

# Impact of COVID-19 on the protection of displaced and stateless populations

## West and Central Africa

June 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an extraordinary and unprecedented emergency for States in West and Central Africa. In response, Governments are taking necessary and legitimate measures to prevent the spread of the virus and to protect populations. These measures are not specific to refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), stateless or returnees and bear a general scope. However, some of these measures may have a disproportionate impact on displaced population due to their specific needs and vulnerabilities.

UNHCR is committed to working in close concert with national authorities and other relevant actors to ensure that all COVID-19 related prevention and response initiatives at the national level include persons of concern, while at the same time closely monitoring the application of these measures to ensure that people are not exposed to specific protection risks.

This note aims at identifying the direct and indirect impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the protection of persons of concern to UNHCR in West and Central Africa. It also presents some key elements of UNHCR response.

### Access to territory and asylum

In April, thirteen countries in West and Central Africa had officially announced the closure of all land borders.<sup>1</sup> Others had adopted a less systematic approach. If Benin had decided to limit land entries and exits to the “*absolute necessity*” for “*essential*” crossings and “*cordons sanitaires*”, Chad and Senegal had ordered the closure of certain borders only. Meanwhile, the Central African Republic had not adopted any measure relating to land borders.

No reference was made in these measures to the situation of asylum-seekers and refugees. However, while Côte d’Ivoire had mentioned the creation of “*humanitarian corridors*” as an exception to border closure with the aim to “*provide support to individuals or communities in urgent need of assistance*”, the Central African Republic and Guinea had referred to humanitarian flights as an exception to the suspension of air travels.

Two months later, if most land borders are still officially closed, cross-border movements have nevertheless been observed, through unofficial border entry points, or allowed by the authorities based on protection needs, such as the entry of Niger asylum-seekers to Mali.<sup>2</sup>

The risk of refoulement linked to border closure is closely monitored by UNHCR and partners. So far, on the northern border of the region, the media have communicated on the expulsions from

<sup>1</sup> Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, The Gambia, Niger, Nigeria, Togo and Sierra Leone

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, UNHCR Sahel Crisis Response, 1-15 May 2020, 05/20, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/76835>

Libya to Chad. Within the region, the arrest for illegal entry of Burkina Faso nationals was reported along with their return to Burkina Faso. In both cases, no clear further information on the profile and needs involved were shared.<sup>3</sup>

As of mid-May, registration of asylum-seekers and process of asylum claims had restarted in most countries of the region, using prevention and control measures. This is a clear improvement compared to April 15, where registration of asylum-seekers had been halted in three countries and restricted to urban or critical cases only in seven countries, and where refugee status determination procedures were still underway in only nine countries and limited to critical cases in two others. Overall, data shows that the numbers of registrations of asylum-seekers and refugees have remained steady in the region since the start of the year and haven't been significantly impacted by COVID-19.<sup>4</sup>

### Response

- In the **Lake Chad Basin** countries (Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger), all official and non-official border points have been mapped to allow proactive border monitoring and facilitate access to territory and asylum. In **Nigeria**, eight additional monitors were deployed at four entry border points in Damasak, Banki, Ngala (Nigeria-Cameroon border) and Pulka (Niger border) to monitor population movements and protection-related concerns in the context of COVID-19 such as the risk of *refoulement*.
- The UNHCR multi-country office based in **Senegal** and covering 8 countries<sup>5</sup> is establishing hotlines to provide remote legal counselling to persons of concern to UNHCR and allow partners to report protection incidents to UNHCR. In **Nigeria**, the National Human Rights Commission launched hotlines with a view to facilitate reporting of violations committed by security agents in the context of the COVID-19 response plan.
- To ensure access to territory and asylum while preserving public health, nurses have been deployed in North-East **Nigeria** at the Damasak, Banki and Ngalaborder border-crossing points to measure the temperature of people entering the country. Isolation centers in these locations are under construction to reinforce existing screening measures.
- In **Ghana**, the Refugee Board is implementing remote interviewing by videoconference in the context of refugee status determination, ensuring social distancing and confidentiality. UNHCR is currently reviewing capacities in all countries in West and Central Africa to support remote processing.

