

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

COVID-19 Response Update #21 (1 – 31 July 2021)

Key Figures

 17.4 million

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

 14,696 cases

of COVID-19 were reported among people of concern to UNHCR since March 2020, including fatalities

 19 out of 19 countries

in the MENA region have confirmed the inclusion of refugees in their national COVID-19 vaccination programmes or plans

 19 out of 19 countries

in the MENA region have started COVID-19 vaccinations for refugees

Regional Developments

Many countries in the MENA region have entered a third wave of COVID-19 infections, with Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia recording the highest number of daily cases in July since the start of the pandemic. Some countries reinstated COVID-19 related movement restrictions, while most scaled up vaccinations, including for people of concern to UNHCR. [Libya became the latest country to begin vaccinating eligible refugees and asylum-seekers](#) upon presentation of a UNHCR certificate, with the first refugees receiving their vaccination shot on 24 July.

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the safety and well-being of forcibly displaced populations, particularly on displaced women and children who, even prior to the pandemic, were at greater risk of gender-based violence (GBV) and child marriage. In July, UNHCR released a data visualisation entitled [COVID deepens threats for displaced women and children](#), which highlights how COVID-19 intensified the risks of GBV and family separation, and disrupted childhoods. The socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 have heightened tensions in households,

while containment measures have created additional barriers to reporting abuse and seeking help. Child marriage and school closures risk long-term damage to displaced children's future prospects, while movement restrictions, lockdowns and border closures limited the possibilities for refugee parents and children to reunite with each other in countries of asylum.

Despite COVID-19 related challenges and funding shortfalls, UNHCR continued providing services for displaced women and children at risk, adapting them as needed. For example in Lebanon, while urgent and high-risk incidents of GBV continued to receive in-person support and access to services, UNHCR also provided cash assistance, remote individual GBV cases management and psychosocial counselling over the phone to women and girls. In Jordan, UNHCR and partners have strengthened access for urban refugee women to GBV services through pharmacies.

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 **Algeria**, UNHCR provided emergency cash assistance to vulnerable asylum-seekers in urban areas, and distributed tablets to displaced children to support distance learning. Life-saving services for GBV survivors continued; however, access to public reproductive health services is limited due to the risk of COVID-19, particularly for pregnant women. To mitigate the risk of COVID-19, UNHCR continued interventions for at-risk women and girls through formal education and other learning activities. So far in 2021, UNHCR and partners have provided medical orientation and referrals for more than 1,200 people of concern living in urban areas. In the Sahrawi camps in Tindouf, a second vaccination campaign was launched as more than 330 new cases of COVID-19 were reported in July, indicating a steady and alarming rise; some 2,500 Sahrawi refugees received at least one dose of the vaccine during the campaign. Meanwhile, health services were maintained across the five camps during the first half of 2021, following a continuity plan put in place by Saharawi leaders with the support of UNHCR and local health partners.

In **Egypt**, 2,219 vulnerable refugee and asylum-seeker families (7,427 individuals) were assisted with a one-off cash grant in July, bringing the total number of families assisted since the beginning of 2021 to 4,438 families (14,391 individuals). The grant amount for each family is designed to cover 65 per cent of the minimum expenditure basket for three months. Meanwhile, as part of a community mobilization and empowerment project, UNHCR launched two computer learning centres in Greater Cairo to allow youth from refugee and host communities to access online employment training programmes. Two additional centres will be launched in Greater Cairo in the coming weeks.

Although UNHCR has made significant progress in addressing the registration backlog caused by COVID-19 related restrictions, a considerable number of people of concern are expected to hold expired UNHCR documents or residency permits at the beginning of the upcoming school year. UNHCR is advocating with the Government of Egypt to exceptionally allow affected children to access schools while their documents are being renewed.

