PROTECTION BRIEF: CHILD PROTECTION

SUDAN SITUATION

MARCH 2026

Uganda: Abdalla interacts with her four sons at her mother's home in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement Photo Credit @UNHCR/Ssozi Mukasa Daniel

Contents

OPERATIONAL OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT 2

DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN 4

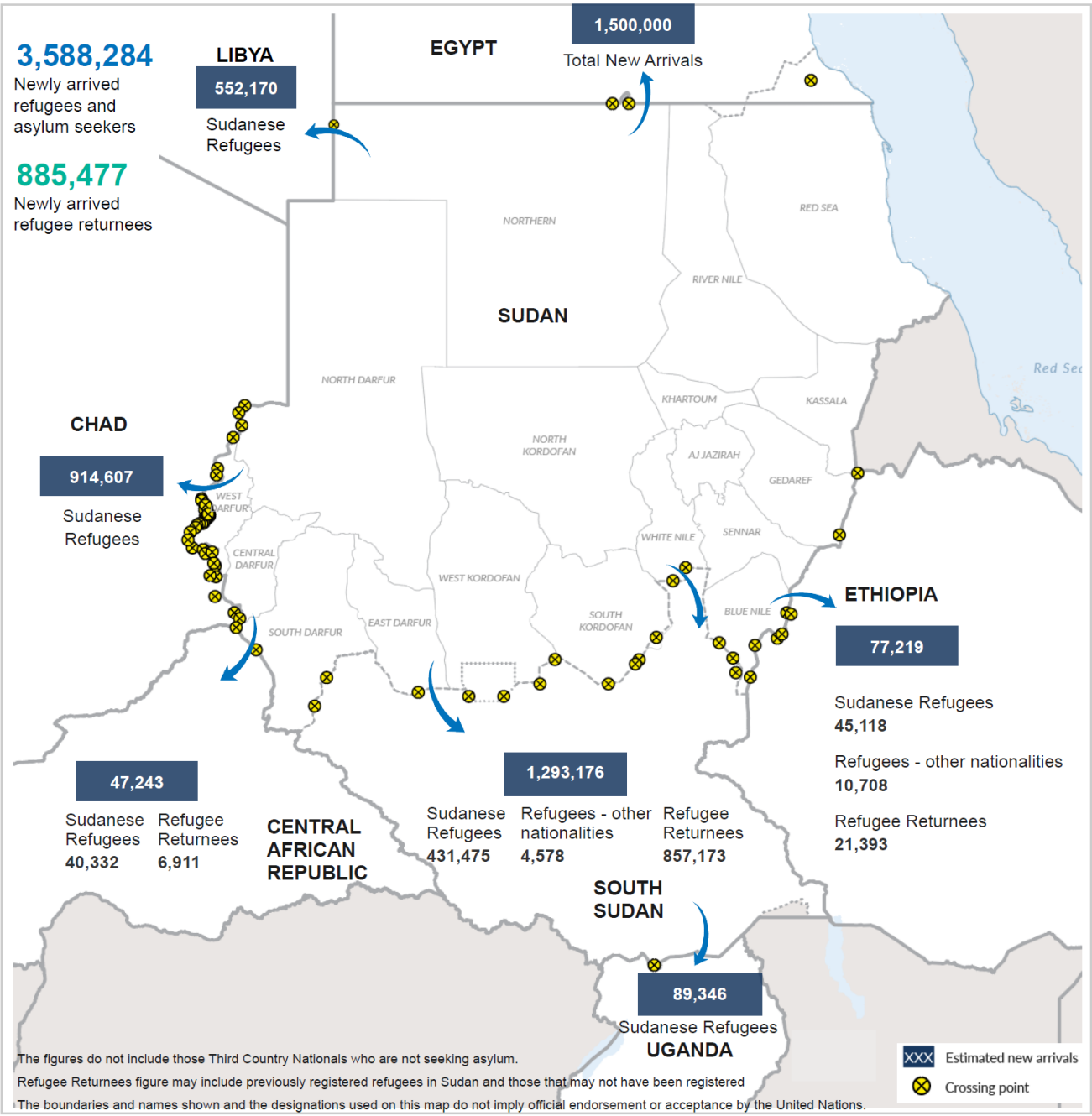
MAIN CHILD PROTECTION RISKS 4

SNAPSHOT OF ACHIEVEMENTS 5

MAJOR GAPS 8

KEY MESSAGES 8

Operational Overview and Context



As of February 2026, more than 9 million people are forcibly displaced due to the outbreak of conflict in Sudan, while nearly 4 .5 million Sudanese refugees and returnees have crossed into neighboring countries, since the conflict began in April 2023.

The conflict that began in Sudan in April 2023 has created the world's largest humanitarian and protection crisis, with children bearing the greatest consequences.[1] Escalation of hostilities, systematic violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and severe restrictions on humanitarian access have driven millions of children and families from their homes, many displaced multiple times both inside and outside Sudan. According to IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) report of March 2026, an estimated 9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) were recorded, along with some 3.5 million returnees across 71 localities in nine states within Sudan. Children constitute the majority of those affected, with approximately 55 per cent of IDPs and 52 per cent of IDP returnees being under 18 years old. Available reports indicate that over 90 per cent of school aged children are currently out of school, 70 per cent of health facilities are non-functional, and vaccination rates have dropped resulting in elevated child mortality and long-term developmental risks for children.[2]

Widespread violations, including killings and maiming, abductions, recruitment and use by armed actors, family separation, and sexual violence, are occurring in a context marked by impunity and the erosion of protection institutions.[3] The destruction and closure of schools have deprived children of safe spaces, leaving them increasingly susceptible to recruitment, child labour, and other forms of abuse and exploitation. Simultaneously, the breakdown of health services, recurrent disease outbreaks, and escalating food insecurity are greatly compounding risks for children across Sudan. With limited access to life saving health services, malnutrition, and the collapse of community-based mechanisms, the safety and well-being of Sudanese children are under severe threat.

