

Weekly Operational Update

16 April 2020

Update on COVID-19 preparedness

Although no cases of COVID-19 have been reported amongst the refugee population and their host communities, UNHCR continues to strengthen efforts to prevent and limit the potential spread of the corona virus among the nearly 760,000 refugees in the country. As of 16 April 2020, Ethiopia reported 92 confirmed cases, three deaths and 15 recoveries.

UNHCR's advocacy with the Government has resulted in refugees in most parts of the country factored into the national and regional COVID-19 response plans. Ethiopia's USD 1.6 billion COVID-19 Multi-Sectoral Preparedness and Response Plan also includes provision of key services to refugees and displaced persons.

Enhanced awareness raising efforts continue to target refugees and, where feasible, the nearby host communities. UNHCR and partners continue to disseminate key prevention messages using different methodologies. The messages are in line with WHO and the Government of Ethiopia's guidelines, including on the recently declared national state of emergency. The declaration, which will last for five months, imposes restrictions on religious, political or any other forms of social gatherings of more than four persons. UNHCR translated key provisions of the declaration to be shared with all refugees across the country for their familiarization and adherence.

Health personnel in the refugee camps are being trained on coordination and leadership, case management, case identification reporting, referral systems and crisis communication. Temporary isolation sites have been prepared in each camp to isolate suspected cases of COVID-19, as part of the camp-specific preparedness plans. The centers will serve to temporarily accommodate potential suspected cases until they are transferred to the Government designated isolation and treatment centers.

UNHCR and ARRA's advocacy efforts have been extended to partners to support the Gambella Regional Health Bureau (RHB) with in-kind donations towards the isolation and quarantine centers. UNHCR donated 500 blankets, 500 sleeping mats, 2,000 bars of laundry soap and 4,000 sanitary napkins. In addition, UNHCR delivered essential aid items to East Wollega, West Wollega and Kamashi zones as humanitarian assistance to IDPs and returnees. The items included 5,000 jerry cans, 1,000 sleeping mats, 25,000 bars of soap and 1,000 blankets. In Benishangul-Gumuz, UNHCR procured 10 infrared thermometers and handed them over to ARRA to facilitate temperature screening.

The number of handwashing facilities continued to be expanded to promote repeated handwashing practices. In Melkadida, 2,350 household handwashing facilities have been installed. In the camps under Sub-Office Shire, 1,543 household stations are being used by the communities in addition to existing handwashing facilities in communal facilities. Other camps are expanding these services to strategic locations such as market areas, health centers, food distribution centers and offices.

In camps in the Tigray Region, door-to-door screenings have started as part of the region-wide screening campaign by the Regional Government. ARRA health staff, together with community health workers, are visiting every household to screen individuals for COVID-19 symptoms, and verifying the availability of adequate soap and handwashing facilities. Refugees are requested to provide information on their travel history, and their knowledge about COVID-19. The responses are registered in a specific format developed by the Regional Health Bureau (RHB). The campaign aims to determine at an early stage, the number of potential patients among the refugee community, and to help contain the spread of COVID-19. It will also ascertain the gaps in awareness raising and hygiene practices among the refugees.

Food distribution is preceded by the spraying of disinfectants at the centres, with refugees required to practice social distancing and to wash their hands with soap before entering the distribution centres. Crowded living conditions, under-resourced and understaffed medical facilities, lack of personal protection equipment (PPE) and shortage of water are some of the challenges which UNHCR and its partners are working towards addressing in many of the camps.

Alternative learning modality

Following the closure of schools across the country as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of the pandemic, over 200,000 refugee students are not engaged regular activities. With limited options for remote learning in the camps, UNHCR is working with key Government offices at the federal and regional levels, to develop alternative learning modalities for refugees while they are out of school. Additional funding is required for the printing of self-study materials.

Support to persons with specific needs

The construction of the rehabilitation centre in Okugo refugee camp in Gambella has been finalized. The next step will be to equip the centre with rehabilitation materials to allow persons with disabilities from the camp to get access to physiotherapy exercises, and to improve their well-being in general.

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