REGIONAL EXTERNAL UPDATE | WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA REGION

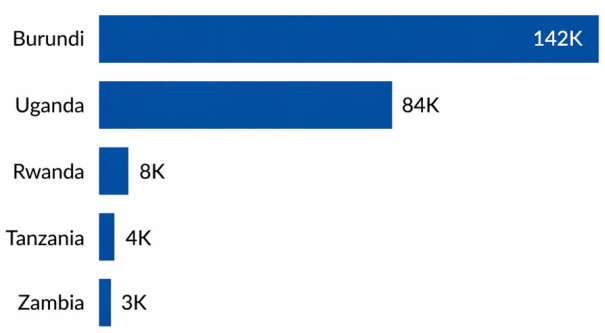
EASTERN DRC SITUATION | December 2025 – March 2026

UNHCR and it's partners receive Congolese refugees spontaneously returning from Burundi © UNHCR DRC

Key figures

	117,300 New arrivals from the DRC in Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia		**99,200** Medical consultations provided in Burundi, the DRC and Uganda		**80,500** Essential items provided in Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda		**67,700** New arrivals from the DRC relocated to Busuma site in Burundi
	40,500 Spontaneous refugee returns from Burundi to the DRC		**35,300** People received shelter support in the DRC and Burundi		**117,300** Refugees voluntarily repatriated from the DRC to Burundi and Rwanda		**18** Quick impact projects impacting 50,000 people in the DRC

241,985*
Cumulative new arrivals from DRC since January 2025

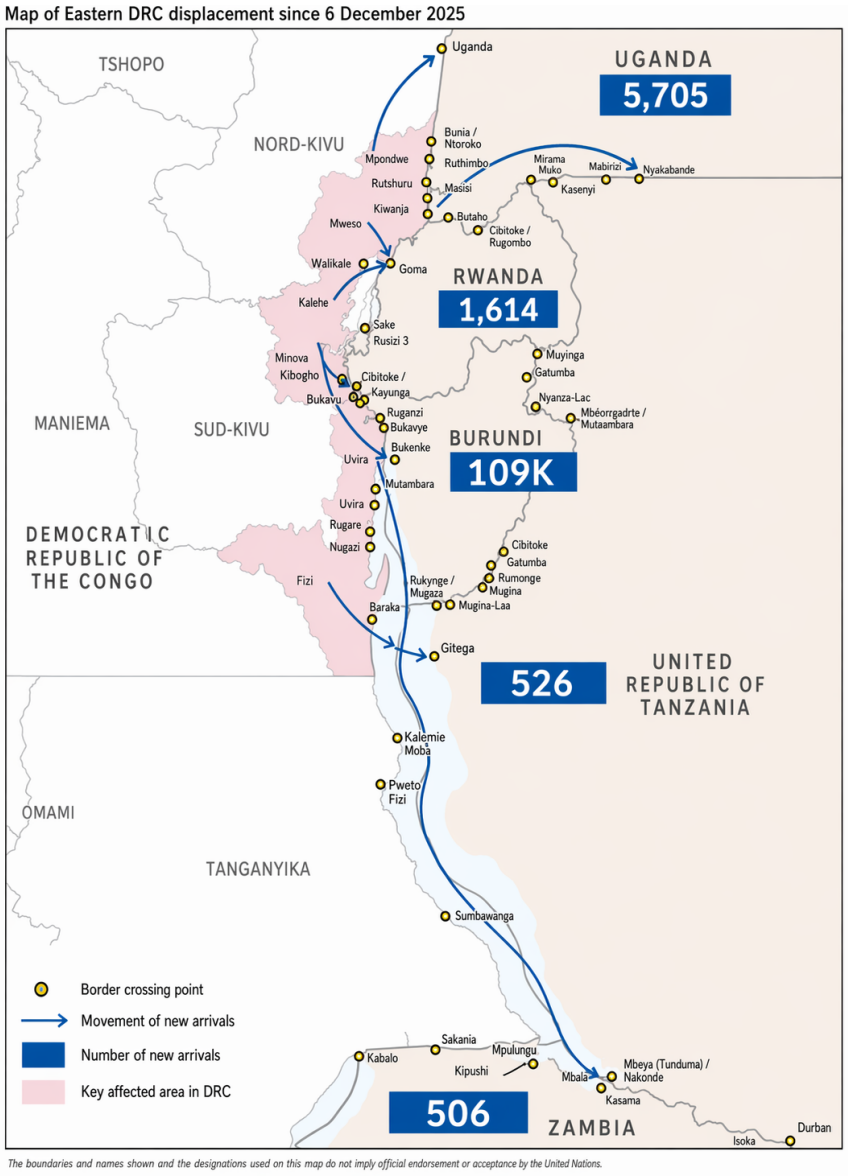


117,351
New arrivals from Eastern DRC into neighbouring countries since 6 Dec. 2025

* Figures reported in Burundi include Burundian refugees who have spontaneously returned from DRC to Burundi since December 2025. As well as the total in Rwanda that includes newlyarrived returns from DRC.

