

UNHCR response to the emergency situation in northern Democratic Republic of Congo

28 October 2021

Key figures

221,694

Central African Refugees are currently living in the DRC

29,777

CAR Refugees physically verified in South Ubangi Province

12,669

refugee identity cards distributed in North Ubangi, South Ubangi and Bas Uele Provinces.

Highlights

As of 26 October, **500 CAR refugees from Mole camp returned home to Bangui** following the relaunch of the voluntary repatriations from North and South Ubangi Provinces on 22 October 2021.

In October, UNHCR and ADSSE distributed core relief items to **4,416 refugees and vulnerable host community members** in Limasa, North Ubangi Province.

In South Ubangi Province, **81 CAR refugees** at the Mole and Boyabu camps **received the second shot of the AstraZeneca vaccine** against Covid-19.



CAR refugees disembark at Port Amont, Bangui, following voluntary repatriation from Mole camp, South Ubangi Province © UNHCR/Ghislaine Nentobo

Operational Context

On 15 October 2021, the President of CAR, Faustin Archange Touadera, declared a unilateral ceasefire, ushering hopes for renewed dialogue, greater access to aid and services as well as an improvement of the security situation in the country. For months CAR government and allied forces have conducted counter insurgency operations to regain control of areas held by armed groups, following widespread post-electoral violence in December 2020, which resulted to an influx of tens of thousands of refugees into northern DRC. By 30 June 2021, UNHCR in coordination with its government partner the National Commission for Refugees (CNR) had biometrically registered 73,645 newly arrived refugees. Statistics indicate that 27,867 individuals (7,701 households) representing 38% of the new arrivals are people who had previously been registered by UNHCR as refugees and must have returned spontaneously to their country of origin before the December 2020 election crisis. Prior to this influx, an estimated 175,000 CAR refugees were already living in the DRC, after having fled political violence and instability in 2013, 2014 and 2017.

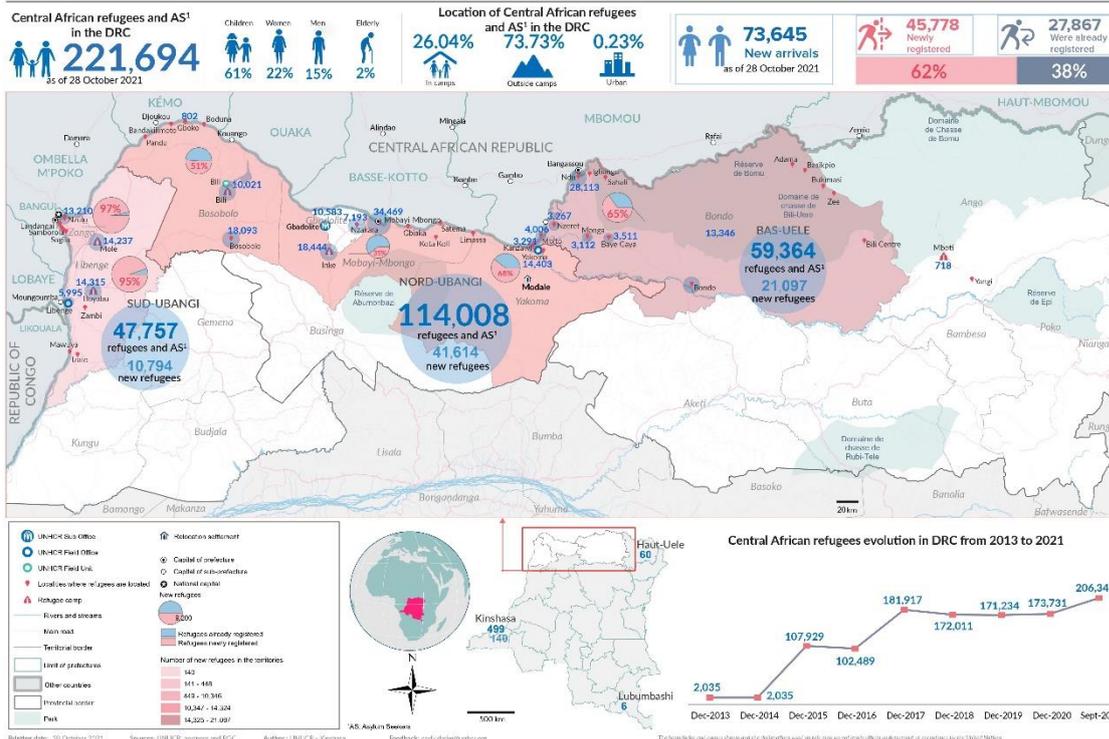
Only 26% of all CAR refugees in the DRC live in the four camps managed by UNHCR and by the DRC government in North and South Ubangi Province; the overwhelming majority live on riverbanks in hard-to-reach border areas, including in Bas Uele province, often within host communities with limited resources. Their living conditions are dire. They often have little or no access to clean water, sanitation facilities, or food.

