



Photo : Patricia Poulhe/NRC

PROTECTION IS PARAMOUNT FOR MORE THAN 470,000 REFUGEES IN CAMEROON

JUNE 2024

Joint advocacy note for the commemoration of the World Refugee Day



BACKGROUND

Cameroon, once lauded for its relative stability, faces multiple complex and deepening crises today. These include the violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the Far North region, in the Northwest and Southwest regions and turmoil along its porous border with the Central African Republic (CAR). These prolonged conflicts have left close to 3.4 million people in dire need of assistance and protection.^[1] These include refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees and asylum seekers. Despite efforts by the Government, humanitarian and development actors, there are growing concerns for the country's refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) caught up in the second world's most neglected displacement crisis.^[2]

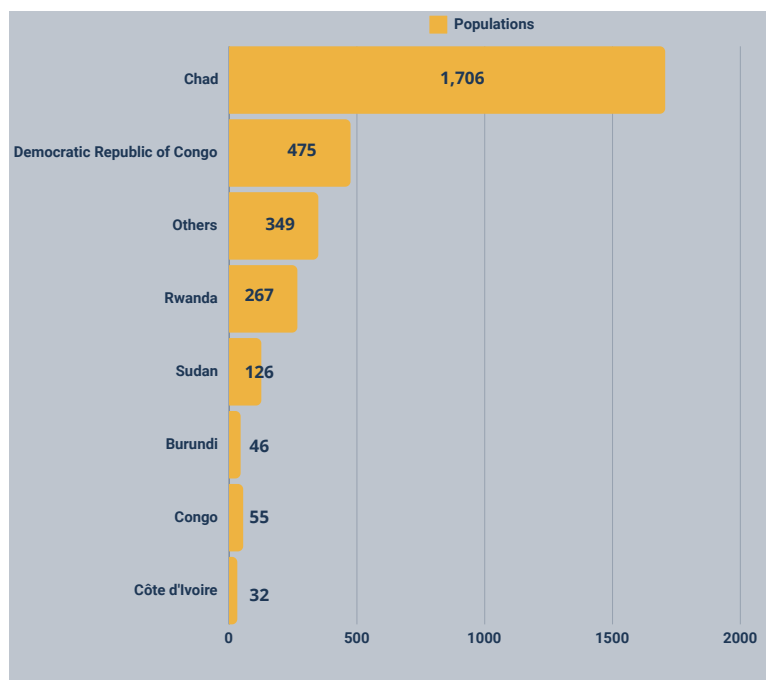
According to UNHCR, as of April 2024, 476,735 refugees are living in Cameroon. About 3/4 of refugees who fled from the CAR found refuge in the bordering East region of Cameroon, after the explosion of violence 2013.^[3] Most of the other refugees in Cameroon are Nigerians displaced by Boko Haram militant attacks, with the majority living in the Minawao refugee camp in the Far North region of the country. The Minawao refugee camp was built for 15,000 refugees but is now home to more than 70,000.^[4] Yet, figures are on the rise due to natural population growth, new arrivals from Nigeria in the Far North, and from Chad in the East.

Refugees in Cameroon live in a context of vulnerability accentuated by the impact of the various conflicts, and the effects of the multiple crises around the world, which have totally diverted the attention of public authorities and governments, contributing to household poverty, secondary displacements, risks of gender-based violence, and severe food insecurity.

"I have been living here with my four children since the crisis forced us to flee our village in 2014. Life is very difficult at times, and we get by with a little farming and working in small businesses to try and find enough to eat.

We also must worry about the future of our children. They need to go to school. We can't do anything because we don't have the resources, we can't make ends meet. We have been forgotten here in Cameroon and it's very difficult for us to even think about the future of our families"

Djeinabou, 32, is a refugee from the CAR. She lives in Bombé Bakary, a small village in the East region which hosts about 600 CAR refugees. She had to leave everything behind when she fled the violence in her home country and now struggles to feed her family.



