An unprecedented response
in an unprecedented year

If you have no reserves to fall back on, you have no resilience in a crisis. When the COVID-19 pandemic shocked the world in 2020, refugees and other people of concern to UNHCR were among the most vulnerable. For them, the most basic advice was often impossible to follow: “Don’t travel.” “Stay at home.” “Keep your distance.” “Get tested.” “Wash your hands frequently.” “Study or work online.”

COVID-19 meant UNHCR’s mission to protect and assist refugees was suddenly mired in an unprecedented emergency, and in a context where travel was difficult and physical contact all but impossible. The borders refugees must cross to reach safety were abruptly closed to stem the spread of the disease. Forcibly displaced people – including children – were excluded from the COVID-19 response, impoverished, evicted, unfed and unable to travel to seek safety or return home. Resettlement, already straining to keep pace with a historic decade of displacement, was squeezed further by the pandemic, with the fewest departures since 2002. There were fears for a worsening of the plight of stateless persons.

And yet, UNHCR had started 2020 on a positive note. The international community had come together for the first Global Refugee Forum in December 2019, making more than 1,400 pledges that would put the Global Compact on Refugees into operation, a manifestation of the whole-of-society approach to respond to forced displacement.

UNHCR had also completed its regionalization and decentralization process, a significant component of an ambitious reform agenda. It aimed to improve delivery, giving more authority to the field while maintaining and strengthening risk management and appropriate controls.

And how important those pledges and reforms were.

When COVID-19 hit, most States found practical solutions to enable protection from persecution and from the pandemic. Some States, particularly in Africa, worked closely with UNHCR to ensure they could uphold their international legal protection obligations to even large influxes of refugees, while shielding their own citizens from the disease. Their leadership and solidarity have been exemplary.

Alongside our international, national and local NGO partners, UNHCR stayed and delivered vital protection activities and services and, critically, bolstered host State health systems and provided cash assistance, shelter and other support to help mitigate the most immediate impacts of the pandemic on the displaced and host communities.

Yet COVID-19’s impact has gone far beyond health and has driven millions of refugees into deeper poverty and despair. Often reliant on daily wage jobs or informal employment, they were among the first to lose out in lockdowns, with poverty rates amongst refugees soaring. And the consequences have been grave, especially for women and children. Gender-based violence has increased, as has domestic violence and early child marriage. Refugee children, especially girls, were already less likely to attend school than their host counterparts, had less access to remote learning opportunities, and are less likely to return to school after the pandemic.

Mental health needs have grown faster than the response can manage.

While COVID stopped many things, it did not stop conflict. Old conflicts persisted or even reignited and new ones erupted, increasing the number of displaced as the year went on. Brutal killings were meted out in Mozambique. Conflict, which included sexual violence, engulfed Tigray in Ethiopia. The scourge of gang violence in parts of Central America drove more people – including children – into exile. The people of the Sahel continued to be plagued and persecuted by conflict and climate change, forcing more and more away from their homes.

UNHCR and partners were determined that the pandemic would not stop them protecting and assisting record numbers of forcibly displaced and stateless people around the world, with by year’s end more than 91.9 million people of concern—refugees and asylum-seekers, returnees, IDPs, and stateless persons. And despite the challenges of conflict, the pandemic and paralysis on political progress on most conflicts, UNHCR has continued to search for solutions so that men, women and children can stop living in a state of uncertainty and instead make the most of their potential. For example, at the behest of South Sudan and Sudan and under the stewardship of IGAD, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, UNHCR is developing a solutions strategy that could help resolve displacement for up to 7 million people in and from the two countries. This has the potential to end the plight of millions of people, but it needs the support of the international community to strengthen peace and security efforts and provide resources to develop the countries, including areas where the displaced will live.

Despite the global economic challenges brought on by COVID, solidarity with and for refugees persevered. The major host governments, themselves often relying on fragile health systems, did not hesitate to include refugees in their health responses. Donors funded a large percentage of our COVID-19 response and, led by the United States of America, Germany and the European Union, responded with practical solutions to enable protection from persecution and from the pandemic. Some States, particularly in Africa, worked closely with UNHCR to ensure they could uphold their international legal protection obligations to even large influxes of refugees, while shielding their own citizens from the disease. Their leadership and solidarity have been exemplary.

