MAURITANIA

SEPTEMBER 2023

UNHCR provides protection and assistance to close to **93,000 Malian refugees*** in the region of Hodh Chargui where Mbera camp is located, and over **16,000 refugees and asylum-seekers*** in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou.

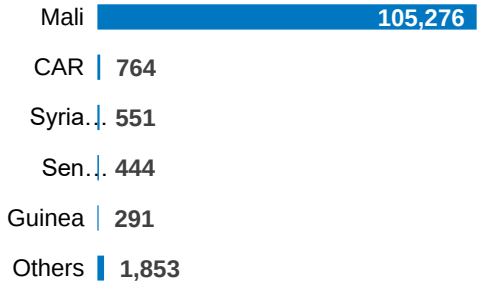
Conditions in Mali are not conducive for large-scale returns, and the refugee population in Mbera camp continues to grow, reaching its peak in population since the camp was established in 2012. **Close to 9,500 newly arrived Malians are currently awaiting registration in the camp.**

The Government of Mauritania has committed to a policy of **inclusion for refugees.** Accordingly, UNHCR is working with partners to build refugee resilience and strengthening **engagement with development actors** to enhance the capacity of national services.

POPULATION OF CONCERN*

108,838 refugees and asylum-seekers

104,020 refugees
4,818 asylum-seekers

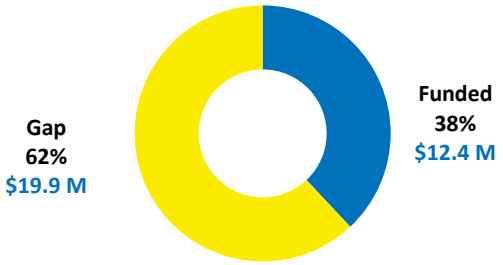


** Refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR as of 31 July 2023. In Mauritania's south-eastern region of Hodh Chargui, there are 84,627 Malian refugees registered inside Mbera camp and 8,341 Malian refugees registered outside.*

FUNDING *(as of 15 August 2023)*

$32.26 million

requested for UNHCR's operation in Mauritania in 2023.



UNHCR IN MAURITANIA

Workforce:

- **65** National
- **22** International
- **45** Affiliate

Offices:

- **1** Country Office in Nouakchott
- **1** Sub Office in Bassikounou
- **1** Field Unit in Nouadhibou
- **1** Field Unit in Nema

Mauritania. UNHCR staff during the registration campaign for Malian refugees outside the camp in Hodh Chargui.

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Working in Partnership

- In close collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization, line ministries and local authorities, **UNHCR coordinates the multi-partner response for Malian refugees**, applying the Refugee Coordination Model in Mbera camp in south-eastern Mauritania near the border with Mali.[1]
- UNHCR participates actively in the UN Country Team and supports the implementation of the **UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSCDF)**, which was recently extended until the end of 2023. UNHCR also takes part in UN and partner-led working groups established for protection, mixed movements, gender-based violence (GBV) and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), and socioeconomic inclusion. Ongoing efforts are also being made to include Mbera camp in the climate action agenda, especially in relation to reforestation, fire prevention and management and clean energy.
- UNHCR has deepened its **engagement with development actors** and partners such as the German Agency for Development Cooperation (GIZ) to support the Government of Mauritania in fulfilling its pledges towards the inclusion of refugees made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum.[2] These partnerships underpin broader efforts by UNHCR to promote **inclusion in national systems** and **foster resilience** and **peaceful coexistence** within refugee and host communities.

Main Activities

Protection

- Thanks to Mauritania's longstanding open door policy, people in need of international protection can access territory, protection against refoulement and **refugee status determination (RSD)** procedures. While continuing to support the development of a national asylum law, UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization in 2022 to formalize its temporary role in RSD in urban areas.
- Mauritania's inter-ministerial decree of 2005 (which was updated in 2022) grants refugees to **access education, employment,** and **social protection** on par with nationals. The updated decree also recognises the formal role of Mauritania's national registry, ANRPTS, in issuing refugees with national identity numbers, identity cards and machine-readable laissez-passers.
- In the south-eastern region of Hodh Chargui, Malian refugees continue to benefit from prima facie protection. Conditions in Mali are not yet conducive for large-scale return. The camp population reached 84,627 in July 2023 – the highest level since the camp was established in 2012.
- From August - December 2022, UNHCR and ANRPTS registered 7,104 Malian refugees residing outside of Mbera camp in the Hodh Chargui region. This joint registration exercise covered eight localities (Amourj, Adel Bagrou, Bougadoum, Nema, Bousteila, Timbedra, Djigueni, Fereini).
- In urban areas, UNHCR has two systems in place for refugee status determination (RSD): Malians who meet certain criteria go through a merged registration-RSD process and receive a refugee certificate renewable after one year, while all other asylum seekers receive a certificate valid for six months first, and a refugee certificate once recognized as a refugee. Refugees registered with UNHCR in urban areas also register with ANRPTS to access national identity numbers and refugee identity cards. UNHCR registered 2,365 individuals in the cities of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou as of 31 July 2023. Out of this number UNHCR registered 1,765 as refugees including 1,524 Malians through the merged registration-RSD process and 241 through the

[1] For more details, please visit: UNHCR, Stratégie de protection et solutions des réfugiés en Mauritanie
[2] Mauritania's GRF pledges include the creation of a national asylum law, issuance of national identity numbers and cards to refugees, and refugee access to healthcare and the labour market on par with nationals.

refugee status determination process. Since the beginning of the year, 645 refugees received a national identification number from the government.