UNHCR and CNR are working together to implement UNHCR's Policy on Alternatives to Camps, which capitalizes on giving refugees the opportunity to become active members of the community, while contributing to the development of host communities. To this extent, three villages across the three provinces have been identified by UNHCR and its partners to serve as 'development hubs', where socio-economic infrastructures are being rehabilitated or constructed, and livelihoods activities planned, to foster the resilience and self-sufficiency of both refugees and host populations. The search for durable solutions continues to be a priority and has led to the relaunch of voluntary repatriations to areas deemed safe.

CAR REFUGEE POPULATION IN THE DRC

Following the end of the emergency exercise to biometrically register new refugees, UNHCR set up a mechanism for continuous registration of small groups of arrivals including people who might be fleeing from ongoing operations by the CAR government or ethnic conflicts in certain localities.

In October, a UNHCR/CNR joint border monitoring mission and border security services reported a new influx of CAR refugees into the localities of Gbatebo, Gbangara, Baladamo Rive, Gbangi and Sidi in Bosobolo Territory, North Ubangi Province. The new arrivals are believed to have fled from about seven villages in Kouango prefecture, CAR preventively, out of fear of further violence during counter insurgency operations. A UNHCR/CNR joint protection mission is currently taking place to further appraise the situation and to carry out a registration exercise to determine the actual number of new arrivals, which is currently estimated at around 6,000 people according to local authorities.



I. PROTECTION NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Both old and new refugees continue to face multiple challenges related to insufficient resources and logistic constraints for humanitarian actors to access the vast and remote border localities in which a majority of new refugees have spontaneously settled. Security incidents continue to be reported in a few areas, pose protection risks.

- On 07 October, tensions between a member of the Congolese Defence Forces (FARDC) and dealers in pharmaceutical products over alleged unauthorized possession of a drug (Tramadol), degenerated into fighting and the burning of the Ndu market, including 15 shelters belonging to refugee households. About nine persons were wounded in the incident while others fled to CAR according to a CNR monitoring report. As of 26 October, calm has reportedly returned to the area and the people who took refuge in neighbouring CAR have returned. Refugees affected are in need of assistance.
- On 05 October, FARDC forces in Bas Uele Province dismantled a hideout of Ex-seleka rebels in the locality of Ngalu, Ango Territory. The operation did not affect the thousands of registered refugees in the area, but there is need to strengthen protection monitoring and to persuade refugees to move further inland where they will be safer from potential attacks by armed groups.
- A majority of CAR refugees continue to live in precarious conditions in hard-to-reach areas close to the banks of the rivers forming the border with CAR, without basic shelter and facing acute food shortages. Nearly 13,000 households are still in need of urgent shelter assistance. Vast distances, extremely poor road conditions and torrential rains continue to greatly affect the capacity of UNHCR and other humanitarian actors to reach people in need.
- Insufficient availability of trucks and sanitary facilities such as latrines, are slowing down UNHCR's efforts to relocate thousands of refugees to the Modale development hub in North Ubangi Province.
- Over 26,000 vulnerable children, including unaccompanied and separated children, out-of-school children and children with disabilities, as well as children who have been exposed to violence, have been identified during several protection assessment and are receiving targeted support.
- Sexual and gender-based violence remains a major concern, with over 113 cases identified among newly arrived refugees making a total of 307 cases documented amongst the old and new refugee caseload since the beginning

- of the year. Most of the incidents occurred on CAR territory. Difficulties in providing sufficient emergency cash assistance further exacerbates risks of SGBV.
- There is an urgent need for hygiene kits to support women and girls of reproductive age. Such kits would enable them to practice good menstrual hygiene, reduce exposure to SGBV, encourage regular school attendance amongst girls and allow them to fully participate in all aspects of social life
- More sanitary and hygiene facilities such as water points, latrines and showers are urgently needed to prevent the spread of diseases and protect refugee women and girls from related SGBV incidents. Existing health facilities in locations hosting CAR refugees are understaffed, poorly equipped and lack essential drugs. There is a need to support these local structures through rehabilitation of health centres and posts, mobile clinics and the distribution of more equipment and drugs.
- Constant supply of nutrition supplements and therapeutic foods is needed to address the increasing levels of acute malnutrition among CAR refugee children, whose families have no means of livelihood and who stand little chance of surviving without emergency aid or support from local communities, themselves experiencing acute poverty.
- There is need for more financial resources to support the rehabilitation and development of community infrastructures as well as livelihood activities in the villages identified as development hubs to host CAR refugees, in line with UNHCR's Alternatives to Camps policy.