## Risk communication and community engagement

The situation of persons of concern to UNHCR, in camps, camp-like settings and outside of camps, requires enhanced and tailored risk communication and community mobilization due to increased health and transmission risks associated with displacement, overcrowding, sub-

<sup>3</sup> Reuters, "East Libya has expelled 1,400 refugees and migrants this year: U.N.", 28/04/20, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-refugees/east-libya-has-expelled-1400-refugees-and-migrants-this-year-u-n-idUSKCN22A11A>; Ghana Web, "Five more Burkinabés arrested in Ghana for illegal entry", 24/05/20, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Five-more-Burkinab-s-arrested-in-Ghana-for-illegal-entry-960535>

<sup>4</sup> In January 2020, 3,600 asylum-seekers and refugees were registered, 10,026 in February, 3,738 in March, 1,920 in April and 2,100 in May. The first cases of COVID-19 in the region were registered in March.

<sup>5</sup> The UNHCR multi-country office in Senegal covers Benin, Cabo Verde, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Senegal, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Togo

standard shelters, often rudimentary sanitation and health services, as well as poor nutritional and health status. Women, the elderly, adolescents, youth, children, persons with disabilities and minorities already experience the highest degree of socio-economic marginalization, increasing their exposure to several additional risks, such as sexual exploitation and child labour.

Risk communication messages and community engagement approaches need to be adapted to social distancing, including through the use of audio and radio content, as well as to the profiles and specific needs of refugees and others of concern, via the development of age and gender-sensitive material which is also culturally appropriate as well as the engagement of youth, women's groups and traditional religious leaders.

### Response

- A **regional** COVID Risk communication and community engagement digital platform was launched by the Risk communication and community engagement regional working group based in Dakar, with the support of UNHCR, Doctors without borders and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), to disseminate graphic, audio and video tools in English, French and more than 18 local languages with a view to support community mobilisers and other national or local platforms sharing prevention messages. Most downloaded and shared tools deal with awareness-raising for children, parenting tips, but also women and some specific groups, including elderly and disabled persons. Building on early lessons learnt since the launch of the platform, UNHCR and partners are now focusing their efforts on fighting the spread of false information and rumours, especially as they relate to treatments, through the production of audio content which can be disseminated in rural areas.



- Through a wide network of e-volunteers and e-reporters in **Ivory Coast**, community leaders in **Ghana**, local artists and online volunteers in **Cameroon** and more than 300 grass roots women organizations regionally, simple messages targeting urban areas and students' groups are being disseminated. While in **Burkina Faso**, radio programmes covering rural areas were aired, radio shows were hosted by refugees and internally displaced people in local languages in **Cameroon**.
- Existing efforts by religious leaders in the **Sahel** region to communicate on the need for adaptation of religious practices in the context of the pandemic are supported by UNHCR and partners through the translation of relevant WHO guidance on religious practices in the context of COVID-19 and the mapping of existing relevant resources in the region.
- The National Human Rights Commission in **Nigeria** contributed to the sensitization efforts on measures to curb the spread of the pandemic in camps for internally displaced people, host communities, return areas and detention facilities through issuance of guidelines targeting protection monitors deployed in the North East of the country. The commission is also carrying out sensitization campaign through electronic and print media on self and community protection, including with a focus on sexual and gender-based violence prevention.

## Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), child protection

In West and Central Africa, displaced women, girls, and LGBTI individuals have always been confronted to a number of challenges, including in terms of access to health services, employment, aid and information, decision-making, bodily autonomy as well as equal participation. These disparities are often resulting from social norms and harmful sexist stereotypes driving gender-based discrimination, equally harming host community members.

These longstanding vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. Increased gender-based violence has been reported by various grassroots women organizations and human rights defenders. The impact of COVID-19 on children's rights is multi-faceted, with repercussions on education, protection, mental health and psychosocial support, health, nutrition with human rights implications. The significant disruption in the livelihoods of many forcibly displaced population is enhancing the risk of resorting to negative coping mechanisms, including child labour.

