

Update on UNHCR operations in the Middle East and North Africa

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

Syria situation

The Syria situation remains one of the largest displacement crises in the world. Over 12 million Syrians are forcibly displaced in the region (5.3 million are refugees and 6.8 million are internally displaced). The conditions in which refugees live in neighbouring countries is challenging amid a worsening socioeconomic situation and heightened negative sentiments towards refugees, with pressure to return and instances of deportations. At the same time, international support has also diminished.

In the Syrian Arab Republic, 15.3 million Syrians, including 6.8 million internally displaced persons, were in urgent need of live-saving assistance and protection. This was the highest number since the start of the crisis. Following the earthquakes that struck the country in February 2023, the humanitarian response was scaled up, including through the temporary easing of sanctions and two additional border-crossing points with Türkiye opened to facilitate the delivery of aid to the north-west part.

By end of June 2023, UNHCR provided 311,000 people with protection services, 283,600 people with humanitarian assistance and 1,740 vulnerable families with emergency cash assistance. This included internally displaced persons and returnees. UNHCR conducted numerous cross-border deliveries to respond to the needs, including 33,500 core relief items, 11,000 tents, 8 rub halls and 1,100 refugee housing units.

Although the United Nations Security Council did not adopt a resolution to reauthorize the cross-border mechanism for the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Syrian Arab Republic via the Bab Al-Hawa crossing, the United Nations and the Syrian Government reached an agreement to maintain the crossing open for six months starting in July 2023, while two additional border-crossing points will remain open until mid-November 2023.

In the first half of 2023, UNHCR had distributed some \$86 million in cash assistance to over 1.5 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries to help meet protection, health, shelter, education and other needs.

While welcoming initiatives by Arab countries to reach a political solution to the Syria crisis, UNHCR considers that conditions in the Syrian Arab Republic are not yet conducive for large-scale voluntary returns in safety and dignity.

Iraq situation

There are nearly 1.2 million internally displaced persons in Iraq and around 5 million returnees. Nearly 223,000 Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers are hosted in neighbouring countries, and over 24,000 Iraqis live in the Al-Hol camp in Al-Hasakeh Governorate in the Syrian Arab Republic. Since the Government of Iraq commenced the repatriation of Iraqis in 2021 from the camp in the Syrian Arab Republic, more than 8,900 individuals have returned to Iraq.

As of 2023, the clusters that were established to address internal displacement have been deactivated, and the humanitarian response plan was discontinued in line with the decision by the humanitarian country team to phase out the humanitarian response for internally displaced

persons. UNHCR and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights co-lead the newly formed protection platform.

Many internally displaced persons and returnees continue to face security and protection risks, including due to the lack of civil documentation and limited local integration and livelihood opportunities. UNHCR is supporting access to civil documentation for more than 44,000 internally displaced persons and returnees, solutions for 102,000 internally displaced persons and refugees living in camps, and the inclusion of displaced populations in Iraq's social protection systems.

North Africa

Despite shrinking operational space, UNHCR continued to deliver vital protection services to refugees and asylum-seekers in Libya, including by facilitating the departure of 640 vulnerable individuals for evacuation and resettlement. The Office also provided life-saving assistance to individuals at disembarkation points and in detention centres.

In Tunisia, UNHCR registered individuals in need of international protection, provided medical assistance and psychosocial support, and distributed food vouchers, hygiene kits, core relief items and financial assistance to those in need.

The number of Sudanese refugees in Egypt grew considerably due to the conflict in the Sudan, with the Government estimating that 317,000 Sudanese crossed into the country since the beginning of the crisis. UNHCR enhanced reception conditions at border-crossing points and increased registration capacity in Cairo and Alexandria. UNHCR also continued to promote social inclusion through the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers in national social protection, health care and education systems as well as in other essential services.

Algeria hosts 103,000 refugees and asylum-seekers across five camps near Tindouf and urban areas. The Office's interventions for refugees and asylum-seekers in urban areas focused on facilitating access to basic services. In addition, UNHCR continues to provide humanitarian assistance to vulnerable Sahrawi refugees.

In Morocco, UNHCR supported nearly 20,000 refugees and asylum-seekers through registration and refugee status determination, the provision of key protection services and humanitarian assistance, and advocacy for inclusion in public services.

