

Update on UNHCR operations in southern Africa

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

As of June 2024, southern Africa had 9.2 million forcibly displaced persons and returnees, 7.6 million of whom were internally displaced by conflict in their countries and 1 million of whom were refugees and asylum-seekers. In addition, the region also counted 1.1 million people who were internally displaced by the impact of climate change. The main drivers of forced displacement in southern Africa have been the complex crises in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique. At the same time, protracted refugee situations continue in Angola, Botswana, the Congo (Republic of), Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Conflict, natural disasters, socioeconomic inequalities, food insecurity and disease outbreaks mark the operational context in southern Africa. Since late 2023, rising instability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and increasing mixed movements of migrants and asylum-seekers along the “southern route” from the East and Horn of Africa to South Africa have raised concerns about access to asylum and protection in the region. Infectious diseases such as malaria, cholera and mpox (previously known as monkeypox) further strained the already-fragile health services in several countries, with some epidemics reaching proportions not seen in recent years. Moreover, several countries in southern Africa were impacted by tropical storms, cyclones, floods and severe drought caused by the El Niño phenomenon, leading to a rise in food insecurity and overall humanitarian needs. These issues are expected to persist into 2025, with factors such as funding shortfalls and the effects of other global crises that are aggravating the situation and making the response by UNHCR all the more challenging.

Democratic Republic of the Congo emergency

The Democratic Republic of the Congo remains one of the most critically underfunded humanitarian situations in the world. Enduring and cyclical violence has internally displaced some 7 million people and forced over 1 million to cross international borders in search of safety. The Democratic Republic of the Congo also hosts over half a million refugees (mainly from Burundi, the Central African Republic and Rwanda), the largest number in southern Africa. In early 2024, escalating conflict in the eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri led to record levels of displacement, food insecurity and protection violations, including gender-based violence, especially against women and children.

Clashes and attacks against civilians also restricted humanitarian access to people in need. The completion of the phased withdrawal of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in April 2024 further exacerbated the complex management of the security situation. Despite the challenging operational context, UNHCR is leading the clusters for protection, camp coordination and camp management, and shelter in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as the inter-agency Regional Refugee Response Plan for the Democratic Republic of the Congo situation, which covers the response in Angola, Burundi, the Congo (Republic of), Rwanda, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia.

Mozambique emergency

In Mozambique, conflict in Cabo Delgado province has displaced some 578,000 people and affected the 24,300 refugees and asylum-seekers hosted in the country. The reduced number of refugees and asylum-seekers compared to last year is a result of a physical verification exercise that concluded in August 2023. This is the second-largest emergency in southern Africa.

In addition to persistent violence, Mozambique faces increasing challenges due to climate change and recurring natural disasters. This includes the current drought induced by the El Niño phenomenon during the 2023-2024 season. Against this background, UNHCR is providing life-saving assistance and protection to affected populations and collaborating with the Government and partners to support the inclusion of forcibly displaced persons in national services and development programmes.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2024 plan for southern Africa – by impact area

Attaining favourable protection environments

Although 14 of the 16 countries in southern Africa have ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees, the region witnessed the shrinking of asylum space in 2023 and 2024 primarily due to implementation of restrictive policies, detention and the increased practice of refoulement at borders. As a response, UNHCR sought to strengthen engagement with States and regional bodies to improve access to asylum. Following the adoption of the action plans on asylum and statelessness of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 2022, UNHCR and SADC conducted regional workshops in the following two years to assess the progress in improving national asylum systems and in the implementation of pledges made during the 2019 high-level segment on statelessness. The workshops led to the endorsement of seven priority actions to improve asylum conditions and the fair and efficient processing of refugee status determination claims, as well as 12 recommendations to address statelessness with a “whole-of-society” approach. In June 2024, SADC also endorsed the extension of the action plans on asylum and statelessness until 2028.

Across southern Africa, over 80 government officials were trained on asylum and migration issues to improve decision-making and safeguard international protection, including in the context of mixed movements. As a result of these efforts, in addition to the prima facie recognition of refugees in Angola and the Congo (Republic of) and the use of accelerated refugee status determination procedures in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Malawi, there was a backlog of 179,000 asylum claims at the end of 2023, which represents a reduction of 13 per cent compared to 2022.

