

UNHCR Regional Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa

# COVID-19 Emergency Response Update #17

**1 - 31 March 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 active cases of COVID-19 in the region


**17.4 million**

2021 planning figure for people of concern in the Middle East and North Africa


**9,882**

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

## Regional Developments

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to exert its toll on people's lives globally and as the Islamic world welcomed the holy month of Ramadan in April, UNHCR has [called](#) for greater solidarity and support for millions of refugees and internally displaced people.

Exacerbated by the pandemic, UNHCR estimates that three in four refugees worldwide can only meet half or less of their basic needs. Families have cut spending on food, are no longer able to pay rent, have fallen deeper into debt, or have been forced to stop children from attending lessons, even where schools have remained open. In March 2021, UNHCR and the World Bank published an [update to the joint study \*Compounding Misfortunes\*](#), which highlights the poverty impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugee and host communities in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq (Kurdistan Region of Iraq).

Coinciding with the holy month of Ramadan, UNHCR launched the ["Every Second Counts"](#) global fundraising campaign. Donations received as Zakat, Sadaqah, or general giving can ease the burden for forcibly displaced families that are away from home and their loved ones. The campaign will provide funds for UNHCR's lifesaving support to vulnerable families, orphans, single mothers, and older people as well as fund UNHCR's regular programming and help meet the mounting needs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Ghazala, 55, a Syrian refugee living in Amman, talks to UNHCR staff at health clinic run by UNHCR and its local partner Caritas in Amman, Jordan. © UNHCR/Mohammad Hawari

## 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 forcibly displaced persons including refugees, IDPs and other marginalized groups into national public health responses, and supporting national systems to deliver assistance



Empowering individuals and families to meet their most immediate and essential needs through cash-based assistance

## Highlights from the Field

As of end-March 2021, an increase of COVID-19 cases were reported in the Tindouf camps in **Algeria**, after a period of some six months with few reported cases. Preventive measures have been implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19 and to reduce the likelihood of a second wave. Movements have been restricted between the camps, mandatory temperature screenings are being taken at the entrance of camps, and sensitization campaigns to raise awareness of COVID-19 have been intensified. Furthermore, UNHCR provided 10,000 rapid antigen tests to strengthen testing capacities in the Tindouf camps and also provided 70,000 face masks for use by the Sahrawi refugees population. In addition, 40,000 FFP2 (filtering face piece) face masks will be exclusively distributed to front line health workers.

In **Egypt**, to address the registration backlog due to the COVID-19 pandemic last year, UNHCR is continuing full-scale activities from its Zamalek, 6th of October City and Alexandria registration centres while observing COVID-19 prevention measures. A new in-house digital queuing system for registration developed by UNHCR in Egypt was also tested and piloted during March. The queuing system ensures proper management of process flows and contributes to social distancing measures at UNHCR's registration sites. During the month of March, a total of 7,624 cases (19,300 individuals) were processed for various registration interviews, which included 673 cases (1,950 individuals) for new registration and 6,430 cases (15,987 individuals) for document renewals.

In **Iraq**, COVID-19 cases continued to rise at a higher rate (above 70 per cent) compared to February 2021, with an average of 5,368 daily cases during March. Close to 30 per cent of these cases were detected in Baghdad, followed by Basrah, Erbil, Duhok governorates. In Duhok, following coordination with the Directorate General of Health (DoH), during the first quarter of 2021, UNHCR's partner implemented a 2021 COVID-19 awareness campaign targeting urban locations with the dissemination of DoH and World Health Organization messages through social media and community centres. So far, the campaign has reached some 7,250 Syrian refugees, 250 non-Syrian refugees, 4,700 IDPs and over 400 host community members. The campaign was planned following focus group discussions with persons of concern (PoCs) who mentioned the need to continue awareness-raising activities.

During March, daily life in **Israel** returned to almost a pre-pandemic situation. As of end-March, most schools had re-opened for on-campus learning<sup>1</sup>. In 2021 UNHCR has distributed 385 laptops for asylum-seekers in primary and secondary schools in Tel Aviv and localities around Israel as a vital tool for ongoing study, and for facilitating distance learning as required.

In **Jordan**, COVID-19 cases continued to rise through the month of March, reaching new records in the number of daily cases and deaths recorded. In light of the government-imposed restrictions to help curb and prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD) also announced a number of prevention measures for refugee camps, which included: issuance of leave permits for emergency cases only, suspension of all in-person educational activities for all grades, suspension of all vocational activities (productions lines will remain operational), and the suspension of all in-person training activities.

UNHCR also continues to respond to COVID-19 in refugee camps in Jordan, working closely with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and SRAD. MoH teams continue surveillance and contact tracing exercises in the camps, while confirmed cases are being quarantined either in their own shelters or at isolation sites and transferred to hospital as needed. In urban areas, UNHCR community-based protection teams are following-up on individual cases through phone counseling, to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on urban refugee populations.

