carried out regularly, and a reception centre at Zimbabwe's border with Mozambique was renovated to receive new arrivals.

Security from violence and exploitation

Gender-based violence is increasing among displaced populations, due to the hardships of the pandemic combined with social norms. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, incidents of widespread and systematic sexual violence against Congolese women and girls, perpetrated by armed groups, remain of concern. Almost 2,800 incidents were recorded on the territory in the first half of the year. UNHCR and partners continue to work with local authorities and humanitarian actors to ensure that psychosocial and medical support is provided to survivors, though ongoing conflict and long distances required to reach health centres are making it extremely difficult for them to access assistance.

UNHCR has established solid prevention and response mechanisms in the region and is working towards mainstreaming risk mitigation. Community protection structures and holistic support for survivors' health, psychological wellbeing and access to justice are core elements of UNHCR's response to all forms of violence and exploitation in the region, including gender-based violence. In the Congo (Republic of), Mozambique and South Africa, training and awareness-raising sessions on preventing gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse were carried out for the local authorities, civil society, and refugee, IDP and host communities. A safe house and a one-stop centre providing services and referrals were established in Zambia.

Basic needs and services

Across southern Africa, operations are prioritizing humanitarian assistance to ensure basic needs are met, though growing demand triggered by the pandemic is leaving increasing numbers in a vulnerable position.

Support to health systems and services is a priority. High morbidity and mortality rates, low nutrition, poor healthcare infrastructure and services, poor living conditions, and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and malaria present major challenges in the region. Access to care and treatment for refugees and asylum-seekers remains an area for improvement in most countries.

Climate and economic shocks, combined with gaps in food rations and supplementary feeding programmes, are driving food insecurity, which is expected to remain high in places like

Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) are collaborating on advocacy measures to improve refugee food security and nutrition in the region.

Support to WASH systems is vital to combat the spread of COVID-19. UNHCR is focusing on community initiatives, such as capacity-building, infrastructure and hygiene promotion, waste disposal and access to clean water. Insecurity and insufficient funding pose significant challenges to WASH activities in the Congo (Republic of) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Shelter needs are high among the newly displaced. Some 500 IDP families in Mozambique and 2,700 IDP families in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have received emergency shelter kits and equipment to rehabilitate their current dwellings.

UNHCR is implementing a range of energy initiatives, powering health centres, guest houses and street lighting from renewable sources. To promote clean energy at the household level, solar-powered lamps, biogas and clean cooking fuels are being used in Malawi and Zimbabwe, and some 2,300 IDP households in the Democratic Republic of the Congo received solar lanterns.

Cash-based interventions are part of regular programming in the Congo (Republic of), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa and Zambia. Some 30,000 families across the region have received cash assistance from UNHCR since the start of the year.

Efforts to improve access to e-learning for school students are of marked importance, especially as the pandemic continues to compromise classroom time across the region. The “connect my school” project in Malawi will improve connectivity and e-learning platforms for teachers and learners in the country’s refugee camps from October 2021.

Community empowerment and self-reliance

Empowering the displaced is at the heart of the response in southern Africa. Community protection structures aim to be inclusive and representative of the whole community, promote dialogue between displaced populations, local communities and the authorities, and strengthen empowerment through participation in decision-making processes. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, community protection groups received support and training from UNHCR to enhance the protection of marginalized groups. In Mozambique, a network of community focal points was trained to raise awareness of protection issues, especially to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse. In Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, community leaders play an active role in COVID-19 risk communication.

The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic has devastated refugee livelihoods, leaving many previously self-sufficient people dependent on assistance to survive. In the first quarter of 2021, UNHCR provided livelihood assistance to more than 11,700 displaced persons and host community members in the region.

Partnerships are generating new opportunities for self-reliance, especially in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, collaboration between the Food and Agriculture Organization, UNHCR and WFP have led to the inclusion of more than 900 refugee families from the Central African Republic in established resilience and livelihood programmes. Also in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a joint multisector programme in which UNHCR plays a key role is anticipated to begin shortly. The programme is expected to support the livelihoods of 2,000 refugee and host community families.

States are making progress towards implementing pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum in 2019 aimed at enhancing economic inclusion. Notably, Malawi and Zambia have taken steps towards including persons of concern in agriculture programmes, and Eswatini formalized its pledge to allocate 500 hectares of land to the refugee population for agricultural purposes.

UNHCR collaborates with a broad range of stakeholders to ensure refugee and host community inclusion in national and international development plans and programming. It is working with the World Bank Group in the Congo (Republic of) and the Democratic Republic

of the Congo, and is expanding engagement with *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* and the African Development Bank in other countries in the region.

Durable solutions

As borders reopen, voluntary repatriation movements have resumed, although underfunding and ongoing COVID-19 restrictions are causing delays. A harmonized assistance package enhances the safety and sustainability of return movements in the region. Planning figures for 2021 anticipated the return of some 25,000 people, mostly to Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Zimbabwe – although less than a quarter of this number had returned as of end-July.

Local integration programmes are progressing in several countries, especially Namibia and Zambia where multi-year projects to sustainably integrate former refugees from Rwanda and Angola through socioeconomic inclusion are ongoing. To support the integration of former Angolan refugees across the region, UNHCR is finalizing a strategy to address delays and bureaucratic hurdles to providing documentation to former refugees and to minimize the risk of statelessness. A study on statelessness and solutions in the Great Lakes Region is underway, using the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a case study. The conclusions of the study will assist with finding solutions for this population.

Resettlement continues to be constrained by COVID-19-related restrictions. Resettlement countries made approximately 5,100 places available to the region for 2021, predominantly in the United States of America. Some 883 submissions were made in the first half of 2021, and 435 people departed for resettlement.

C. Financial information

The comprehensive needs budget for southern Africa for 2021, approved by the Executive Committee in October 2020, amounted to \$345 million. This increased to \$388.51 million as of the end of July 2021, reflecting an increase of \$9.9 million for the IDP situation in northern Mozambique, \$20.4 million to mitigate the protection and socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, and \$13.2 million for the Central African Republic refugee emergency impacting the Congo (Republic of) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Regional activities were 36 per cent funded as of end-July.