In **Iraq**, with the lifting of lockdowns and easing of COVID-19 restrictions by the authorities, UNHCR has recorded a slight decrease in the overall COVID-19-associated protection risks and challenges reported by people of concern. Nevertheless, the impact of COVID-19 on internally displaced populations (IDPs) remains significant and the number of individuals resorting to harmful coping mechanisms remains high. According to

protection monitoring reports, the main concern raised by IDPs and returnees related to access to livelihoods and health care. Other concerns widely raised by vulnerable displaced families include psychological trauma, stress and anxiety, suspension of education activities, and domestic violence.

Meanwhile, UNHCR and the Directorate General of Health [inaugurated the first COVID-19 vaccination unit](#) in Domiz-1 refugee camp in Duhok Governorate, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The newly established unit is part of the camp's primary health care centre, which provides vital health-care services to camp residents (31,000 Syrian refugees) and those living in nearby urban areas. UNHCR also rolled out a second round of COVID-19 cash assistance for refugees, asylum-seekers, IDPs and returnees who meet the eligibility criteria. The assistance consists of a one-time cash transfer of IQD 240,000 (USD 165) to help cover the cost of basic household and individual hygiene items. In July, a total of 9,948 refugee families received cash assistance, bringing the total number of supported families in 2021 to 11,932.



A refugee receiving COVID-19 vaccine in the newly inaugurated vaccination center in Domiz-1 refugee Camp in Duhok Governorate, KR-I.
Photo: © UNHCR/Rasheed Hussein Rasheed

In **Jordan**, since mid-June, registration centres in urban settings partially reopened for rapid face-to-face Asylum Seeker Certificate renewal interviews through protection booths. This has increased the efficiency of renewals, helping speed up backlog clearance. Remote individual case procedures (registration, refugee status determination and resettlement) continued, with limited in-person processing.



Refugee health volunteer Sameeh goes from door to door in Zaatari Camp to ask refugees if they took the vaccine and, if not, encourage them to register to take it. Photo: © UNHCR/Yousef Al Hariri

In **Lebanon**, all refugees known to UNHCR have been reached with COVID-19 awareness through SMS, WhatsApp, social media platforms and UNHCR's website, as well as by volunteers and partners through individual phone calls or home visits. UNHCR has trained and mobilized more than 3,000 community members for the COVID-19 response, including 520 focused on vaccination. A total of 8,360 people were supported by outreach

volunteers to enrol on the national vaccination platform, and a total of 759 refugees were vaccinated thanks to UNHCR mobile vaccination teams in refugee settings in the North, Bekaa and South. Meanwhile, UNHCR is supporting two mass vaccination sites in the North and South with medical supplies.

In Mbera camp in **Mauritania**, UNHCR staff, refugee community leaders and health workers received their second vaccine dose as part of a public vaccine sensitization campaign.

In **Syria** on 1 July, the Government announced that it would exempt anyone entering Syria from presenting a negative COVID-19 PCR test if a vaccination certificate approved by health authorities is presented. A reduction in the fees of the PCR tests from USD 100 to USD 50 for all citizens was also announced.

Tunisia was marked by a concerning rise in COVID-19 infections, with 3,000 – 9,000 daily cases reported throughout July. The country registered the highest mortality rate per capita from COVID-19 in Africa and MENA, and ranks among the highest daily mortality rates per capita globally. The public health system, in particular intensive care units, continued to be overwhelmed. The epidemical situation improved slightly at the end of July, following stringent national prevention measures.

UNHCR continued its SMS campaign launched in May targeting refugees and asylum-seekers in Tunisia, providing awareness on COVID-19 and information on vaccine registration. UNHCR also strengthened its monitoring of the COVID-19 situation among people of concern, and continued to provide rapid tests at disembarkation points for individuals intercepted at sea.

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 17 August, UNHCR's total financial requirements for the COVID-19 Emergency are **30 per cent funded**, with **USD 272.7 million received** (inclusive of indicative allocations of softly earmarked and unearmarked funds), of which **USD 79.6 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/>

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