



# PROTECTION BRIEF

# CENTRAL AFRICAN

# REPUBLIC

**SUDAN SITUATION**

**SEPTEMBER 2023**

# Operational Context & Analysis

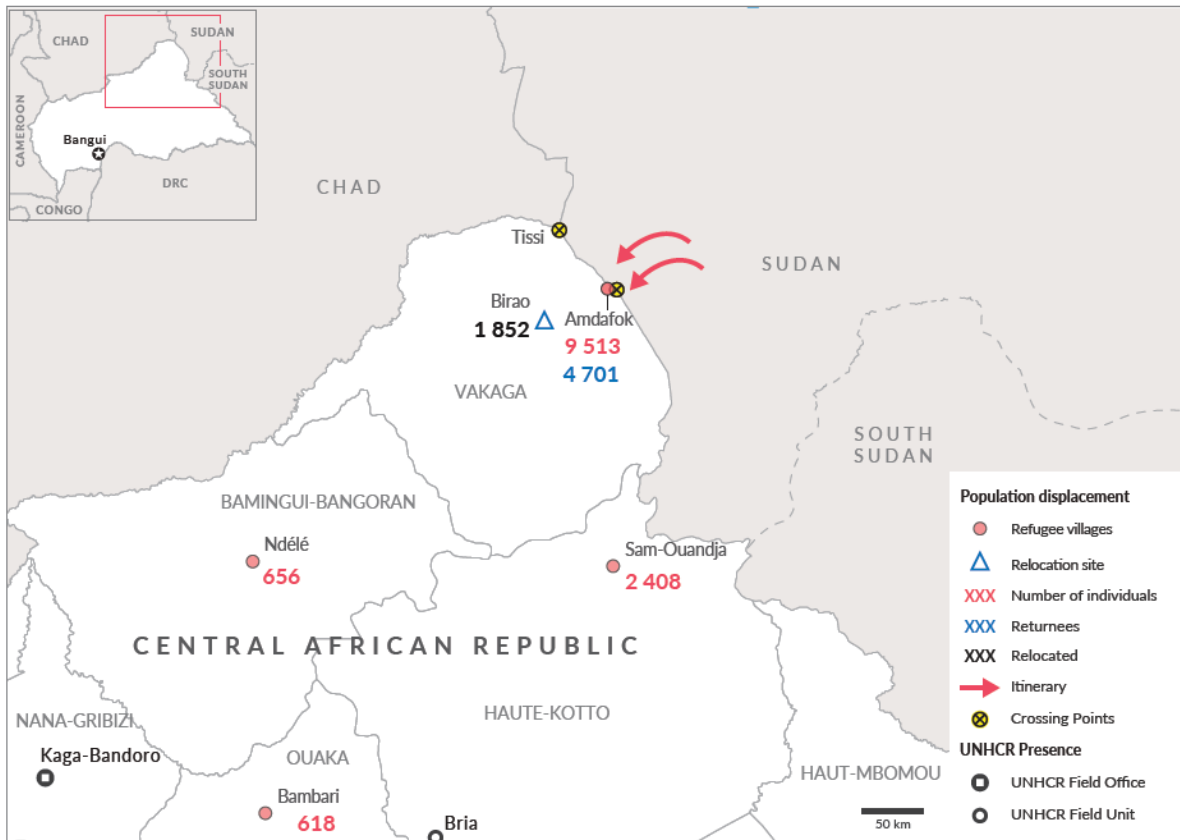
The ongoing fighting in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has displaced more than 5,5 million people, including over 1 million individuals to neighbouring countries. <sup>1</sup>

Since the beginning of the crisis, an estimated number of 18,545 individuals have arrived in the Central African Republic (CAR) from Sudan, including 15,047 Sudanese refugees and 4,701 Central African refugee returnees. Considering the present trends, UNHCR estimates that arrivals to CAR could reach up to 25,000 forcibly displaced persons by the end of the year. <sup>2</sup>

Most of the arrivals have left from bordering regions of Sudan and specifically towns like Nyala and Um-Dafuk and surrounding villages in South Darfur, forced to leave areas severely affected by the conflict and the collapse of law and order, with patterns that reflect the evolving confrontation between the parties to the conflict.