According to UNICEF, grave violations against children have significantly increased over the past two years, with 17.3 million children now in urgent need of humanitarian assistance[4]. Access to specialized services, including case management, mental health and psychosocial support, and alternative care for unaccompanied and separated children remain limited, leaving the most vulnerable without critical support. Sexual violence against children has reached alarming levels, including among very young children, pointing to patterns of abuse that are likely underreported.[5]

Reports from OHCHR indicate that multiple armed actors involved in the conflict have recruited and used children, including through coercive practices and community-level pressures linked to survival and access to assistance. Testimonies further suggest that boys are often perceived as potential fighters and, in some areas, have been prevented from leaving conflict zones unless they agree to join armed groups, exposing them to grave protection risks.[6]

Nearly 4.5 million people have fled Sudan to Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, South Sudan, and Uganda, with children comprising close to half of this population and facing heightened protection risks throughout their displacement.[7] During flight and upon arrival, children are exposed to trafficking, exploitation, and family separation, often after already experiencing severe trauma. National systems and host communities, already under strain, are struggling to respond to the scale and complexity of needs.

While governments and humanitarian actors, including UNHCR and partners, are delivering essential child protection services such as Best Interest Procedures, psychosocial support, and alternative care arrangements, the response remains critically under-resourced. Gaps in the availability of child protection services as well as workforce capacity are limiting the reach and quality of support. As needs continue to exceed resources, many children and families are left without adequate protection, are compelled to undertake often dangerous onward movements in search of safety and protection.

