Regional Bureau for Europe

UPDATE #24

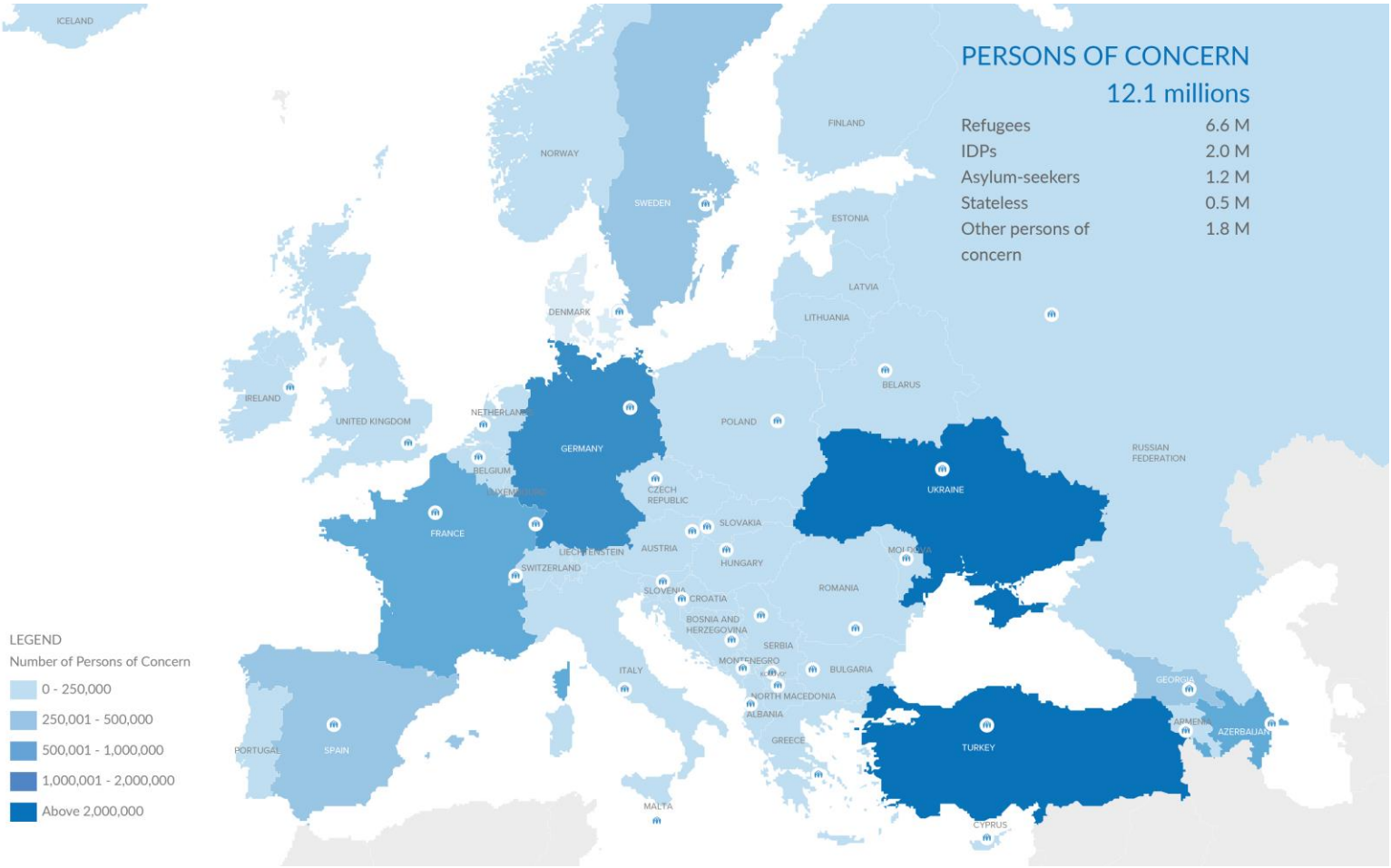
12 January – 1 February 2021

Regional COVID-19 infection and death rates peaked on 7 January and receded since at a moderate pace. To curtail the spread of new virus variants, **movement and travel restrictions** were extended and in some cases tightened.