The holistic support services for victims and coordination between concerned sectors, including health, policy and justice, social services, are jeopardized, with priorities, coordination efforts and resources redirected to the COVID-19 response.

### *Response*

- The health mobile clinic response was scaled up in **Burkina Faso** by UNHCR and partners for survivors of gender-based violence, leading to a tenfold increase in the identification of survivors of gender-based violence.
- In **Niger**, **Burkina Faso** and **Mali**, UNHCR is planning remote gender-based violence safety audits evaluating gender-based violence risks.
- The National Human Rights Commission in **Nigeria** initiated a collaboration with OSIWA, DFID and the Shehu Yar'Adua Foundation to adapt an application to monitor human rights violations including sexual and gender-based violence for all persons and vulnerable/displaced communities during and after the pandemic.
- In **Nigeria**, after the authorities decided to relocate *Almajiri* children (*talibe* children), the National Human Rights Commission issued an [advisory opinion](#) on the protection of *Almajiri* children promoting the best interest of the child principles and advising against, for instance, the relocation of children to places outside their country of origin, leading to the “*denial of access to their parents, guardians or home governments for a structured development*”.

## Healthcare

In most of the countries in the region, persons of concern have the right to access national health services and are included in Governments' response plans. However, in West and Central Africa, and in particular in remote areas hosting refugees and internally displaced people, public health services are ill-equipped to deal with the COVID-19 as a result of limited number of trained health personnel, weak case detection management, inadequate treatment units, etc. Ongoing armed conflicts have resulted in the closure of hundreds of health centers, and displaced populations are contributing to overstressing the capacity of those that remain open. In addition, the health situation is already fragile, characterized by the persistence of diseases such as malaria, respiratory infections, measles and diarrhea, exacerbated by a precarious security situation.

### **Response**

- UNHCR is advocating in favour of the inclusion of persons of concern, in particular those with specific needs, in national response plans, but also through a proactive participation in regional working groups and political arenas, including within the African Union and ECOWAS.
- Direct support to national health systems to strengthen their infection prevention and healthcare responses, including through the provision of medical equipment and supplies (ambulances, prefabs, personal protective equipment, sanitation products, medicine, etc.) and training of health personnel.
- In **Chad**, in refugee camps in the town of Iriba, personal protection equipment, including face masks, were provided to refugees. In **Nigeria**, while 41,000 pieces of disinfectant soap, 6,400 face masks, 7,500 hand sanitizers and 5,000 buckets were delivered to the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and internally displaced people (NCFRMI) with a view to assist persons of concern to UNHCR, the Nigerian Immigration Service was provided by UNHCR with hygiene materials and personal protective equipment to facilitate safe border screening.
- In **Chad**, 176 officials in Gore are being trained on epidemiological surveillance and the management of suspected/confirmed COVID-19 cases.
- With a view to facilitate social distancing in **Nigeria**, 500 emergency decongestion shelters are being built in camps for internally displaced people in Borno State. Similarly, in **Central African Republic**, sites hosting internally displaced people are being re-designed through Non-Food Items (NFI) distribution.

## **Education**

In the early stages of the pandemic, all governments in the region had decided to temporarily close educational institutions in an attempt to contain the virus, impacting over 140 million children across the region, including displaced children included in national education systems in all the countries. With the progressive easing of confinement measures, a minority of educational institutions have reopened, especially for students concerned by exams, and others are planned to in the upcoming weeks.

The negative outcomes of prolonged school closure are likely to disproportionately impact the three million children of concern to UNHCR in the region, who see their education interrupted, lose the safety offered by a school, and get exposed to a higher risk of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation. Refugees and forcibly displaced communities are excluded in practice from national virtual learning initiatives, often failing to obtain the devices, infrastructure and connectivity required to properly engage. The longer marginalized children are out of school, the less likely they are to return, especially for girls, or catch up due to prolonged absence.

To ensure the continuity of learning in a protective environment and to prepare for the safe reopening of schools, UNHCR and partners are supporting governments in the development of COVID-19 education response strategies that include refugees and internally displaced children and youth.

