



Protection Eroded: The Human Cost of Underfunding 2026

Credits

UNHCR wishes to acknowledge the contributions of all staff and consultants at Headquarters and in the field who have participated in the preparation of this Underfunding Report.

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The maps in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of UNHCR concerning the legal status of any country or territory or area, of its authorities, or the delimitation of frontiers or boundaries.

Data in this report are drawn from the most recent statistics available to UNHCR, financial data as of 31 July 2026 or otherwise specified.

For any corrigenda found subsequent to publication, please visit the [Underfunding webpage](#) on the UNHCR.org website.

All financial amounts are expressed in US dollars unless otherwise specified.

Cover photo: After 10 years as a refugee in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Jeanne returned to Burundi with her 10 children through a voluntary repatriation convoy. Now a member of a local cooperative, she is rebuilding her family's life and future in her homeland.

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Executive summary

UNHCR's ability to protect and assist refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) and stateless people is being eroded by a sustained and worsening funding shortfall. As of July 2026, UNHCR had received only **32% of its total requirement for the year**, leaving nearly **8.3 million forcibly displaced people at risk of losing access to UNHCR assistance**. This decline follows two consecutive years of falling contributions while the number of people under its mandate remains close to record highs.

Falling funding levels are having a dramatic impact on enjoyment of a broad range of rights. In many contexts, underfunding is already causing the loss of essential services and systems that protect people forced to flee from violence, exploitation, exclusion, and other risks. From Chad, where more than 1 million protection and livelihoods services will be cut impacting hundreds of thousands of refugees, to Afghanistan, where over a million refugees returned or forced to return are not receiving the support they need to rebuild – displaced people are already bearing the brunt of this underfunding.

This report traces that impact across the whole journey a refugee makes from the moment they cross a border and are registered and documented, through having their claim for protection recognized, to preventing and responding to gender-based violence and harm to children, to rebuilding a self-reliant life and, ultimately, to a safe and sustainable return home.

A funding gap at any one stage of this journey has consequences for the rest. Registration backlogs leave people without legal identity, which limits access to services and heightens exposure to arrest, detention or refoulement. Closed safe houses leave gender-based violence survivors without medical, legal, or psychosocial support, risking prolonged harm.

Under-resourced child protection systems leave children unidentified and exposed to separation, exploitation, or recruitment. And returnees without reintegration support may be pushed into harmful coping strategies or renewed displacement – back to the country they just left, or onto dangerous onward journeys in search of safety.¹ Protection impacts are also severe for internally displaced people.

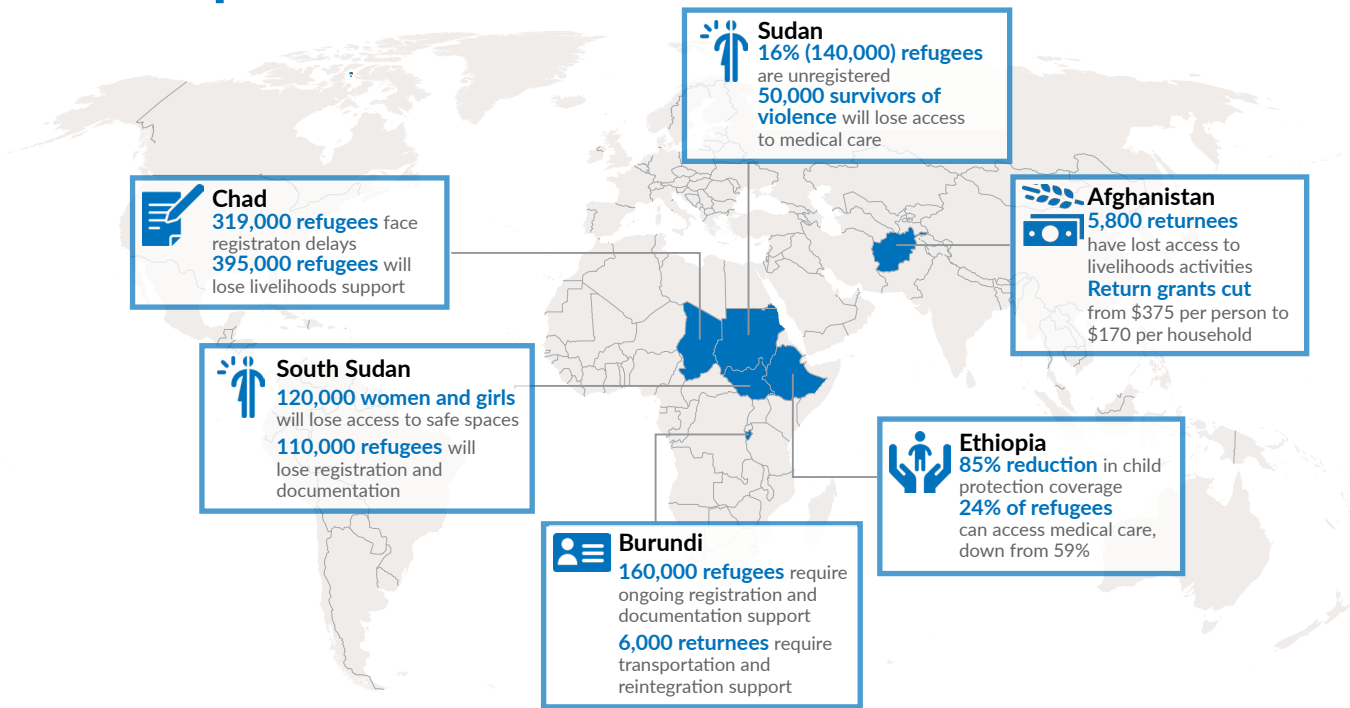
Even while UNHCR prioritizes protection and solutions work in its allocation of shrinking resources, the scale and persistence of the shortfall means even these prioritized areas are now facing significant reductions in capacity. Further cuts can no longer be absorbed without putting people at direct risk – by leaving survivors without safe places to go, children without protection, people without legal status, and returnees without the support they need to reintegrate safely.