Refugees by country of origin as of April 30th, 2024 ^[5]

[1] HRP 2024

[2] [NRC neglected displacement crisis report 2023](#)

[3] [UNHCR Data](#)

[4] [Minawao profile, UNHCR, Dec 2023](#)

[5] [Source: UNHCR data portal, 30th April 2024 - \[https://data.unhcr.org/fr/country/cmr\]](#)

REFUGEES' CHALLENGES

Faced with various challenges, **the biggest one is related to civil documentation.** Being in Cameroon for ten years, many refugees have given birth to children who have no identity papers, either from their countries of origin or from Cameroon. Some parents don't know how to apply for a birth certificate, while others don't see the importance of this document, which is a fundamental right, especially for access to education. Moreover, the lack of centers in rural areas, of staff and official status, of funds and of synergy amongst state services, especially health centers and civil status centers, further amplifies the issue and will affect multiple generations. **As a result, 190,000 school aged children were reported without birth certificate in the East region only in 2023.**^[6]

The Far North region is one of the most remote of the country and hosts most of the Nigerians refugees of the country.^[7] This massive increase of pressure on the state administration is affecting not only displaced populations but also host communities, as around 400,000 children currently do not hold a birth certificate.^[8] Yet, lack of civil documentation can result in missing out on formal education, where it is often a necessary requirement to complete primary school and obtain exam certificates. Displaced persons without documentation also face higher risks and restrictions to their movement, which limits their ability to seek and maintain livelihoods and income-generating activities.

Added to this, refugees struggle to acquire official identity documents or have academic or professional degrees officially recognized, limiting their self-reliance and access to financial services. They are also regularly denied formal work authorization, are relegated to jobs that do not match their skills, or to labor in informal sectors with few protections. These challenges make it even more difficult for displaced communities to achieve durable solutions and build their self-reliance.

Access to Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights is another challenge faced by refugees. In fact, most refugees left behind land titles and other documents establishing ownership or use rights, that either got lost or destroyed as they fled. While in displacement, their lands and properties are often subject to secondary occupation by neighbors, relatives or other members of the community. It is also common for relatives to sell the property or land in the absence of the original owner. In all these cases, when they attempt to return home, they are met with disputes and uncertainty, possibly resulting in even more conflict. Moreover, the search for farming or inhabitable land by refugee populations is a regular source of conflicts between refugees and host communities. Nevertheless, as the right to adequate housing implies living in a home, even if temporary, without the threat of eviction, within a secure environment that allows access to a livelihood and basic services, HLP rights are an essential component to the full enjoyment of rights and the sustainable integration in communities.

Although more than 4,000 Nigerians and 1,000 CAR refugees agreed to voluntarily return in 2023, majority of the refugees in Cameroon still do not want to return to the CAR or Nigeria,^[9] **because of persistent fear, feeling of security in host localities, and lack of protection and livelihood opportunities in their countries of origin.** Therefore, it is more important than ever to take concrete action to find durable solutions for refugees in Cameroon, for them to no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and to enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement. However, work towards durable solutions is often faced with severe challenges among which continuing conflict and violence, lack of political will, lack of fundings to supports initiatives.

[6] The Guardian Post, 31 August 2023

[7] <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/analysis-forcibly-displaced-persons-far-north-cameroon-february>

[8] Cameroon Tribune, Tuesday 12 July 2022 P. 5

[9] VOA, 19 August 2023



"When we first came here, things weren't going well at all. In the beginning, WFP distributed food to us. But for I don't know how many years now we have not received any food assistance. Also, the house where we lived, it was always raining inside, we were exposed. And with my husband's disability as you can see, it wasn't easy at all" - Balkissa, refugee from the CAR

Refugee policy in Cameroon

Cameroon is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 African Union protocol. The government adopted a refugee law in 2005 (Law No. 2005/006), which entered into force in 2011. Together, these international and national regulations guarantee refugees freedom of movement, the right to work, free access to education and healthcare, and access to assistance from UNHCR. They also require authorities to register all asylum seekers and guarantee refugees the right not to be forcibly returned to their country of origin. In March 2017, the government signed the Tripartite Agreement with the government of Nigeria and UNHCR outlining modalities of voluntary return of refugees to Nigeria. In addition, the Yaoundé Declaration on Durable Solutions in the context of Forced Displacement related to the CAR crisis calling for more concerted action to help CAR refugees has been signed after a key regional conference organized by the Government of Cameroon and the UN Refugee Agency in April 2022.

Although Cameroon has been lauded for its progressive refugee policies, there is a gulf between these commitments and legal arrangements, and practice on the ground. Policies where this gap is most prominent are those regarding registration and status determination—which have an impact on refugees' access to quality education and decent jobs, and ultimately their ability to become self-reliant—as well as on forced returns.