### **Response**

- In order to address the immediate educational challenges due to school closure, UNHCR has received emergency funding from Education Cannot Wait (ECW) through their First Emergency Response window dedicated to the COVID-19

response in **Burkina Faso**, **Chad**, and **Mali**, supporting access to distance education programs and strengthening WASH capacities in schools.

- In low resource/low connectivity areas, where very few households have access to electricity, TV or internet, radio education is one of the few ways children have to continue learning. In **Burkina Faso**, UNHCR will distribute 3,200 solar-powered radio sets to refugee children to ensure they can have access to the distance learning programmes broadcast through national and community radios. In **Mali**, 5,500 solar-powered radios are ready to be deployed to support distance learning in central and northern regions, benefiting 11,000 refugee, internally displaced and host community children. All radio distributions are accompanied by school kits for homework, as well as community awareness sessions to ensure that families are involved in their children's home-based learning.
- In **Ghana**, if the Ministry of Education is broadcasting distance learning programmes through national television, most households in camps do not have television sets. UNHCR is planning on procuring 20 television sets and decoders that will be placed at various points where students can gather in small groups observing social distancing so they can follow live lessons during this period.
- In **Burkina Faso**, **Cameroon**, **Chad**, **Guinea** and **Liberia**, UNHCR continues to pay teacher incentives during the closure of schools for both refugee and national teachers in refugee settings with a view to retain teachers and ensure continuity of income during times when many other livelihoods opportunities have ceased.
- In the refugee camps in eastern **Chad**, where 100.000 refugee pupils had to stop school due to the pandemic, teachers are going the extra mile to provide students with homework exercises corrected each week, while in the South, provincial committees have set up distance learning programs such as radio lesson broadcasting. In urban areas, home-tutoring is underway to help refugee learners prepare for the national examination. With UNHCR's support, awareness campaigns organized by refugee students continue and free English classes through WhatsApp will be launched with the participation of an English professor from the University of Central Florida.
- In **Cameroon**, 68 tablets were offered to DAFI scholarship recipients with a view to provide an access to online learning programmes. To help primary and secondary students in their final year get ready for their return to school and sit the examinations, the "Girls Leadership Group" and the DAFI Cameroon Club have supported them with distance learning during quarantine.
- in **Burkina Faso**, **Chad**, **Mali** and **Niger**, schools have been equipped with hand washing kits and solar water pumps, classrooms and latrines have been newly constructed, and teachers are being trained in hygiene and safe sanitation, as well as Mental Health & Psychosocial Support (MHPSS).

## Statelessness

General measures enacted by several governments in the region to fight the new pandemic had negatively impacted UNHCR and partners' capacity to identify and support persons at risk of statelessness, ensure birth registration, birth documentation and issuance of nationality certificates to stateless persons and persons at risk of statelessness.

With the progressive easing of confinement measures across the region and through enhanced engagement, UNHCR and partners have been able to resume their statelessness activities.

### **Response**

- In **Burkina Faso**, civil registration and the issuance of identification documents have resumed, allowing the government to deliver, with the support of UNHCR, 30,000 late birth certificates and 20,000 National ID cards to internally displaced people and host communities. 8,260 late birth certificates have already been established and registration is ongoing for ID Cards in the Northern, Center-North and Boucle du Mouhoun regions.
- In **Niger**, UNHCR and the telecommunications company Orange pursue their partnering to send sensitization text messages on statelessness and the importance of birth registration in six local languages, reaching a total of 138,983 persons across the country so far, and targeting areas where risks of statelessness are most prevalent.
- In **Mali**, the exercise aiming at the naturalization or the regularization of nationality for refugees of Mauritanian origin in Kayes resumed in early May, after a COVID-19 related break. 167 cases are to be processed in May. In addition to a technical support, UNHCR is providing hygiene materials to prevent the spread of the virus. Physical distancing measures are enforced.
- In **Ivory Coast**, after the easing of confinement measures, local committees against statelessness have resumed their meetings, reassuming their key role in the identification and referral of persons of undetermined nationality or otherwise at risk of statelessness to registration and civil documentation services. Two additional committees were established through local decrees.