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The World Bank and international financial institutions took drastic measures, including rapidly providing around $1 billion of grants instead of loans for refugee-hosting countries. The private sector, including contributions from innovative Islamic financing mechanisms, contributed $537.5 million and shared its valuable expertise to improve our worldwide response.

This was an unprecedented response to an unprecedented year and helped us carry out our mandate around the world. This support also steadied our resolve to see through our ambitious reform agenda. The pandemic forced acceleration in a number of areas, including streamlining processes and partnerships to enable greater flexibility and improved delivery of assistance. And the global uprising against racism and social justice gave us pause and prompted reflection on our own shortcomings and biases, unconscious or not. This led to sometimes painful, yet necessary, internal discussions on race equality and inclusion within UNHCR. To address the issues raised, and building on work on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, we launched agency-wide discussions, hired external experts to guide us, and developed an interim plan of action to make UNHCR a better, more inclusive agency which will undoubtedly make us a better champion of refugees and the displaced.

Despite the many achievements of 2020, there are unfortunately more forcibly displaced people than ever and their needs are greater. The additional hardship brought by COVID-19, the lack of political progress on resolving conflicts, combined with funding shortfalls for UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies, compounds their suffering. Ending wars and rebuilding peace would allow many millions to fulfill their dreams of going home. Yet even a fully-funded UNHCR would only be able to address a portion of these needs, and humanitarian funding windows are not adequate or sufficiently predictable for the response that is required.

This is why the underpinnings of the Global Compact on Refugees must be implemented in response to today’s displacement crises. There must be greater inclusion—not only in the health response and vaccinations, but in other social services and the socioeconomic response. In designing and implementing financial rescue packages, host countries need to include refugees to prevent further hardship and suffering, and donor States must ensure hosts are properly resourced to allow them to continue to extend the protection and support needed to refugees, the displaced and the communities that host them.

And we need greater support elsewhere, including crucially in the area of vaccine equity to avoid a world divided by inoculated and infected, ultimately leaving no one safe from a resurgence of the virus. I appeal in the strongest terms to those States with resources and capacity to do more to share vaccines and logistical support so that all people, including refugees and their hosts, can be protected from the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic also reminds us of the importance of prevention and preparedness. Clearly this applies to future pandemics, but it must also be applied to prevent and resolve conflict and address the climate emergency, which threatens us all and from which no country alone can protect its population.

If it has taught us anything, I trust this year has taught us all that the greatest threats to our health and safety—whether it be a pandemic, the climate emergency or conflict—require multilateral cooperation and action to address and resolve.

—Filippo Grandi
UNHCR High Commissioner

The Special Envoy

At its heart, UNHCR’s mission is about compassion and humanity. That simple truth is easily drowned out by the din of social media or lost in political arguments. In the Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Angelina Jolie, UNHCR has a high-profile champion whose inspiring and focused advocacy can cut through the noise and bring the conversation back to solutions for refugees.

On World Refugee Day, in an article for *Time* magazine, she urged Americans to look beyond borders and see the fight for rights and equality as universal, and asked governments to work towards durable settlements to the world’s conflicts. The article cited UNHCR data on displacement, while an accompanying video helped spotlight the plight of refugees in Bangladesh and Myanmar, with UNHCR staff briefing the Special Envoy on day-to-day challenges they encounter. She addressed the UN Security Council on sexual violence against children, highlighting Iraq’s Yazidi minority and challenging Member States to do more for survivors. At a UNHCR-UNICEF roundtable, co-hosted by Canada and the United Kingdom, she urged governments to invest in educating refugee children.

Although COVID-19 made travelling almost impossible, the Special Envoy remained informed and engaged, making a virtual visit to UNHCR’s Yemen operation in December and learning about the challenges that both the displaced and UNHCR staff on the ground are battling on daily basis, and speaking to UNHCR field officers in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela about the impact of the pandemic on their work.

