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Emergency preparedness and response

Summary

This paper outlines the measures taken by UNHCR to strengthen its emergency response capacity in the context of several simultaneous large-scale emergencies, resulting in unprecedented levels of displacement. It describes the priorities which will drive the work of UNHCR's Emergency Services and a number of critical issues shaping the current operating context. It highlights the complex environment in which emergencies take place, and the challenge of ensuring that the rights, perspectives and aspirations of persons of concern remain at the heart of emergency response.

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I. Introduction

1. The last two years witnessed an unprecedented series of displacement crises, as a result of new or rapidly deteriorating conflicts, with a profound impact on millions of uprooted people and the communities and States receiving them. Four new system-wide level-3 emergencies were declared by the Emergency Relief Coordinator – in the Central African Republic, Iraq, the Philippines (Typhoon Haiyan) and South Sudan – all of which engaged UNHCR’s responsibilities for internally displaced people (IDPs) within the inter-agency framework of the Transformative Agenda.
2. In the cases of the Central African Republic, Iraq and South Sudan, each crisis also necessitated a UNHCR-led refugee response in at least three neighbouring countries. For example, as well as the massive internal displacement resulting from conflict in South Sudan from mid-December 2013, almost 500,000 people fled as refugees to Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda, requiring UNHCR emergency operations in five countries. Refugees from Iraq fled to Jordan and Turkey, as well as the non-neighbouring countries of Egypt and Lebanon. Within Iraq, new waves of internal displacement in 2014 unfolded against the backdrop of a pre-existing IDP operation in south-central Iraq, and alongside a large-scale UNHCR-led emergency operation for Syrian refugees, which was just one component of the fluid and complex regional Syrian refugee response.
3. In parallel with these high-visibility emergencies, UNHCR also declared level-1 or level-2 emergencies in an additional five situations, including Ukraine. A response to new forced displacement was also required in a number of other continuing crises, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan and Yemen.
4. Many of these emergencies are characterized by the following elements:
 - (i) the complex, evolving and potentially protracted nature of the conflicts underpinning them;
 - (ii) an acute failure of protection – associated with gross violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law – as the driving force behind humanitarian needs;
 - (iii) the politicization of humanitarian aid and a reliance on aid as a substitute for effective political action to secure conflict resolution;
 - (iv) a proliferation of actors engaged in humanitarian action and in the protection of civilians, both within and outside the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) system; and
 - (v) a myriad of acute challenges associated with operating in insecure and volatile environments in which conflict increasingly has a regional or cross-border dimension.
5. As such, emergency response is much more than a technical and logistical exercise linked to the availability of resources. Ensuring that the rights, dignity and welfare of people affected by crisis remain at the centre of emergency operations is a perpetual challenge and a crucial priority.

II. Reconfiguration of UNHCR’s emergency response capacity

6. The imperative of responding to emergencies has been a central feature of UNHCR’s organizational culture and a key driver of institutional change, such as when a stand-alone Division of Emergency, Security and Supply was established in 2009, and the Emergency Preparedness and Response Section was created to incorporate a dedicated stand-by emergency staff capacity, following the Iraq crisis of 1991. In 2011 and 2012, the reinforcement of UNHCR’s corporate approach to emergencies through, *inter alia*, the strengthening of UNHCR’s global supply capacity, the establishment of a dedicated capacity for information management, and the development of an emergency policy

framework, were shaped by experiences in IDP and refugee emergencies resulting from crises in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Somalia, and by the IASC's Transformative Agenda.

