

UNHCR Regional Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa

COVID-19 Emergency Response Update #18

1 – 30 April 2021

Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, Yemen, and Turkey

Key Figures



20

out of 20 UNHCR countries / operations are reporting COVID-19 cases in the region



17.4 million

people of concern in the Middle East and North Africa



12,553

cases of COVID-19 reported among persons of concern including fatalities since March 2020

Regional Developments

During the holy month of Ramadan, a rise in new COVID-19 cases was observed across several Middle Eastern and North African countries, including in Egypt, Iraq and Libya.

To support families during Ramadan, particularly given their depleted resources due to loss of livelihoods as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR **Libya** started its Ramadan food distribution campaign in coordination with the World Food Programme. Some 5,340 refugees and asylum-seekers (1,454 families) were targeted as part of the campaign in Tripoli, alongside some 4,000 others targeted in Zawiya (45 km west of Tripoli), Zwara (102 km west of Tripoli) and Misrata (190 km east of Tripoli).

In **Lebanon**, UNHCR distributed food parcels in the Bekaa Valley as part of its Ramadan campaign, adding to it soap bars to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 among persons of concern, while continuing COVID-19 awareness sessions. The food items covered 15 days during the month of Ramadan to benefit vulnerable refugee families.



Mohammed, a refugee from Somalia, gets medical assistance in a UNHCR supported Caritas clinic in Alexandria, Egypt. Photo © Pedro Costa Gomes / UNHCR

Main Lines of Response



Continuing, adapting, and delivering protection and assistance to the most vulnerable



Strengthening communication with communities



Prioritizing immediate interventions to prevent infections and supporting access to services and materials



Advocating for the inclusion of refugees, IDPs and other marginalized groups into national public health and other responses, and supporting national systems to deliver assistance



Empowering individuals and families to make the best decisions for themselves, through cash-based assistance

Highlights from the Field

A rapid increase of COVID-19 cases continued to be reported in the Tindouf camps in **Algeria**, particularly among the elderly, with over 160 active cases as of end-April. The Algerian Government provided 5,000 vaccines to Sahrawi refugees during April, with priority given to vulnerable persons above 65 and people living with chronic diseases. Movements to the camps have been restricted, with the exception of delivering life-saving assistance.

For UNHCR's urban refugees programme in Algeria, an online survey was launched to gather information on knowledge and interest of the vaccination programme among persons of concern. Results indicated that 70 per cent of the surveyed refugees and asylum-seekers were aware of the national vaccination programme. Among those, only 30 per cent expressed an interest in being vaccinated, and some 60 per cent felt they did not have enough information. To address vaccine hesitancy among refugees, UNHCR and its health partner organizes weekly sensitization sessions, and information is also provided to persons of concern through a dedicated hot-line. Further to this, UNHCR is developing a set of leaflets, posters and multimedia messages in multiple languages to enhance awareness among refugee communities.

In **Egypt**, a steady increase in the number of COVID-19 cases was observed over the Easter and Ramadan period, reaching more than 1,000 cases per day. As a result, the Ministry of

Education announced on 25 April that the school year for public kindergartens through to high school would conclude earlier (at the end of April), with exceptions made for students taking their final exams in grades 9 and 12.

UNHCR Egypt is continuing its eight-week intensive registration exercise, launched on 22 March, to provide new registration appointments to unregistered unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). This includes all UASC who were identified by partners during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic last year and who remained unregistered as of this April. In less than one month, some 300 UASC have already been registered as part of this exercise. UNHCR and partners conduct protection screenings and ongoing monitoring for more than 1,100 unregistered UASC in Egypt and prioritize the scheduling of their registration based on protection risks and other vulnerabilities.

Amid a rise in COVID-19 cases across **Iraq**, the High National Health and Safety Committee chaired by the Prime Minister announced Ramadan-related measures to help curb the spread of COVID-19. These included a partial curfew starting from 20:00, and a total curfew on Fridays and Saturdays during Ramadan, with some services exempted. The Ministry of Education also announced that starting 18 April, schools would only be open for two days a week for a duration of two months.

