UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

UNHCR Preparedness and Response

Displacement in Eastern DRC and Neighbouring Countries

February - April 2025

Clemence, displaced by violence in Masisi territory, North Kivu province, acts as a community representative for displaced people in sites around Goma. © UNHCR/Joel Z. Smith

KEY FIGURES

553,000 people targeted for assistance

$40.4 million required

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is seeking $40.4 million to strengthen preparedness and deliver life-saving protection and assistance to 275,000 internally displaced persons in South Kivu, North Kivu, Maniema, and Tanganyika provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), as well as to support a potential influx of 258,000 refugees, asylum-seekers, and returnees in neighbouring countries, including Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.

This appeal comes in response to the worsening humanitarian situation and mass displacement caused by renewed fighting in eastern DRC. In January alone, over 500,000 people were forced to flee their homes in North Kivu. As the conflict continues to escalate into South Kivu, displacement is already occurring both within the country and across borders, further increasing the need for immediate assistance.

Overview

The recent escalation of conflict in North and South Kivu has displaced over half a million people by the end of January 2025, with many fleeing from Goma and its surrounding areas. Goma, the capital of North Kivu, is home to approximately 2 million people.

Intense hostilities around Goma reportedly resulted in at least 2,900 deaths including significant civilian casualties and thousands of injuries, while leaving many residents trapped without access to water, electricity or internet connectivity. Explosive remnants of war, abandoned across many areas, are compounding risks to civilians, including Congolese nationals and refugees who live in this region.

Widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law have been reported, including summary executions, sexual violence and arbitrary arrest in both North and South Kivu provinces. Civilians in areas on the margins of armed clashes in South Kivu have reported widespread looting, extortion by armed actors, and targeted executions and reprisals against civilian populations perceived to be affiliated with armed groups. Some 55 per cent of civil society organizations in the province that provide medical and psychosocial assistance to sexual assault survivors report that the insecurity has inhibited them from delivering critical services. Increased displacement and resource scarcity exacerbates the vulnerability of women and girls, exposing them to further sexual violence and abuse.

Before January, South and North Kivu provinces were already host to 4.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), representing the majority of the country's 6.7 million IDPs. In early February, IDP communities in Minova were given a deadline to vacate humanitarian sites, including tented settlements, schools, and churches, and return to their areas of origin despite the lack of guaranteed security and essential services. In the same period in South Kivu, more than 150,000 people were newly displaced, seeking shelter in new IDP sites, schools, church and hosting homes.

Similarly, around Goma, IDP sites emptied during bombardment, with IDPs seeking shelter in homes, schools, and churches. In total, it is estimated that more than 70,000 shelters - the equivalent to all emergency shelters built by UNHCR and Shelter Cluster partners in 2023 and 2024 - have been destroyed, leaving about 350,000 people without a roof over their heads.

By 18 February, the Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster estimated that 90 per cent of the IDP sites and collective centres in Goma had been entirely emptied. The estimated population remaining in IDP sites was estimated to be less than 62,000 people – under 10 per cent of those previously living in sites.

Rapid assessments indicate that significant numbers of IDPs in both provinces are spontaneously returning to their villages of origin, while others remain with host families, in collective centres, and IDP sites. Those hesitant to return cite a variety of factors, including the need for assistance with transportation, the potential destruction of property, the presence of some armed groups and the risk of unexploded ordnances, and limited access to basic services.

Humanitarian access to address urgent needs continues to be significantly restricted. The closure of Goma airport since late January has prevented the operation of humanitarian flights, disrupting response efforts in North and South Kivu–which rely on Goma as a humanitarian hub. Road access from Goma to Minova and Kalehe has gradually resumed, however, the violence has severely damaged essential infrastructure, and water, electricity

and connectivity services remaininintermittent. Healthcare facilities are strained by the surge in casualties and face a significant risk of increased incidents of communicable diseases with cases of cholera, mpox and measles already observed as on the rise.

Countries bordering the DRC—including Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia—already host significant numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers from the DRC and the wider region. So far, over 23,000 people have fled to neighbouring countries, including 21,500 who crossed into Burundi within just a few days in mid-February, with smaller numbers seeking refuge in Rwanda and Uganda. Given the ongoing insecurity, further displacement from South Kivu remains highly likely.