Figures are provisional, reflecting reported arrivals; registration is ongoing as the situation remains fluid.

Map of Eastern DRC displacement since 6 December 2025



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

1. Context

In 2026, UNHCR began conducting intention surveys following requests by some newly arrived Congolese refugees in Busuma, Burundi, to return to South Kivu. These requests came amid ongoing spontaneous returns of around 40,500 individuals to South Kivu, following the reopening of the Burundi–DRC border on 23 February 2026, despite the fragile situation in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and despite limited access to services and opportunities in return areas.

Following the surveys, around 20,000 people indicated their willingness to return and planning began for Governments–UNHCR facilitated returns to the DRC, targeting around 2,000 individuals per week. The return operation will support refugees who have made a free, informed and individual decision to go back home, with UNHCR ensuring access to accurate, up-to-date information on conditions. UNHCR's non-return advisory primarily targeted at states, advises against forced returns, deportations, non-voluntary repatriation and premature cessation of refugee status, and had previously cautioned that conditions for safe, dignified and sustainable return have not been met broadly across eastern DRC. However, the advisory does not prohibit or negate the right of refugees to voluntarily return at any time, as outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and UNHCR guidelines.

Those expressing intent to return are part of an estimated 117,300 people who fled eastern DRC to neighbouring countries between 6 December following an escalation of clashes in South Kivu and March 2026. As of 31 March 2026, around 1.2 million Congolese refugees and asylum-seekers were hosted in neighbouring countries, including 242,000 displaced since January 2025.

In response to the deteriorating protection environment and forced displacement, UNHCR launched a $47.2 million emergency appeal covering December 2025 to March 2026. This enabled the DRC and host countries to deliver life-saving assistance, strengthen protection, support reception and registration of new arrivals. However significant gaps remained across sectors, by the end of March.

Amid rising needs, regional and international efforts to de-escalate tensions gained momentum. UNHCR supported mediation efforts in Doha between the Congolese Government and Alliance Fleuve Congo - March 23 Movement (AFC/M23), and the Washington Accords between the DRC and Rwandan Governments, by providing technical advice on civilian protection and facilitating community engagement to ease tensions, although violence persisted in eastern DRC.

2. Key achievements and challenges

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Congolese families happily returned home from Burundi, months after they fled violent clashes in South Kivu province, eastern DRC
© UNHCR/March 2026

Protection Monitoring:

Through presence-based protection monitoring, UNHCR and its partners identified 6,354 protection incidents in North Kivu and South Kivu between the end of December 2025 and March 2026, mainly linked to the activities of armed groups, including bombings, looting, killings, forced recruitment of children by armed groups and other human rights abuses. Protection partners referred 1,316 survivors to appropriate protection and assistance services, strengthening access to individual case management and support mechanisms.

Gender-based violence (GBV):

Violence against women and girls remained a serious concern and included incidents of rape. UNHCR provided multi-sectoral assistance to 102 survivors and at-risk individuals, and psychosocial support to 865 people in Lubero and Beni territories in Grand North Kivu.

Child Protection:

UNHCR and its partner CIAUD organized two Early Childhood Integration sessions for unaccompanied refugee children at Sange Regional Park in South Kivu, providing safe spaces for psychosocial support, early learning and social integration. Two mass awareness sessions on child protection were also held at the Kavimvira Transit Centre, reaching 45 people and focusing on children's right to education.

In March, UNHCR provided training to 25 members of community-based protection structures in Goma, North Kivu, strengthening capacities to implement community-centred approaches and deliver more effective protection services.

Education:
UNHCR and its partner CIAUD handed over a newly constructed and equipped six-classroom building at the Mapinduzi Institute in Panzi, Bukavu, South Kivu, reducing overcrowding and improving learning conditions for forcibly displaced and host community children.

Health:
Between December and March, UNHCR and its health partners provided 8,429 medical consultations, including 75 mental health consultations, to refugees in eastern DRC. A total of 302 live births were recorded, with 98 per cent attended by qualified health personnel.