Separately, during a virtual design competition and fashion show organized by UNHCR’s Kenyan partner RefuSHE, the Special Envoy reunited virtually with a Congolese refugee she had met three years before and who had since been resettled to the United States of America. In October, the Special Envoy joined U.S. Representative Chrissy Houlahan for an online conversation on combating gender-based violence, and the following month she addressed the Republic of Korea’s conference on Action with Women and Peace, demanding an end to impunity around sexual violence in conflict. Her poignant op-ed in *The Financial Times* invited readers to consider the context and complexity of UNHCR’s work, and to support refugees with respect and understanding as well as donations.

—Angelina Jolie
UNHCR’s Special Envoy
UNHCR IN 2020

To protect and assist 91.9 million people of concern in 132 countries and territories,

UNHCR’s budget was $9.131 billion

It received $4.776 billion in contributions

Its expenditure was $4.838 billion

UNHCR was present in 132 countries and territories with offices in 520 locations

People of concern 2015-2020

Key results in 2020

Safeguarding fundamental rights

**REGISTRATION**

9.2 million individuals (5 years and above) with biometric records in PRIMES. Target: 10 million

2019 result: 8.8 million

**STATELESSNESS**

63,200 stateless persons acquired a nationality, or had it confirmed

Target: 100,000 | 2019 result: 81,074

**ASYLUM APPLICATIONS**

115,800 individual asylum applications processed by UNHCR

Projection before COVID-19: 120,000, 2019 result: 120,400

**CHILD PROTECTION**

45,974 best interests assessments conducted. Target: 48,451

2019 result: 56,091

Responding with life-saving support

**EMERGENCY AND CORE RELIEF ITEMS**

600,000+ people of concern received core relief items in emergency-affected countries.

Target: 600,000 | 2019 result: 588 million

**CASH ASSISTANCE**

$695 million of cash assistance delivered to people of concern across all operations.

Target: $650 million

**SHELTER**

249,000 people of concern lived in a refugee housing unit.

Target: 250,000 | 2019 result: 219,000

**HEALTH**

0.19 under-5 mortality rate (per 1,000 under-5s per month) in refugee camps.

Target: <1.5 | 2019 result: 0.3

**FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION**

61% of surveyed sites had acceptable levels of global acute malnutrition (>10%). 2019 result: 61%

**WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE**

43% of people of concern had at least 20 litres of safe water per day.

Target: 45%

Building better futures

**EDUCATION**

1.7 million children enrolled in primary education.

Target: 1.9 million | 2019 result: 1,476,716*

**RESETTLEMENT**

22,800 UNHCR-facilitated resettlement departures.

Target: 70,000 | 2019 result: 63,726

**ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

1.7 million people of concern had access to a sustainable source of electricity. Target: 2.5 million

* Data includes backlog since the previous Global Report reporting cut-off date (30 July 2019) and assessments reported in the Global Report 2019.
GLOBAL STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2020-2021

The Global Strategic Priorities (GSPs) for the 2020-2021 biennium set out areas targeted by UNHCR to enhance protection for people of concern and find solutions for them. The GSPs are divided into two categories: “operational priorities” for field operations and “support and management priorities” for core organizational functions. The operational priorities influence the development and implementation of country-level plans by field operations. The GSPs are in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and reflect UNHCR’s 2017-2021 Strategic Directions and commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit, including under the Grand Bargain.

This year for the first time, the Global Strategic Priorities are fully integrated into the Global Report, and reporting on UNHCR’s achievements and challenges across all GSP areas in 2020 can be found in the thematic chapters of the Global Report.