Despite tightened COVID-19 prevention measures taken by some States, **access to territory for persons of concern** is generally maintained.

Movement restrictions continue to impact UNHCR staff in country offices. To date, 34 offices are **partially teleworking** while three are on **full telework mode**.

Populations of Concern



SOURCE: UNHCR 2020 MID-YEAR TRENDS AND ANNEX TABLE

Includes Serbia and Kosovo (S/RES/1244 (1999)). The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Operational Context

- All 49 countries and one territory in the region have reported COVID-19 cases among the general population. To date, 36 countries have reported cases among persons of concern at some point, and some of the concerned individuals have in the meantime recovered. However, any figures or estimates should be taken with caution due to varying approaches to testing, data segregation and reporting.
- According to the WHO, infection and death rates in the European region peaked on 7 January and receded at a moderate pace until the end of the month. However, the contagion rates of the new virus variants remained high and prompted countries to extend and in some cases tighten movement and travel restrictions. Non-essential commerce remains closed in many countries and some authorities have chosen to impose the use of FFP2 masks for certain activities, for example for asylum case workers in Austria.
- Voluntary COVID-19 vaccination programmes are being rolled out at different paces across the region. While the UK programme has reached more than half a million people with the first jab as of the end of January, other countries are waiting for their doses. In some EU Member States, public discussions have picked up related to the slow implementation of vaccination plans, prompting the leaders of Germany and France to give an indicative timeline until the end of the summer for all people who want to vaccinate to be able to do so. Other countries have indicated similar timelines.
- As of 1 February, three UNHCR offices are on full telework mode, while 34 offices are in partial telework mode. Field and on-site visits to reception centres are strictly regulated, and some UNHCR and partner staff will have to show negative PCR tests before accessing centres in some countries.

UNHCR Areas of Intervention

PROTECTION

- **Quarantine measures upon arrival:** Testing and quarantine measures are in place in all countries registering significant numbers of sea arrivals. However, these protocols can limit in some cases UNHCR and partners' access to persons of concern, notably to provide information on procedures and for identification of people with special protection needs. In January, 1,039 individuals arrived by sea in **Italy**, two of whom reportedly tested positive for COVID-19. All arrivals observe a 10-day quarantine and, since arrivals were much lower than in December, only two of the five ferries needed to be functional at the end of January with 350 persons observing quarantine. UNHCR has been offering regular trainings for Italian Red Cross staff on board to ensure adequate and up-to-date information is provided to persons of concern during quarantine. The Italian Red Cross confirmed that self-declared unaccompanied children and persons with special needs identified on the ferries during individual and collective sessions are referred to responsible authorities. However, limited availability in reception centres for unaccompanied children is creating delays in transfers from the Lampedusa hotspot and other disembarkation locations.
- In **Spain**, 3,010 persons arrived in January, mostly by sea, less than in December but 25 per cent more than in January 2020. Consistent with recent trends, 68 per cent of these persons arrived in the Canary Islands (2,058). Of those who arrived in the mainland, three people tested positive for COVID-19. As per protocol, they were placed in isolation areas, while those they were traveling with were referred to a quarantine reception centre. In Almeria, some 46 persons who had tested negative upon arrival were transferred to a quarantine reception centre as a precautionary measure after having been exposed to a COVID-19 positive person during registration. Due to quarantine measures at ports, UNHCR's partner was unable to access 43 people (8.5 per cent of arrivals in the Alboran area) quarantined in first-line registration/detention centres to provide them with information on procedures upon arrival.
- **Reception conditions:** Lack of sufficient reception spaces, overcrowding and inadequate facilities continue to pose challenges to physical distancing, hygiene and other preventive measures in centres, increasing the risk of contagion. **Romania** has been recording higher numbers of new asylum-seekers since November and has in the meantime reached its full quarantine capacity for new arrivals before their transfer to reception centres, where possibilities for COVID-19 prevention measures are limited. UNHCR has formally advocated with asylum, health and local authorities for an adequate and coordinated response. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, reception centres across the country have