During the reporting period, health officials also reported 2,380 cholera cases and 13 related deaths in the Fizi, Nundu and Uvira health zones hosting Burundian refugees, including 61 cases and one death among refugees. UNHCR supported the Government response, including through awareness raising on safe hygiene practices.

In March, a mass measles vaccination campaign targeting 260,000 children was launched by operational partners in North Kivu following more than 12,000 cases and 157 deaths reported in early 2026, mostly among children under five, amid ongoing fighting and displacement. Forcibly displaced children were among those vaccinated.

Shelter/ Infrastructure:
UNHCR and its partners provided emergency shelters and kits of essential items to 5,000 IDPs in South Kivu.

Shelter support was also provided to internally displaced people and returnees, through financial aid to 3,799 people, including 1,969 people in South Kivu and 1,830 in North Kivu. This enabled them to build secure homes, protected from elements, while reducing risks of protection incidents.

UNHCR and its partners completed quick impact projects (QIPS) aimed at addressing urgent community needs, strengthening social cohesion and improving access to basic services for displaced and host communities.

In February, the 18 projects were handed over to local authorities and communities in Beni and Lubero territories, impacting more than 50,000 people across the Greater North Kivu area.

In Beni, 10 projects included market sheds, a peace hut, boreholes and classrooms in Oicha, Mbau and the outskirts of Beni. In Lubero, eight QIPs were delivered, including rehabilitated water points, a sanitation block at Lukanga market, a bridge and classrooms.

A sustainable facility for the AMANI connectivity and IT centre was also inaugurated in Oicha. Equipped with solar power, furniture, IT and office equipment, and internet access, the centre supports internally displaced people, returnees and host community members to develop digital and professional skills and promotes social inclusion.

UNHCR also handed over a newly constructed warehouse at Kunda market in Bagira, Bukavu in South Kivu, to the market committee, made up of forcibly displaced and host community members, improving storage, supporting small businesses and strengthening local economic activity.

Spontaneous returns:
Following the reopening of the Burundi–DRC border on 23 February, around 40,500 Congolese refugees (9,200 households) spontaneously returned from Burundi. Most crossed through the Kavimvira border point near Uvira in South Kivu.

In North Kivu, UNHCR and the CNR also identified 1,088 spontaneous Congolese returnees from Uganda and Rwanda in Masisi (Kitshanga) and Rutshuru territories in North Kivu, through a community-based monitoring mechanism established with partner INTERSOS.

Conditions in many areas of return remained fragile, with acute humanitarian needs. Initial UNHCR assessments in Uvira and Fizi showed families arriving with few belongings and in urgent need of shelter, basic household items, healthcare, water and sanitation. Many returned to find their homes destroyed and belongings looted, making it challenging for them to resume normal life without substantial support.

Voluntary repatriation:

Between January and March 2026, 1,246 refugees, comprising 90 per cent from North Kivu and 10 per cent from South Kivu were voluntarily repatriated from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Rwanda through nine convoys organized by UNHCR in collaboration with its partners. In addition, 256 refugees from South Kivu were voluntarily repatriated to Burundi through six convoys during the same period.

As of 31 March, 4,726 intentions to return have been registered, including 3,568 Rwandan refugees from 646 families and 1,158 Burundian refugees from 250 families awaiting convoys to their respective countries.

Rwandan refugees who were in Goma eastern DRC, arrive home during voluntary repatriation convoys © UNHCR/March 2026

Regional Updates

Neighbouring countries, including Burundi and Uganda, continued to host the majority of new arrivals from eastern DRC, despite recent spontaneous returns from Burundi under difficult conditions. In addition to the Global Appeal and Humanitarian Response Plan, UNHCR launched a $47.2 million appeal in December to respond to renewed large-scale violence in South Kivu and resulting displacement. By the end of March, significant gaps remained across all sectors, underscoring a persistently volatile context in eastern DRC and the dire humanitarian situation in host countries, requiring additional time-bound funding.

Burundi

Population movement:

Despite recent spontaneous returns of Congolese refugees to the DRC, Burundi still hosted around 109,000 people who fled clashes in eastern DRC since December 2025. As of 31 March, the Government of Burundi, with UNHCR support, had relocated 67,000 refugees to the Busuma site in December, while around 4,000 were still staying in transit centres awaiting relocation.

These transit centres are severely overcrowded, with Cishemere hosting around 3,500 people and Makombe around 500, far exceeding available capacity and resulting in dire living conditions. Urgent support is required to improve shelter, food assistance and access to essential services, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Funding shortfalls further strained conditions at Busuma, leading to environmental degradation, overcrowding and limited access to water, sanitation, healthcare and shelter, despite efforts by the authorities, UNHCR and partners. The deteriorating situation contributed to increased spontaneous returns to South Kivu, even as protection risks remained high in eastern DRC.