The newly arrived population have largely settled in spontaneous sites along the border areas, with fewer managing to be hosted by families or in one of the newly established sites in the prefecture of Vakaga, in northeast CAR.

## Situation Mapping



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.  
 Data source: UNHCR, Government of Central African Republic

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, Sudan Situation <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation>

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, Sudan Regional Refugee Response - May to December 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/103163>

According to the results of protection monitoring activities (*Project 21*) that were put in place soon after the start of the influx, 54 percent of the interviewed household indicated that during the flight, they were involuntarily separated from family members who have remained in Sudan. As a result, most of the displaced persons (90 percent) are women and children, including unaccompanied and separated children, often arriving undocumented. According to the testimonies collected by the protection teams, adult men have mostly preferred to remain in Sudan to monitor the evolution of the situation, to protect their property or possibly to take part to the conflict. Family separation therefore remains one of the main concerns according to surveys conducted with the households arrived in CAR.

Amongst the new arrivals, 16,066 individuals including 11,365 refugees and 4,701 returnees have been registered in the Vakaga prefecture, bordering Sudan. The Government of CAR and UNHCR have also registered 656 Sudanese refugees who reached CAR transiting through Chad and moved onward towards the town of Ndélé (prefecture of Bamingui-Bangoran). Arrivals have also been reported in the town of Sam Ouandja (Haute-Kotto prefecture) and the city of Bambari (Ouaka prefecture) where UNHCR and the National Commission for Refugees (*Commission Nationale pour les Réfugiés*, CNR) have pre-registered 2,408 and 618 refugees respectively.)

The Government of CAR has maintained a favourable border policy regime since the beginning of the crisis, granting access to territory to all people fleeing the conflict. CAR is a State Party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol as well as the 1969 OAU Convention. In a very welcomed development, on 19 August, the Government of CAR signed a Decree granting refugee status on a *prima facie* basis to all Sudanese nationals who have fled the violence in their country since April 2023.

According to the results of protection monitoring activities conducted by UNHCR and partners, 77 percent of households consulted upon arrival stated that they have not encountered difficulties in accessing the territory of CAR, while 33 percent reported some kind of impediment linked to demands for identity documents, the imposition of illegal fees and the need to resort to smugglers due to lack of documentation. Most of these issues have been reported at and around the Am-Dafock border, the main crossing point along the primary route from Sudan to CAR.

Since the inception of the influx, the security situation in the Am-Dafock border area has remained extremely volatile. On the one hand, the proximity of the border to conflict areas inside Sudan, and the lawless situation in the region of South Darfur triggers a continuous risk of spill-over of the conflict and of infiltration of armed elements. On the other, the withdrawal, on 19 June, of the Tripartite Force CAR-Sudan-Chad and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA) has left a security vacuum that further exposes civilians to security risks and have negative repercussions on safe humanitarian access. For instance, at the end of May 2023, humanitarian personnel have been targeted by unidentified armed elements on the route connecting the border with Birao.

To improve the safety of the newly arrived refugees, but also to improve the capacity to provide continuous assistance and services, UNHCR and other humanitarian partners, in coordination with the authorities, have supported the voluntary relocation of the population from Am-Dafock inland into the area of Birao (Vakaga prefecture). Refugees are hosted in Korsi, a new neighbourhood of the northern city of Birao. and a complex operation of onward transport has been undertaken during the past months. As of 28 September, a total of 1,825 individuals have been relocated to the new neighborhood called Korsi (70 percent women and children). As the roads connecting to Am-Dafock have become impracticable since July, due to the rainy season, the assisted relocation exercise to Korsi has been temporarily put on hold, although a process of self-organized relocation continues. While Birao and Korsi area have currently become the target areas of the humanitarian response, UNHCR and partners have deployed some frontline staff in Am-Dafock to conduct protection monitoring at the border and provide information on relocation opportunities and available services in relocation areas to new arrivals.