Planned response

DRC

In the DRC, UNHCR remains ready to assist those in urgent need and is conducting multi-sectoral assessments to evaluate the current situation and inform the response strategy. In the current constrained environment, key activities will focus on coordinating and delivering humanitarian assistance, in alignment with UNHCR's leadership and co-leadership roles within the relevant clusters:

- **Protection**: Monitoring the evolving protection situation for civilians; documenting population movements and mapping localities where IDPs have spontaneously returned; supporting community-based protection mechanisms to share information on protection-related topics and respond to specific needs, including of groups such as older people, unaccompanied children and people with disabilities; assistance to survivors of sexual violence and other human rights abuses.
- **Shelter and non-food items (NFIs)**: Distribution of materials to reinforce/rehabilitate damaged shelters and/or expand the facilities in hosting households; cash assistance for local construction; cash assistance for rent and distribution of essential supplies including household items and dignity kits.
- **Camp coordination and camp management**: Providing management and coordination of IDP sites and collective centres; supporting IDPs who express the desire to return to their locations of origin to do so voluntarily and in safety and dignity.

Neighbouring countries

In neighbouring countries, contingency plans have been revised in coordination with governments and humanitarian partners to respond to the evolving crisis in the DRC – and further adjustments may be necessary as the situation develops. Prioritization exercises of life-saving interventions have taken place to define minimum preparedness measures in case of an escalation that triggers mass movements into neighbouring countries. As a result, efforts in neighbouring countries will focus on both preparedness and the immediate needs of new arrivals.

Burundi

Refugees and asylum-seekers in Burundi have access to national public service systems, however, an influx of new arrivals in the country would strain existing systems, posing significant challenges in access to services. As of 18 February, a reported 21,500 people had fled into Burundi through its western border with the DRC over the course of just a few days. To support new arrivals, UNHCR is present at border points and is working closely with government authorities and partners to ensure a coordinated response. Efforts include providing protection services such as access to territory, emergency registration, reception facilities, and multi-sectoral assistance for both refugees and host communities.

Burundi hosts 88,980 refugees and 1,960 asylum-seekers, with the majority (99 per cent) from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Around 56,000 refugees

People fleeing the DRC wait at the border with Burundi. © UNHCR/Bernard Ntwari

live across five refugee camps.

Rwanda

Despite the generally favourable protection environment for refugees in Rwanda, critical preparedness measures to ensure sufficient response to an influx of new arrivals are required. This will include enhancing capacity for registration and protection at entry points and transit centres, and transportation of asylum-seekers from border points to transit centres and to refugee camps. To ensure adequate capacity for new arrivals, activities will also include the expansion of existing transit centre infrastructure and construction of new transit centres as required.

In existing camps and settlements, services will be expanded in key areas such as WASH, health, and nutrition screening. Additional shelters will be set up to support up to 5,000 households, alongside land demarcation and plot allocation to accommodate new arrivals. In this regard, UNHCR will advocate for integrated services where possible in line with the "solutions from the start" approach.

To support basic needs, UNHCR will procure and preposition non-food items for 5,000 households, using cash as a modality where feasible. Rwanda hosts approximately 135,0000 displaced persons, 90 per cent of whom live across five refugee sites.

Tanzania

UNHCR in Tanzania will require additional support for infrastructure development, logistics, protection assistance including registration, shelter, education, health and other basic services for individuals in vulnerable situations arriving from the DRC. The refugees in the country are accommodated in two refugee camps. The majority from the DRC reside in Nyarugusu camp which has little absorption capacity for an additional influx from the DRC and will require the identification of a suitable site to accommodate the new arrivals. In identifying new sites, UNHCR will advocate for the expansion of existing services to accommodate new arrivals and promote integrated solutions in line with the "solutions from the start" approach. Previously constructed reception and transit facilities have been closed, therefore assessments of new areas will need to be conducted, to establish accessibility and infrastructure requirements.

Tanzania hosts some 230,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, of whom around 85,000 are from the DRC.

Uganda

In the event of a refugee influx from the DRC, the response in Uganda will focus on expanding the existing reception capacity and delivery of assistance. Existing transit centres require upgrading and opening new areas in existing settlements, to be able to receive new arrivals.

New arrivals who are received and registered at transit centres, spend at least 48 hours before they are transported to reception centres in the settlements. At the transit and reception centres, the new arrivals are expected to stay for no longer than 72 hours except in situations of public health emergencies and/or lack of adequate and accessible facilities like shelters, WASH and health, among others, to support the relocation. Once in the settlement, the government allocates plots where they settle. UNHCR will advocate for expansion of existing facilities to accommodate the new arrivals and integrated services where possible in line with the "solutions from the start" approach.