Mauritania maintained its open-door policy towards refugees and asylum-seekers, hosting over 108,000 individuals who were mainly from Mali. The Office's strategy in this country focused on core humanitarian interventions and facilitating development activities that aimed to foster inclusion in local economies.

Gulf Cooperation Council countries

UNHCR continued resource mobilization activities across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, raising close to \$62 million (inclusive of government and private sector contributions) as of August 2023.

Yemen

Since April 2022, a de facto truce has led to a "no peace, no war" situation in Yemen. To respond to the ongoing humanitarian needs, UNHCR has carried out life-saving health interventions. Over 230,000 extremely vulnerable displaced Yemenis also received nearly \$9.5 million in cash assistance in the first half of 2023. Meanwhile, the registration of refugees and asylum-seekers in the north is set to resume and plans for the resumption of assisted returns of Somali asylum-seekers are under way. Some 1,200 returns are projected to take place in 2023.

Mixed movements

Mixed movements were ongoing in the region, with the risk of smuggling and trafficking, primarily in North Africa. UNHCR continued to work with the relevant authorities and partners to enhance humanitarian access to people in need of international protection and ensure their identification and referral. Approximately 54,000 asylum-seekers were newly registered in

North Africa, mainly Eritreans, Sudanese and Syrians, of whom 38 per cent were women, 37 per cent were men and 25 per cent were children.

Movements by sea from North Africa to Europe continued. Some 34,300 persons crossed from Tunisia to Italy in the first half of 2023, with the increase seen to be related to the challenging socioeconomic situation in countries of origin coupled with stricter migration control measures. In addition, 27,900 persons crossed from Libya to Italy, the majority being Bangladeshis, Egyptians, Pakistanis and Sudanese.

More than 9,000 persons were disembarked in Libya after rescue or interception, mostly in the east of the country. UNHCR does not have consistent access to disembarkation points in Tunisia and western Libya, and no access in eastern Libya, which hinders the identification of people with international protection needs. Sea arrivals in Yemen doubled, while attempts to cross from Lebanon decreased. Some 2,200 refugees and migrants are known to have died at sea between North Africa and Europe.

To respond to mixed movements, UNHCR developed a regional routes-based strategy that aims to strengthen access for persons on the move to State-based protection and assistance, with the objective of reducing dangerous onward journeys. UNHCR continued to strengthen cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to support greater operational coordination.

Increasing movements, combined with reduced resources, contributed to community protests and tension in the region. To promote peaceful coexistence, UNHCR and partners strengthened community outreach, enhanced coordination and provided capacity-building for partners and affected communities.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2023 plan for the Middle East and North Africa

Contributing to a safe and favourable protection environment

From January to July 2023, over 118,000 individuals were newly registered by UNHCR in the region, representing a slight increase compared to the same period in 2022. The primary nationalities of those registered were Syrian (38 per cent), Sudanese (36 per cent) and Eritrean (6 per cent). In Egypt, 44 per cent of those newly registered were Sudanese.

UNHCR continued to focus on community empowerment and resilience-building. Some 882,000 persons participated in community structures and awareness-raising on how to strengthen child protection, prevent gender-based violence and address the needs of people with disabilities. UNHCR responded to 1 million queries regarding cash assistance, registration, durable solutions, health care and legal protection in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Jordan, including from some 62,000 Sudanese.

The region's digital participatory tool was expanded to several countries in the region. In countries using the tool, UNHCR engaged 1,000 community members in programme planning, implementation and monitoring, and facilitated structured dialogues with vulnerable groups, including 6,200 women and girls and 700 people with disabilities. A special webpage¹ designed to provide direct information on protection and assistance to refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless people reached 5 million users and facilitated referrals to services for 30,000 people in the region.

In response to gender-based violence, UNHCR mainstreamed risk mitigation measures in its operations across the region, especially in the context of the response to the earthquakes in the Syrian Arab Republic and the Sudan situation. In Egypt, Lebanon and Türkiye, more than 54,000 persons participated in awareness-raising sessions on the prevention of gender-based violence, and nearly 85,000 survivors and persons at risk benefited from assistance.

UNHCR strengthened its child protection interventions to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. It also promoted the best interest principle and facilitated

¹ See <https://help.unhcr.org>.

access to national child protection services through strengthened technical support, capacity-building and advocacy.