During the Global Refugee Forums in 2019 and 2023, 214 pledges aimed at supporting forcibly displaced and stateless persons, as well as host countries, in southern Africa were made. Of these, 67 per cent were made by States. As of June 2024, of the 146 pledges made in 2019, 14 per cent had been completed, 73 per cent were in progress, and 13 per cent were in the planning stage. As for the 68 pledges made in 2023, these are in the early stages of planning or implementation. Notable developments towards operationalizing the Global Compact on Refugees in the region include: the launch of the new national refugee policy in Zambia, which is expected to lead to a more enabling legal and protection environment for refugees to achieve self-reliance; the creation of an inter-ministerial committee in Madagascar tasked with drafting a new refugee law; the inclusion of refugees in the revised land law in Mozambique; and the resumption of the registration and documentation of refugees and the issuance of residence permits by the Government of Angola to former refugees from Liberia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. Furthermore, in the Congo (Republic of) and Mozambique, UNHCR worked with partners to promote the inclusion of displaced persons in development programming and their access to social safety nets and livelihood opportunities.

Based on the increased number of mixed movements in southern Africa, UNHCR worked with States, regional economic communities and United Nations agencies to implement a route-based approach. To support stakeholders in ensuring international protection and solutions for

refugees while also upholding the rights of migrants, UNHCR developed a regional mixed movements strategy for 2024-2027. The strategy focuses on: (a) ensuring safe access to territory, registration and documentation; (b) strengthening asylum systems for persons in need of international protection; (c) improving policy and legal frameworks; (d) mitigating human trafficking and exploitation; (e) promoting safe return, durable solutions and mobility programmes; and (f) enhancing data collection and analysis for evidence-based programming.

In 2024, UNHCR received continued funding from the Safe from the Start programme for the prevention of gender-based violence and response. Implementation has focused on ensuring that affected communities can actively participate in activities, including through innovative approaches such as a mobile phone application which allows refugees who are facing gender-based violence to send distress signals in Botswana and community-based radio drama in Malawi. To address gender-based violence, UNHCR launched a pilot, community-based training for first responders with women-led refugee organizations and leaders in South Africa. An assessment of child protection policies and strategies and a review of the implementation of the new UNHCR policy on child protection in southern Africa were undertaken through a consultative workshop with UNHCR staff from the 16 countries in the region. UNHCR, with the assistance of law firm DLA Piper, undertook research on the child rights legal framework in southern Africa.

Realizing rights in safe environments

Eight countries in southern Africa have been identified as some of the world's most vulnerable to the impact of climate change. At the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024, Angola, the Congo (Republic of), Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia struggled with severe droughts and intense flooding, with millions of people affected, including refugees and internally displaced persons. In 2023, in partnership with the University of Pretoria and its Centre for Human Rights, UNHCR initiated a research project to explore the application of the 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa to persons who cross borders due to natural hazards and the adverse effects of climate change. UNHCR also continued its strategic partnership with SADC and the African Development Bank to strengthen the inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless individuals in national and regional development plans and programmes, and to promote the effective management of challenges related to climate change. In follow-up to the technical meeting held between SADC, the African Development Bank and UNHCR in October 2023, and the SADC Ministerial Committee of the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation that was convened in July 2024, UNHCR and SADC plan to hold a ministerial meeting on forced displacement, fragility mitigation and climate resilience in southern Africa in November 2024.

In 2024, significant challenges were faced in the health sector in the region, as most countries weathered outbreaks of diseases, including measles and mpox. Notably, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe struggled with the worst cholera epidemic in recent years. UNHCR worked with governments and partners to manage outbreaks in the region, establishing an operational framework with priority actions for collaboration with the World Health Organization. Given the rise of hunger due to ration reductions, breaks in the food pipeline and severe drought, operations in Angola, the Congo (Republic of), Mozambique and Zimbabwe received training on the Standardized Expanded Nutrition Survey and UNHCR continues to follow up on progress in planning and implementing nutrition surveys. Despite the constraints on the delivery of water, sanitation and hygiene services caused by health emergencies and natural disasters, UNHCR successfully promoted the inclusion of refugees in national planning efforts, increased the efficiency and environmental sustainability of water supply systems, as well as advanced environmentally-friendly approaches to solid waste management. Between January and June 2024, some 13,800 people received water and sanitation services, of whom 9,850 were assisted as part of responses to climate shocks.

In 2023, UNHCR and partners recorded over 600,000 cases of spontaneous returns of internally displaced persons to Cabo Delgado province in Mozambique. Access to returning communities was hampered by security and funding constraints, and UNHCR thus prioritized: protection monitoring for displaced and returning communities; support to the civil registry for the issuance and replacement of civil documentation; the prevention of gender-based violence and response; and the promotion of access to basic services. Between October 2023 and

July 2024, UNHCR assisted 20,000 internally displaced persons and host community members in acquiring birth certificates and national identification. UNHCR also provided some 1,400 people with shelter assistance, which included climate-resilient shelters, shelter upgrades and shelter repair kits.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UNHCR supported authorities with the reintegration of 1,810 refugee returnees and 10,000 internally displaced returnees in 2023. In addition, UNHCR, together with partners, helped the Government to establish a programme for the security of land tenure, and to issue property rights documentation as part of efforts to ensure sustainable solutions for internally displaced persons in the provinces of Ituri and Haut Uele. In 2024, through protection monitoring and advocacy efforts led by UNHCR, some 521,000 internally displaced persons successfully returned to their places of origin; a total of 281,615 were registered and documented, and some 17,190 received cash assistance to meet their basic needs. UNHCR is prioritizing support to national and provincial authorities to build upon return investments by proactively collaborating with development actors.