- Alongside registration and documentation, UNHCR ensures a comprehensive protection response for asylum seekers and refugees in Mauritania that is underpinned by strong community engagement. UNHCR works with its partners, including refugee-led community structures, to proactively identify people with specific needs, mostly through home visits. Once identified, they are registered in the UNHCR database and can receive targeted support to access basic services, such as public health and social protection services. In Mbera camp, UNHCR collaborates with Femmes Ressources (women refugee-led organisation), relying on their knowledge of the community and language skills to identify people with specific needs and support their access to services in the camp. UNHCR also provides vulnerable refugees (e.g., those with serious medical conditions, with disabilities, single parents, children at risk) with targeted assistance, including psychosocial counselling, and emergency support for an average duration of one year to respond to their most critical needs.
- In Mbera camp, a traditional structure of refugee representation has been active for several years alongside a growing number of dynamic refugee-led associations (e.g., brigades for waste management, fire prevention and management, environmental protection). Twenty specialized community-based structures (education, child protection, GBV, WASH, environment, fire brigades, blood donors, etc.) allow an effective community-based approach through regular communication with communities, feedback mechanisms and promotion of bottom-up initiatives. Since 2022, UNHCR has signed grant agreements with Femmes Ressources and with SOS Nomade, a refugee-led organization working on child protection.
- Specialized programmes have been developed to raise awareness and strengthen capacity to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and to encourage and enable refugee children to access education. Focal points for gender-based violence have been appointed among the community in schools, in health centres and among local policemen for police stations in Bassiknou and Mbera camp. In the urban areas of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, UNHCR partners with the Association des Femmes Cheffes de Familles (AFCF) to combat early marriage, domestic and gender-based violence, as well as to enhance child protection among host and refugee communities. Accountability mechanisms, including in relation to PSEA, are also being enhanced.
- Equally important is UNHCR's collaboration with actors engaged in responses to **mixed movements.** UNHCR actively promotes respect for the principle of *non-refoulement* with Mauritanian authorities, including through targeted training activities. As such, in September 2022, UNHCR participated in a disembarkation simulation exercise in Nouadhibou organized by IOM in partnership with the EU, where recently negotiated standards operational procedures on disembarkation were tested. UNHCR works closely with IOM, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and national NGOs to ensure referral pathways for mixed movements are in place and functioning. UNHCR likewise advocates for **access to detention centres** to identify people with international protection needs. As of 31 July 2023, 201 visits to detention centres in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou resulted in 66 individuals being released, registered, and provided with documentation.

Inclusion and Resilience

- In support of the Government of Mauritania's inclusion policy towards refugees, UNHCR is facilitating the **inclusion of refugees in national social protection programmes** (Tekavoul, El Maouna). In 2023, the governmental entity in charge of solidarity and social inclusion (Taazour) surveyed more refugee households to assess their socio-economic conditions. Based on this survey, the most vulnerable refugee households are enrolled in the national social registry and related social protection programmes. As of August 2023, 19,898 refugee households have been surveyed in Mbera camp (18,145), Nouakchott (1,567) and Nouadhibou (186).
- Under the joint ProNexus project, UNHCR and GIZ work together to enhance stakeholder capacity to support the **socioeconomic inclusion of refugees**. Since 2022, UNHCR has partnered with the National Agency for Employment (*Techghil*), the Economic Inclusion Programme (*Al Baraka*) and the Agency for the Promotion of Credit Unions (PROCAPEC) to expand their services to refugees, including in Bassiknou and Nema. By engaging with and investing in national entities the ProNexus project ensures a shared focus on refugees

and host communities, as well as greater reliance on national expertise and ownership. In 2023, the ProNexus project supported the collection of socio-economic data during the out-of-camp registration exercise conducted in 2022 to better understand the access to national basic services of over 7,000 refugees residing among the host community in the Hodh Chargui region.