The Government of CAR, has assumed a strong leadership in the coordination of the refugee response, supported by UNHCR and in accordance with the modalities of the [Refugee Coordination Model in mixed situations](#). Since the beginning of the crisis, a new mechanism for coordination and response to the crisis in Sudan has been set up. Specifically, weekly meetings are held in Birao with all the actors

involved in the response. Regular meetings are also organized in Bangui to coordinate the response, in coordination with the Cluster mechanisms at national and regional level.

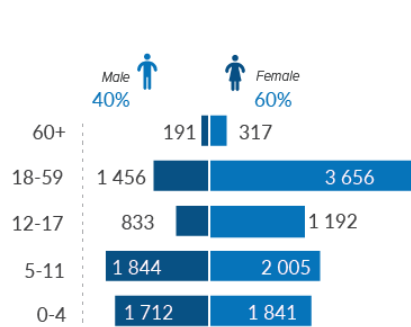
The current priority protection activities include finalizing the individual registration of newly arrived refugees, including through biometrics; awareness raising on and support for safe and voluntary relocation away from border areas; identifying persons at heightened protection risk and in need of specialized support; establishing mechanisms to effectively mitigate and respond to gender-based violence and ensure child protection services, including alternative care arrangements for unaccompanied children. The overall response to people affected by the crisis in Sudan remains multi-sectoral, focusing on protection, education, food security, health, including mental health, nutrition, shelter and coverage of basic needs, as well as water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). Access to basic services, particularly water and health, is a challenge for the whole region that pre-dates the current crisis, with several refugee hosting areas also characterized by high levels of food insecurity.

It is important to note that in addition to the ongoing crisis, CAR is already hosting 514,547 internally displaced persons (IDPs) according to the latest data from the *Commission Mouvement de Populations* (CMP) of July 2023. Furthermore, it is estimated that some 2.1 million people are in a situation of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or more). Among other regions, the sub-prefecture of Birao, which continues to receive most of the people affected by the crisis in Sudan, is projected to record high level of food insecurity (IPC Phase 4) in the period from September 2023 to March 2024.<sup>3</sup> The conflict in Sudan and the rainy season exacerbated an already precarious socio-economic situation. Markets have always experienced significant price variability depending on accessibility linked to road conditions and on the security situation. However, the impact of the conflict in Sudan and the resulting disruption of the cross-border supply chain has led to significant increases in the prices of basic commodity or shortages of goods including in the refugee-hosting areas.

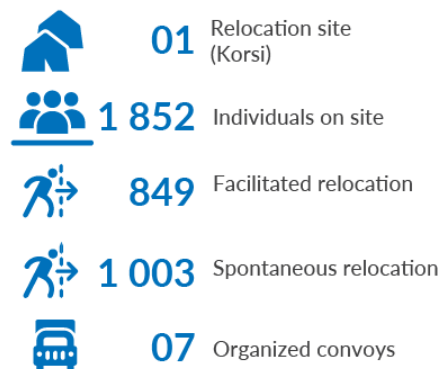
## Key Trends & Figures



### Age and gender breakdown



### Refugee relocation in Birao



<sup>3</sup> Central African Republic: Acute Food Insecurity Situation April - August 2023 and Projection for September 2023 - March 2024  
<https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1156361/?iso3=CAF>

## Protection risks

Following the outbreak of the crisis in mid-April 2023 in Sudan, UNHCR and its partners have conducted regular protection monitoring activities in the main areas of arrival through its interagency and cross-border protection monitoring systems (*Project 21*), as well as through a periodical direct presence at the border areas in Am-Dafouk. Up to August 2023, a total of 975 households (69 percent refugees and 31 percent refugees returnees) have been consulted in Birao (Vakaga prefecture), Ndélé (Bamingui-Bangoran prefecture) and Sam Ouandja (Haute-Kotto prefecture) to detect various protection risks and needs, both those encountered during the journey and while crossing the border, as well as protection risks and needs currently faced in the hosting community. UNHCR is further expanding protection monitoring activities, including through the support of community-based structures and outreach mechanisms, in areas of refugee arrivals along the border, within the Korsi area in Birao, and in other key locations where Sudanese refugees have settled such as Ndélé and Sam Ouandja cities.

