

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

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

By mid-2024, the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region hosted 26 million forcibly displaced persons, including 5.4 million refugees and asylum-seekers and 21 million internally displaced persons. The number of forcibly displaced persons has increased by 9 million in just 15 months. The number of refugees originating from South Sudan remains the highest in the region, representing some 40 per cent of the total.

The Sudan has been grappling with brutal conflict since mid-April 2023 and the resulting complex and large-scale protection and humanitarian crisis. The conflict has involved extreme levels of violence and human rights violations against civilians. As of August 2024, over 10.3 million people have been forcibly displaced since the onset of the crisis, with approximately 8 million newly displaced within the Sudan, as well as around 260,000 refugees hosted by the Sudan who self-relocated to existing camps in the country seeking safety. Over 2 million people have also sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Those fleeing include more than 1.5 million Sudanese refugees and over 600,000 individuals who were refugees in the Sudan that have returned home in adverse circumstances, mainly to South Sudan. In early August, famine was confirmed in parts of North Darfur. The 2024 regional refugee response plan was updated mid-year to include Libya and Uganda, alongside the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia and South Sudan.

Heavy rains and severe flooding triggered by El Niño have devastated parts of the region, affecting hundreds of thousands of refugees, internally displaced persons and host communities, causing additional displacement. While flooding is an annual phenomenon, 2024 was particularly challenging in this regard. UNHCR declared an emergency in Burundi and South Sudan, where the situation is expected to worsen, posing a grave risk to millions more by the end of the year. UNHCR is working closely with the authorities, partners and communities to ensure that early warning alerts based on flood simulations reach communities in time for effective risk mitigation.

The South Sudan situation remains Africa's most significant refugee displacement crisis, with 2.3 million refugees and asylum-seekers and a further 2 million internally displaced within South Sudan. Protracted displacement has been fuelled by a prolonged civil war, further compounded by the impact of large return movements from the Sudan, food insecurity and climate change. Moreover, four consecutive years of flooding have destroyed homes and livelihoods, exacerbated food shortages and weakened the economy.

Conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo continued to displace populations into Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania with over 18,000 displaced so far this year.

Somalia continues to grapple with significant challenges, such as insecurity and armed conflict, as well as the devastating impact of climate change, through droughts and flooding. As of June 2024, there were 3.9 million internally displaced persons and

900,000 Somali refugees in the region. Somalia also hosts some 40,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from Ethiopia and Yemen.

Voluntary repatriation to Burundi continued, with 14,000 refugees who received assistance in their return between January and July 2024, bringing the total number of people who received such assistance since September 2017 to 248,000. Some 322,000 Burundian refugees remain in the region. Following the decision taken in November 2023 to reinforce the promotion of voluntary repatriation to Burundi, partners have been supporting an increasing number of refugees returning home, mainly from the United Republic of Tanzania.

Mixed movements

Between January and June 2024, nearly 11,000 biometrically registered asylum-seekers and refugees were recorded as moving onward from their first countries of asylum, both within and beyond the region. Twenty-four per cent of these individuals were Sudanese refugees. Those taking irregular routes as part of mixed movements faced many protection risks.

In response to these mixed movements and many more not captured through registration, UNHCR, in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration and other partners, is adopting a route-based approach to strengthen protection interventions for refugees and migrants along key routes throughout their journeys.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2024 plan for the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region – by impact area

Attaining favourable protection environments

In the first half of the year, 180,000 individuals were recorded as seeking asylum in the region, often exerting pressure on overstretched reception capacities in hosting areas. States mostly maintained generous asylum policies, but 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.

A reduced willingness to grant refugee status to certain populations on a prima facie basis, coupled with a reluctance to adopt more efficient individualized asylum procedures, has resulted in a backlog of more than 440,000 registered asylum-seekers in the region by the end of June 2024. This backlog has had an impact on inclusion in national systems, access to rights and durable solutions. The increasingly restrictive responses by some States towards irregular onward movements also raised protection concerns.

Countries in the region adopted relevant laws and policies and made progress in the implementation of some pledges made at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum. Despite efforts to promote inclusion in national systems, unmet basic needs contributed to heightened protection risks, including a rise in negative coping mechanisms, human trafficking, and movements to and from countries of origin within the region and beyond. Sexual violence, threats to the civilian character of asylum by armed groups, forced recruitment and abductions adversely impacted displaced persons.