[1] *The Sudan crisis - A children's crisis*

[2] *Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025 - Overview - Sudan | ReliefWeb*

3 OHCHR: Sudan: Entrenched impunity fuelling gross human rights violations and abuses

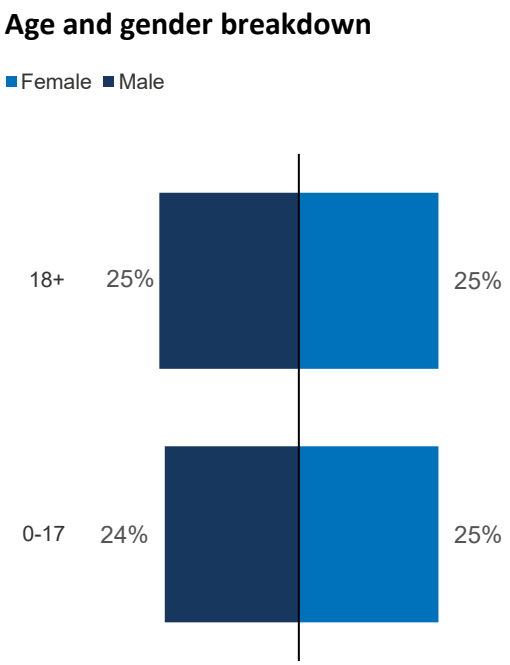
4 Number of children in need of humanitarian assistance in Sudan doubles as conflict enters third year amid 'perfect storm' of threats to children

5 Children as young as one reported among survivors of rape during Sudan's violent conflict

6 2026-02-13-rsf-offensive-fasher-capture-1-en.pdf

7 Situation Sudan situation

Demographic Breakdown



49%

Children

51%

Women & girls

49%

Men & boys

Main Child Protection Risks

Children affected by the Sudan crisis face severe and multiple protection risks across displacement routes and in refugee-hosting countries. Family separation remains a defining feature of the crisis. Over 58,000 unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) have been recorded across the countries hosting Sudanese refugees, though the actual scale is likely higher due to continued population movements, limited access to certain border areas, and weakened child protection identification systems.

During displacement, children often travel alone along irregular and dangerous routes, facing violence, exploitation, trafficking, and further separation. UNHCR protection staff and child protection partners in Chad and South Sudan report that many children receiving case management and psychosocial support have arrived after experiencing extreme violence, including sexual abuse, witnessing killings of family members, often presenting significant trauma. There are also reports of forced recruitment of boys, particularly youth and adolescents, by armed actors, as well as trafficking of young women and girls for sexual exploitation.

In South Sudan, partners on the ground report that many young boys and girls are taking irregular routes to Europe with the support of traffickers and smugglers. These actors are increasingly using remote pathways to evade authorities, further heightening the dangers faced by children on the move. While the Government of South Sudan has strengthened its screening, victim identification, and case management efforts, significant gaps remain in both protection services and the prevention of internal trafficking. These challenges are particularly severe for unaccompanied and separated children, who continue to be highly vulnerable to exploitation both within South Sudan and across border.

In countries of asylum, children continue to face significant protection risks linked to overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to services. Poor shelter conditions, lack of lighting, and insufficient access to water and sanitation increase exposure to violence, abuse, and exploitation. Economic hardship and declining humanitarian assistance have contributed to harmful negative coping mechanisms, including child labour, forced/child marriage, and family separation. These risks are particularly acute in contexts where there has been high numbers of arrivals, such as Chad and South Sudan, and where services are overstretched and protection systems not fully established.

In urban contexts, particularly in Egypt and Libya, risks are closely linked to precarious legal status and limited access to services. Unaccompanied and separated children, as well as children who are part of female-headed households, are especially vulnerable to exploitation, including child labour and trafficking. Limited access to civil documentation further exacerbates risks, restricting access to services and increasing exposure to exploitation and statelessness.

Child protection risks remain underreported due to stigma, fear of retaliation, insecurity, and barriers to accessing services, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Weak community structures and overstretched services further limit early identification and response.

Snapshot of Achievements

Across refugee hosting countries, UNHCR and child protection partners continue to scale up interventions despite operational and funding constraints.