Empowering communities and achieving gender equality

In coordination with partners, UNHCR actively worked to include refugees in national education systems. Notably, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, joint efforts by UNHCR and UNESCO resulted in significant advancements in the integration of refugees into provincial education sector plans. In Malawi, the partnership between UNHCR and the Ministry of Education bolstered the education response through the deployment of additional teachers, capacity development and quality assurance in refugee-hosting schools. In Zambia, the Government extended a concession to refugees to allow them to seek support for the financing of tertiary education through its Higher Education Loans and Scholarships Board.

Access to sustainable livelihoods and economic inclusion in southern Africa remains constrained by legal and policy restrictions on the right to work and freedom of movement. Poverty, conflict and lack of development among hosting communities also continue to limit sustainable progress towards self-reliance. Building on commitments made at the Global Refugee Forums in 2019 and 2023, UNHCR worked with governments and partners to foster a more favourable environment for economic inclusion in the region. In 2024, UNHCR will conclude the implementation of its four-year regional livelihoods and economic inclusion strategy, which has, since its launch in 2021, supported over 46,600 forcibly displaced people – only 2 per cent of those in need.

Collaboration is under way with the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization on multi-year interventions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Eswatini to assist 286,000 and 2,600 forcibly displaced people respectively, with farming and agricultural initiatives to promote livelihoods, economic inclusion and entrepreneurship. In Angola, UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme are finalizing a partnership arrangement to support agricultural livelihoods for refugees in Lôvua settlement. In Zambia, an additional 400 refugee and host community farmers are set to be included in the farmer support programme, while in Zimbabwe, the expansion of the irrigation scheme is under way for the 100 hectares of agricultural land allocated by the Government for use by refugees.

In collaboration with central banks, the Alliance for Financial Inclusion and other stakeholders, UNHCR promoted the integration of forcibly displaced persons into the national financial inclusion strategies in Eswatini, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. Between October 2023 and June 2024, UNHCR also provided 735 internally displaced persons in Mozambique with livelihoods assistance.

Securing solutions

Out of the 16 countries in southern Africa, 10 are party to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and six are party to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Among them, four States have adopted national action plans to eradicate statelessness. UNHCR focused on improving the quantitative and qualitative data on stateless populations at the regional level; ensuring birth registration for the prevention of statelessness; and conducting advocacy to foster favourable policies and laws. Botswana, Mozambique and South Africa are undertaking qualitative studies on statelessness that will inform the response

by the Government and other stakeholders. Following the accession in 2023 by the Congo (Republic of) to both statelessness conventions, UNHCR is supporting the country in launching mobile birth registration and documentation activities, and in conducting a national awareness campaign on the importance of birth registration.

UNHCR prioritized other durable solutions when financial, political and security conditions allowed. In 2023, some 11,000 people were assisted to return to their countries of origin, while between January and June 2024, UNHCR assisted with the voluntary repatriation of 6,100 refugees out of a projected 24,300, mostly to Burundi, the Central African Republic and Rwanda. Although voluntary repatriation remains the most viable durable solution in southern Africa, reduced funding continues to affect its implementation. Furthermore, the resurgence of violence in areas of return in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other such developments in countries of origin, including natural disasters, have delayed activities.

In 2023, UNHCR submitted the cases of nearly 9,100 refugees for resettlement, supported 3,600 people departing to third countries, and invested in complementary pathways that benefited 38 refugees from Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In the first six months of 2024, the cases of some 2,670 people were submitted for resettlement, and over 2,700 people received support to depart, most of whom had their cases submitted in previous years. In addition, 17 refugees accessed education pathway opportunities this year. A total of 63,200 refugees with protection needs are projected to require resettlement in 2024.

C. Financial information

The comprehensive needs budget for southern Africa for 2024, which was approved by the Executive Committee in its annual plenary session in October 2023, amounted to \$492.2 million. The current 2024 budget for the region remains unchanged as of 31 August 2024.

The breakdown of the requirements by impact area is as follows: attaining favourable protection environments (\$172.4 million); realizing rights in safe environments (\$128.4 million); securing solutions (\$99.3 million); and empowering communities and achieving gender equality (\$92.0 million).

As of 31 August 2024, 33 per cent of the region's 2024 financial requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions. In comparison, 28 per cent of the region's 2023 financial requirements of \$471.7 million were funded as of the same time last year.