Preventing and responding to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse and supporting child protection

Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and safeguarding child protection remain top priorities for the region. Several capacity-building initiatives have been implemented to support and strengthen these efforts with the provision of necessary technical assistance. UNHCR increased and sustained strategic partnerships with refugee-led organizations, civil society and local authorities, as well as with

committees established at the community level, to improve mitigation efforts and to safely identify survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Addressing the root causes of sexual exploitation and abuse requires long-term investments. These include: tackling economic and social vulnerabilities; strengthening law enforcement; promoting changes in social and gender norms; ensuring safe and quality assistance; and improving organizational mechanisms for prevention and response.

Despite these challenges, UNHCR and its partners have taken positive steps to strengthen the inclusion of refugee children in national child protection systems in 5 out of 11 countries in the region (Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan and Uganda) through capacity-building and coaching. This support included mentoring the social services workforce on case management, alternative care arrangements, family training and reunification, and best interest procedures.

Under its regional peace-building programme for youth, UNHCR supported training for 5,370 refugee youth mentors on conflict resolution mechanisms. This training had a positive impact on young people and adolescent refugees, including by facilitating dialogue and resolving conflict between refugees and host communities.

Promoting protection and solutions for internally displaced persons

Conflict-induced displacement accounts for 74 per cent of the 21 million internally displaced persons in the region, while climate change and natural disasters account for the remaining 26 per cent. UNHCR continued to implement the tri-cluster approach in addressing the needs of internally displaced persons in the region, playing a leadership and advocacy role in protection, shelter/non-food items, and camp coordination and camp management. The operational response of UNHCR included the provision of core relief items, cash-based interventions and protection services to individuals with specific needs.

In the Sudan, despite the complex and challenging context, UNHCR is providing life-saving protection and assistance to internally displaced persons. In inaccessible areas, UNHCR collaborates with local partners and community-based protection networks to conduct protection monitoring; identify and refer people with specific needs to specialized services; communicate with communities; and raise awareness on protection issues. Multipurpose community centres have been established to support internally displaced persons living among host communities, and more than 30,000 have received cash assistance so far in 2024 to cover their immediate needs.

In Somalia, UNHCR supported initiatives that strengthen the self-reliance and resilience of refugees, returnees, internally displaced persons and host communities, and promoted equitable access to public services, housing with security of tenure and social safety nets. This approach aligned with the Federal Government of Somalia's national durable solutions strategy as well as with the United Nations sustainable development goals.

In South Sudan, through the Support Platform of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), UNHCR and the Government of South Sudan developed and adopted in October 2023 the South Sudan Durable Solutions Strategy and Action Plan for internally displaced persons, returnees, refugees and host communities. Progress has also been made with "Pockets of Hope", a related solutions-oriented initiative that targets areas with refugee returnees through investments in medium to long-term interventions meant to build resilience, government ownership and responsibility.

Empowering communities and achieving gender equality

Providing cash and multisectoral assistance

In the first half of 2024, nearly 360,000 individuals (110,000 households) were assisted with cash grants, of which 90 per cent of recipients were refugees, mainly

living in camps, followed by internally displaced persons (7 per cent), as well as returnees and members of the host community (1.5 per cent for each). Cash assistance interventions have been diversified and expanded to help meet needs in the sectors of energy, hygiene, shelter and voluntary repatriation. The UNHCR response to climate impacts also represented 6 per cent of the total disbursed. Post-distribution findings indicated that 84 per cent of recipients purchased desired items in local markets. Food purchases ranked highest, irrespective of the type of cash programme implemented, followed by hygiene items and firewood or fuel. Where feasible, UNHCR will continue to prioritize cash interventions, including in emergency responses. In addition, UNHCR will explore the development of targeting strategies and increase the digitalization of transactions to ensure financial inclusion.

Addressing food insecurity

Throughout the first half of 2024, refugees in the region continued to face cuts in food rations, ranging from 30 to 70 per cent of the standard requirement. The most recent assessments show that refugees face high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition in the region, primarily driven by conflict, climate change and limited livelihood opportunities. The use of negative coping strategies to address food shortages persists, with 84 per cent resorting to one or more such mechanisms like skipping meals. Moreover, refugee children under the age of 5 in Ethiopia, South Sudan and the Sudan continue to suffer from alarmingly high rates of acute malnutrition. Efforts to prevent and treat malnutrition are ongoing, alongside advocacy to ensure that at least new arrivals receive 100 per cent of their food rations.

UNHCR and the World Food Programme are pursuing joint approaches to increase self-reliance for greater food security in five countries in the region with an enabling environment. Additional partnerships and investments are essential for the success of the initiative.