reached capacity, and many areas intended for isolation purposes are now being used for general accommodation, increasing the risk of COVID-19 spread. In a visit on 11 January to follow up on the situation that unfolded in the Lipa emergency camp in December, UNHCR found that although life-saving solutions are being put in place, more needs to be done to ensure that all people affected can access safe and dignified living conditions and efficient services, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Outbreaks in reception and detention centres** occurred in several countries this month. In **Slovakia**, 22 detained persons, including some asylum-seekers, tested positive in two detention centres, along with half of centre staff. All detainees testing positive were transferred to a separate building for quarantine. Meanwhile, two new outbreaks were reported in accommodation centres in **Ireland**. On 1 February, media reported the detection of some 20 new positive cases in an immigrant detention centre in **Spain**'s Canary Islands. In the **Czech Republic**, COVID-19 has been detected in most collective refugee facilities and detention centres with asylum-seekers. Access to the facilities has been curtailed and visitors require a negative test result no older than 48 hours, which also applies to UNHCR's legal aid and social counselling partner. UNHCR was able to negotiate solutions for online counselling and arranged for testing for partner staff when needed. In the **UK**, in a former barracks used as temporary shelter in Wales, a COVID-19 outbreak led to the evacuation of residents to local hotels. NGOs and residents had previously complained about conditions lacking heating, electricity and the ability to self-isolate. The British Red Cross has called on the Government to remove all asylum-seekers from former barracks unless it can immediately address the unsafe and unsanitary conditions in which the men are being held.
- Overcrowded facilities may result in **mental health** issues, **tensions** and in some cases violence. In **Cyprus**, overcrowding, lack of separation between quarantine sections, combined with the presence of 150 persons hosted outside the camp without access to adequate WASH facilities, have resulted in protests in the Pournara camp and some damages to the building. Later, a COVID-19 spread was identified among residents, and 18 people who tested positive were moved to the Eden centre for quarantine, along with the 42 persons with whom they were in close contact. Meanwhile, two of the shelters housing UASC have several positive cases who were placed in isolation, which limits space for new arrivals, which as a result will remain in Pournara or be sent to Kofinou reception centre.
- To ensure an adequate health response in reception centres for asylum-seekers, authorities continue looking for solutions. In **Luxembourg**, for example, after setting up temporary structures to alleviate conditions in asylum centres, the national reception agency is seeking further ways to isolate vulnerable residents and collaborating with health authorities on large-scale testing campaigns in centres and to care for residents who test positive. In **Austria**, the new state-owned reception centre management was able to accelerate COVID-19 testing procedures followed by eight-day isolation for individuals newly arriving in facilities. In addition, rapid antigen tests were introduced as part of the protocol before any transfer to other facilities.
- **Registration and asylum procedures**: In **North Macedonia**, Border Police resumed the biometric registration and profiling of all individuals apprehended, after a suspension of nearly ten months due to COVID-19. Meanwhile, authorities in **Albania** resumed asylum procedures after a COVID-19-related hiatus of several months. UNHCR continues to monitor the situation and has offered support in setting up online interviews, which authorities have not opted to introduce for the time being.
- **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs):** In **Ukraine**, movements through Entry Exit Checkpoints (EECPs) remained restricted in January, with only two EECPs functioning: in Stanytsia Luhanska (daily) and Novotroitske (twice a week). From 1 to 29 January, 24,443 crossings were recorded at the Stanytsia Luhanska EECP, nearly half the number recorded in December. This was primarily linked to the harsh winter weather affecting the functioning of the crossing point. Due to low temperatures, on several days, UNHCR and its NGO partners had to stop operating the two electric cars that transport people at this checkpoint. Some 989 crossings were recorded at the Novotroitske EECP. Of those, 23 persons were transported to an observation facility for self-isolation.