7. The rapid unfolding of simultaneous new, large-scale emergencies in 2012 and 2013 placed unprecedented demands on UNHCR's capacities and resources. A two-stage review in 2013 and 2014 concluded that a number of new measures were required to reinforce UNHCR's capacity and systems to fulfil its responsibilities for leadership, coordination and delivery in emergencies, taking into account the experience of the roll-out of the Transformative Agenda and the development of the *Refugee Coordination Model*¹ and *Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situations, Coordination in Practice*.²

8. As an immediate priority, a strengthened and reconfigured Emergency Services was established within the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply in mid-2014. The team commenced work in January 2015 with an assessment of lessons learned from recent reviews of UNHCR's emergency response, and a series of internal and external consultations designed to help refine the vision, priorities and working methods of the new team. The Emergency Services consist of three key components, outlined below.

A. Multifunctional emergency standby teams

9. Three teams are now in place – each led by a Principal or Senior Emergency Coordinator – responsible for providing emergency preparedness support to country operations. Teams are on permanent standby for automatic deployment upon declaration of a level-2 or level-3 emergency. A key focus of the standby teams is on ensuring rapid and effective field-level delivery that places people at the heart of the response through community-based approaches, an emphasis on protection, and attention to sexual and gender-based violence from the beginning.

B. Emergency Policy and Capacity Development Section

10. A new Section was created, responsible for ensuring that policies, guidance and training that are in place are innovative and up to date, reflect best practice, and capacitate field-level delivery, with a particular focus on accountability to persons of concern.

11. The Section will ensure that lessons learned are incorporated into emergency policy guidance, capacity development and internal procedures, drawing on the field experience of standby teams, automatic reviews after three months, UNHCR and IASC evaluations, and lessons emerging from IASC-led operational peer reviews.

12. Existing training workshops – including the Workshop on Emergency Management (WEM), the Senior Emergency Learning Programme (SELP), the Training on Information Management in Emergencies (TIME), and Situational Emergency Trainings (SETs) delivered as part of preparedness actions – will be regularly updated.

13. A further priority will be to ensure that emergency guidance is clear and accessible to colleagues in the field. To this end, a new digital emergency handbook will be released online and in tablet and mobile format in the first half of 2015.

C. Partnership and Deployment Unit

14. The Unit has been reinforced to strengthen UNHCR's engagement with the extensive network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government and civil response partners that work together with UNHCR in emergency operations through standby partnerships and other arrangements. In 2014, of the 441 emergency deployments, some 60 per cent were provided through agreements with NGO and government partners. Government and civil protection partners also deliver technical support and solutions in the

1 Available from <http://www.refworld.org/docid/542554e14.html>.

2 Available from <http://www.unhcr.org/53679e679.pdf>.

fields of communications, logistics, engineering and other technical support, staff accommodation and offices, as well as venues, accommodation and base camps for emergency training events.

15. In 2012 and 2013, UNHCR delivered an innovative capacity strengthening project for 11 national NGOs from Asia, East Africa and the Middle East. The Unit is also working together with a number of NGOs to establish a predictable system for rapid organizational deployment to emergencies with global refugee emergency response agreements.

16. The Unit will strengthen the systems for ensuring that the right number, level and profiles of staff are available for rapid deployment to provide the enormous surge in capacity required in emergency operations, and that staff receive appropriate support in the areas of information and communications technology, security management, staff welfare, and accommodation.

III. Revision of the emergency policy framework

17. In parallel with the reconfiguration of the Emergency Services, the High Commissioner issued a *Policy on Emergency Response Activation, Leadership and Accountabilities* in January 2015. The policy updates and supplements earlier guidance based on experience in recent emergencies. It focuses on preparedness, internal leadership and coordination arrangements, ensuring predictable and responsive systems, and clarifying accountabilities in the context of UNHCR's corporate commitment to leading, coordinating and delivering a timely, effective and predictable emergency response.

18. The policy reaffirms the accountability of the regional bureaux for providing strategic direction, oversight and support to emergency operations, regional/country Representatives for operational delivery and headquarters divisions. The Emergency Services assumes a complementary role in convening coordinated, coherent and timely cross-divisional support, mobilizing resources in support of the bureaux and the country operation, promoting consistency in the approach adopted across UNHCR's emergency operations, including through transfer of learning, and initiating back-up action as needed.