In **Kuwait**, the national vaccination campaign continued, with 660,000 Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis vaccinated as of the end of March, and more than 1 million individuals registered on the national vaccination platform.

After imposing a total lockdown in January 2021, **Lebanon** continued its gradual reopening and entered a final phase of its COVID-19 de-confinement plan during the month of March. Nevertheless, hospital bed occupancy and intensive care unit (ICU) bed occupancy remained highly elevated throughout March. In the framework of UNHCR's hospital expansion interventions that commenced last year, a total of 319 regular hospital beds and 99 ICU beds have now been installed and are operational in select hospitals across the country.

<sup>1</sup> As of 18 April 2021, all schools in Israel were re-opened for on-campus learning

Meanwhile, with the worsening socio-economic situation in Lebanon, the proportion of refugees impacted by the pandemic continued to grow, with raised numbers of eviction threats made against refugee communities. During the first months of 2021, eviction numbers were observed to have more than doubled since 2020. UNHCR continues to advocate with landlords and local community leaders to find solutions to prevent the threat of eviction. However, landlords themselves are often financially compromised due to the dire economic situation and the devaluation of the local currency.

In **Libya**, the rate of COVID-19 cases continued to grow rapidly, with a total of some 159,000 COVID-19 cases recorded as of 31 March since the start of the pandemic, of which over 9,140 were active cases. Meanwhile, UNHCR implemented Quick Impact Projects in the health sector to support the national health response. In March, UNHCR and partner the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) completed the rehabilitation of the [Abu Dhar Alqafary healthcare centre](#) located in Abusliem, southern Tripoli, which had been badly damaged and subsequently closed following fighting that broke out in Tripoli in 2019. More than 60,000 IDPs and returnees who currently live in Abusliem and some 700 persons a week are expected to benefit from receiving services in the healthcare centre. Another [healthcare facility](#) in Abusliem was also rehabilitated by UNHCR and partner DRC, which included the installation of a 2,000-litre water tank, an electricity generator, rehabilitation of sanitation facilities, as well as the supply of medical equipment.

Meanwhile, as part of efforts to ensure continuity of durable solutions despite global COVID-19 restrictions, UNHCR facilitated the direct resettlement of 119 refugees on six separate flights from Libya to Canada and Europe during March, in coordination with the International Organization for Migration.

Between February and March 2021, UNHCR in **Mauritania** took a series of measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 in Mbera Camp which included: increasing the number of COVID-19 tests performed (568 tests in February and March), performing medical screenings of new arrivals at the Fassala border point, and supporting the roll-out of a two-week campaign to highlight the importance of COVID-19 prevention measures. Meanwhile, three ambulances were supplied to the Ministry of Health for the Hodh Chargui region to support the COVID-19 and health response.

In **Morocco**, despite movement restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, UNHCR's protection interviews, counselling, psychosocial support and identification of refugees' needs continued to be conducted both in-person and remotely through protection hotlines. So far in 2021, over 400 counselling sessions have been conducted through UNHCR's protection hotlines, 30 per cent of which were for women.

As of end March, health authorities in **Syria** reported 18,498 confirmed COVID-19 infections since the start of the pandemic, an increase from some 15,640 in February. In north-east Syria, the number of confirmed cases in March increased by over 1,000 from the previous month, reaching 9,665 cases. As part of the health response and in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, UNHCR in Syria established and operated a 20 cubic meters per hour capacity oxygen generation station at the Al-Zabadani Hospital in rural Damascus. The station is one of the main isolation centres inside Syria, with a 100-bed capacity.

In **Tunisia**, UNHCR conducted information sessions throughout March to disseminate information on COVID-19 to PoCs residing in UNHCR shelters.

As **Turkey** entered into a full national lockdown in late-March following a rise in cases, UNHCR published information on COVID-19 measures and COVID-19 vaccinations on its Help Website and is using its Communication with Communities platforms to further disseminate information. UNHCR and its partners are providing vaccination counselling, to make available reliable vaccine-related information to refugees.

In **Yemen**, a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases has been witnessed since the beginning of March 2021. While accurate data remains difficult to determine due to the limited testing capacity and major destruction of health infrastructure, most new cases officially reported have been detected in Hadramaut, Aden and Taizz governorates. In March, UNHCR and partners implemented a series of activities contributing to the COVID-19 response, including the provision of furniture to complete three isolation centres for COVID-19 patients and accommodations for medical staff in Aden and Lahj hospitals. In addition, 40 oxygen concentrators were donated to three hospitals in Sana'a and Personal Protective Equipment was delivered for 900 front-line partner staff to cover a period of six months.

## 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 4 May, the Supplementary Appeal is **11 per cent funded**, with **USD 50.9 million received**, of which **USD 4.8 million** is for the MENA region.



UNHCR and partner Qatari Red Crescent Society supported Al Gomhori Hospital in Sana'a, Yemen with ventilators, hospital beds and other medical equipment. © QRCS Yemen

### 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](mailto:MENAreporting@unhcr.org)