Lack of humanitarian funding

According to the Humanitarian Response Plan 2024, humanitarian partners in Cameroon need at least \$103.5 million to implement a multi-sectoral response that addresses the most urgent needs of 470,000^[10] refugees targeted in the country.

However, for the past three years, funding for refugee response in Cameroon has steadily decreased. On 26 March 2024, WFP and UNHCR issued a press release **warning that vital food assistance to refugees in four regions of Cameroon is at risk of being disrupted due to funding constraints.** The concerned regions include the Far North, Adamawa, East and North regions, affected by the Lake Chad Basin conflict and the influx of refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR). In fact, funding shortfalls have already forced WFP to reduce rations for refugees in the four regions to 50% and to distribute incomplete food baskets. All this reinforces grave concerns the effects which could force families into harsh coping mechanisms. And the situation is unlikely to improve unless donor countries devote more attention and funding to finding durable solutions for those populations.

[10] OCHA Situation Report, 7 May 2024

[11] WFP press release

WHAT DO REFUGEES NEED AFTER LEAVING EVERYTHING BEHIND?


After years away from home, the most important thing many refugees need is access to livelihood opportunities and a chance to rebuild the lives they knew.

In fact, without livelihood opportunities to help them earn income, refugees struggle to purchase even the most basic necessities. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for refugees to work in many of the places they've sought refuge, as they often experience discrimination or isolation.

Refugees fleeing their homes generally leave with little to nothing more than the clothes on their back and what few items they can carry, as they are running for their lives. They are forced to leave their houses, jobs, schools, belongings and memories behind. Unable to return to their homeland, settle permanently in their host countries, many refugees find themselves confined indefinitely to camps or living in crowded or makeshift shelters without proper water or sanitation systems, often in volatile zones. Despite the fact that local communities have opened their doors, they often have little to share. Therefore, refugees are urgently in need of food, shelter, protection, water, education and health care.

Durable solutions (voluntary repatriation, local integration in the host country of first asylum or resettlement in a third country) are the options available for the permanent resolution for refugees. All three are regarded as durable because they promise an end to refugees' suffering and their need for international protection and dependence on humanitarian assistance.

Voluntary repatriation, which entails the return of refugees in safety and dignity to their country of origin, is by far the preferred durable solution today. However, in post-conflict situations, the reintegration of returnees poses considerable challenges. The transition from short-term humanitarian assistance in support of reintegration to longer-term reconstruction is rarely a smooth process. In the politically fragile environment that frequently characterizes post-conflict situations, returnees are often left in deprived conditions for extended periods without means or opportunities to better their situation. It is therefore important to bring together humanitarian and development actors, to ensure that greater resources are allocated to create an environment conducive to sustainable repatriation.

A photograph of a man in a white cap and patterned shawl, pointing upwards with his right hand. He is standing in a field of tall grass. The background is a bright, slightly hazy sky.

Aboubakar had to move in 2017 due to instability on the border with the CAR. With his wife and 8 children, they fled to Ngadi with nothing. Little by little, he raised the funds to buy a small field and, thanks to humanitarian assistance, was able to expand it to 4 hectares.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On this World Refugee Day focusing on solidarity with refugees – for a world where refugees are welcomed, Danish Refugee Council (DRC), CARE Cameroon, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Plan International, Action Contre la Faim (ACF) and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) are calling on:

1- The international community to increase its support for legal aid to refugees, to strengthen their access to civil documentation. This includes supporting the Government in increasing the capacity of the National Bureau of Civil Status (BUNEC) to provide birth certificates refugees' children born in Cameroon by opening and staffing new offices in refugee hosting areas.;

2- Humanitarian donors to recognise and support the integration of HLP emergency responses from the onset. This includes supporting advocacy efforts to improve access to HLP rights for conflict-affected populations in emergency contexts and increasing overall funding to the HLP sector;

3- Government to implement concrete actions to ensure the right to durable solutions both for refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, by respecting commitments of international and regional conventions including the Kampala Convention and the Yaoundé Declaration;

4- Government to ensure that all civil status centers are well equipped to provide timely and quality services especially in crisis situations, in line with the African Charter on Statistics and the Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa (SHaSA);

5- Donors should increase their multiyear financing for refugee response in Cameroon, in alignment and with World Bank efforts to invest in longer-term solutions.

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