In the countries covered by the Syrian Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, 1.5 million children were enrolled in formal and non-formal education, with 892,000 benefiting from education-related social protection programmes. Efforts to increase the enrolment of refugees in tertiary education are ongoing. Under the UNHCR-United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) strategic collaboration framework, progress was made on the inclusion of refugee children in national education systems. For example, the Iraqi Kurdistan region now includes Syrian children in public schools and hires refugee teachers under the same conditions as nationals.

To address statelessness in the region, UNHCR provided legal assistance, technical support and capacity-building opportunities for authorities issuing civil documentation. Improving access to birth registration and birth documents remained a key priority, with significant progress in countries under the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan.

UNHCR promoted good practices relating to psychosocial support and strengthened the capacity of staff and partners to address mental health needs among forcibly displaced and stateless people in the region. As part of the earthquake response in the Syrian Arab Republic, 67 frontline staff were trained to carry out evidence-based psychological interventions.

Empowering communities and partnership

The partnership for improving prospects for forcibly displaced people and host communities, known as PROSPECTS, continued to support the development of innovative tools to strengthen accountability to affected people and two-way communication to reach broad audiences. Learning events and dialogues enhanced collaboration and localization, including by engaging refugee and women-led organizations through the accountability to affected people grant and the community protection network in the Middle East and North Africa region. PROSPECTS promoted new ways of working through learning and adaptation, participation and inclusion, communication and transparency, with persons with specific needs in mind.

UNHCR facilitated a workshop on the Arab strategy for the prevention of and response to all forms of violence in the asylum context, especially sexual violence against women and girls. The strategy, which was developed by the League of Arab States, provides Member States with a guiding framework for its implementation. The workshop helped define regional priorities to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.

UNHCR continued to support the “No Lost Generation” initiative that encompasses components on education, youth and child protection, mental health and psychosocial support. UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF held a workshop on child protection in the context of mixed movements for North Africa and Yemen operations to identify priorities and enhance collaboration.

UNHCR and partners are committed to achieving a rate of 15 per cent of refugee enrolment in higher education by 2030. UNHCR supported connected learning initiatives for refugees through local partnerships in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. The aim of these initiatives is to provide access to digital platforms for skills-building and preparation for the labour market, while also employing refugee youth as facilitators.

Together with the Middle East and North Africa Statelessness Network, known as “Hawiati”, and the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights, UNHCR convened a consultation on statelessness for 35 representatives from 25 entities from civil society, the United Nations, academic and research institutes, as well as experts and affected individuals. The consultation served to strengthen collaboration on statelessness in the region and to enhance engagement with affected communities.

Pursuing solutions

In 2023, UNHCR maintained its resettlement capacity in the region and continued to strengthen integrity safeguards, as reflected in the organization’s mid-year regional biannual report on

fraud and inconsistencies. Resettlement opportunities in the region met only 5 per cent of the needs, and UNHCR country operations hosting Syrian refugees faced reductions by resettlement countries with respect to resettlement quotas in 2023. Efforts to advocate resettlement for Syrian refugees and analyse minimum resettlement requirements in country operations hosting Syrian refugees were needed.

Despite the challenges, UNHCR submitted the cases of approximately 20,000 individuals for resettlement consideration from January through June 2023. In close coordination with States and IOM, 16,800 individuals departed for resettlement by the end of June 2023. This represented a significant increase when compared to the same period in 2022. The expansion of resettlement and complementary pathways continued to be prioritized in line with international burden- and responsibility-sharing and with the Global Compact on Refugees.

To further strengthen integrity safeguards, the regional integrity working group, in coordination with resettlement States, held a session with refugee representatives from the region to better understand their needs and concerns, and seek solutions to integrity dilemmas and exploitation schemes.

Approximately 16,500 Syrian refugees returned home in the first six months of 2023, which represents a decrease of around 5,000 individuals compared to the same period in 2022. Together with the regional durable solutions working group and under the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, UNHCR and partners coordinated efforts in support of returning refugees, including counselling and assistance with documentation and specific needs, with a view to reducing the risk of harm and enabling informed decisions on return. In collaboration with States, partners and other stakeholders, UNHCR will continue to invest in complementary pathways, including opportunities in North Africa and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, dedicated resources and the establishment of new partnerships.

C. Financial information

The current 2023 budget for the region stands at \$2,441.6 million. This is relatively consistent with the 2022 budget of \$2,432.4 million. As of 31 August 2023, only 32 per cent of the Middle East and North Africa region's 2023 requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.