At the same time, following persistent clashes in parts of eastern DRC, Congolese nationals continued arriving in Burundi even by March 2026. UNHCR is yet to determine whether they are refugees arriving for the first time or returning to Burundi after having previously left voluntarily.

Registration of Congolese refugees and asylum-seekers at the Busuma site in Burundi © UNHCR/March 2026

Registration:
UNHCR and the Government launched a Level 2 registration exercise in Busuma, registering 14,116 people (3,809 households) by 31 March. This registration aims to strengthen data accuracy, improve targeting for assistance, and clarify current population dynamics, including recent voluntary departures and new arrivals.

Protection Monitoring:
UNHCR and protection partners in Busuma received over 500 protection cases through dedicated protection desks at the Busuma site resulting from arrests and detention, lost documentation, disputes, family reunifications, and assistance.

Gender-based violence:
Of the reported incidents between December 2025 and March 2026, 92 per cent involved rape, while the rest were related to psychological abuse, sexual assault, physical assault and denial of resources, opportunities or services. Reporting remained low and access to services limited, suggesting that needs are likely underrepresented.

Child protection:
Protection actors continued providing individual multi-sectoral assistance to children with protection needs in Busuma, including unaccompanied and separated children, and other children at heightened risk. UNHCR and its partners provided counselling to children, family reunification, temporary care arrangements with foster families and essential items.

People with specific needs:
Between December and March, humanitarian partners identified 1,478 persons with specific needs in Busuma, highlighting the growing number of refugees requiring targeted support, including older persons, survivors of violence, and children facing heightened protection risks. Support provided included counselling, referrals to service providers, home visits and distributions of essential items to improve their living conditions.

Education:
UNHCR provided remedial classes for around 2,000 learners to help address learning gaps caused by displacement. However, overcrowding, limited infrastructure, and a shortage of teachers posed significant challenges to access to education for forcibly displaced children.

Health:
Health partners delivered 89,640 medical consultations between December and March, alongside hospital referrals, mental health support and maternal healthcare. 3,914 malnutrition cases were recorded, including severe and moderate acute malnutrition, underlining the fragility of the newly arrived population.

Following a cholera outbreak, health authorities reported 265 cases from December 2025, including 204 at Busuma site and 61 at other sites, with 10 deaths recorded, including two at Busuma and eight at other sites. The situation has since stabilized, with no new cases reported since 12 January. However, given precarious living conditions at several sites, the risk of resurgence remains high, and the situation continues to be closely monitored.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH):
WASH conditions were among the most critical gaps in the emergency response. In Busuma, water availability reached around 6,55 litres per person per day, far below emergency standards, while sanitation infrastructure continued to face immense pressure with about 90 persons per latrine.

Shelter:
UNHCR and shelter partners provided shelter support to 26,520 individuals at the Busuma site from December to March, yet housing conditions remained critical with only 40 per cent of the 67,000 people at the site adequately sheltered, leaving 60 per cent without proper accommodation. Additional emergency tents and communal hangars continue to be installed amid funding and material constraints.

Other infrastructure:
Since December, road access improvements have facilitated the delivery of assistance to Busuma site. However, progress remains limited, and ongoing soil erosion continues to threaten access and infrastructure, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive environmental response.

Despite multi-purpose assistance to new arrivals from the DRC relocated to the Busuma site in Burundi, significant needs remain for shelter and basic services © UNHCR/ 2026

A total of 80 solar streetlights are operational at Busuma site, with 34 additional units under installation. These measures have improved safety, night-time visibility and access to services, particularly for women and children.

Essential Items:
Between December and March, UNHCR and partners provided essential items such as blankets, sleeping mats and buckets to 78,000 refugees, helping families meet urgent and immediate needs.

Food and cash assistance:
Various food distributions were carried out between December and March through different partners and in-kind donations. In some instances, food rations were complemented by cash assistance; however, overall rations remained below standard levels by the end of March.

Solutions:
By the end of March, intention surveys indicated that about 30 per cent of refugees and asylum-seekers at the Busuma site had expressed interest in returning to specific areas in South Kivu in the DRC. The first convoy will include 500 individuals and will mark the start of regular repatriations.

UNHCR's non-return advisory remains in place and reflects UNHCR's assessment that conditions for large-scale returns to eastern DRC including South Kivu are not yet met. This operation does not constitute an endorsement that those conditions have changed. In this specific case, returnees will be transferred to government-controlled areas with established protection presence. UNHCR and partners will monitor conditions and can suspend operations if the situation deteriorates.