**Security and safety.** The safety and security of the newly arrived refugee population remains a paramount risk, particularly considering the overwhelming presence of women, children and older person, and the significant number of individuals still residing in insecure border areas. A population already significantly affected by the acute violence directly suffered or witnessed in areas of origin, and by episodes of harassment and extortion during their journey to safety, continues to be exposed to the risk of attacks, sexual violence, forced recruitment due to their proximity to porous and non-securitized border areas. At the same time, the remoteness of other settlement areas and the general weakness of rule of law mechanisms and law enforcement actors triggers physical protection risks also in other settlement areas, equally affecting refugees, returnees, and residents. Since the beginning of the Sudan crisis, consulted refugees, returnees and other displaced, have spontaneously disclosed some 920 protection incidents that took place in the main refugee hosting areas in the prefectures of Vakaga, Bamingui-Bangoran and Haute-Kotto. About 23% of these incidents identified Sudanese refugees as victims.<sup>4</sup> These incidents include attacks against life and physical integrity (27%), attacks against property (47%), Gender-based violence (24%), and physical violence. Several violations (approximately 37% of incidents), are attributed to unidentified armed elements present along the border areas or on the routes connecting Birao to the border and to other localities in the prefecture, where there is little or no presence of regular law enforcement and where public order is severely disrupted. The numbers of incidents reported may be an underestimation, since systematic monitoring visits were only extended to cover the most remote refugee-hosting areas in early June.

**GBV.** Protection monitoring activities, safety audits and consultations through community-based structures, have highlighted persistent occurrence of physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional violence. Sexual violence linked to the conflict and instability in the country represents a continuous risk highlighted by the respondents. The presence in insecure and lawless border areas of a refugee population largely consisting of women and children creates a fertile terrain for incidents of sexual aggression reportedly perpetrated by armed groups. The absence of services and of a constant humanitarian presence in several remote areas, including in Am-Dafouk, hinder a precise appraisal of the situation, possibly leading to an underestimation of the current trends.

In a country where GBV is endemic, and often perpetrated within families and communities, the situation is challenging also in other locations where refugees have settled. The frequent absence of male members of the household exposes the refugee population to renewed risk of GBV in the host communities. *Project 21* highlighted that 46% of the respondent, largely represented by women, expressed that they feel unsafe in the host community, notably during water or wood collection and when their community networks are not present. Initial reports of sexual assaults perpetrated in the Korsi area by local residents have started to emerge and are followed up through increased attention towards mitigating measures and security in the site.

<sup>4</sup> Protection monitoring activities document incidents affecting different categories of population in the coverage area. The remaining 70% of the victims are residents or IDPs.

GBV risks are also stemming from weak self-reliance opportunities amongst newly arrived refugees. The search for natural resources such as firewood and forage or shea fruit used in the production of marketable products often drives women and girls to leave settlements and populated areas in Birao to venture towards more remote areas, increased risks of exposure to sexual assaults. In addition, Protection teams have detected the occurrence of harmful coping strategies, with instances of women and girls engaged in the sell and exchange of sex to meet their basic needs. Early marriages, already present in the social fabric before the flight, is a phenomenon that starts to be observed. In this context, aside GBV awareness and mitigation activities, the uninterrupted provision of food and other humanitarian assistance, as well as investment in community-based self-reliance initiative benefitting women heading household is of paramount importance.