## **Voluntary repatriation**

In line with widespread Government containment measures limiting movement to curb the spread of COVID-19, the facilitated voluntary repatriation of refugees has been suspended throughout the region. This suspension is affecting principally population refugees from Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire and Mali.

However, spontaneous returns are still occurring through the few remaining open borders or through informal border crossing points. These returns without assistance and appropriate protection and health control measures may put both the refugees and their communities at risk.

In addition, some return under adverse circumstances are taking place as result of the deterioration of the security situation in the country of asylum. In Burkina Faso, attacks by armed groups in April 2020 has obliged the 9,000 Malian refugee inhabitants of the Goudoubo refugee camp to flee and 3,000 of them have already returned to Mali. For similar reasons, some returns of Nigerian refugees from Chad may occur as a result of the recent outbreak of violence in the Lake Chad Region.

### **Response**

- UNHCR is engaging with refugee communities in the region to inform them about the context, explain the suspension of the facilitation of voluntary repatriation, seek their patience and discourage spontaneous returns through informal border crossing points without adequate health prevention measures in place.
- UNHCR **Côte d'Ivoire** is negotiating with the authorities the functioning modalities of humanitarian corridors with appropriate health prevention measures to allow for the voluntary repatriation of refugees in neighbouring countries in the context of the COVID-19 response plan.

- UNHCR is supporting information management coordination in **Lake Chad Basin** countries to identify the continuous spontaneous returns throughout the region. Recent returns are prompted by a military operation in Chad as well as other security incidents in countries of asylum. Based on this data, UNHCR is better able to engage registration and protection staff, and work with governments to reintegrate returnees.
- UNHCR **Nigeria** successfully advocated the government to allow for the spontaneous return of a large group of Nigerian returnees who were stranded at the border. The group was received by UNHCR which provided quarantine space, hygiene kits, and sensitization to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Returnees were registered and provided with immediate material assistance to facilitate their reintegration.
- UNHCR pursues reintegration activities of returnees in **Central African Republic**, including those who have repatriated spontaneously, through provision of cash-based support, livelihood interventions, access to identity documentation, in addition to legal support for land, housing, and property.
- UNHCR **Mali** is responding to the recent large-scale influx of returnees through registration and provision of immediate relief in terms of shelter, cash-based support, as well as health and personal hygiene supplies.

## Resettlement and complementary pathways

All resettlement departures have been suspended globally since 17 March 2020. The most significant impact of COVID-19 on resettlement and complementary pathways to third countries in the region is the loss of already allocated resettlement slots. Resettlement countries continue to request submissions and are assessing how they might adapt their programmes to the current context in consultation with UNHCR.

While COVID-related restrictions in some countries of the region have been partially lifted, resettlement departures remain, for the time being, suspended. Despite the suspension, resettlement States continue to request to receive resettlement submissions and have remained flexible around submission dates.

Several resettlement States have continued to express willingness to process and receive urgent and emergency cases during this time, although travel constraints are hampering these efforts.

### *Response*

- A second round of discussions with key resettlement States is taking place between May 25 and throughout June to enable further review of submission targets. The Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) are proceeding virtually throughout June.
- Through the coordination of the UNHCR Regional Bureau for West and Central Africa, multiple operations whose resettlement activities have been adversely affected by COVID-19 are extending their support remotely to other operations with case processing, review and capacity development activities.
- The Regional Bureau is conducting a large-scale capacity analysis exercise across the region to assess the ability of operations to accommodate remote interview procedures in order to ensure that resettlement (as well as other protection interventions requiring substantive interviewing) can continue despite the pandemic. Limited remote resettlement interviewing is already underway in **Niger**, following a pilot exercise and the lifting of some internal travel restrictions.



- Mitigating measures for complementary pathways are being implemented, such as remote counselling to provide applicants with guidance to complete necessary forms. For the most vulnerable and at-risk individuals, the office is looking into providing them with cash assistance and shelter.

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