
Update on UNHCR operations in West and Central Africa

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

By July 2023, approximately 13.4 million people in the region were forcibly displaced or stateless, compared to 13 million at the end of 2022. The increase was mainly due to a rise in the number of internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria, and in the number of refugees and asylum-seekers in Chad, Côte d’Ivoire and Togo.

Of the 2 million refugees in the region, women and children comprised 81 per cent, and Chad was the largest refugee-hosting country, followed by Cameroon. Across the region, the effects of climate change intensified conflict over resources and exacerbated food insecurity among forcibly displaced and stateless persons.

The coup d’état in the Niger, the influx of refugees from Burkina Faso in the coastal countries of Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, and the Sudan crisis forced UNHCR to scale up emergency preparedness and response activities. It also enhanced coordination with all actors, including development partners, to ensure an effective response.

Sudan situation

In 2023, Sudanese arrivals in eastern Chad surpassed 360,000 individuals. Despite having officially closed its border, the Government of Chad continued to allow Sudanese refugees to access its territory. It is expected that approximately 600,000 people will have arrived in eastern Chad by the end of 2023, including 515,000 refugees, 5,000 Chadian refugee returnees and 80,000 Chadian migrant returnees. With this projected increase in arrivals and including some 409,000 Sudanese who had already arrived in eastern Chad in 2003 and 2004, the total number of Sudanese refugees in the country will likely reach approximately 900,000 by the end of the year.

In the Central African Republic, 12,600 Sudanese refugees sought refuge, and 4,700 Central African returnees repatriated from the Sudan between April and July 2023. In this context, UNHCR and partners continued to provide protection and life-saving assistance.

Central Sahel

In the central Sahel, namely Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger, displacement continued to increase, with 2.8 million people currently internally displaced and over 410,700 refugees. In 2023, the number of internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso surpassed 2 million, and asylum-seekers from Burkina Faso fled to nearby coastal countries. Moreover, protection incidents, including in relation to the protection of children, the right to life and property rights, increased by more than 30 per cent in Burkina Faso in 2023.

In Mali, there were over 376,000 internally displaced persons, and more than 209,000 Malian refugees remained in neighbouring countries. At the same time, Mali hosted over 64,900 refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly from Burkina Faso. Data, which was collected by the regional inter-agency protection monitoring system, revealed that the situation was quickly deteriorating in the country and, with a significant increase in the number of protection incidents registered, was having a detrimental impact on the humanitarian situation. Also, the impact that the complete withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali will have on humanitarian operations, including in terms of access, remains uncertain.

In the Niger, a country situated at the crossroads of mixed movements towards Algeria, Libya and Morocco, and ultimately across the Mediterranean Sea, the Office continued to provide protection and assistance to forcibly displaced people and to work towards solutions, such as the socioeconomic integration of Malian refugees in Tillabéri and projects such as the “villages des opportunités” in Maradi that help foster peaceful coexistence with the host community. UNHCR assessed potential scenarios, and contingency plans were developed for areas affected by forced displacement. In the Niger, there were over 682,000 forcibly displaced individuals, including over 309,000 refugees and asylum-seekers and 335,200 internally displaced persons.

Coastal countries

According to governments and the local authorities, the estimated number of arrivals from Burkina Faso in coastal countries rose to 65,000, with 43,000 newly arrived in the course of 2023. Approximately 82 per cent of arrivals (54,000) from Burkina Faso have been registered to date. Coordination with governments and humanitarian actors helped ensure a consistent and coordinated approach, and the regional inter-agency protection monitoring system informed protection analysis.

Central African Republic situation

There were almost half a million internally displaced persons in the Central African Republic, while over 750,000 Central Africans had sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Between April 2017 and June 2023, improved security conditions in some areas of the country enabled 34,800 Central African refugees to return home, mainly from Cameroon, the Congo (Republic of) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Efforts continued to translate into action the recommendations of the 2022 Yaoundé Declaration on Solutions in the context of Forced Displacement related to the Central African Republic Crisis, including through engagement with regional institutions and the provision of technical support to governments.

Lake Chad Basin situation

In the Lake Chad Basin region, there were more than 3.6 million displaced people, including 3.1 million internally displaced persons and nearly 340,000 refugees and asylum-seekers. In response, UNHCR provided humanitarian assistance, including to host communities. In 2023, Cameroonian asylum-seekers from the Far North Region continued to arrive in Nigeria, escaping violence. In the course of 2023, over 8,800 asylum-seekers sought refuge in the Adamawa State in Nigeria, reaching a total number of 22,500.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2023 plan for West and Central Africa

Emergency preparedness and response

Sudan situation: UNHCR and partners in Chad worked to meet the needs of the displaced population by providing protection, health care, and water and sanitation. Registration activities and border and protection monitoring were ongoing across the region. About 116,000 new arrivals were relocated to seven existing and three newly established camps, where around 18,000 family shelters and 3,300 latrines were built. Nevertheless, relocation efforts were hampered due to heavy rains as well as shelter and infrastructure challenges.