IV. Key priorities

19. The following are among the key priorities which will shape the work of the Emergency Services, based on gaps and needs identified in recent emergencies and key messages emerging from internal and external consultations.

(i) Strengthening focus on analysis, early warning and preparedness, with support for country and regional preparedness in high-risk operations, together with the government and national and international partners, provided through the deployment of the emergency standby teams, the application of the *UNHCR Preparedness Package for Refugee Emergencies* (2013) and, in IDP contexts, the *IASC Emergency Response Preparedness Guidance* (forthcoming in 2015). The aim is to ensure that preparedness actions that are undertaken in high-risk contexts take full account of national capacities, are context-driven, enable preliminary analysis of likely protection risks, and enhance leadership and coordination arrangements;

(ii) Placing protection and accountability to affected populations at the centre of UNHCR's and the broader humanitarian response. For example, UNHCR will ensure that refugee response strategies and plans are underpinned by and respond to analysis of protection risks, and will seek to ensure that Humanitarian Coordinators, Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) and cluster leads place protection at the heart of the HCT strategies and individual cluster plans. Senior protection staff and community-based protection capacity are included as part of the emergency standby team to facilitate this objective;

(iii) Finding the right balance between the speed, automaticity and volume of response, including the rapid mobilization of global standby resources comprising

emergency standby and technical teams, emergency rosters and standby deployment arrangements, and the mobilization of global core relief item stockpiles for 750,000 people within 72 hours. The response is tailored to the needs and realities on the ground, and is shaped by, takes account of and supports national and local capacities – including government, NGOs and local communities – as well as facilitates solutions (for example culturally-appropriate locally-procured shelter options);

(iv) Ensuring effective delivery of UNHCR’s responsibilities in relation to leadership and coordination, recognizing that attitudinal change is still needed.³ The messages of the Transformative Agenda, *Refugee Coordination Model* and the *Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note* need to be fully implemented at the field level, and practical support provided to address implementation challenges. Good partnership requires that systems are effective from the perspective of those with whom they engage. Coordination mechanisms – including clusters or refugee coordination – must be streamlined and, where necessary, adapted to focus on efficiency, avoiding duplication of effort and facilitating field-level delivery;

(v) Fostering new and innovative approaches for emergency preparedness and response that draw on new methods and good practices, including in the areas of cash-based interventions, alternatives to camps, information management and information sharing with communities.

V. Key challenges

20. In the context of the complex operating environment described in the introduction of this paper, UNHCR expects to confront a number of overarching challenges in ongoing and future emergencies, on which the engagement of Executive Committee members remains critical. Among these are the following:

(i) Finding ways to remain in proximity to communities and deliver emergency operations in insecure environments, so that the aim to “stay and deliver” truly compasses meaningful delivery of protection and assistance, through systems which facilitate this objective and find the right balance between ensuring access to life-saving protection and assistance, and retaining accountability for the financial and other resources provided by donors;

(ii) Managing expectations placed on humanitarian aid and recognizing that, ultimately, securing protection and solutions for individuals and communities depends on political solutions, for which humanitarian action cannot be a substitute. In this regard, the challenges of continuing to deliver protection and assistance are particularly salient in protracted crises, given that funding and visibility levels are often difficult to maintain, and place a huge strain on host governments and populations;

(iii) Engaging with protection actors beyond the humanitarian system. At both international and national levels, the ability of people in situations of conflict and displacement to access protection is affected by the attitudes and behaviours of a range of actors, including local communities and institutions, armed groups, national governments, peacekeeping troops, private sector actors, multi-dimensional stabilization missions, international and national NGOs, and faith-based organisations – many of whom are not part of the “traditional” IASC humanitarian system. It is critical that coordination mechanisms and donor policies foster an inclusive approach to humanitarian responses.

³ On inter-agency coordination and partnership more generally, see EC/66/SC/CRP.5.