	329,000 children at risk supported with protection services.
	58,151 unaccompanied and separated children identified.
	21,218 children at risk benefited from Best Interest Procedure (BIP).
	119 Child-Friendly Spaces supported (CFS)
	131,944 partners and local child protection committees/ structures trained.
	USD 66 million financial requirements for child protection response.

Child Protection Operational Response

Throughout 2025 and early 2026, UNHCR and partners implemented child protection programmes across countries hosting Sudanese refugees, with a focus on border areas, settlements, and sites receiving new arrivals.

Efforts focused on strengthening inclusive national child protection systems to ensure that refugee children can access protection on an equal basis with host community children, while providing complementary services where national capacities are overstretched. Particular emphasis was placed on protecting children across mixed movement routes, including through strengthened cross-border coordination, early identification, and continuity of care for children at risk. The response also prioritized reinforcing family and community-based care and enhancing community-based protection mechanisms to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect. Across all interventions, efforts were made to advance accountability to children and ensure child-friendly refugee protection and solutions.

Recognizing that child protection outcomes cannot be achieved in isolation, UNHCR and child protection partners worked across sectors, including education, health, shelter, and cash assistance, to strengthen protective environments and reduce child protection risks. This included promoting safe access to services, reducing exposure to harm, and supporting families and communities to mitigate risks and adopt positive coping strategies.

These efforts were implemented under severe operational and financial constraints. Despite efforts to scale up child protection interventions, the magnitude, protracted nature and complexity of needs resulting from the crisis continue to exceed available resources and operational capacity.

The 2025 Regional Refugee Response Plan for child protection was funded at only 22 per cent. In 2026, UNHCR and its partners estimate that USD 66 million will be required to sustain and expand critical child protection interventions across affected countries, including Chad, the Central African Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, South Sudan, and Uganda.

Provision of Child Protection Services

In situations where asylum-seeker and refugee children do not have access to national child protection systems, UNHCR and partners implement supplementary child protection services, while continuing to advocate for inclusion in national systems and to strengthen government institution capacity to assume responsibility over time. Across Chad, CAR, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, South Sudan and Uganda, over 329,000 at-risk children benefited from child protection services, including Best Interests Procedures, psychosocial support, and referrals to specialized services, with a particular focus on unaccompanied and separated children and those exposed to violence, exploitation, and abuse.

Best Interests Procedures ensured individualized protection responses, with over 21,000 children supported by UNHCR and partners during the reporting period, including more than 12,000 children at heightened risk in Chad and nearly 6,000 children in South Sudan, amongst others.

Family tracing and reunification as well as alternative care arrangements remained a priority given the high number of unaccompanied and separated children across the region. In Chad and Ethiopia, more than 275 temporary foster families were identified, trained and supported to provide alternative care for unaccompanied children, while foster care systems were expanded across multiple provinces in Chad. In South Sudan, Best Interest Procedures supported both alternative care placements and family reunification and alternative care arrangements, including foster care and supervised independent living for older adolescents, were implemented through established systems in Uganda. However, increasing numbers of unaccompanied and separated children continue to place additional strain on available care options and support mechanisms in refugee hosting countries.

Delivery modalities and capacity constraints vary across contexts. In Uganda, child protection services were delivered through established settlement-based systems, supporting both new arrivals and protracted refugee populations, although increasing numbers are placing growing pressure on capacities and quality of service. In Egypt, targeted Best Interest Procedures combined with cash assistance supported unaccompanied and separated children exposed to vulnerabilities and risks linked to irregular movement. In Ethiopia's Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions, delivery of services remains severely constrained by insecurity and the collapse of the national child protection system. As a result, UNHCR and partners rely heavily on community-based identification and referrals where access is possible, although coverage remains extremely limited compared to the scale of needs.

Across refugee hosting countries, UNHCR and partners supported initiatives aimed at strengthening protective environments and reinforcing the role of families and communities as central actors in preventing, identifying, and responding to child protection risks. In Chad and Ethiopia, parenting programmes and support initiatives were scaled up to enhance caregivers' capacity to provide safe and nurturing care. In South Sudan, over 4,500 caregivers participated in training and structured information sessions, while in Uganda similar initiatives reached hundreds of caregivers and contributed to strengthening family-based protection.

