

# Democratic Republic of the Congo

2 April 2020

## Main highlights

- As of 1 April, there were 123 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the DRC, with 11 reported deaths. No new cases of Ebola have been recorded since 17 February; should this trend continue until 12 April, the epidemic can be declared over.
- On 25 March, UNHCR declared a global L2 emergency for the COVID-19 situation.
- Across DRC, UNHCR is putting in place prevention measures in refugee camps, IDP sites and transit centres. This includes temperature screening and handwashing at entry points, the installation of handwashing stations in public places (markets, health centers etc.), distributions of soap and cleaning products, and awareness-raising on COVID-19 using posters, leaflets, radio spots, and community networks.
- UNHCR continues its protection and assistance activities to the extent possible maintaining physical distancing.



*A refugee from the Central African Republic washes her hands in Inke refugee camp, Nord Ubangi Province, with a handwashing station recently installed by UNHCR amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. © UNHCR/Ghislaine Nentobo*

## Operational context

On 24 March, President Tshisekedi declared a countrywide state of emergency, and shut down national borders to stop the spread of COVID-19. While most COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in Kinshasa, a first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Ituri Province on 27 March according to WHO, while two additional cases were confirmed in South Kivu Province on 29 March. As part of the measures taken to prevent further spreading of COVID-19, the DRC Government has banned gathering of more than 20 persons, and ordered the closure of schools, universities, churches, restaurants and other public spaces for four weeks, from 19 March. As most cases have been identified in Kinshasa, the DRC Government has also banned all travel of persons from Kinshasa to the provinces and vice versa, and only is allowing cargo shipments.

## UNHCR COVID-19 response

The health and well-being of refugees and internally displaced persons is a priority for UNHCR, and it has adjusted its operations in DRC to address the COVID-19 response and continue supporting its beneficiaries.

UNHCR has contributed to inclusion of refugees and internally displaced people into the DRC's national preparedness and response plan against COVID-19, and it is following up with the authorities to ensure that they are fully taken into account in the implementation of preparedness, prevention and response activities. UNHCR continues its protection and assistance activities, while at the same time, mitigating any negative impact of its actions on affected populations, in line with the principle of "do no harm". While it is continuing critical assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons, UNHCR is reducing the number of beneficiaries being received in its offices and has adjusted its activities to limit interaction between staff and persons of concern, and between persons of concern, taking into account physical distancing requirements.

UNHCR is informing its beneficiaries about COVID-19 and measures to prevent infection. Information material prepared by UNICEF on behalf of the Ministry of Health and translated in the languages spoken by refugees is being distributed across the country. Awareness-raising is also being done through sensitization sessions and radio (among others in Kasai, Haut-Katanga and Ituri provinces), and through established community committees. Sensitization sessions are taking place in groups of less than 15 refugees keeping at least two meters distance from each other.



### PROTECTION

- UNHCR continues to relocate South Sudanese refugees from overcrowded sites to the new Bele settlement, limiting the numbers to 10 persons per convoy. In order to reduce numbers at the Aru Transit Center (Ituri Province), UNHCR also relocated 11 households of newly arrived asylum seekers to Biringi settlement on 28 March. Body temperature was checked at departure and arrival, and handwashing was mandatory.
- In the Kasai region, protection monitoring is being reinforced to prevent discrimination against returnees at border entry points, and to ensure inclusion of all persons of concern in health centers.
- UNHCR continues a mobile money distribution for over 5,700 internally displaced households in the towns of Beni and Butembo, North Kivu Province, while implementing precautionary measures related to COVID-19. Cash assistance is also ongoing in Bunia (Ituri Province) and Fizi (South Kivu Province), equivalent to three months of rent.
- On 18 March, UNHCR repatriated the last convoy of 149 refugees to the Central African Republic with special health and hygiene measures put in place to protect both humanitarian staff and refugees.
- The National Refugee Commission (CNR) informed UNHCR that it will deliver attestations to asylum-seekers for a longer period than usual (until September 2020 instead of June 2020). CNR will also suspend any decision to reject asylum-claims, as it will not be able to address appeals from rejected candidates, due to its confinement measures.
- In Bunia, Ituri Province, UNHCR continues the registration of new arrivals in displacement sites in a limited way due to COVID-19 prevention measures; only basic information is being gathered in order to avoid long queues.
- In the new Bele settlement, for South Sudanese refugees in Haut Uele Province, a food and mosquito net distribution started on 28 March in a door-to-door fashion, in order to avoid crowds and protect refugees against COVID-19.



