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## **Update of UNHCR operations in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region**

### **A. Situational analysis, including new developments**

By the end of 2023, the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region hosted some 5.1 million refugees and asylum-seekers and 19.4 million internally displaced persons, totalling some 24.5 million people. The majority of refugees and asylum-seekers were in Uganda (1.6 million), the Sudan (968,000), Ethiopia (957,000), and Kenya (692,000). The internally displaced were mainly located in the Sudan (9.1 million), Ethiopia (4.4 million), Somalia (3.9 million), South Sudan (2 million) and Burundi (74,000).

The conflict in the **Sudan**, which escalated since fighting broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces and rebel groups in Khartoum in April 2023, has led to displacement inside and across borders, constituting the largest humanitarian crisis in the region. As of January 2024, some 6.1 million Sudanese were newly internally displaced, while over 1.5 million people had fled to the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, Rwanda, South Sudan and Uganda. These figures include people who were already internally displaced and refugees who had sought safety in the Sudan prior to the conflict. An increase in the number of Eritreans, Ethiopians and Sudanese crossing into Libya from the Sudan, historically a departure and transit country for mixed movements, has been observed.

In 2024, UNHCR will continue its response to the emergency in all affected countries, under the leadership of the Regional Refugee Coordinator. Together with partners, UNHCR will address the needs of those displaced in the region through the 2024 inter-agency Regional Refugee Response Plan, which covers the emergency as well as resilience activities and interventions aimed at strengthening inclusion and national systems. UNHCR will also prioritize the protection of displaced people impacted by the gender-based violence that has dominated the Sudan crisis.

**South Sudan** remains Africa’s largest displacement situation, with over 2.2 million refugees in neighbouring countries and 2 million internally displaced persons. Since the outbreak of the war in the Sudan, South Sudan has received over 425,000 refugee returnees, alongside some 103,000 Sudanese refugees. With respect to its emergency response to the influx, UNHCR will prioritize integrated settlement approaches where possible. Solutions will be pursued for South Sudanese returnees, Sudanese refugees, and internally displaced persons. In this context, UNHCR will work closely with the national steering committee to fully activate the national taskforce on the costed plan of action associated with the national durable solutions strategy adopted in late 2023.

By the end of December 2023, over 811,000 refugees from the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** were hosted in neighbouring East African countries, of whom 52,130 were received and assisted in Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania in 2023. Host countries struggle to provide critical lifesaving services to new arrivals amid declining funding. In May 2023, tripartite discussions between the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and UNHCR were initiated to explore the feasibility of refugee returns from Rwanda, with follow-up technical working group meetings in June and November 2023. Discussions will continue in 2024, with the aim of initiating returns, where feasible. In 2024, the support of the international community to address insecurity in the eastern provinces will be required to prevent further displacement and decrease protection risks.

**Somalia** continues to be affected by conflict, climate-related shocks, including drought and floods, outbreaks of communicable diseases and weak social protection mechanisms. Almost 3.9 million people are internally displaced, with 787,000 Somali refugees in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Yemen. The overall security situation remains volatile with non-State armed groups present in northern Somaliland around Lascaanood. The security situation and counter-terrorism operations undertaken by the Somali National Army against non-State armed groups, including al-Shabaab in the south, have presented a challenging environment in which to deliver protection, assistance and essential services, and have also impacted the prospects of a large-scale return of displaced populations.

The political and security situation in **Burundi** has been relatively stable, which has encouraged refugees to voluntarily return home despite ongoing economic challenges, reduced assistance from the international community and limited services in areas of return. In 2023, some 26,000 Burundian refugees were assisted to return, a 21 per cent increase from 2022. The twenty-eighth meeting of the Tripartite Commission involving UNHCR and the Burundian and Tanzanian governments, held in December 2023, agreed to transition from facilitating returns to Burundi to promoting them in 2024. The Government of Burundi and UNHCR will continue to mobilize development actors to support the sustainable reintegration of Burundian returnees.

After a long and devastating multi-year drought, the **Horn of Africa** is now facing the effects of the El Niño phenomenon. Displaced people continue to be on the frontlines of the climate emergency. Since September 2023, 5.2 million people in Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan and the Sudan have been affected by heavy rains, which have provoked floods landslides and destroyed infrastructure. Over 4.5 million people in the region have been displaced by climate-related disasters, with 68,000 cases of cholera reported. Forecasts for unusually wet climatic conditions in 2024 will likely contribute to further displacement, disease outbreaks and food insecurity.

UNHCR will continue implementing multi-sectorial responses in its refugee operations, including in the areas of protection, shelter, health and nutrition, and water and sanitation, while for internally displaced persons maintaining cluster coordination responsibilities for protection, emergency shelter and non-food items, and camp coordination and camp management. This approach will also be followed for displaced persons affected by the floods. In the first quarter of 2024, UNHCR will engage in an inter-agency needs assessment exercise for affected communities, which will inform recovery strategies.

