

**Statement Delivered by the Director of the Regional Bureau for West and Central Africa to
the March 2021 Standing Committee of UNHCR Executive Committee (80th Meeting)**

**Madam Chairperson of the Executive Committee,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

This time last year, I came before you as a new Director of the then newly constituted Regional Bureau for West and Central Africa. I, like my other colleagues in the decentralized Bureaux, was extremely hopeful for the new structures and the work that lay ahead. I told you then - as the dark clouds of the pandemic gathered - that the *“The onus is now on us to deliver with speed and agility.”* This remains true.

As I come before you today, I can confirm that one year on, the task of constituting the Bureau is largely behind us and we can better appreciate the extent of our capacities but also the gaps that need to be addressed in order to deliver on the core objectives of the Decentralisation and Regionalisation. Having come full cycle on our management and oversight of country operations we are also much better placed today to pinpoint the capacity needs in field operations.

Madam Chairperson,

In the last several months, several countries in the West and Central Africa region have held presidential and parliamentary elections. The lead-up to two of these elections— in the Central African Republic and in Cote D’Ivoire – caused large numbers of people to leave their homes. In both instances, Emergency Level 1 declarations ensured the necessary preparedness and response. Emergency teams and resources were deployed to bolster the reception capacity in countries of asylum who, without exception, kept their borders open to asylum-seekers. We strongly commend governments in the region for respecting their international obligations even as stringent measures have been taken to contain the spread of COVID-19. We have continued to prioritize public health, shelter and sanitation to ensure duty of care to asylum seekers in the midst of this devastating pandemic.

While the fear of electoral and post-electoral violence drove thousands of Ivorians from their homes, it is encouraging to note that prospects for solutions for Ivorian refugees and asylum seekers are already discernible on the horizon, thanks to concerted efforts towards national reconciliation. We must seize, with determination, these opportunities for solutions which may help bring closure to the situation of Ivorian refugees. In particular, we are committed to revitalising the Roadmap for the Implementation of Comprehensive Solutions for Ivorian refugees that was agreed in November 2018 with the Government of Cote d’Ivoire and the governments of the main countries of asylum for Ivorian refugees.

We remain equally hopeful that the situation in the Central African Republic will stabilize significantly to allow for a stepped-up response to meet the most urgent needs of the now more than 725,000 IDPs in the country – among them, some 100,000 newly displaced. We are particularly concerned by a steep rise in the number of incidents of Gender Based Violence (GBV) which has long characterised the crisis in the Central African Republic. Referral networks, psychosocial and medical programmes, livelihood support for survivors have been severely disrupted alongside activities that were underway to buttress the return and re-integration of IDPs and refugee returnees. All said, we are expanding our presence to contribute to a concerted humanitarian response to some of the most affected communities in areas such as Bangassou and Batangafo inside the Central African Republic while maintaining emergency response to the nearly 100,000 new CAR refugees in neighbouring countries.

Madam Chairperson, Excellencies, ladies and Gentlemen,

Conditions in North-east Nigeria have remained extremely worrying. In recent weeks, several locations have come under fierce attack by Non-State Armed Groups prompting a sharp reduction of presence of humanitarian workers in these locations and the forced displacement of thousands of Nigerians towards relatively safer locations. Insecurity in the region continues to deal a cruel double blow: on the one hand it heightens the humanitarian crisis, on the other hand, it hinders our very access to attend to the resultant needs of affected populations.

Despite the very constrained environment nearly 5,000 refugees in Cameroon have requested return assistance to Bama and Banki in NE Nigeria. Many say their living conditions in the Minawao camp have become increasingly difficult, particularly due to declining assistance such as food. We are working with the Government of Nigeria and the Government of Cameroon to lend some support to these returns, albeit, in less than ideal conditions.

Turning to the Sahel, the unfortunate threshold of 2.1 million forcibly displaced persons in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Chad was crossed at the end of 2020, testifying to the persisting crisis. In the context of the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel, we are working closely with the other UN agencies to foster greater coherence, collaboration and complementarity between the humanitarian, development and peace approaches. Specifically, UNHCR is working together with UNDP to outline a joint Plan of Action for six countries in the Sahel where we expect to have more collaboration, joint programming, joint advocacy and resource mobilisation.

Madame Chairperson,

We are acutely aware of the need to ensure climate sensitive responses not only in the Sahel but across our operations. We are taking measures to “Green our response” across our varied interventions. Particularly in the Sahel, we are increasing the use of clean energy for beneficiaries

of our programmes; we are exploring alternatives to firewood, and prioritising semi-durable shelters using local materials to limit the use of plastic sheeting.

Despite the odds that persons of concern to UNHCR are faced with in the West and Central Africa region, I want to underline that there have been positive developments – a number of them the result of innovative approaches in the context of COVID. We have introduced distance learning, distributed solar radios to families and reached over 100,000 children using this method. Where necessary we have adjusted our methodology for Refugee Status Determination and adopted virtual interviews in a number of places, including for resettlement interviews. We are increasingly adopting digital approaches for communication with communities.

Madame Chairperson,

Before I conclude, let me highlight that to meet the range of challenges that I have very briefly outlined, UNHCR continues to count on its dedicated staff, many of whom are working on the frontline of crises and increasingly finding themselves in harm's way in the midst of a volatile working environment. Today, they must also contend with COVID. As is the case around the world, the restrictive COVID prevention measures are exacting a toll on staff and their well-being. We continue to pay close attention to the health and well-being of our staff. We have brought in one more medical officer and an additional staff counsellor to attend to the needs of staff. There are up to 50 Peer advisors across the region. We are rolling out a network of service providers to provide quick, in-country support for the health and well-being of staff. We are working together with our operations to address disrupted cycles of rest and recuperation. **Our single prayer to governments today is that as we go forward, please include frontline humanitarian workers in national vaccination plans. Do the same for refugees and other persons of concern.**

I thank you

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