Protection (including prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence, child protection, legal and physical protection and community-based protection), health, education and WASH services will be provided in the settlements, integrated wherever possible within local government service delivery mechanisms.

Uganda hosts over 1.6 million refugees, of which over 550,000 are from the DRC.

Zambia

Given the extremely remote and rural areas that potential new arrivals from the DRC would likely travel to, UNHCR will strive to construct and expand transit and reception facilities to be able to respond to the most likely scenario of 15,000 asylum-seekers. Essential services and assistance provided within such centres will include access to clean water, hot meals, psychosocial first aid, primary healthcare, and non-food items for new arrivals.

UNHCR will also undertake site planning and development of new refugee villages within settlement areas, namely access roads, plot demarcation, emergency shelter, WASH facilities, as well as protection services including the extension of community-led protection networks, child protection, prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence, early identification of persons with specific needs and individual case management.

In accordance with Zambian law, asylum-seekers will undergo refugee status determination and individual biometric registration and documentation.

UNHCR will work to preposition immediate food assistance for 15,000 new arrivals before transitioning each family to cash assistance. Emergency kits and tools will also be provided to help each family start up agriculture activities and transition to self-reliance by the next harvest season. As part of "inclusion from the start", the capacity of the national healthcare system will need support to conduct rapid assessments and provide the minimum health service package for new arrivals (including procurement of vaccines, essential medicines and medical supplies).

Zambia hosts 107,000 displaced people, the majority of whom – 68,000 – are from the DRC. Refugees mainly live in village-like settlements alongside former refugees and their Zambian host communities.

Financial requirements

This appeal seeks $40.4 million to strengthen preparedness and provide life-saving protection and assistance targeting 258,000 potential refugees, asylum-seekers and returnees to neighbouring countries – Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia – and 275,000 internally displaced people in South Kivu, North Kivu, Maniema and Tanganyika provinces of the DRC.

Budget breakdown by country (US$)

Country	Total population targeted for assistance	Total requirements (US$)
DRC	275,000	10,800,000
Burundi	58,000	4,982,000
Rwanda	100,000	7,969,000
Tanzania	25,000	4,000,000
Uganda	60,000	5,000,000
Zambia	15,000	7,652,000
Total	**533,000**	**40,403,000**

Budget breakdown by sector (US$)

Country	Protection	Shelter and NFIs	WASH	Health and Nutrition	Camp Coordination and Camp Management	Total requirements (US$)
DRC	2,500,000	7,000,000			1,300,000	10,800,000
Burundi	1,263,500	2,914,500	350,000	454,000		4,982,000
Rwanda	1,020,000	2,929,000	3,020,000	1,000,000		7,969,000
Tanzania	870,000	1,853,000	600,000	677,000		4,000,000
Uganda	1,400,000	1,700,000	700,000	1,200,000		5,000,000
Zambia	2,082,000	3,035,000	1,288,000	1,247,000		7,652,000
Total	**9,135,500**	**19,431,500**	**5,958,000**	**4,578,000**	**1,300,000**	**40,403,000**

Coordination

In neighbouring countries, the respective government and UNHCR co-lead the refugee response, as outlined in the regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for the DRC (January 2024-December 2025), following the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM). The RRP includes annual country-level plans, managed by UNHCR, to coordinate the inter-agency response in collaboration with national authorities, UN agencies, NGOs, and partners.

Inside the DRC, UNHCR leads the Protection Cluster and the Shelter Cluster, and co-leads the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster.

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees and sustainable response approach, UNHCR also advocates with development partners to ensure that IDP and refugee hosting and return areas are prioritized in their programmes. In addition, UNHCR and partners in coordination with the authorities are striving for a 'solutions from the start' strategy in establishing a settlement approach whereby preparedness and response activities in neighbouring countries aim to avoid parallel systems but rather strengthen existing systems that can both serve new arrivals and host communities through a humanitarian-development nexus approach.

Flexible funding

Flexible funds help UNHCR to prepare for the unpredictable, to kickstart an emergency response, and to bolster support to forgotten or under-resourced crises. They also enable UNHCR to plan and manage resources efficiently and effectively. Without flexible funding, we would not be able to properly prepare for any new emergency that may arise, or deliver thousands of emergency supplies, essential shelter and protection assistance in the first phase of the response. Flexible funding also remains vital as the emergency response develops, especially for crises that fall out of the spotlight and remain neglected. Flexible support to specific emergency situations, and especially flexible donations to general emergency preparedness and response, are a lifeline for people forced to flee.