In line with UNHCR's strategic objectives towards durable solutions for conflict-affected populations, especially those in protracted displacement, UNHCR in Iraq funded a [qualitative assessment](#) developed by the IMPACT Initiatives to measure the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socio-economic conditions of refugee households that rely on daily-wage work in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Reports of lack of work and low wages were a recurring theme throughout the assessment, with participants noting that finding livelihood opportunities was easier before the pandemic and that government-imposed lockdown and movement restrictions resulted in the loss of income. Overall, participants stressed that working in daily-wage jobs was the only way to provide for their households. Lack of skills and experience, and insufficient capital to invest in their own businesses were the most cited challenges for participants to transition from the informal sector into any formal work. It was highlighted that the challenges in engaging in any other kind of work other than non-daily-wage work had increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The key findings will be used to inform the humanitarian response.

In **Jordan**, the rate of COVID-19 cases took a downward turn in April, though daily numbers of cases remained high for most of the month. The national vaccination programme continued, with some 700,000 people across Jordan reportedly vaccinated. In refugee camps, the number of vaccinated refugees more than doubled in April, exceeding 4,600 refugees in total, with more than 14,000 registered to receive the vaccine – representing almost 12 per cent of the camp population, compared to 15 per cent of the total population in Jordan. There are currently three in-camp vaccination centres in Jordan, one in Azraq and two in Zaatari. Meanwhile, UNHCR is further strengthening its efforts to promote vaccine registration among refugees in camps as well as in urban areas. The latest survey shared via social media showed a 10 per cent increase in awareness on the national COVID-19 vaccination campaign and a 20 per cent increase in registration from the first survey conducted in February 2021. Fear of side effects and vaccine safety and efficacy remain among the top reasons holding people back from registering. Key activities of UNHCR's mobilisation campaign also include social media awareness messaging, consultations at Community Support Centres and Facebook live Question and Answer sessions. Furthermore, to help vulnerable refugee families cope with the poverty impact of COVID-19, UNHCR disbursed the first round of COVID-19 emergency cash assistance in 2021 to more than 7,500 vulnerable refugee families.

During April, **Lebanon** remained in the final phase of its COVID-19 de-confinement plan, after lockdowns and strict curfews were implemented at the start of the year. While remote modalities remained in place for the majority of activities, on 23 April UNHCR re-opened its Reception Centres across Lebanon for delivering critical in-person activities, such as renewal of documentation and case verification activities. UNHCR's latest protection monitoring reports indicated the worst rates so far of refugees conveying difficulties in buying food (85 per cent vs. 8 per cent in March 2020), paying rent (80 per cent vs. 47 per cent in March 2020), being unable to access healthcare (28 per cent vs. 6 per cent in March 2020) and being unable to purchase essential medicines (25 per cent vs. 12 per cent in March 2020). In addition, over 50 per cent reported having to buy food on credit, compared to the average of around 33 per cent in previous months. In light of the deteriorating socio-economic situation and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR Lebanon has expanded its multi-purpose cash assistance, increasing the number of targeted families by over 31,000 since the start of this year. April also saw an increase in sea crossings from Lebanon towards Europe, due to the deteriorating socio-economic

situation. So far in 2021, at least 10 boat departures have been recorded, carrying some 567 individuals.

In **Libya**, the launch of the national COVID-19 vaccination campaign was announced, as new cases of COVID-19 continued to be recorded during April (over 18,500). During the month, UNHCR and its partner the Danish Refugee Council completed two Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) in Tripoli. The first at the Qawmia al-Arabiya school improved the operational capacity of the school for host and IDP communities, including through the construction of two hand washing stations outside the school to encourage proper hygiene. The second QIP was at the Ghout Al Shaal Health Centre, which serves an area hosting IDPs. Warehousing capacity at the health centre was increased and existing sanitation facilities rehabilitated, as well as other general rehabilitation works and structural improvements.