- In line with its **global policies**, UNHCR relies on and continues to expand the use of **cash assistance** in Mbera camp and urban areas. In August 2023, UNHCR, WFP and the National Social Protection Programme Tekavoul took the lead for the Cash-based interventions (CBI) working group, involving nine organizations providing cash assistance to refugees and the host population. As of 31 August 2023, more than 85,500 refugees received multipurpose cash and cash for specific interventions related to livelihoods, domestic energy, shelter, education, and hygiene.
- UNHCR actively participates in the national working group **for the inclusion of refugees in the national healthcare system** led by the Ministry of Health. Already in 2020, the Ministry of Health had gradually started to manage the delivery of health services in Mbera camps, thanks to the World Bank's IDA 18 RSW funding. In 2023, UNHCR and the Ministry of Health formalized their collaboration with a roadmap that articulates commitments and timelines for the full inclusion of refugees in the national healthcare system. During the transition to a full cost recovery system, UNHCR covers for refugees the costs associated with treatments not covered by the government-led health system, and specialized treatments. With its partners, UNHCR continues to ensure the overall quality of healthcare in the camp, while taking concrete measures to promote improvements in healthcare for the host population as well.
- UNHCR has also leveraged its partnership with the World Bank and others to ensure an overall improvement in the quality of healthcare in Hodh Chargui, including for the host population. This area-based approach is essential in promoting social cohesion between refugees and the host population. During the COVID-19 pandemic and with the support of the African Development Bank, UNHCR, for example, delivered medical supplies and equipment (e.g., medicalized ambulances, incinerators, ultrasounds, laboratory equipment and operating theatre equipment) to health facilities in Bassiknou district, in addition to capacity building and site rehabilitation.

Education

- In 2023, UNHCR partnered with the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO) and the Mauritanian Ministry of Education in Mauritania to develop an action plan for the inclusion of refugees in the Mauritanian education system by the end of 2023.
- There are around 40,000 school-aged children in Mbera camp, where UNHCR co-leads with UNICEF the Education Working Group and supports **primary education** with stipends for school staff including 134 teachers, school infrastructure repairs and maintenance, capacity-building and broader advocacy, and outreach.
- In urban areas, UNHCR and partners promote the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in the public school system. During the school year 2022-2023, 1,199 refugee children were enrolled in primary and secondary education, 49 per cent of them in public schools. Targeted efforts are made to identify and increase enrolment and participation of out-of-school refugee children, such as after-school support lessons in Nouadhibou.
- 106 refugees benefitted from DAFI scholarships in 2023 to pursue university studies in Nouakchott thanks to the support of the EU, Germany, and Denmark.

Environmental Protection

- With a population of 85,000 refugees, Mbera camp is among the largest settlements in Mauritania, despite being in an area prone to climatic shocks such as droughts, forest fires and flooding. Most refugees rely on firewood and charcoal for domestic fuel, which has contributed to deforestation.
- In view of the foregoing, UNHCR has implemented **cash assistance** to encourage refugee households to use liquified petroleum gas (LPG) in place of firewood. In this framework, around 1,000 households received cash payments for the procurement of LPG for domestic use between 2022 and 2023. More than 96 per cent

of targeted households purchased gas kits and began refilling their gas canisters. Based on the success of this pilot, UNHCR plans to standardize the use of LPG by refugee households in the coming years.

- Efforts are also underway to reforest areas inside and around the camp. In 2022, UNHCR and partners supported local NGOs and refugee volunteer groups to plant 25,000 seedlings. These same refugee associations have also contributed to **fire prevention and management**, waste management, environmental education, and the protection of reforested areas.
- To **rehabilitate and protect the environment in refugee-hosting areas** and to promote social cohesion, UNHCR continues advocating for Mbera camp and surrounding villages to be included in the Great Green Wall initiative, and for agencies to develop concrete activities and interventions under the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework.
- The Mbera Fire Brigade, an all-volunteer group established by Malian refugees in 2018 to fight bushfires and protect the camp and the surrounding villages, received the 2022 Nansen Refugee Award for Africa.

Multisector Response in Mbera camp

- UNHCR facilitates monthly **food and cash distributions** in collaboration with WFP.
- UNHCR, together with UNICEF and WFP, implement a targeted **nutrition programme** through the camp's four health structures.
- UNHCR ensures maintenance and optimization of the existing water system, construction, and rehabilitation of semi-permanent latrines; collection, transport, and treatment of solid waste; and the implementation of hygiene awareness-raising activities to prevent the spread of water-borne diseases. UNHCR relies on a World Bank-funded initiative that supports installations and repairs by government entities **to water management and sanitation systems.**
- UNHCR ensures the distribution and replacement of core relief items such as shelter kits, jerry cans, mosquito nets, as well as the distribution of hygiene kits for all refugees, mostly through cash assistance.
- UNHCR also provides one-off **cash assistance for shelter** to newly arrived refugee households in the camp.
- UNHCR also ensures the **maintenance of roads and infrastructures** within the camp.

Return and Resettlement

- **Resettlement** remains a critical protection tool for the most vulnerable refugees in Mauritania. As of 31 August 2023, UNHCR made 33 resettlement submissions and facilitated the departure of 84 individuals.

UNHCR is grateful for the support of donors to UNHCR operations in Mauritania:

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