II. MULTISECTORAL RESPONSE



PROTECTION

- On 22 October, UNHCR and partners relaunched voluntary repatriations of CAR refugees in the DRC, with a first convoy of 250 persons from Mole camp (South Ubangi), to Bangui. A second convoy with another 250 individuals left on Tuesday 26 October. Bi-weekly convoys will transport a total of over 5,300 refugees to Bangui, the Lobaye and Ombella M'Poko prefectures by 10 December 2021, including about 453 refugees from Inke camp through UNHAS flights. UNHCR and partners are providing transport, civil documents, school attendance certificates for children as well as vaccines before departure and a return package upon arrival. Between 2019 and 2020, 5,463 refugees (1,354 households) from South Ubangi voluntarily returned home before the operation was suspended due to election-related violence.
- In October UNHCR and CNR completed the physical verification of CAR refugees in Mole and Boyabu camps, South Ubangi Province. A total of 29,777 persons (7,351 households) were reached during the operation launched in September.
- UNHCR and CNR delivered 5,607 additional refugee identity cards, making a total of 12,669 IDs distributed since April 2021 in Modale, Yakoma, Limasa, Gomba, Boyabu, Mole, Zongo, Bondo and Bosobolo. The document improves refugees' access to social and economic services as well as easing movements within the DRC.
- In North Ubangi, UNHCR and partners relocated 258 more CAR refugees from Yakoma to Modale, bringing to a total of 4,890 persons (1,371 households) moved to the site since 17 April 2021.
- Thanks to advocacy by UNHCR and CNR, local authorities have allocated a site in Wenze village for the relocation of new CAR refugees currently living along border areas in Congo Rive, Sambolola, Sagila Vigilant and Mbaye, South Ubangi Province. Wenze, situated 15km from Zongo Centre, already has a health centre, three primary and secondary schools, security, administrative services and swathes of arable land that will serve the farming needs of the refugee population.
- In Bosobolo Territory, North Ubangi Province, UNHCR and CNR obtained official authorization to allocate two other sites in Sidi and Boduna for the relocation of refugees. Some of people who had been living in makeshift shelters by the river have already begun moving to the sites and gathering materials to build their own homes.
- In October, UNHCR and CNR supported the organization of a mobile court session at Inke camp, North Ubangi, for the issuing of birth certificates for eight CAR refugee children whose births were not declared within the 90-day period as required by the national law.
- During the reporting period, ADSSE distributed CRIs to 34 separated and unaccompanied children living with host families in Yakoma, North Ubangi Province. The items included kitchen sets, lamps, buckets, clothes and slippers.
- UNHCR and AIDES provided cash support to 50 CAR refugee survivors of SGBV in and out of camp areas at Inke and Modale, to enable them to resume school and support their socio-economic reintegration. The majority of the 307 survivors continue to receive multi-sectoral assistance, including psycho-social support.



CAR's Prime Minister, Henri Marie Dondra receives a refugee family returning home at Port Amont in Bangui© UNHCR/Ghislaine Nentobo



SHELTER AND CORE RELIEF ITEMS (CRIs)

- In North Ubangi UNHCR and ADSSE distributed CRIs comprising lamps, soap and mosquito nets to 4,416 persons (1,250 households) including CAR refugees and vulnerable host community members in Limasa
- In Modale, the newly relocated refugees are receiving core relief items including blankets, soap, sleeping mats and solar lamps .About 153 people with special needs also received CRIs and clothing items.
- AIRD has completed the construction of 1,469 emergency shelters out of 2000 planned in Modale. 1,371 of these shelters are already occupied by refugee households moved to the site since April 2021.
- In October ACTED completed 53 of 156 semi durable shelters for persons with special needs at the Modale settlement.
- To facilitate voluntary repatriations of CAR refugees from Mole and Boyabu camps, AIRD built two transit centres, two weighing stations and rehabilitated the 22km Libenge-Batanga road as well as the road from Zongo to Magba port (South Ubangi Province), which is the boarding point for refugees repatriating to Bangui.