UNHCR is not alone. Across the humanitarian and development community, including governments, UN agencies, NGOs and civil society organizations, funding shortfalls are forcing reductions in services, limiting support for vulnerable populations and constraining the ability to respond to massive unmet needs.

The examples that follow illustrate both the damage already done and what is at further risk by the end of 2026. Unlike food or shelter, protection cannot be rationed into smaller portions for more people: you cannot deliver 60% of a legal status or half a safe house. **Below a certain threshold, the system doesn't shrink, it fails.** And this failure leaves people outside of the system unprotected and without the support they need to rebuild their lives.

¹ Data relating to onward movement is available at [Situation Route-Based Approach](#).

Examples of countries under strain



While every country featured in this report is affected, a small number demonstrate protection and solutions systems at the point of collapse.

Afghanistan is a returns crisis unfolding in real time. Over a million people have returned in 2026 alone, driven largely by deportation and adverse conditions in neighbouring countries, and arriving in a country many have never lived in. Returns grants have been cut from \$375 per person to \$170 per household, and reintegration grants are available to just 175 households so far in 2026, compared to 5,300 households in 2024. This leaves returnees, particularly women and girls facing severe restrictions on work and education, almost nothing to rebuild with.

Burundi is simultaneously absorbing a mass influx of refugees fleeing renewed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while trying to reintegrate 98,000 of its own returning citizens, of whom 6,000 still need basic transportation and reintegration support. Resource constraints now also threaten the continuity of registration services across every hosting area in the country.

Chad is facing a protection crisis at enormous scale as it hosts a large and growing refugee population including from Sudan. At current funding levels, 319,000 people face registration delays, 200,000 women and girls will lose access to gender-based

violence safe spaces, 233,000 children will no longer receive protection services, and 395,000 people will be deprived of livelihoods support. Together, they show protection systems at breaking point.

Ethiopia shows how quickly protection erodes without sufficient funding. Safe houses for gender-based violence survivors have more than halved in a year and access to medical care for survivors fell from 59% to 24% in a single quarter. Child protection safety and justice services will reach only 14,000 of the 95,000 children planned an 85% collapse in coverage, while 200,000 South Sudanese and Eritrean asylum-seekers remain unregistered, leaving them without the documentation required to access protection, assistance, freedom of movement, and essential public and private services.

In **Sudan**, refugee registration was suspended for the first five months of 2026, leaving 140,000 people or 16% of the population without legal identity, significantly increasing the risk of arrest, detention or deportation, while limiting access to essential services such as healthcare, education, food assistance and legal protection. Conflict-related sexual violence remains widespread in Darfur and Kordofan, where more than 50,000 survivors will lose access to life-saving post-rape care without further funding.

South Sudan shows how funding shortfalls can undermine protection and solutions at multiple stages. Around 5,000 new asylum-seekers arrived each month from Sudan in early 2026, adding pressure to asylum procedures which are only 28% funded. Without additional funding, up to 110,000 people will lose access to registration and documentation, more than 80,000 women and girls

will go without specialized gender-based violence services, and over 10,000 children will be left without critical child protection support.

Together, these operations are not warning signs. They are the places where protection is already failing and where the consequences are unfolding in real time.

