



Burundians Return to Homeland from Tanzania

In less than six weeks up to Dec. 11, more than 34,000 former Burundian refugees returned to their homeland with the help of UNHCR and its partners in both Burundi and Tanzania. International agencies stepped forward to assist the Burundians after the Tanzanian Government concluded they were no longer refugees and announced it would close Mtabila refugee camp by the end of the year.



Returnees receive a warm welcome in Muyange. © UNHCR/K. McKinsey

more than half a million returnees since 2002. “We have helped returnees reclaim their land, build homes, learn skills, start businesses and, in general, resume normal lives,” says Catherine Huck, UNHCR representative in Burundi. “UNHCR intends to continue working closely with the government and development organizations to make sure that this latest group of returnees can restart their lives.”

The Hub provided broad support to the Burundian return operation through the participation of several of its specialist units, including Field Safety, Public Information, Registration and Profiling, Refugee Systems and Status Determination.

UNHCR and partners including the International Organization for Migration arranged convoys of trucks and buses to take the thousands of Burundians across the border and then on to locations throughout Burundi. After an initially slow start, the pace of return quickly increased as the former refugees understood peaceful conditions prevailed in Burundi, family and friends would welcome them and that they would receive assistance – even to settle land claims. “We see more and more people coming forward and the pace of the convoys is picking up,” Chansa Kapaya, UNHCR’s acting representative in Tanzania, reported at the time.

Of course, it’s never easy for former refugees to return to their homeland and rebuild their lives. But those are areas where UNHCR can certainly help, assisting the Burundi Government to reintegrate

The Regional Support Hub publishes the RSH Bulletin to provide illustrative examples of the work done by country operations and RSH specialists for refugees.

The Hub Looks Back, Around ... and Ahead!

Yes, there were lessons-learned but there were also applause, laughter and colourful outfits as well as an array of international cuisine at the recent year-end retreat that the Regional Support Hub hosted at its Nairobi office. Unusual perhaps but then again, according to the head of the Hub, Thomas Albrecht, this retreat and strategic-planning session were all about thinking differently.



RSH Head Thomas Albrecht © UNHCR/D. Maclsaac

“We have to take a different approach,” he said, urging the 80 colleagues participating in the retreat to look at UNHCR operations across the region in new ways and, specifically, to consider bottom-up planning and to embrace innovative approaches. Communication was another key theme throughout the retreat. “UNHCR does very good work in this region,” Albrecht said, “but few people know about it.”

Considering the Hub serves some 13 UNHCR country offices, 22 sub-offices, 38 field offices and 37 field units in the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region, Albrecht said there is a lot to tell the world about the positive impact UNHCR is having in the lives of hundreds of thousands of refugees.

Albrecht also spoke of the importance of making sure that UNHCR staff in the region know exactly what resources are available to help them – specifically through the Hubs’s 22 specialist units, ranging from Registration and Profiling to Health Information Systems to HIV/AIDS and Reproductive Health. Furthermore, Albrecht stressed that lessons learned from operational successes (and also from challenges) must be documented and then shared with colleagues and partners through the region – and beyond.

“There is no point in simply going out on missions or simply writing emails to one country operation and then the next and the next,” he said. “What we should be focusing on is building capacity – practical, results-oriented guidance materials with simple tools and checklists – and walking jointly with operations towards solutions.”

The retreat was particularly timely in that it heralded the start of annual planning at the Hub, when the Executive, Administration and specialist units consider, debate and draft new strategic directions and work plans for the years to come. The process yielded, for example, the 2013-2015 Strategic Directions of the Regional Support Hub, which will soon be made available to colleagues at offices in the region and at UNHCR Headquarters.



Staff dress up for the retreat. © UNHCR/D. Maclsaac

Ethiopia JAM Tackles Food Insecurity Puzzle

In some places in Ethiopia, aid agencies have been feeding refugees for more than 20 years. So why don't refugees always have enough food? UNHCR operations and senior management made answering this question a top priority by supporting a joint assessment mission (JAM) at the end of last year.

“When refugees arrive, they have limited resources – so a joint assessment is important for providing critical information on how we assist them,” says Moses Okello, UNHCR’s representative to Ethiopia. “And UNHCR fully supports the JAM exercise – the results will help all parties improve the delivery of services to refugees, including access to food.”

For her part, Allison Oman says a joint assessment mission is like a jigsaw puzzle, and that the latest JAM that UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) conducted in Ethiopia was no exception. “A JAM is trying to understand food insecurity in the refugee context – and every piece of information is another small piece that forms the whole,” says Oman, the Hub’s senior regional nutrition and food security officer.

“If you discover that refugees are using 30% of their ration to mill the remaining 70%, then this is a clear area for intervention, and if you discover that refugees are selling a specific commodity because they don’t like it or don’t recognize its value, this is also a piece of the puzzle,” Oman continues. “Nutritional status, access to clean water, domestic fuel – all of these can support or diminish food security – and so, we spend the JAM trying to complete the puzzle so that we can make meaningful recommendations to improve the lives of refugees.”



The joint assessment mission team from UNHCR, WFP, the Ethiopian Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) and other partners travelled to Afar, Shire, Assosa, Gambella and Dollo Ado to meet with stakeholders – including refugee and host communities and local authorities. Donor observers from ECHO, the U.S. Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration, and Britain’s Department for International Development also joined the mission. Sub-teams looked into food security/coping strategies, and issues such as access roads, distribution and infrastructure.