**Child protection.** The presence of armed elements around the main areas of arrival in Am-Dafock represents a concrete risk for children to be recruited, particularly if unaccompanied or separated from their parents or previous legal or customary caregivers. Furthermore, the effect of the conflict on families and communities have exposed children to risks of abuse, violence and exploitation, and increased levels of psychosocial distress. Identifying appropriate family-based care arrangements for unaccompanied children in the current context remains a further challenge.

The overall psychosocial well-being of children is seriously affected also by the lack of education. Within the pre-registered refugee arrivals, 38 percent have been identified as children of school age (57 percent girls). According to consultations with the newly arrived refugees (*Project 21*), 92 percent of the respondent households confirmed that their children has been enrolled in schools while in Sudan. While in the relocation site in Birao, education activities have started, access to education remains disrupted for the high percentage of children who have not yet been relocated and remain at the border. Lack of access to education and other forms of childcare and support to well-being, coupled with the situation of deprivation and lack of humanitarian assistance may further expose refugee children to associated protection risks. According to *Project 21*, 22 percent of the consulted households have highlighted the risks of child labour, forced marriage and unwanted pregnancies.

## Key elements of the protection response

**Continuous individual registration and biometric enrolment.** Since the influx, UNHCR has ensured an initial pre-registration at the border to determine the size of the arriving population. This initial activity is currently followed by a process of individual registration through biometric enrolment for all Sudanese refugees, similarly to other groups living in other areas of CAR.

Between 10 May and 15 June, the CNR, UNHCR and partners have been present in Am-Dafock to receive, identify, pre-register, and provide life-saving support to people fleeing Sudan. This temporary site, located at approximately one kilometre from the border and in the proximity to the military contingent of the MINUSCA, initially guaranteed some level of mitigation to the most immediate physical security risks. The biometric registration and document delivery started at the border. However, due to the subsequent withdrawal of MINUSCA and the logistic constraints with the inception of the rainy season, the activity has continued in the town of Birao. As of 28 September 2023, some 2,492 households (9,310 individuals) have been biometrically registered the Vakaga prefecture. Biometric registration in other prefectures will begin in early October.

Registration of refugees, and the related issuance of individual documentation, represents an essential operational step to plan humanitarian assistance and services, but it represents also a critical protection tool to guarantee identity, prevention of *refoulement*, freedom of movement, and as one of the initial steps to identify persons with specific protection needs.

In parallel, UNHCR continues to invest and organise capacity-development activities for CAR asylum authorities to reinforce the institutional response and asylum system.

**Relocation.** To mitigate safety and security risks of the newly arrived refugees, a voluntary relocation process was launched on 26 May from the border area of Am-Dafock to Korsi, in the town of Birao. The

infrastructure and services in the site have been rapidly scaled up to support a multisector response, which includes shelter, WASH and the provision of food and non- food items, nutrition and health services as well as protection services, including child protection services (recreational spaces, psychosocial support, family tracing and reunification) and activities to reinforce GBV mitigation and response.

The relocation exercise was preceded by a sensitisation campaign with the newly arrived communities on the scope and importance of the move as a security safeguard, its modalities, as well as information campaigns in the destination areas, to reinforce community acceptance. On 15 June, humanitarian operations supporting the relocation were suspended due to the deterioration of roads following the start of the rainy season as well as due to the absence of national security forces and MINUSCA at departure in Am-Dafock and along the routes. Despite this challenge, Sudanese refugees continued to arrive to the Korsi area by their own means. In this location, UNHCR and its partners support the CNR in monitoring, reception and registration of new arrivals. As of 28 September, some 1,852 individuals have relocated from Am-Dafock to the Korsi area in Birao (Vakaga prefecture). Mirroring the composition upon arrival, 68 per cent of the relocated Sudanese refugees are women and children.

To date, the CNR and UNHCR partners continue to organise awareness sessions to inform both the displaced population and the host communities about the importance of relocation from the border to safer inland locations. One of the main observed challenges to the process is the emotional pressure that partners still remaining in Sudan exercise over female refugees resulting in their resistance to be relocated in the absence of the male head of the family.