Despite overstretched resources, UNHCR, the Government of Chad and partners helped meet the basic needs of the newly arrived refugees and foster economic inclusion, while also supporting host communities. The regional inter-agency protection monitoring system was activated in the border region, and over 4,200 refugee households were interviewed on their protection needs, informing the protection response in assisting the most vulnerable. Also, over 4,000 people were reached through gender-based violence sensitization activities, and survivors were referred to relevant services for appropriate action such as psychosocial support and material assistance.

In the Central African Republic, immediate efforts to assist new arrivals focused on protection and life-saving assistance, including registration and the construction of communal shelters and infrastructure. As part of the prevention of and response to gender-based violence, referral pathways and standard operating procedures have been established. A listening centre was

established, community-based listening groups set up, and psychosocial support activities provided. UNHCR undertook advocacy in favour of new arrivals, and the Government of the Central African Republic granted refugee status on a prima facie basis to 13,000 Sudanese refugees. So far, around 1,700 individuals relocated from the border to a safer government-identified area where assistance is being provided.

Coastal countries (Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo): In 2023, emergency preparedness and response measures were strengthened in the four coastal countries and contingency plans developed in Benin and Togo. UNHCR activities focused on advocacy, protection monitoring and registration; community support; and the provision of emergency shelter. In Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, the relocation of new arrivals and advocacy on the granting of refugee status were ongoing. As of July 2023, Togo granted refugee status to 19,400 asylum-seekers from Burkina Faso through accelerated procedures, and Benin recognized some 860 refugees on a prima facie basis. The regional inter-agency protection monitoring system was also active in Côte d’Ivoire. In relation to the prevention of and response to gender-based violence, in line with the Safe from the Start initiative, UNHCR helped build the capacity of national actors and strengthened systems to adequately address this.

In the coastal countries, the participation of UNHCR in the preparation of an inter-agency response plan and collaboration with development actors aimed to strengthen coordination and joint resource mobilization. In this context, the Office faced some logistical constraints, including due to the high cost that a physical presence in the affected areas entails and the need to conduct regular field missions.

Lake Chad Basin situation: In the Niger, UNHCR was engaged in an urbanization project in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, local authorities and communities. This initiative aimed to provide legal access to land for displaced families in the eastern region of Diffa.

In Chad, UNHCR strengthened its partnership with the *Agence Nationale des Titres Sécurisés*. Approximately 3,100 identification documents and some 11,200 birth certificates were issued to refugees and internally displaced persons. Meanwhile, in Cameroon, a memorandum of understanding was signed between UNHCR and the Central Bureau of Census and Population Studies to ensure the inclusion of refugees in the fourth general population and housing census. This will serve to identify refugees and internally displaced persons, including with a view to helping provide socioeconomic data to governments and development actors to promote inclusion in their planning and programmes.

In Nigeria, discussions were ongoing on the need to relocate Cameroonians that arrived in Adamawa State to a safer area. In July 2023, UNHCR contributed to the fourth Lake Chad Basin Governors’ Forum to showcase positive local practices in implementing durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons in the region and garner support from key stakeholders.

Chadian influx in the Central African Republic: As of the beginning of August 2023, a total of 31,700 Chadian asylum-seekers had been pre-registered in the Central African Republic. UNHCR is working on the development of a site where relocation and biometric registration could take place.

The Niger: Recent violence and attacks in the Niger triggered the internal displacement of over 20,000 people. Between January and April 2023, some 8,000 people who had entered the country through irregular means and included some asylum-seekers and refugees who were expelled from Algeria were stranded at Assamaka and other locations in the region of Agadez. The humanitarian response plan led by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) focused on addressing the basic needs of the mixed group. Despite limited resources, core relief items were distributed to more than 500 Malian refugees who were among the 8,000 people removed from Algeria. A referral mechanism for the identification of potential asylum-seekers was also established by IOM, UNHCR and the authorities. Since the establishment of the emergency transit mechanism in the Niger in 2017, over 4,200 individuals have been evacuated from Libya to the Niger.

Burkina Faso: In this country, there were over 2 million internally displaced persons, and 36,300 refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly from Mali. Burkina Faso is committed to an open

door policy towards refugees, in line with its pledge made at the first Global Refugee Forum in 2019. UNHCR supports the Government in providing essential humanitarian aid to refugees, internally displaced persons and affected host communities, and in strengthening national services. Wherever possible, UNHCR advocates the inclusion of refugees and internally displaced persons in national strategies. Despite the closure of more than 6,150 schools due to insecurity and conflict, affecting more than 1 million children, UNHCR has continued to support the enrolment of refugee and internally displaced children in the national education system, in particular through the construction of multimedia classrooms and the distribution of school kits in schools hosting large numbers of refugees.

Mali: UNHCR carried out the registration of newly arrived refugees, including those who arrived as part of the influx from Burkina Faso in the Sikasso region of Mali. UNHCR strived to ensure that all those at risk of gender-based violence and survivors had safe and timely access to services. Both the forcibly displaced and host populations benefited from income-generating projects.

Critical protection needs

Access to territory and asylum: UNHCR is engaged in a constructive dialogue with the governments of coastal countries to ensure that access to territory for asylum-seekers is granted and that their legitimate security concerns are considered. In line with the UNHCR position on returns to Burkina Faso, collaboration is ongoing with the concerned governments to continue to guarantee access to the territory.