### HEALTH

- In the Kasai region, UNHCR is supporting the Government in setting up confinement centers to be used for future identified COVID-19 cases, instead of the general hospitals. This is so that general hospitals can continue to be used in the treatment of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Sites were identified,

and UNHCR will support by raising awareness, building the centers, and delivering masks, gloves and equipment to help address critical shortages in the DRC's health care system.

- UNHCR has adopted strict measures to protect Burundian refugees in South Kivu Province against COVID-19. New procedures are in place for the distribution of core relief items and other goods, and refugees are confined upon their arrival in Mulongwe settlement, while dormitories in transit centers are being cleaned daily.
- Asylum-seekers who are still in transit centres in South Kivu will be transferred to Mulongwe settlement once health protocols are established for their arrival. At the site UNHCR is constructing new hangars where they will remain in self-isolation for a 14-day period and protocols are being put in place to respond should COVID-19 be detected.
- Epidemiological surveillance is being reinforced in refugee camps and settlements, with partners being briefed on COVID-19 symptoms, mode of transmission, and prevention methods.
- In health centers in camps for refugees from the Central African Republic, waiting rooms have been reorganized in order to respect physical distancing measures and limit the number of people in a room.
- Two ambulances were dispatched in Biringi and Dungu settlements (Ituri and Haut-Uele provinces) to be put to use for both South Sudanese refugees and local communities.



### WATER AND SANITATION

- As of 27 March, daily awareness-raising sessions have started, and handwashing stations were installed at refugee settlements' entry points, and in public places (markets, health centers), in areas hosting South Sudanese, Burundian and Central African refugees. Among those, 50 handwashing stations were installed in six locations hosting South Sudanese refugees alone.
- UNHCR provided rubber boots and 20 handwashing stations to the townhall of Zongo, a border town in the DRC's Sud-Ubangi Province, which is close to the Central African capital Bangui, where cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed.

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## Operational impact and constraints

UNHCR's regular operations across the DRC are affected by confinement and social distancing measures implemented amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The following are the main activities that have been affected so far.

- The voluntary repatriation of refugees to the Central African Republic and to Rwanda has been suspended amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. UNHCR also suspended the voluntary repatriation of DRC refugees living in Angola.
- Over 35,000 refugees from the Central African Republic are estimated to be living in Ango Territory, Bas Uele Province. Their biometric registration, planned for March, has been postponed due to COVID-19 prevention measures, and funds reallocated to COVID-19 prevention measures.

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## Identified needs and gaps

UNHCR requires additional funding, both to implement COVID-19 preparedness measures, and to support the continuity of field delivery in the sectors of WASH, Health, Education, Protection.



### PROTECTION

As communities and families enter isolation, UNHCR's protection monitoring systems have received reports of increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence.

**HEALTH**

Areas hosting refugees from the Central African Republic were previously not affected by Ebola, and therefore were not subject to UNHCR's previous comprehensive campaign to prevent Ebola. UNHCR is facing a lack of thermometers to install at entry points in camps hosting refugees from the Central African Republic, while there is also a lack of protective gear for healthcare staff.

**WATER AND SANITATION**

Efforts are ongoing to scale-up sensitization and hygiene measures in Central African refugee settlements, as UNHCR is addressing challenges in terms of availability of handwashing stations, sanitizing gel, and soap.

## Working in partnership

UNHCR is collaborating closely with UNICEF on the production and dissemination of sensitization materials on COVID-19. UNHCR has ensured that the material was translated into languages spoken by refugees. UNHCR is working with IOM and the Provincial Government in Kalemie (Tanganyika Province) to provide assistance to IDPs living in overcrowded sites and adamant to return to their area of origin.

## External / Donor Relations

**As of 19 March 2020**

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency is grateful for the support of:

### Donors for UNHCR operations in DRC in 2020

United States of America (6.2 M) | Sweden (3.1 M) | Japan (0.56 M) | United Nations Foundation (0.32 M) | International Olympic Committee (0.23 M) | European Union (0.17 M) | UNAIDS (0.03 M)

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