OPERATIONAL GSPs

FAVOURABLE PROTECTION ENVIRONMENT

1. Safeguarding access to territorial protection and asylum procedures; protection against refoulement; and supporting the adoption of nationality laws that prevent and/or reduce statelessness (Legislation on refugees, Law and Policy on IDPs and Legislation on statelessness)

NARRATIVES in the chapter on Safeguarding fundamental rights

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<th>HOW WAS UNHCR ENGAGED?</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Extent law consistent with international standards relating to refugees and asylum seekers</td>
<td>Improving national law and policy in 80 countries.</td>
<td>Improved in 9 countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent law and policy consistent with international standards relating to internal displacement</td>
<td>Improving national law and policy in 17 countries.</td>
<td>Improved in 14 countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent citizenship law consistent with international standards relating to prevention of statelessness</td>
<td>Improving citizenship laws in 40 countries.</td>
<td>Improved in 19 countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of stateless persons for whom nationality granted or confirmed</td>
<td>Seeking rise in rate of stateless people acquiring or confirming nationality in 14 situations.</td>
<td>63,200 stateless individuals acquiring or having their nationality confirmed.</td>
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FAIR PROTECTION PROCESS AND DOCUMENTATION

2. Securing birth registration, profiling and individual documentation based on registration (Birth registration and Registration)

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<td>% of children under 12 months old who have been issued with a birth certificate by the authorities</td>
<td>Increasing systematic issuance of birth certificates to newborns in 53 situations.</td>
<td>Improved in 20 situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of people of concern registered on an individual basis</td>
<td>Maintaining or increasing levels of individual registration in 96 refugee situations.</td>
<td>Maintained in 45 situations</td>
</tr>
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</table>

BASIC NEEDS AND SERVICES

3. Reducing protection risks faced by people of concern, in particular, discrimination, gender-based violence and specific risks faced by children (Gender-based violence response, Best interests procedures and Access to national child services)

NARRATIVES in the chapter on Responding with life-saving support

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<td>Extent known gender-based violence survivors receive appropriate support</td>
<td>Improving support for gender-based violence survivors in 95 refugee operations, 10 IDP situations and 3 returnee situations.</td>
<td>Improved in 42 situations</td>
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<td>Extent community is active in gender-based violence prevention and survivor-centred protection</td>
<td>Improving community involvement in prevention of gender-based violence and protection of survivors in 57 refugee situations, 8 IDP situations and 4 returnee situations.</td>
<td>Improved in 21 situations</td>
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<td>Extent children of concern have non-discriminatory access to national child protection and social services</td>
<td>Increasing non-discriminatory access to national child protection and social services in 37 refugee situations, 4 IDP situations and 3 returnee situations.</td>
<td>Improved in 15 situations</td>
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<td>Prevalence of global acute malnutrition (GAM) (6-59 months)</td>
<td>Maintaining UNHCR standards or reducing level of GAM in 36 refugee camp/settlement situations.</td>
<td>Standard met in 27 situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-5 mortality rate</td>
<td>Seeking UNHCR standards or reducing under-5 mortality rates in 44 refugee camp/settlement situations.</td>
<td>Standard met in 159 sites in 19 countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of households living in adequate dwellings</td>
<td>Maintaining or increasing the percentage of households living in adequate dwellings in 48 refugee situations, 15 IDP situations and 7 returnee situations.</td>
<td>Increased in 56 situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of litres of potable water available per person per day</td>
<td>Maintaining or increasing the level of water supply in 46 refugee situations.</td>
<td>Increased in 26 situations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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4. Reducing mortality, morbidity and malnutrition through multi-sectoral interventions (Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) and Under-5 mortality rate)

5. Meeting international standards in relation to shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene (Shelter and Water)
COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND SELF-RELIANCE

6. Promoting active participation in decision-making of people of concern and building coexistence with hosting communities (Female participation in leadership and management and Coexistence)

7. Promoting human potential through increased opportunities for quality education and livelihoods support (Self-reliance and Education)

DURABLE SOLUTIONS

8. Expanding opportunities for durable solutions for people of concern, particularly those in protracted situations, including by strengthening the use of comprehensive approaches and contributing to sustainable reintegration, local settlement and successful resettlement in third countries