Protection environment in countries in transition: UNHCR continued working to maintain a favourable protection environment. Notably, the Office advocated that transitional governments adhere to relevant international legal frameworks and regional protection initiatives. Advocacy and capacity-building around the need to preserve the civilian character of asylum continued, as did registration and documentation activities for new arrivals. Protection monitoring, including in the context of mixed movements, was enhanced in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and the Niger, thanks to the regional inter-agency protection monitoring system.

Statelessness: Efforts were ongoing to support governments to fulfil their pledges made during the high-level segment on statelessness, which took place during the 70th plenary session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme in 2019. Of particular note was Benin's promulgation and publication of a law relating to the status of refugees and stateless persons and its approval of a new nationality code that eliminated gender discriminatory elements. In Côte d'Ivoire, a special law for the acquisition of Ivorian nationality by declaration is pending adoption by the Council of Ministers. UNHCR, in collaboration with the Economic Community of West African States and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), supported at the technical level the adoption of the first regional model law on statelessness determination, the protection of stateless persons and naturalization. Notwithstanding these positive developments, the lack of data on statelessness and financial constraints continued to hinder statelessness eradication efforts in the region.

Maintain a predictable response to internal displacement

Cameroon, Chad, the Niger and Nigeria ratified the 2009 African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention). In June 2023, Chad joined the Niger in the application of the Kampala Convention through national legislation. The process of incorporating the Kampala Convention into national legislation is also at an advanced stage in Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Nigeria.

In line with the work of the Special Adviser of the United Nations Secretary-General on Solutions to Internal Displacement, UNHCR supported a solutions-oriented approach in its ongoing response in the Lake Chad Basin region. This included efforts in the Central African Republic, Chad, the Niger and Nigeria.

Solutions

Naturalization: Mali hosts 14,900 Mauritanians refugees who are at risk of statelessness. A total of 5,500 requests for naturalization were made with the support of UNHCR, and 2,500 were approved as of July 2023. In Senegal, over 8,600 out of 11,500 Mauritanian refugees opted for naturalization, and more than 500 requests were submitted and 70 approved. In March 2023, the Government of Côte d’Ivoire delivered 500 passports and 72 birth certificates to former Ivorian refugees who remained in Ghana. In addition, the authorities in Ghana approved the issuance of residence permits with an indefinite validity and at a reduced cost for Ivorian passport holders.

Voluntary repatriation: In 2023, some 1,300 Nigerians returned from Cameroon. To enhance the protection environment, UNHCR assisted with the construction of 300 transitional shelters for the returnees in Banki. In the framework of the tripartite agreement with Cameroon and Nigeria, approximately 3,900 Nigerian refugees were assisted in their return home.

Resettlement and complementary pathways: In 2023, the cases of more than 2,000 individuals were submitted for resettlement. Over 2,200 departures also took place, mainly to Canada, France, Germany and the United States of America.

Central African Republic Solutions Support Platform: The Governments of Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo validated the Central African Republic Solutions Support Platform’s governance structure and were in the process of establishing a technical committee to help draft national solutions strategies. Further engagement with other country signatories of the Yaoundé Declaration on Solutions is ongoing. The support of regional institutions, such as ECCAS, was also sought to help enhance the advocacy efforts of UNHCR.

Climate action

The UNHCR Regional Strategic Plan on Climate Action focuses on ensuring protection for the forcibly displaced in climate-vulnerable settings, while also enabling them to live self-sufficiently, be resilient to the impacts of climate change, and gain access to environmentally sustainable resources and services. In line with these aims, several actions are ongoing across the region. In Cameroon, UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding with the Center for International Forestry Research and with the World Agroforestry in Cameroon to support communities affected by displacement, and help ensure the sustainable management of forest resources and the conservation of the environment. In addition, reforestation activities are successfully ongoing in the Far North Region. In Niger, degraded soil recuperation activities are being undertaken in the Tahoua, Tillabery and Diffa regions. In Burkina Faso, UNHCR is actively promoting climate smart agriculture to reduce the use of chemical fertilizers and the quantity of water needed for irrigation. Moreover, in Mali, compressed bricks are produced with locally available material using hydraform block technology, which does not require energy for production.

C. Financial information

The 2023 budget for the West and Central Africa region, which was approved by the Executive Committee, amounted to \$896.5 million.

Three supplementary budgets were approved for the response to the Sudan emergency, which included components for the response in Chad, totalling \$135.4 million, and for the Central African Republic, amounting to \$15.4 million. An additional \$17.5 million was allocated from the operational reserve for the response to arrivals from Burkina Faso in coastal countries.

As a result, financial requirements for the West and Central Africa region currently stand at \$1,064.9 million, representing a 20 per cent increase compared to the original budget approved in 2022. As of 18 September 2023, these needs were only 35 per cent funded, with \$375.3 million in funds available, including the preliminary allocations of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.

While 2023 funding levels have exceeded levels reached at the same point in 2022, the drastic increase in needs continues to outpace the resources available.