Rwanda

New arrivals from the DRC:

From December 2025 to March 2026, Rwanda received 111 new arrivals of Congolese refugees and asylum-seekers and 1,503 Rwandan returnees, bringing total arrivals since January 2025 to 8,339.

Reception capacity: The three transit centres currently operating are Nyarushishi, Kijote and Nkamira. Nyarushishi, which hosts returnees from the DRC, has a capacity of 2,000 and currently accommodates 808 individuals. Kijote, also designated for returnees, has a standard capacity of 250, with a maximum of 300, and hosts 177 individuals. Nkamira, which receives new arrivals, has a capacity of 7,200 and currently hosts 2,433 refugees and asylum-seekers from the DRC.

Health and nutrition:

Upon arrival, UNHCR and its partners conduct systematic clinical and nutrition screening to identify individuals in need of urgent medical care, including older persons, people with chronic conditions, pregnant and lactating women, and children under five. Screening also enables early detection of measles cases, followed by case management, isolation, and vaccination of children aged 9 to 15 months.

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and Shelter:

UNHCR ensured operation and maintenance of WASH facilities in transit centres for continued services delivery to new arrivals and Rwandan returnees. The WASH coverage was within the standards of 20 litres per person per day and 20 persons per latrine drop hole. The disinfection at key sanitary areas and latrines was regularly done for vector and odour nuisance control. This helped to prevent the spread of diseases among refugees and returnees.

The adequacy of shared shelter facilities was kept through regular maintenance and repairs for all accommodation blocks and renovating electrical installations for lighting.

Tanzania

DRC New Arrivals:

From December 2025 – March 2026, Tanzania received 526 new arrivals from the DRC, bringing total arrivals to4,243 since renewed violence in eastern DRC in January 2025. New arrivals said they were coming from Fizi, Goma, and Uvira and entered Tanzania through land routes.

Essential Items:

From December 2025 – March 2026, Tanzania received 526 new arrivals from the DRC, bringing total arrivals to4,243 since renewed violence in eastern DRC in January 2025. New arrivals said they were coming from Fizi, Goma, and Uvira and entered Tanzania through land routes.

Uganda

Congolese refugees in Uganda receive shelter support from UNHCR and its partners at the Kabazana Reception Center in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, southwest Uganda © UNHCR/ 2026

Congolese arrivals and registration:

From December 2025 to March 2026, 5,088 Congolese asylum-seekers and refugees were registered in Uganda. Since January 2025, cumulative registered arrivals reached 83,820, including 77,770 people registered. This brings the total number of Congolese refugees and asylum-seekers in the country to 657,223, including those from previous influxes.

Uganda continued granting access to territory and asylum to Congolese fleeing violence in eastern DRC. In February, the Government issued a directive lifting prima facie refugee recognition for new asylum-seekers from the DRC, transitioning to individual Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedures. The Government clarified that the decision is not intended to close Uganda's open-door policy and that individuals previously granted refugee status will retain their protection in accordance with national law and Uganda's international obligations.

Relocation:

A total of 2,572 individuals were relocated from Nyakabande and Matanda Transit Centres to refugee settlements, offering them better access to protection and basic services.

Protection:

UNHCR worked with partners to provide protection services, including psychosocial support, prevention and response to violence against women and girls, and child protection interventions such as family tracing and identification.

UNHCR and its partners provided essential items to 2,306 new arrivals at the Kisoro and Matanda Transit Centres. The items included blankets, sleeping mats, soap, jerrycans, basins, and sanitary materials for women of reproductive age. The items helped to improve living conditions and to reduce risks of negative coping mechanisms.

Water, sanitation and hygiene:

UNHCR and partners also ensured access to safe and clean water for all new arrivals at the transit centres. UNHCR supported local health facilities to improve access to primary healthcare in refugee settlements.

At Nyakabande Transit Centre, health services were provided for more than 1,200 new arrivals, while 70 new arrivals, mainly children and pregnant women identified with malnutrition, received nutrition services. All new arrivals at the transit centres were provided with three hot meals per day, with food support from the World Food Programme (WFP).

Zambia

Around 506 Congolese refugees and asylum-seekers arrived in Zambia between December and March, bring total arrivals since January 2025 to 3,426. Most arrivals were registered in Meheba Settlement in North-Western Province and Mantapala Settlement in Luapula Province.

UNHCR and its partners provided new arrivals with basic protection and basic services, although the needs remained significant due to funding shortfalls.

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