HEALTH

- **Inclusion in vaccination plans:** Refugees are generally included in national preparedness and response measures on a par with residents, and therefore included in national vaccination programmes. Some country offices report of persons of concern in risk groups having been vaccinated before the end of January (older refugees). In some

countries, for example **Austria**, **Estonia** and **Switzerland**, asylum-seekers living in collective reception centres are among the prioritized groups to receive vaccination. UNHCR offices are monitoring implementation and intervening when necessary to ensure all persons of concern are included. In **Austria**, UNHCR is focusing its advocacy on the situation of subsidiary protection holders, as they have access to limited social welfare support and consequently may face obstacles in accessing the vaccination. Similarly, the office in the **UK** is discussing with partners the challenges faced by undocumented individuals who are unable to access national health services, for example after a claim rejection. In **Romania**, following advocacy by UNHCR and WHO, the Government amended the National Vaccination Strategy on 20 January to include a reference to foreigners with legal residence, which includes refugees and subsidiary protection holders, people in detention and asylum-seekers in reception centres. Similarly, **Moldova**'s national vaccination plan covers all persons living in the country, including persons of concern, after advocacy by UNHCR and a joint intervention by UNHCR and IOM. In **Bulgaria**, while persons of concern are not explicitly mentioned in the plan after a UNHCR and UNICEF joint intervention in December, refugee numbers have been included in the number of vaccine doses required for the national programme. In **Belarus** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, advocacy continues to include persons of concern in vaccination plans.

- In **Greece**, as of 24 January, 1,351 persons of concern had tested positive for COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic, four more than at the beginning of the month. Of these, 599 were on the mainland and 752 on the islands. In the meantime, some of these people have recovered.
- Quarantine spaces are now available in Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) on all islands, and for new arrivals on Lesvos, Chios and Leros. In January, technical works were completed for an isolation area in the Evros RIC and for a second isolation area in Samos RIC. In addition, UNHCR upraded the quarantine area in the Chios RIC.
- An estimated 7,300 people are hosted in the Mavrovouni site (Lesvos) as of 29 January. To prevent and mitigate the spread of the pandemic, asylum-seekers have undergone rapid COVID-19 testing by national health authorities before entering. The site is equipped with an isolation area and a Medical Hub, where UNHCR is installing 20 Refugee Housing Units to expand the capacity of the quarantine area and provide more effective isolation. According to the authorities, there have been no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the site since 25 December. According to the authorities, there have been no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the site since 25 December. On 23 January, the Government announced findings of lead contamination outside the site's residential area as well as measures to mitigate risks for workers and asylum-seeker, like structural works in areas adjacent to the contaminated plot and fencing. UNHCR notes the assurances given by the authorities, calls for a swift implementation of the announced measures and reiterates that that no effort should be spared to ensure that all people who reside and work in the site are safe. More information about the situation in the Mavrovouni emergency site is available here.
- UNHCR completed all works in the quarantine area for new arrivals in Western Lesvos Municipality. The site was graveled, leveled, equipped with proper drainage systems, and 45 insulated tents were set up. All shelter is connected to the electricity network powered by two generators. Hot water for showers and washing is supplied by six solar-powered water heaters. As part of site planning, UNHCR installed two containers for reception and administration purposes, one tent for Médecins Sans Frontiers' medical service provision, and two storage units.
- Between 16 March 2020 and 3 January 2021, UNHCR has provided accommodation and protection services to 2,180 asylum-seekers at high risk of COVID-19 complications by moving them out of the islands' RICs and the Mavrovouni site in Lesvos. The management of transfers to the mainland has since been transferred to the Greek Government.
- In **Ukraine**, the Government announced on 5 January that residents in NGCA (non-government-controlled areas) and Crimea are now allowed to end their self-isolation or observation in GCA upon presenting negative results of an antibodies test. This free testing was gradually introduced at EECPs as of 15 January. However, during monitoring visits, UNHCR noted that, in practice, testing availability was limited at the EECP. Results of the test are received on a phone app, and those who cannot install the app must still self-isolate at designated observation facilities.

COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITIES

- As COVID-19 vaccination campaigns are being rolled out across the region, UNHCR is scaling up its communication with communities of concern to ensure their access to government information and vaccines, using the channels that

are most reliable and preferred by the respective communities. Offices also prepare to monitor and address any harmful rumors, misinformation or disinformation. In **31 countries in the region**, mass information and communication with communities is ongoing, meaning that information material is being developed, translated and disseminated on COVID-19 vaccination, in support of governments' efforts. In nine of these countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom) efforts are well advanced, with persons of concern already having access to updated information about the vaccine in multiple languages, from official sources, and supplemented by multi-media material and various outreach activities.

- To support these efforts by country operations, UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe has developed internal notes with guidance and good practices. The office in **Switzerland** has posted vaccine-related information for asylum-seekers on its website, and in **Austria**, information has been disseminated in multiple languages in cooperation with community organizations. In **Russia**, UNHCR is organizing a survey to check on, among other things, the intention of persons of concern to vaccinate. In **Hungary**, the Office is developing a strategy for Refugee Outreach Coordinators with refugee/migrant background, who are recruited part-time by UNHCR and partners, to provide information about the vaccinations and facilitate a two-way communication. Other Offices, like **Greece** and **Malta**, are updating their HELP sites and websites to include vaccine-related updates. Meanwhile, **Austrian**, **German** and the **UK** authorities have updated and translated their information websites in different languages.

CASH-BASED AND IN-KIND ASSISTANCE

- **Cash-based interventions** remain important where livelihoods of refugee and asylum-seeking families have been compromised due to the pandemic and lockdown. In **Ukraine**, as COVID-19 measures continued disproportionally affecting the informal labour sector, UNHCR provided a second round of COVID-19 cash assistance to 540 refugee and asylum-seeking families on 17 December to cover winter needs, such as warm clothing, rent and heating.
- In **Greece**, to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and movement restrictions, UNHCR provided winter cash support to all households residing in the mainland and islands in all types of accommodation. The winter cash top-up amounts to EUR 45 per individual and was loaded to UNHCR cash cards on 29 December. Some 72,837 beneficiaries in 39,926 households received the cash top-up countrywide.
- In **Turkey**, UNHCR and the authorities continue working on the one-off COVID-19 emergency cash assistance, with some 106,000 households approved for payment, 80,000 of which received the cash by the end of December.
- **In-kind:** UNHCR has been delivering COVID-19-related in-kind support, where needed, to persons of concern, host communities or authorities working with them. In **Ukraine**, for example, UNHCR provided a hospital in the conflict-affected town of Volnovakha (Donetska oblast) with laundry, tumbler and ironing machines to ensure hygiene of bed linens and personnel robes. It is the COVID-19 designated hospital in the area but it also offers emergency and regular treatment to those living along the contact line and close to the EECP Novotroitske.
- As part of its Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) in Ukraine, UNHCR supported a local initiative in Chasiv Yar (Donetska oblast) that provides hot meals to families with specific needs during the pandemic. These families' children used to receive one meal at school before the pandemic required them to switch to distance learning. UNHCR provided a refrigerator, an oven and other kitchen appliances to help volunteers who are now able to cook and deliver free hot meals to over 80 children from low-income families.
- Also in Ukraine, UNHCR monitored the impact of its November COVID-19 Response in safe shelters, which was part of the UNAIDS Country Envelope 2020 and consisted in delivering hygiene items, PPE, remote temperature sensors, washing machines, bed linen, beds and mattresses to 13 safe shelters in six regions of Ukraine. These centres provide services to people living with HIV, people with addictions, homeless persons, IDPs, and GBV survivors. The exercise revealed that shelters supported by UNHCR provided services to 324 persons, including 106 IDPs, 42 persons with disabilities, 27 older persons, 33 children and 31 persons living with HIV.
- In **Bulgaria**, a needs assessment carried out in 2020 in two immigration detention centres resulted in the distribution of 660 hygiene kits by the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) this month. BRC also provided winter clothing and shoes for more than 200 asylum-seeking women, men and children in all reception facilities. UNHCR monitored the distribution.