At the community level, interventions focused on strengthening community-based mechanisms for the safe identification and referral of children at risk. In Chad, more than 87,000 children were reached through group activities aimed at promoting psychosocial well-being and early identification of protection concerns. In South Sudan, community-based child protection mechanisms continued to serve as a critical entry point for psychosocial support, with community-based child protection committees and refugee volunteers playing a central role in providing services, including information sharing, safe identification, and linking children and families to available assistance.

Child-Friendly Spaces (CFSs) remained a key platform within these community-based approaches. Across the region, 119 Child-Friendly Spaces were operational, with services concentrated in areas of high refugee arrivals. In eastern Chad alone, over 225,000 children accessed psychosocial support through 88 Child-Friendly Spaces, while in South Sudan over 41,000 children benefited from structured psychosocial activities, underscoring the continued reliance on these spaces as essential entry and service provision points for vulnerable children.

Across operations, sustaining access to safe spaces and community-based support remained a challenge. In Uganda, Child-Friendly Spaces and integrated child protection services continue to support children across settlements, although high demand and limited resources are affecting the quality and frequency of services. In Ethiopia, despite funding constraints, UNHCR and partners-maintained access to Child-Friendly Spaces and community-based mental health and psychosocial support. In Libya, UNHCR sustained direct implementation to ensure continuity of support in a highly constrained environment, while in CAR, access challenges and limited partner presence continue to restrict the scale and reach of safe space interventions.

Localization and Capacity Strengthening

Efforts were made to meaningfully engage children, families, and local communities in the delivery of supplementary child protection services, with a strong emphasis on localization. UNHCR continued to strengthen partnerships with national authorities, refugee-led organizations, and community-based structures to sustain and expand service delivery.

A key focus was on reinforcing the capacity of frontline workers across operations. Over 13,944 local actors and child protection committee were trained on child protection principles, case management, and referral pathways, contributing to improved identification and response to child protection risks at the community level. In South Sudan (4,575) and Ethiopia (8,712), trained caregivers, community leaders and refugee volunteers supported localized responses including in hard-to-reach areas with limited presence of child protection staff and government officials. In Ethiopia, strengthened community level capacities enabled the continuation of essential child protection services despite reduced partner presence, partly due to funding challenges. In Uganda, strong partnerships with local governments, national NGOs and refugee led and community-based organizations helped sustain service delivery in the face of increasing financial constraints. In CAR and Libya, efforts centred on maintaining core services through a limited number of partners operating under challenging access conditions.

Strengthening Coordinated and Multi-Sectoral Child Protection Responses

UNHCR, in collaboration with national authorities, led and strengthened the coordination of the child protection response across key refugee-hosting operations to ensure a coherent, efficient, and prioritized response. Through Child Protection Working Groups and inter-agency mechanisms, coordination efforts focused on harmonizing approaches, avoiding duplication, and ensuring that limited resources are strategically allocated to reach children most at risk, while strengthening national ownership and promoting localization through engagement with national actors, local organizations, and community-based structures. These efforts contributed to enhancing the quality, accountability and sustainability of the child protection response across operations.

This included strengthening the alignment of Best Interests Procedures, SOPs, data systems, and referral pathways, reinforcing common standards, and supporting collective prioritization in contexts where needs far exceed available resources. In Chad, coordination structures were reinforced to respond to large-scale influxes, while in Uganda and South Sudan coordination mechanisms supported greater consistency and alignment of approaches across actors. In Sudan, where formal child protection systems remain severely disrupted, efforts focused on maintaining minimum coordination and supporting community-based mechanisms, where access allows.

