

89th Standing Committee | 13 March 2023

Mamadou Dian Balde, Director Regional Bureau for the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region

Madame Chair,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We began last year full of hope, in the Region:

The peace agreement ending the conflict in northern Ethiopia had been signed;

The solutions initiative for South Sudan and Sudan was progressing.

In Kenya, the Shirika plan was underway.

We were marching toward the 2nd Global Refugee Forum with great confidence.

Yet, that hope was tested.

In February, the outbreak of conflict in Lascaanood, Somalia caused more than 100,000 people to flee to Ethiopia. Continued conflict in the eastern DRC led to thousands fleeing to Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi.

And now, we are grappling with a major humanitarian emergency, caused by a brutal war at the center of the African continent - in Sudan. The conflict has caused one of the largest protection crises in recent years, with over 8 million people displaced in less than one year. Our Sudanese brothers and sisters and the refugees they were hosting have lost loved ones, livelihoods, and a future for their children.

In the middle of all these challenges, we have seen neighbouring countries and communities keeping their borders and doors open to receive those forced to flee; humanitarian partners coming together to

support hosting countries in the response; development partners, such as the World Bank, African Development Bank and the European Union stepping up their efforts from the start of an emergency - a way of working that has been discussed for years – and now taking shape.

During my visits the past few months to 10 of the 11 countries covered by the Regional Bureau, I witnessed with pride how our teams are responding to the needs of people. I also noted their deep concern as they face extremely tough decisions on which essential services they should curtail due to overstretched resources; and a sense of frustration when they cannot reach people due to lack of access.

I wish I didn't have to state the refrain "overstretched resources" time and time again but, frankly, I am worried. The World Food Programme has informed of pipeline breaks expected in the coming months. We know when there is food insecurity, there is a major increase in protection concerns including gender-based violence, tensions with host communities and higher risks of regional instability. We are doing our best to work together to strengthen investments in livelihoods to decrease people's dependence on aid. After fleeing to safety, the opportunity to earn a living is key to rebuild lives with dignity.

Madame Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

Few weeks ago, in this same city, at the second Global Refugee Forum, we all heard governments in the region, intergovernmental bodies like IGAD, EAC and the ICGLR, public and private sector partners, humanitarian and development actors, make transformational pledges.

Uganda's commitment to uphold its generous policies on self-reliance, Kenya's Shirika Plan to transform refugee camps into municipalities, Ethiopia's pledge to transform protracted refugee camps into settlements, to cite few, were pledged. And we heard matching pledges, in the true spirit of the Global Compact on Refugees.

Let's support these countries and their partners implement these pledges. It's our protection and solutions compass for the next 4 years. And we are moving on this, with partners. Regulations have been issued in Kenya, digital IDs being delivered in Ethiopia, greater engagement of private sector happening in several contexts, to cite few. We need to continue with the required determination.

Mme Chair and distinguished delegates,

Climate impact is going to remain an ongoing feature in our region, for populations feeling unfairly impacted by challenges they did not contribute creating. Cycles of drought and storms seem to be never ending. We have developed a regional climate response strategy that will guide us as we work together with governments, regional institutions, UN sister agencies, communities and other partners to respond and ensure the inclusion of refugees and other displaced in mitigation plans.

UNHCR has supported the adoption by the African Union of the *Protocol Relating to the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa*. This is major step, requiring continued support.

We have worked with partners to respond to the needs of internally displaced people, most significantly in Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan where we remained particularly focused on responding to protection needs, shelter, and providing core relief items. We plan to continue these efforts this year, should access and funding allow.

For both refugees and IDPs, we remain committed to *finding solutions*. What the region first and foremost needs is for peace efforts to take hold. Once peace returns to areas of conflict, we can really consider the usually most requested solution, which is *voluntary return*.

Nearly 600,000 people have returned to their countries of origin in the region, the majority to Burundi and South Sudan. We are now promoting returns of Burundians and seek support to make the voluntary returns sustainable.

In South Sudan, over 470,000 South Sudanese caught in the Sudan crisis had to “return” with nothing, going back to places they had not been to in decades, – where there are very little services and opportunities. Here too, we need reintegration so that returnees can restart their lives.

We saw progress on *resettlement*. A record number of cases were submitted, and departures doubled compared to 2022. We also increased our efforts to encourage complimentary pathways. We aim to continue these efforts in 2024 and we count on you to be able to do so.

Finally, Mme Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

I reaffirm our commitment to strengthening our engagement with local and refugee-led organisations. They know best. In Uganda, I recently met with several of these organizations: I was impressed by their efforts to keep a strong cohesion between hosts and refugees, and into supporting livelihoods. There are strong examples of this in all countries in the region.

I also want to underline that country operations in my region are proactively identifying and mitigating risks. In the past year, lessons learned on aid diversion risks, particularly in Ethiopia and Somalia, have been shared across the region. In the current operational environment of Sudan, we are working hard to balance the challenges of minimizing risks with our determination to stay and deliver.

Thank you to the Member States, NGOs, private sector, development partners and UN agencies for your partnership and collaboration in ensuring support for protection and solutions for affected populations in the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes Region. I urge you to continue investing and dare I say increasing, this support so that we can end having to repeat the words “overstretched resources” and instead use terms like “resilience, economic opportunities, and solutions.”

Thank you.