While at the time of issuance of this brief road conditions still do not allow the continuation of the relocation, it is expected that the operation will resume at the end of the rainy season in October or November.



*New arrivals collect water at the UNHCR-supported Korsi area, near Birao (Vakaga prefecture). UNHCR/Josselin Bremau*

**Preserving the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum and of refugee sites.** The unstable security situation in the Prefectures Sudanese refugees have arrived, as well as the porosity of the border between CAR and Sudan in these remote areas, have triggered significant risks of infiltration and presence of armed elements, linked to the fighting ongoing in Sudan. The presence of armed elements has been detected since the end of May in Am-Dafock. In addition, according to findings of protection monitoring, the RSF and affiliated armed elements patrol and control the Sudan side of Am-

Dafock and neighboring villages, regularly pillaging essential goods such as food, livestock, and vehicles/motorbikes. This risk may extend also to refugee settlement and sites further away from the border. As a central part of its advocacy efforts to promote the safety and security of the civilian population, including refugees, since the inception of the crisis and in cooperation with other humanitarian actors, UNHCR has raised the awareness of the CAR authorities on the importance of preserving the civilian character of the refugee movements and of the sites where they settle, including by calling for the identification and separation of armed elements.

**GBV response.** Together with partners, in the context of the refugee response, UNHCR has initiated and reinforced GBV mitigation and response activities targeted to the areas of Birao, in order to offer timely and quality services to GBV survivors. Mirroring other initiatives already in place in other areas of the country for the response to internal displacement, current interventions include a medical response and follow-up in confidential spaces within the Korsi area; a psychosocial response, at individual as well as at community level; the provision of dignity and menstrual hygiene kits; local awareness-raising campaigns, extended also to men and adolescent boys; the establishment of two “*Ma Mbi Si* listening centres” and safe spaces for women and girls (in Korsi and Birao town). In addition, referral pathways for survivors in and outside the camp have been updated and strengthened and capacity-development activities are regularly organised with GBV case managers and community leaders.

**Child protection.** To effectively shape a response to child protection issues, including neglect, abuse, and various forms of violence, in the Korsi area and in the host community of the Vakaga prefecture UNHCR and partners conducted child protection risks assessments, to better gauge the overall well-being of children, detect psychosocial support needs, understand the situation of children separated from their families to determine the needs for alternative care arrangements.

UNHCR partners have set up a child-friendly space in the Korsi area and another in the host community in Birao to enhance children's safety; to provide emotional and psychological support and restore children well-being; and as an available entry point for access to information, identification of children at risk, and referral to support services. In the child-friendly spaces, recreational activities are also carried out on a regular basis.

Child survivors of GBV also benefit from various GBV response services including through case management. GBV partners organize awareness-raising sessions with the community and sensitize community representatives about the risks involved in early marriages. UNHCR partners also conduct Best Interests Procedure for individual children at heightened risk and, depending on the need identified, refer them to international and local humanitarian partners for expert support, including psychosocial care (INTEROS), health assistance (NOURRIR, Doctors Without Borders, International Medical Corps or the local health district). Cooperation on referral of cases of unaccompanied children is established with the ICRC for family tracing services.

**Strengthening community-based structures.** In Vakaga prefecture, where Birao town and its neighborhood Korsi is located, UNHCR and partners have facilitated the creation of a community protection network consisting of 30 community representatives (of which 5 refugees) and 227 protection committee members (of which 10 refugees) with a diversified composition reflecting age, gender and diversity in membership. To date, two sessions have been organized to promote dialogue and peaceful coexistence between the refugees and the local community in Birao. A mapping of local community structures has also been undertaken and support will be provided to selected local women's associations in the host community in the form of contractual arrangements. Amongst other initiatives, these local associations are engaged in community awareness activities for GBV prevention and response and empowerment of refugee women to promote ensure greater inclusion, engagement and avenues for conflict resolution. Challenges in adequate presence and resources have so far limited these promising initiatives to the sole areas of Birao, without the possibility to extend efforts to strengthen community-based structures to other neighbouring areas where Sudanese refugees have settled, such as in the towns of Sam Ouandja, Ndélé and Bambari.