SUPPORT AND MANAGEMENT GSPs

1. FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT

> NARRATIVES in the chapter on Funding UNHCR’s programmes

INDICATOR | RESULTS
--- | ---
UNHCR streamlined its financial management and reporting systems and applied effective financial controls |UNHCR's annual financial statements included a statement of internal controls for the first time.
UNHCR records and discloses its accounts in compliance with the International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS) |UNHCR closed its 2019 accounts and obtained an unqualified opinion from an audit conducted virtually due to COVID-19.
UNHCR embeds robust financial controls and business processes in delivery of cash assistance |UNHCR supported digitalization of new payment mechanisms and secure and direct cash delivery.
UNHCR simplified and harmonized its partnership arrangements and entrusted a greater share of resources to local partners |51.455 billion was sent to 1,143 partners, including 728 national NGOs. 28% of operational programme expenditure went to local/national responders (above 25% Grand Bargain commitment.)

2. INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

> NARRATIVES in the chapter on Safeguarding fundamental rights

INDICATOR | RESULTS
--- | ---
UNHCR strengthens global protection and solutions capacity and response with direct operational support, enhanced monitoring and partnerships |Greater community engagement and COVID-related innovations facilitated forcibly displaced people's active participation and role as frontline responders.
UNHCR enhances promotion of gender equality and reinforces accountability to people of concern at global and operational levels |UNHCR issued operational guidance on risk communication and use of instant messaging, and operational guidance and a guide for senior managers on accountability to affected people.

3. PROTECTION AND SOLUTIONS

> NARRATIVES in the chapters on Safeguarding fundamental rights and Responding with life-saving support

INDICATOR | RESULTS
--- | ---
UNHCR (in close collaboration with States, international development and peacebuilding entities and other relevant actors) supervises and advocates in favour of national, regional and global protection frameworks and capacities |UNHCR advocated for States’ accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Despite COVID-related court closures, UNHCR intervened as a third party in 18 cases in 10 jurisdictions.
By partnering, supporting national systems and institutions, and implementing comprehensive responses, UNHCR strengthens the protection of displaced and stateless persons |UNHCR co-chaired the Global Protection Cluster task team on anti-trafficking in humanitarian action, and issued the “Introduction guide to anti-trafficking action in internal displacement contexts”.

4. USE OF DATA AND INFORMATION

> NARRATIVES in the chapter on Transformative initiatives

INDICATOR | RESULTS
--- | ---
UNHCR and partners manage and use data and information to enable evidence-based actions, programme design and resourcing decisions |UNHCR issued a report on SDGs and displacement, led assessments for UN Special Rapporteurs’ reports on people with disabilities, and developed a demographic data model for evidence-based programming.
UNHCR makes information and analysis available to support the inclusion of refugees and other people of concern in international and national development frameworks |UNHCR led inter-agency processes to develop monitoring frameworks, including a global inter-agency multi-sectoral COVID-19 monitoring framework.
UNHCR’s data and information management approaches, including storing and sharing of personal data, respect protection practices and privacy concerns |A WFP-UNHCR hub supported collaboration and data interoperability, and UNHCR provided technical leadership to the UN Common Cash Statement Working Group.
UNHCR aims for common cash transfer arrangements with partners, implement and scale up cash assistance programmes in an informed joint humanitarian action.

UNHCR applies a proactive approach to security management, with a qualified security workforce, security training and support to emergencies.

UNHCR analyzed progress towards workforce diversity and gender parity, and created the UNHCR Skills Catalogue, including close to 1,400 skills, including insights on skill gaps and talent requirements.

UNHCR has stocks of core relief items to provide emergency assistance for up to 600,000 people and dispatched within 72 hours.

UNHCR has the systems, tools, skills and processes needed to inform and guide joint humanitarian action.

UNHCR expanded political and operational support from private and public sectors to improve the welfare of displaced populations and host communities.

UNHCR has the systems, tools, skills and processes needed to inform joint humanitarian action.

UNHCR has plans to scale up digital assistance across a range of contexts in an informed joint humanitarian action.

UNHCR is informed by improved joint needs assessments and developed and implemented in consultation with key stakeholders, including national authorities, civil society, development partners and private sector representatives.

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