In addition, UNHCR and partners worked across sectors to promote child protection outcomes and ensure safe and equitable access to services for children and their families. Strengthened linkages with sectors such as education, civil documentation, livelihoods, cash, and basic needs contributed to addressing the underlying drivers of protection risks. In Chad, over 17,000 birth certificates were issued, supporting access to rights and services, while in Libya over 5,400 out-of-school children were identified and referred to education programmes, contributing to safer pathways for children at risk.

Major Gaps

Despite UNHCR and partners reaching more than 329,000 children with child protection services, this accounts for only a small proportion of those in need, highlighting a significant coverage gap driven mainly by severe and sustained underfunding. In contexts, like Chad and South Sudan, where there has been significant numbers of arrivals, limited resources have necessitated the prioritization of accessible locations, leaving remote and newly affected areas largely underserved.

Human resource capacities remain critically insufficient. The current ratio of approximately one case worker per 450 children at risk is nearly 18 times higher than the globally recommended minimum standard for child protection case management in humanitarian settings. As a result, individualized case management is reduced to administrative tracking rather than providing meaningful protection support.

Operational constraints further limit the scale and reach of the response. Insecurity and logistical challenges restrict access to border and remote areas. In South Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, CAR, and Libya, reduced partner presence has further constrained the delivery of specialized services, at a time when national child protection systems remain overstretched, weak and under-resourced to respond effectively to the scale of the needs.

Access to safe spaces and psychosocial support remains insufficient in all refugee hosting countries, particularly in South Sudan, Ethiopia and Chad where child protection services remain significantly below the recommended interagency child protection minimum standards. Adolescents are particularly underserved, with limited access to education, adolescent and youth skills development programmes and livelihood opportunities, which in turn increases their vulnerability to violence, abuse, exploitation and onward movements.

These gaps are compounded by broader structural pressures. Economic hardship, food insecurity, and reduced assistance are driving families toward harmful coping strategies, including child labour, child marriage, and family separation. At the same time, persistent gaps in birth registration and legal documentation continue to expose children, particularly newly arrived refugees, to risks of statelessness and limit their access to essential services.

Key Messages

- **Protect children from grave human rights violations and uphold international law.** UNHCR calls upon all parties to the conflict to respect and uphold the protection of children in accordance with international humanitarian and human rights law. Parties to the conflict must immediately prevent and end grave violations against children, including killings and maiming, recruitment and use of children in the conflict, abduction, and sexual violence, ensure accountability for perpetrators. Children must have safe, dignified and unhindered access to protection, assistance and family care in Sudan and across borders.

- **Scale up critical child protection responses for children at risk.** Sustained and flexible funding is urgently required to identify and support children at risk, including unaccompanied and separated children and survivors of violence. This includes strengthening Best Interest Procedures, family tracing and reunification, and safe alternative care arrangements, particularly in high-influx and underserved areas.
- **Strengthen and resource national and community-based child protection systems.** Prioritize early and sustained investment in inclusive national systems, community-based protection mechanisms and localized responses, to support the continuity of child protection services, strengthen local ownership and ensure reach to children in hard to-reach areas, particularly where formal systems are overstretched or have collapsed.
- **Invest in qualified child protection workforce to improve quality and coverage of services.** A qualified workforce is essential to deliver quality child protection services, support inclusive national systems, enable effective coordinated response and advocacy and engage children, families and communities to prevent harm and promote children's safety and wellbeing.

- **Strengthen protective environments for children**, including through coordinated, multi-sectoral approach to child protection. Invest in safe and equitable access to basic services, including education, documentation and assistance to ensure that all interventions reduce children's exposure to violence,

exploitation, abuse and neglect. Deliberately target adolescents who face heightened exposure to child labour, child marriage, recruitment and use in conflict and onward movement.

- **Ensure sustained humanitarian access and protection of children affected by the Sudan crisis.** Unimpeded access is essential to deliver timely, life-saving child protection services, particularly in countries of asylum and remote border areas. Efforts must prioritize the protection of children from violence, harassment, abuse, exploitation, and forced return to unsafe conditions.