In addition, over 250 refugees and asylum-seekers were scheduled to receive food packages in the first week of February.

UNHCR Response in Europe

- UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 situation is focused on:
- Continuing to **provide protection assistance**, including legal aid, support to registration, documentation, refugee status determination, protection counselling, prevention and response to gender-based violence, as well as child protection services;
- Supporting national authorities in setting up **preparedness and response plans**, including improving access to water and sanitation where possible and enhancing reception capacity post disembarkation by establishing quarantine and isolation areas in reception centres to better monitor and isolate confirmed or suspected COVID-19 cases, as necessary;
- Enhancing national and community-based **communication platforms** to interact with refugees and displaced communities and transmit quality information on hygiene, access to health care and other essential measures in a culturally appropriate manner and in relevant languages;
- Supporting authorities, in some operations, in identifying alternative **accommodation** or bringing current housing for asylum-seekers up to acceptable protection and hygiene standards;
- **Ensuring the inclusion** of persons of concern, host communities and service providers in the provision and distribution of adequate hygiene items;
- **Advocating continuously** to ensure the inclusion of persons of concern in national COVID-19 preparedness and response plans;
- **Providing additional one-off cash distributions** to persons of concern, to allow them to cope with the adverse economic impact of COVID-19 and related measures on their livelihoods and self-reliance.

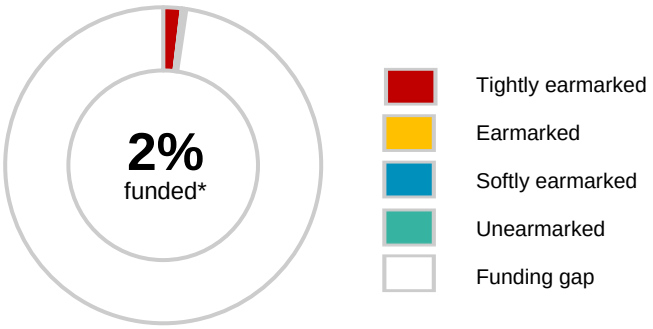
Working in partnership

- UNHCR supports governments' efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic through existing coordination mechanisms and by working closely with WHO and other partners. In addition, UNHCR co-chairs the Issue-Based Coalition on Large Movements of People, Displacement and Resilience, steering collective advocacy efforts on COVID-19-related issues affecting persons of concern.

Financial Information

- UNHCR released in December 2020 its supplementary appeal for 2021 COVID response seeking an additional USD 455 million. While most of the pandemic-related activities amounting to USD 477 million have been already mainstreamed and included in UNHCR's 2021 Global Appeal totalling USD 8.6 billion, the supplementary COVID-19 response focuses on exceptional socioeconomic and protection impacts related to COVID-19 as millions of refugees, internally displaced and stateless people fall into conditions of extreme hardship.
- The UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe is grateful to donors who have provided generous and timely support for the Coronavirus Emergency Situation response globally, and in Europe in particular, including for non-COVID-19-related interventions, which are critical to ensure business continuity.

Requested for UNHCR's COVID-19 response globally in 2021: USD 924 M



Total contributed or pledged to UNHCR COVID-19 appeal[1]: USD 21,675,189 (2%)

including: African Development Bank | European Union | China | Education cannot Wait | UN Covid-19 MPTF | Swedish Postcode Lottery | Sunshine forever limited | UNHCR Insamlingsstiftelse |Japan Association for UNHCR | Private donors USA | Other private donors

Unearmarked contributions to UNHCR's 2020 programme[2]

Norway $80M | Sweden $66.9M | Netherlands $36.1M | Denmark $34.6M | Germany $22.1M | Switzerland $16.4M | Ireland $12.5M | Belgium $11.9M

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[1] *As of 9 February 2021*

[2] *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. Where a donor has contribution $10 million or more, the total amount of the contribution is shown.*