Protracted and new conflicts have resulted in onward and **mixed movements** across the region and beyond. UNHCR will enhance its protection responses for people on the move, including by strengthening monitoring and the provision of services along the migration routes, with particular attention to children, women and youth. Support to States to identify and address the factors that contribute to onward movements will be prioritized. As of January 2024, all new, multi-year country strategies will incorporate activities in countries along two key routes from the East and the Horn of Africa to North Africa and via the central Mediterranean to Europe.

## **B. Progress and challenges in 2023 and updated plans for 2024**

### *Global Compact on Refugees and the second Global Refugee Forum*

The region was well represented at the second Global Refugee Forum in December 2023, co-convened by Uganda, with participants from governments, displaced persons, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders. The region was represented by 67 refugees who had speaking roles and featured in 27 side events. Host governments and other entities from the region submitted 100 new pledges that set the vision and ambitions for protection, inclusion and solutions over the next four years. Pledges include transforming camps into settlements and municipalities (such as in Ethiopia and through Kenya's Shirika Plan), as well as increasing access to education and agriculture in communities hosting forcibly displaced people across the region. UNHCR and partners have embarked on multi-stakeholder pledge coordination and management to support pledge implementation action plans.

*Promoting a favourable protection environment*

Inconsistent access to national asylum procedures was observed in some situations, leaving many unregistered and undocumented asylum-seekers unable to meet their basic needs and remaining vulnerable to refoulement. A reduced willingness to grant refugee status to certain populations on a prima facie basis, coupled with a reticence to operationalize fair and efficient individualized asylum procedures, has resulted in a backlog of more than 315,000 registered asylum-seekers, impacting inclusion in national systems, access to rights and durable solutions. The increasingly restrictive responses by States to mixed movements also raised protection concerns. UNHCR will continue to support States and regional entities to adopt and implement favourable policies for refugees and asylum-seekers in the region, most of whom are nationals of countries from the region. The validation of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's (IGAD) Policy Framework on Refugee Protection<sup>1</sup> will facilitate a harmonized approach to refugee management and asylum in the IGAD region. Similar efforts are underway with the East African Community.

*Strengthening child protection, and preventing and responding to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse*

In 2023, there were 2.7 million refugee children in the region exposed to protection risks, including family separation; sexual exploitation and abuse; child trafficking and smuggling; and a lack of access to asylum and documentation. In 2024, UNHCR will focus on strengthening national child protection systems and alternative care and family tracing initiatives, establishing community support mechanisms and enhancing the capacity of child protection partners in country operations. Collaboration with relevant stakeholders on child protection coordination mechanisms will also be prioritized.

Given alarming reports of conflict-related sexual violence, including rape, gang rape and ethnically targeted attacks, UNHCR will continue to prioritize programmes for the prevention of gender-based violence, as well as for risk mitigation and response, with a focus on the inclusion of refugee women and girls in national social and legal protection frameworks. Through engagement with community-based organizations, including those led by women, remote service provision and case management will be strengthened.

*Education*

In 2023, approximately 51 per cent of displaced children were out of school. Only 20 per cent of refugee children attended secondary school, with 2 per cent in tertiary education. Low levels of post-primary education pose protection risks, including exposure to gender-based violence, child labour and recruitment into armed groups, while limiting access to livelihood activities and increasing dependency. UNHCR will continue to strengthen and expand opportunities for inclusion in national systems for refugees, asylum-seekers and returnees. Support to emergency education programmes will be provided in emergency settings.

*Protection and solutions for internally displaced persons*

UNHCR's protection focus for the 19.4 million people internally displaced within the region by conflict and natural disasters will remain on life-saving activities informed by protection monitoring. Concurrently, sustainable solutions will be pursued, where viable, in line with the Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement.

*Cash and multi-sector assistance*

In 2023, approximately 900,000 individuals received cash grants, compared to 1.2 million people in 2022, as a result of a reduction in available funding. At least 85 per cent of beneficiaries were refugees, 11 per cent internally displaced persons, 3.5 per cent returnees and less than 1 per cent individuals from host communities. Approximately 49 per cent of cash transfers were made through banks and mobile transactions. Post-distribution monitoring reports indicated that 83 per cent of recipients preferred a cash modality of assistance, while

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://igad.int/regional-review-and-validation-workshop-on-the-draft-igad-policy-framework-on-refugee-protection/>

35 per cent preferred a combination of in-kind and cash grants. Findings also indicated that 84 per cent of recipients were able to purchase desired items in local markets. Food purchases ranked highest, followed by hygiene items and firewood or fuel. Where feasible, UNHCR will continue to prioritize cash interventions, including in its emergency responses, and increase the digitalization of transactions to ensure financial inclusion.

### *Health*

In 2023, the region's fragile health systems continued to experience challenges in terms of capacity to deliver adequate services. Funding shortfalls constrained health activities, impacting partners and ministries of health. Refugees, particularly in urban areas, continued to face cost barriers to accessing primary health care in some countries. The conflict in the Sudan drastically damaged the health infrastructure, impeding access to life-saving services. Outbreaks of communicable diseases, such as cholera, measles and dengue fever, significantly affected displaced people in the Sudan.

