UNHCR Regional Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

COVID-19 Response

Update #20 (1 – 30 June 2021)

Key Figures

20

out of **20** UNHCR countries / operations are reporting COVID-19 cases in the region

17.4 million

people of concern in the Middle East and North Africa (2021 planning figures)

13,786 cases

of COVID-19 reported among persons of concern to UNHCR from March 2020 to June 2021, including fatalities

19 out of 19 countries

in the MENA region have confirmed the inclusion of refugees in their national vaccination programmes or plans

Refugees in 16 MENA countries

have already started receiving COVID-19 vaccinations

Regional Developments

Globally, and as witnessed across the MENA region, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to psychological distress which constitutes a major threat to refugees' health and well-being, according to data released in UNHCR's Annual Public Health Global Review. In parallel, delivery of and access to protection services – especially those previously face-to-face – has been more complicated. Despite the challenges, UNHCR and partners have adapted to the pandemic, providing remote services, including on case processing, to address the specific needs of people of concern.

As highlighted in MENA's UNHCR's Mental Health and Psychosocial Response during the COVID-19 outbreak last year, fear of eviction, discrimination, isolation, as well as loss or reduced livelihoods have been major sources of psychosocial distress. There has also been evidence of negative social reactions, including panic, stigma, domestic violence, and discrimination in communities.

Psychologists and trained community workers continue to provide people of concern with mental health support to cope with the psychological stressors caused by the pandemic. As an example, in **Iraq**, community awareness was scaled up during and after the height of the pandemic. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) community workers have maintained awareness sessions in primary health-care centres as well as other camp areas, posted information through social media, and partners have continued to share mental health promotion materials on camp management platforms. During June, some 4,400 people of concern were reached through these types of outreach. In addition, most of the MHPSS interventions during June were implemented face-to-face when possible, and with the appropriate precautionary measures in place. Some 400 people of concern were supported with specialized one-to-one psychological counselling in June, either in person or through remote means.

During the first quarter of 2021, over 17,650 refugees, asylum-seekers and other people of concern have received mental health and psychological support services across 11 Operations in MENA.

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 refugees, IDPs and other marginalized groups into national public health and other responses, and supporting national systems to deliver assistance
- Empowering individuals and families to make the best decisions for themselves, through cash-based assistance

Highlights from the Field

In the Tindouf camps in **Algeria**, the second vaccination campaign continued during June, with the participation of the Directorate of Civil Protection and local public health institutions. UNHCR meanwhile maintained its awareness-raising campaign, distributing information on vaccinations among people of concern across the five camps in Tindouf.

In **Egypt**, some four million citizens have been vaccinated against COVID-19 and the Government plans to vaccinate 50 percent of citizens in 2021. Some 403 centres have been allocated nationwide to administer vaccines, with around 110,000 individuals receiving the vaccine per day. UNHCR's health partner continues to support refugees and asylum-seekers with vaccine registration, with 172 people of concern assisted so far. Refugees are currently able to register on the national vaccination platform using their asylum documents issued by UNHCR.

Working together with UNHCR and the World Health Organization, health authorities in **Iraq** have included refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country's National Deployment and Vaccination Plan for COVID-19. Refugees and IDPs can register themselves through the online system and are eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccination through Iraq's public health-care system.

In **Jordan**, the Government announced it would consider UNHCR-issued asylum-seeker and refugee certificates that have expired during the COVID-19 pandemic valid until 31 December 2021, regardless of the date of expiry. This decision means that even if a person holds an expired refugee or asylum-seeker certificate, they should still be able to access national services, including health and education, by presenting their existing documentation. Meanwhile, in line with the improved and stable COVID-19 situation in Jordan, several in-person UNHCR activities are resuming in parallel with remote processing. A pilot small-scale reopening of the registration centres, which have been closed since March 2020, was initiated during the week of 13 June. In Azraq and Zaatari refugee camps, the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate notified UNHCR of the resumption of activities in the camps at 50 per cent capacity as of 18 June, subject to the epidemiological situation.

UNHCR in **Lebanon** has been fully mobilized to help contain the transmission of COVID-19 among the refugee population and ensure their equal access to testing, treatment and vaccines under the national COVID-19 response plan. In mid-June, following UNHCR discussions with the Ministry of Public Health, the Government of Lebanon approved the use of mobile vaccination units in refugee informal settlements and collective shelters. This approach is expected to overcome barriers to refugee vaccination including transport costs, registration and security. Meanwhile, in response to vaccine hesitancy among the refugee population, UNHCR is communicating with communities to encourage registration in the national vaccination platform, focusing on targeted awareness and training. Moreover, UNHCR has been supporting the Government's vaccination "marathons" to ensure refugee inclusion, supporting with outreach volunteers and helping with registration and disseminating messages to scale up refugee participation.

Second COVID-19 Vaccination Centre in Zaatari Camp, Jordan. Photo: © UNHCR/Shawkat Alharfosh

The number of COVID-19 cases in **Tunisia** considerably increased during the month of June, with the health system struggling to cope. At the end of June UNHCR started dispatching COVID-19 antigen tests to three hospitals in support of COVID-19 testing capacity, including in areas hosting large refugee populations (Gabes, Medenine and Sfax). Further donations including face masks, gloves and medical gowns are also planned. During the second week of June, UNHCR also installed five Refugee Housing Units[1] to serve as screening units at hospitals and vaccination centres in Tunis.

[1] *The Refugee Housing Unit is an innovative, prefabricated shelter solution that has been utilized by UNHCR as part of the COVID-19 response, including for screening and isolation of cases.*

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 22 June, UNHCR's total financial requirements for the COVID-19 Emergency are 29 per cent funded, with **USD 269.4 million received** (inclusive of indicative allocations of softly earmarked and unearmarked funds), of which **USD 79.5 million** is for the MENA region.

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 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan website
- Support UNHCR's COVID-19 preparedness and response plans: https://giving.unhcr.org/en/coronavirus/
- Refugees deliver mental health services to locked down camps in Iraq (July 2020)

Mental health and psychosocial support for Syrian refugees at Domiz camp, Iraq. Photo: © UNHCR/Rasheed Hussein Rasheed

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