In **Mauritania**, the national COVID-19 vaccination campaign was launched, with the Government aiming to vaccinate 63 per cent of its population. In Mbera camp, where the vaccine will be administered by the health facilities, UNHCR has started to identify refugees who meet the criteria for the first two planned priority groups as determined by the Government, which include (a) public and private sector health workers, chronically ill people, people over 70, military and civilian employees at the country's entry points who are responsible for border surveillance and (b) people aged 60-69, education personnel, armed and security forces who are in contact with the general population, civil servants, public transport drivers and the prison population. In the urban areas of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, UNHCR will assess the number of refugees who fit into the first two targeted groups. Meanwhile, upon request of the Director of the regional hospital, UNHCR donated four Refugee Housing Units¹ in Nouadhibou to support the national COVID-19 response.

In **Morocco**, the Government confirmed the inclusion of migrants and refugees in its national COVID-19 vaccination campaign, launched at the end of January. UNHCR is closely coordinating with national institutions and civil society organizations to ensure the effective inclusion of asylum-seekers and refugees in the campaign. So far, 36 refugees have been vaccinated. UNHCR through its medical partner is also ensuring refugees are provided with the information needed to make informed decisions.

¹ *The Refugee Housing Unit is an innovative, prefabricated shelter solution that has been utilized by UNHCR as part of the COVID-19 response, including for screening and isolation of cases.*

As of end-April, COVID-19 cases in the **Syrian Arab Republic** increased by some 5,000 since the previous month, out of a total of 22,135 cases reported by Syrian health authorities since the pandemic started last March. In North-East Syria, the number of confirmed cases reached 14,822 (an increase of 39 per cent compared to the previous month). During April, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour issued a circular suspending all services conducted physically in UNHCR's Community Centres. Following this, UNHCR updated the guidance notes for the implementation of its programmes during COVID-19 and shared them with partners for effective remote service delivery. UNHCR also delivered ICT equipment to partners allowing them to implement UNHCR-supported programmes remotely, which included 150 laptops, 237 modems, 206 power banks, and 190 headphones.

In **Tunisia**, UNHCR is participating in the national coordination mechanism for the COVID-19 vaccination campaign to advocate for the inclusion of asylum-seekers and refugees. UNHCR will support persons of concern among the highest priority groups to register for and access the COVID-19 vaccine.

In **Turkey**, following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions on 1 March, daily figures have since shown a steep increase, rising to over 60,000 cases in April. The Government announced a full lockdown between 29 April - 17 May, covering the Eid al Fitr period. Following this decision, UNHCR reached out to partners and refugees to map needs, as refugees will be unable to go to municipalities and social services centres to receive assistance.

During the past month, a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases across **Yemen** continued to be observed. While accurate data remains difficult to determine due to the limited testing capacity and major destruction of health infrastructures, several sources confirmed thousands of additional cases and hundreds of new deaths during April. Countrywide, humanitarian groups have called for urgent and strict curfew and preventive measures. UNHCR has also re-issued and shared COVID-19 preventive guidelines with partners to help mitigate the spread. During April, UNHCR supported the Ministry of Health of the Government of Yemen with 28,000 PCR diagnostic tests. The Ministry will use the stock to strengthen the testing capacities of six isolation centres in Aden, Al-Hudaydah, Hadramaut, and Lahj governorates.

Global and MENA Financial Information

In 2021, UNHCR is seeking USD 924 million, of which over 50 per cent is mainstreamed in the annual budget and some USD 455 million is sought through the [COVID-19 Supplementary Appeal](#), for activities in 2021 related to the exceptional socio-economic and protection impacts of COVID-19. As of 18 May, the Supplementary Appeal is **12 per cent funded**, with **USD 56.6 million received** (inclusive of indicative allocations of softly earmarked and unearmarked funds), of which **USD 4.8 million is for the MENA region**.

Contributed without restrictions on its use, unearmarked funding allows UNHCR critical flexibility in how best to reach refugees and other populations of concern who are in the greatest need and at the greatest risk.

Resources:

- [UNHCR's 2021 COVID-19 Supplementary Appeal](#)
- For MENA regional and country reports on COVID-19 response, please visit – [UNHCR Global Focus](#); [UNHCR Operational Portal \(Syria Regional Refugee Response\)](#); and the [Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan website](#)
- Support UNHCR's COVID-19 preparedness and response plans: <https://giving.unhcr.org/en/coronavirus/>

For more details, please contact UNHCR MENA Regional Bureau in Amman (Jordan) at: MENAreporting@unhcr.org