In 2024, operations in the region will focus on strengthening access to primary health care, responding to epidemics and supporting national health systems. Strategies to promote inclusion in national health insurance and social protection schemes, informed by good practice examples in countries like Djibouti, will also be prioritized.

### *Food security*

Refugees and internally displaced persons are among the most vulnerable to acute food insecurity, as they have lost assets, had their community-based safety nets disrupted, and lack access to national social protection systems. The 4.4 million refugees who depend on humanitarian food aid received only between 30 to 60 per cent of the full food basket ration in 2023. UNHCR surveys revealed that 1 in 10 refugee children under the age of 5 suffered from acute malnutrition, and nearly half of all children under the age of 5 had stunted growth and micronutrient deficiencies, which, if left untreated, could have long-term effects. In 2024, UNHCR will work with the World Food Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization and other partners to increase food security through agricultural and other livelihood interventions.

### *Livelihoods*

There is a high level of commitment from IGAD and the East African Community to advocate and support freedom of movement and conducive policies that enable economic inclusion for refugees in the region, as per the Munyonyo Ministerial Declaration on Durable Solutions. However, legal frameworks in some countries do not foster formal access to employment for refugees. A regional livelihoods survey conducted by UNHCR in 2023 indicated that 66 per cent of refugees lived in countries with limited or no access to formal employment. The main obstacles included mandatory work permits, administrative restrictions and high unemployment rates in the host economies. Continuing to work with development partners and international financial institutions in 2024 remains key to fostering economic growth and facilitating employment opportunities.

### *Durable solutions*

In 2023, some 578,000 people returned to their countries of origin, the majority to Burundi and South Sudan and smaller numbers to Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia and the Sudan. South Sudan has faced challenges in finding immediate solutions for returnees from the Sudan, some of whom continue to be hosted in temporary transit centres. In Burundi, the reintegration of returnees requires additional support, including from development actors.

In 2023, UNHCR submitted a record number of 35,750 cases for resettlement from the region. Close to 28,000 refugees departed for third countries, doubling departures in 2022. Refugees benefited from private sponsorship, family reunification, employment and educational opportunities, as well as other pathways for refugee admission to third countries. In 2024, UNHCR will continue to pursue routes-based approaches, including supporting the Emergency Transit Mechanism in Rwanda; focus on protection referrals based on heightened

vulnerabilities; provide protection through the strategic identification of refugees in protracted displacement and engage with partners to ensure equitable access to third country solutions.

#### *Eradication of statelessness*

The draft Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights Relating to the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa was adopted at the African Union summit in February 2024. Moving forward, UNHCR will continue to play a catalytic role to facilitate the ratification of the Protocol through advocacy with Member States of the African Union.

In July 2023, UNHCR and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region organized an experts' conference that galvanized the support of development partners towards addressing statelessness. A new study on Preventing Statelessness by Advancing Durable Solutions in the Great Lakes Region highlighted the risk of statelessness among refugees in a protracted situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, due to the lack of documentation with which nationality could be claimed.

In 2024, UNHCR will work to mainstream the prevention of statelessness in comprehensive durable solutions strategies in the region and support States in the implementation of related pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum 2023. UNHCR will prioritize access for displaced persons in the Great Lakes region to civil documentation. This includes continued collaboration with the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region on their pledge to develop and adopt a regional civil registration policy, which will enhance access to civil status documentation, particularly birth certificates.

#### *Risk management*

High risks identified by UNHCR operations in the region relate to emergencies (preparedness for influxes and climate disasters); the protection environment (support for internally displaced persons, access to territory, externalization, aid diversion); essential services (lack of access, insufficient funding, food insecurity); and climate change. Mitigation measures have been identified in operational risk registers for action. Opportunities include the pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum in 2023, progress on inclusion and the expansion of partnerships. Work will continue on defining risks and putting in place mitigation measures in selected operations (Ethiopia, Kenya and the Sudan), launching a risk-based oversight tool for the region, conducting training in risk management for partners and conducting fraud risk assessments for country operations.

### **C. Financial information**

The Executive Committee has approved the 2024 budget of \$2,149.0 million for the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region.

This comprehensive needs budget for the region aims to respond to ongoing emergencies, including: the displacement resulting from the devastating conflict in the Sudan; conflicts in Somalia's Laasanoob region and in Ethiopia's Amhara region; recovery interventions for displaced and returning populations in northern Ethiopia; refugee influxes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan into Uganda; the return of Burundian refugees; and the floods in Somalia and South Sudan. In the current environment of reduced resources, emergency responses will be prioritized, as well as the inclusion agenda to allow refugees to benefit from national programmes. As of 31 January 2024, operational needs for the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region have been 12 per cent funded, with \$254.7 million in voluntary contributions recorded, including the indicative allocation of flexible funding.

In line with the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR is mapping resources allocated to refugee situations through development partners and others that would complement resources from UNHCR. This would inform prioritization and increase efficiency, while continuing to explore opportunities for direct funding from certain development partners.