

Severe food shortages impact Africa's refugees

UNHCR and WFP are concerned that sustained cuts to food assistance will have severe nutrition and protection-related consequences as refugees try to cope by skipping meals, pulling their children out of schools to stay at home or work, and selling family assets.



The Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP), Ertharin Cousin and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, are very concerned that critical shortages in food assistance are affecting some 2 million refugees in 10 countries across Africa. The shortages could worsen in coming months without new resources to meet food needs.

The number of refugees in Africa nearly doubled from 2.6 million in 2011 to nearly 5 million in 2016. While donor funding for refugee assistance increased during this period, it did not keep pace with rapidly rising needs. As a result, the humanitarian response is significantly underfunded. This has forced cuts in food assistance for some groups of refugees.

The two agency heads warn that food shortages will have dire consequences on the health and protection of such vulnerable people, unless more support is urgently made available.

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“We can’t imagine how difficult life is for thousands of refugee families with no food, and often denied the possibility to work or provide for themselves in other ways. Refugees are extraordinarily resilient, but cuts in food assistance – sometimes as high as 50% – are having a devastating impact on the health and nutrition of thousands of families,” said UNHCR’s Grandi. “The right to food is a basic human right. We are working with WFP to ensure that no refugee goes to sleep hungry, but support has to come quickly.”

Humanitarian needs

“Millions of refugees depend on WFP food and our work to treat and prevent malnutrition to stay alive. But in Africa they are in danger of being overshadowed by large humanitarian crises elsewhere,” said Cousin. “Donors have been very generous facing unprecedented global needs. But no refugee deserves to be abandoned and left behind.”

UNHCR and WFP recognise the very concerning food security and nutrition situation in the Horn of Africa and the unprecedented needs for assistance. Individuals are fleeing Somalia and South Sudan and arriving as refugees in critical condition. Over 75% of the Somali refugee children who have arrived in Dollo Ado in Ethiopia since January were acutely malnourished.

Ten refugee operations in Africa have experienced cuts affecting the quantity and quality of food assistance for approximately 2 million refugees. Food rations have been dramatically cut – in some cases by up to 50% – in large operations including Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Mauritania, South Sudan and Uganda.

Refugees in Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Burundi and Ethiopia, have had specific commodities cut, including micronutrient fortified blended foods, needed to ensure an adequate quality diet.

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The nutritional situation of these refugees before the cuts to food assistance was already worrying and is now worsening. Nutrition surveys in 2016 documented high levels of acute malnutrition, anaemia and stunting. In many refugee sites in Ethiopia, Chad, Sudan and Djibouti acute malnutrition is 'critical' and anaemia is greater than 40%, indicating a public health crisis.

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