New shelters are being built to provide decent accommodation for refugees at Modale settlement © UNHCR/Jadot Busanga



WATER AND SANITATION

- ACTED completed 14 additional latrines at the Modale development hub, bringing the total of communal latrines blocks built for refugees since the beginning of the year to 294. 40 other latrines for vulnerable host community members are under construction. These latrines improve sanitation conditions and prevent the spread of diseases as well as strengthen peaceful cohabitation.
- ACTED carried out maintenance of 245 handwashing stations set up in Modale to encourage good hygiene practices and prevent the spread of Covid-19 among refugees.



HEALTH

- In South Ubangi Province, 81 CAR refugees at the Mole and Boyabu camps, received their second shot of the Astra Zeneca vaccine, during a mass vaccination drive against Covid-19, jointly organized by UNICEF and the DRC ministry of health. AIDES and UNHCR provided facilitated the integration of refugees in the exercise. The beneficiaries are amongst an estimated 200 persons who received the first shot of the vaccine earlier in July.
- In October UNHCR supported provincial health authorities to carry out Covid-19 tests for refugees voluntarily returning to CAR.
- To further strengthen prevention against Covid-19 infections, AIDES has provided material support to the Mole camp dressmaking association in South Ubangi, for the sewing of 4,000 reusable face masks. The masks will be distributed to refugees with disabilities and elderly persons.
- In North and South Ubangi provinces, AIDES distributed 1,400 surgical masks to health workers and support staff at the Mole, Boyabu and Bili camps, as well as the Modale settlement, to prevent the spread of Covid-19.
- During the reporting period, UNHCR and AIDES equipped the Covid-19 isolation centres in the four refugee camps in North and South Ubangi with oxygen concentrators, thermometers, masks and other medical equipment and supplies. AIDES also recruited four nurses, community health and hygiene workers to strengthen the Covid-19 response at the health centres of the four camps.
- AIDES continued screening with thermometers at 15 entry points to the four refugee camps, reaching an estimated 66,557 persons.



LIVELIHOODS AND FOOD SECURITY

- In North and South Ubangi Provinces, 23,053 persons (4,650 households) including 9,784 refugees (2,405 households) are benefitting from a WFP resilience project that includes Food Assistance for Assets (FFA). This is a form of conditional cash assistance for income generating activities, nutrition, and activities to strengthen social cohesion and peaceful cohabitation between refugees and their hosts. UNHCR advocated for the inclusion of refugees along the Yakoma, Modale, Vamboro, Nganzamba axis, as well as the Zongo council area covering Congo Rive and Sambolola in South Ubangi. FFA aims to address people's immediate food needs with cash, vouchers or food transfers while improving their long-term food security and resilience.
- In October UNHCR provided cash assistance to 50 CAR refugee households and host community members in Modale, to enable them to start small businesses or sustain income generating activities to enhance self-sufficiency amongst refugees and strengthen the resilience of host communities. 300 other households in Modale have also been selected to benefit from cash assistance by UNHCR to farming activities until December 2021.
- UNHCR and AIDES facilitated access to local markets for refugee farmers, enabling them to sell products from community farms. In Mole camp (South Ubangi) refugees sold 90 bags worth 100kg of cassava to traders from Zongo and neighbouring Bangui.

IV. COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

UNHCR is coordinating and leading the refugee response in northern DRC in collaboration with the CNR, four implementing partners (ADSSE, AIDES, AIRD, ACTED) and with other UN agencies (WFP, FAO and UNICEF), international and local NGOs (World Vision, LIZADEEL, APEE).



V. OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

The declaration of a unilateral ceasefire throughout CAR by President - Faustin Archange Touadera raises hopes for progressive stabilization of the security situation in parts of CAR, that have until now experienced sporadic violence. UNHCR is expecting that more CAR refugees may want to voluntarily return to areas which are safe, including Bangui, the prefectures of Lobaye and Ombella M'Poko, after the resumption of voluntary repatriation on 22 October 2021. UNHCR plans to facilitate over 5,300 returns before the end of the year and will likely continue in 2022, given the thousands of persons who are expressing interest in voluntary repatriations through intention surveys and community mechanisms.

External / Donor Relations

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is grateful for the support of:

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