ARRA’s Herodawit Merid leads a community forum during the JAM. © UNHCR/S. Tadesse

And the JAM made an effort to ensure the refugees’ voices were, and are, heard, through the use of focus-group discussions and interviews and consultation on the draft report and recommendations. “Refugees will often say, you came and asked us a bunch of questions and then nothing happened, nothing improved,” Oman says. “The goal in a JAM is to ensure that this is not the case and that refugees can feel the positive impact on their food security and lives after a JAM takes place.” At the close of the fieldwork, mission members met in Addis Ababa to consolidate their findings and settle on common issues and concerns. Oman says the JAM received great support from the UNHCR, WFP and ARRA field teams.

Dadaab Wireless Project Helps Connect Partners



Dadaab receiver © UNHCR/E. Njoroge

UNHCR partners at the refugee camps in Dadaab, Kenya, will soon enjoy more accessible and secure online communication thanks to a new IT project – which could very well expand to benefit UNHCR operations across the region. “For security reasons, we won’t need to use public ISPs (Internet service providers); we’ll have our own system,” says Abdalla Khalil, senior regional IT officer at the Hub. “There is Internet service in Dadaab now, but it’s not reliable or available all the time.”

The Internet Connectivity Project aims to solve such problems, with UNHCR providing the Internet connection to its partners. A VSAT satellite dish has been installed at the UNHCR sub-office in Dadaab. And Khalil and his team have been busy setting up a wireless network linking the dish to the Dadaab SO telecommunications tower and receivers hosted by partners and NGOs around the camps. The team has been configuring routers, and expects the new Internet service to be up and running by the end of January. Among the 22 organizations set to benefit from the new service are CARE Kenya, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and the Kenyan Department of Refugee Affairs (DRA).

Khalil says the new wireless service won’t necessarily be faster, just more reliable, easier to maintain and economical as

well – because UNHCR will own the system and no longer have to pay partners to maintain their own Internet service. “It’s ours,” he says. But it could be yours, too. Khalil adds that if the Dadaab experiment proves successful, UNHCR should be able to offer similar wireless service at its operations across the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region.

Better Data Promises Better Resettlement Process in Eritrea

Software upgrades and a verification exercise in Eritrea have combined to bring benefits to Somali refugees there and particularly those refugees awaiting resettlement. Indeed, several RSH specialist units have combined to carry out the series of missions in support of Eritrea Protection staff: Refugee Systems, Registration and Profiling, and Resettlement.

The team started by upgrading to proGres 3.2.4 and updating the database. But they soon realized they would have to carry out a physical validation of the refugee population to resolve data inconsistencies. And that need meant they also had to come up with a registration methodology and process for updating data capable of handling the three main refugee settlements in Eritrea and the various servers involved.



UNHCR's Anhared Price helps conduct the verification exercise. © UNHCR/K. Hagi

It was a big challenge, but one that had to be met. The verification exercise, which started in September, is the first since a partial one around 2003. UNHCR understood the need to reconcile inconsistencies between the proGres database and the Eritrean Government’s food-distribution list. “First, the verification exercise is significant because it gives us a clearer picture of the numbers,” said UNHCR Protection Officer Mwhaki Kinyanjui. “And, second, we were able to see every individual in the camp, verify their bio-data and use the biometric technology to capture their fingerprints.” Kinyanjui calls that “monumental” because Eritrea has a large pending resettlement population – about one-third of the refugees there – and providing accurate registration data is crucial. Besides upgrading proGres, the mission also installed the latest version of the resettlement software CORTS and trained staff to use it – immediately. By the end of the exercise, every refugee had received a proof-of-registration certificate with a verified spelling of their name, and their date and place of birth – approved by UNHCR and the Eritrean Office for Refugee Affairs. “Now that our refugee registration database is so much improved,” Kinyanjui added, “we hope this reduces the processing time for families.”

African Union Pledges Action to Stop Statelessness

The recent African Union Symposium on “Citizenship in Africa: Preventing Statelessness, Preventing Conflicts” was seen as a big step forward in bringing governments and partners together to tackle the issue. AU representatives at the Nairobi meeting pledged to support UNHCR efforts at encouraging member countries to adopt the UN statelessness conventions. Many African countries lack uniform criteria for determining citizenship and, as a result, discrimination can leave people stateless and trigger conflict. Specific ongoing cases of concern include the revoking of Sudanese nationality to Southerners living in the North and the denial of nationality to eligible South Sudanese following South Sudan’s independence. Nationality issues have also led to conflict in Cote d’Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Symposium participants committed to take concrete steps to address statelessness. In their own countries, they agreed to review national laws and to advocate for accession to the 1954 and 1961 international conventions. They also agreed there is an Africa-wide need to identify and map stateless people. “What the pledges mean for UNHCR and others is that we have a lot of material to follow up on with these governments in the next two-to-three years,” says Mark Manly, the head of UNCHR’s Statelessness Unit and on mission from Geneva. “If implemented, they will lead to a significant improvement in the situation – we’ve come a long way and with a lot of momentum, but there’s still a lot to do.”

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