## Challenges & Opportunities

UNHCR has a long and close collaboration with the CNR, as the main institution responsible for the management of refugee affairs and one of its main strategic partners already before the Sudanese crisis. This cooperation, together with other governmental partners, has facilitated the recognition on August 19 of a *prima facie* status to the newly arrived Sudanese refugees, as well as the relocation of the affected population to safer and better serviced areas, contributing to a more effective and timely response and a gradual process towards self-reliance. The recent visit of a high-level governmental delegation to the Vakaga prefecture highlighted the strong engagement of the national authorities in the refugee response, while also underlining the quest for more humanitarian and development-oriented area-based support to some of the most impoverished regions of the Central African Republic.

Access to the border town of Am-Dafock represents a severe challenge due to the poor road conditions and the very volatile security situation. The inception of the rainy season has rendered the roads impracticable, as the border area is flood prone and access to Am-Dafock remains only possible by air. In addition, the withdrawal of MINUSCA forces from the border around Am-Dafock on June 18 has further jeopardised the safe access to the area for humanitarians. As a result, the relocation operation had to be suspended, together with most of the humanitarian response activities.

In addition, extremely poor communication infrastructure and network connection, with communication only possible via satellite phone, has heavily affected the possibility for remote monitoring of the situation at the border, including detecting new arrival trends and the needs of the population. While community-based monitors remain active and a minimal presence of local partners' staff continues, any information on the evolving situation can only be relayed periodically with in-person travel to Birao, if the security and road conditions allow. In these circumstances, the continuous presence of refugees at the border remains a serious humanitarian concern.

## Key messages

- UNHCR commends the Government of CAR for maintaining access to its territory for people fleeing the conflict in Sudan and welcomes the recent Decree granting *prima facie* refugee status to Sudanese nationals who have fled the violence in their country since April 2023.
- The Government of CAR is exhorted to continue efforts in maintaining the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum and of refugee hosting sites, by securing the border areas and by putting in place the necessary measures to ensure the identification and separation of combatants from the civilian population.
- Authorities are encouraged to ensure the continued and safe access to asylum for civilians fleeing from Sudan, and to guarantee safe and unimpeded access to humanitarian organisations for the provision of protection services and multi-sectoral assistance in all locations where refugees are settled.
- UNHCR welcomes the efforts of the Government of CAR in responding to the needs of refugees and refugee returnees from Sudan. The Government is encouraged to continue to reinforce the capacity of the national and local authorities in charge of managing the refugee response under their respective competencies as well as in creating opportunities for the integration of refugees into national services.
- UNHCR welcomes the collaboration and coordination with MINUSCA, UN sister agencies and international and local NGOs and the ongoing efforts in pooling all available resources to respond to the refugee crisis in the country. UNHCR exhorts donors to increase their support for the overall humanitarian response in CAR, currently severely underfunded.

- Funding falls woefully short of meeting the most fundamental life-saving protection requirements. **42.6 million USD is required for the overall response in CAR** under the Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for the Sudan situation, of which some 8 million USD needed under to scale up lifesaving protection interventions, including registration, protection monitoring, community engagement and mobilisation, GBV prevention and response interventions, activities to support the well-being of children and to address the needs of other refugees and returnees in vulnerable situations.
- UNHCR welcomes the generosity of the CAR authorities and the local population in receiving refugees from neighbouring Sudan and in sharing resources to support their initial survival. Considering the long-lasting crisis affecting the whole country, and in a spirit of burden sharing, it is critical that additional development-oriented resources can also be mobilised and adequately invested in refugee hosting areas and in areas of refugees and IDP return, to support and improve services, infrastructures, and livelihood opportunities to the benefit of the whole population.

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