Securing solutions

Global Compact on Refugees

Host governments in the region renewed their commitments to the inclusion and self-reliance of forcibly displaced persons at the Global Refugee Forum in 2023. Eight governments¹ announced 34 pledges. Some 250 pledges were also made by other entities in support of policy pledges of host governments. UNHCR continued to facilitate pledge matching at the global, regional and country level, including through the multistakeholder pledges.

A regional roadmap to the 2025 High-Level Officials Meeting has been developed to outline the next steps to ensure host country policy commitments to protect, include and find solutions for refugees and stateless persons remain central to their efforts. Country-level roadmaps and action plans are currently under development. UNHCR is also supporting host governments with the costing of some of the policy pledges. Regional mechanisms and processes, including the IGAD Support Platform, continued to be leveraged to facilitate the implementation and matching of pledges. At country level, Ethiopia and Uganda held consultations with key stakeholders, including donors and partners, on follow-up to pledges made at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum. A high-level donor mission to Ethiopia in April 2024 also sought to galvanize support for pledges made by the Government.

Expanding development partnerships

UNHCR strengthened its collaboration with development partners to further support inclusion and self-reliance of the forcibly displaced. Building on a joint project with IGAD and the East African community to help improve the investment climate in

¹ Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda.

refugee-hosting areas, UNHCR helped advance the financial inclusion of forcibly displaced people and to respond to the Sudan regional crisis by mobilizing additional development funding from the African Development Bank. Development-oriented responses for Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia and South Sudan were further pursued with the Directorate-General for International Partnerships of the European Commission, alongside continued support to protracted refugee situations in countries such as Kenya and Uganda. Collaboration with the World Bank has further deepened, focusing on gradually linking services, such as education and health care, to national and local systems.

Pursuing durable solutions

In the first half of 2024, UNHCR submitted the cases of 15,600 refugees for resettlement, and a total of 14,000 refugees were resettled, with 64 per cent originating from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and others originating from Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan and the Sudan. UNHCR estimates that some 600,000 refugees in the region are in need of resettlement in 2025.

In the same period, UNHCR facilitated the return of 10,300 refugees and asylum-seekers within and to the region. The vast majority of those returning were Burundian refugees, with 9,870 individuals returning from Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. To ensure sustainable returns, UNHCR continues to advocate with development partners for improvements to basic infrastructure in return areas, in support of the Government of Burundi. During the reporting period, some 400 Rwandan refugees and 37 Somali refugees were assisted to return home. Furthermore, some 230,000 refugees returned to their countries of origin in a self-organized manner, including 220,000 South Sudanese. Ethiopians, Sudanese and Somalis were also among these returnees.

Eradicating statelessness

The 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 by the Assembly of Heads of States and Governments during the 37th Ordinary Session of the African Union Summit in February 2024. Several African Union Member States have indicated the willingness and readiness of their governments to ratify the Protocol, which requires 15 ratifications to enter into force. To ensure that relevant entities of Member States are prepared for the next steps once the Protocol is opened for ratification, UNHCR and technical experts hosted a webinar for representatives of governments, regional organizations and donors with a view to examining the critical aspects of the Protocol. The webinar helped equip them with the necessary information on ratification, which will ultimately allow those at risk of statelessness to enjoy the right to a nationality.

Risk management

The management of risk remained complex in the region, with the main categories of risk related to emergency preparedness and response; the protection environment and challenges in facilitating solutions; and fraud, including aid diversion. UNHCR is implementing risk treatments, with 74 per cent of risk treatments in place, and conducting risk assessments on thematic issues as needed. Internal discussions on the prevention of aid diversion continue to be held, with an emphasis on lessons learned. Discussions relating to risk management are being held in UNHCR country operations in Ethiopia, Kenya and the Sudan, and these aim to provide a structured approach regarding the type and level of risk that can be taken by individual operations.

C. Financial information

At the beginning of 2024, the comprehensive needs budget for the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region, which was approved by the Executive Committee in October 2023, amounted to \$2,149.1 million. As of 31 August 2024, the conflict in the Sudan resulted in a supplementary budget of \$163.7 million, of which \$60.0 million represented requirements in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region. Also as of 31 August 2024, the current 2024 budget for the region totals \$2,209.1 million, representing a 2 per cent increase compared to the final budget for 2023.

As of 31 August 2024, the breakdown of the requirements by impact area is as follows: realizing rights in safe environments (\$1,186.7 million); attaining favourable protection environments (\$567.4 million); empowering communities and achieving gender equality (\$268.6 million); and securing solutions (\$186.3 million).

The overall requirements for the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region were funded at 37 per cent as of 31 August 2024. The consequences of underfunding are evident in all sectors, from basic needs to shelter and protection. The UNHCR underfunded report 2024 provides information on the most pressing needs in several countries in the region.