“Humanitarian assistance saves lives and must continue wherever needs arise. But when emergency tools become the long-term default, and entire generations remain trapped in dependency, we are not building sustainability. We must measure success by whether people can rebuild their lives.”

– Barham Salih, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

UNHCR has already taken difficult decisions

Since the dramatic downward trend in financing the humanitarian system, UNHCR has implemented extensive prioritization and efficiency measures to preserve critical protection and solutions activities. The organization had to make the difficult decision to reduce its workforce by 33% in 2025. Its presence was also significantly reduced, with offices closed in 140 locations worldwide and operations discontinued in 15 countries compared to 2024. At the same time, UNHCR implemented efficiency measures and estimated savings of more than \$135 million through asset sales, cost reductions and quantified efficiency gains in 2025. Efforts to identify and implement further efficiencies continue in 2026, with a focus on maximizing the impact of available resources while maintaining critical protection and assistance for people forced to flee.

UNHCR is also contributing actively to the UN80 reform agenda, working with the wider UN system to identify opportunities for greater coherence, efficiency and effectiveness while safeguarding clear accountability for refugee protection. This includes work on common services, integrated supply chains, humanitarian and beneficiary-data interoperability, closer complementarity with sister agencies, and the redesign of country and regional support arrangements to better reflect displacement, protection and cross-border realities. These efforts complement UNHCR's own reforms, with the shared objective of reducing duplication and administrative burden so that increasingly scarce resources can be directed towards protection, assistance and solutions for forcibly displaced and stateless people.

These measures have helped slow the impact of funding declines, but they cannot fully offset the consequences of a funding shortfall of this magnitude. Many of the impacts highlighted in this report are occurring despite substantial efforts to increase efficiency and concentrate resources on the highest-priority activities. Efficiency measures, including those pursued through UN80, are essential, but they cannot substitute for the resources required to maintain essential protection systems. In many contexts, further reductions can no longer be absorbed without affecting essential protection services, support to national systems, and pathways toward self-reliance and solutions.

Global overview: What is at stake?

Funding shortfalls are increasingly affecting UNHCR's ability to sustain critical protection and solutions activities for forcibly displaced people in the countries where it works. From 2024 to 2025, available funding decreased by 24%, falling from \$5.178 billion to \$3.932 billion. This downward trend continued into 2026. As of 31 July 2026², UNHCR had received \$2.716 billion against total requirements of \$8.505 billion, covering only 32% of the funding needed for the year (a funding gap of \$5.789 billion). This represents nearly half the amount of funding available in 2024.

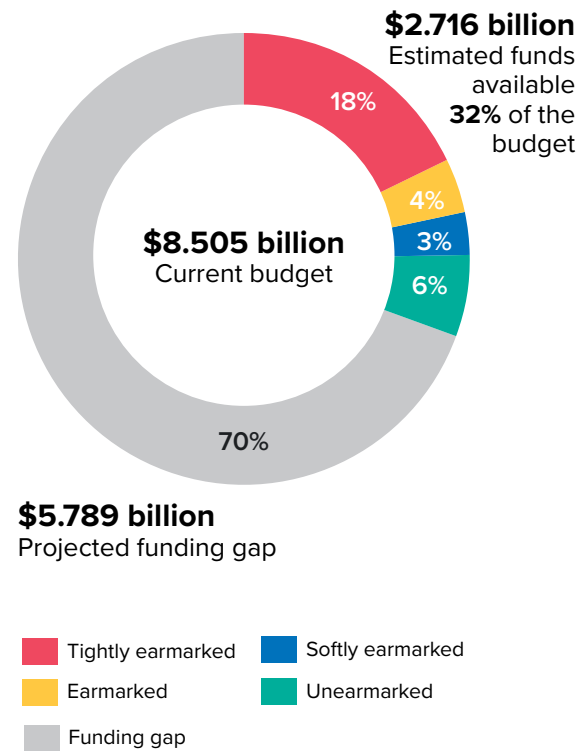
The consequences of this funding gap are already being felt across operations. In 2025, UNHCR supported almost 30.7 million people with a range of services, including protection, cash assistance, healthcare, education, shelter and core relief items.

In 2026, funding shortfalls have put nearly 8.3 million forcibly displaced people at risk of losing access to this assistance.

This is not just a reduction in the number of people reached. It reflects growing pressure on the systems that protect people, support their inclusion and reduce long-term dependency.

This is despite the fact that the population that UNHCR is mandated to serve is not reducing. At the end of 2025, 129.4 million people were forcibly displaced or stateless worldwide, equivalent to approximately one in every 64 people globally, and the number of people under UNHCR's mandate is projected to rise to 131.2 million by the end of 2026.

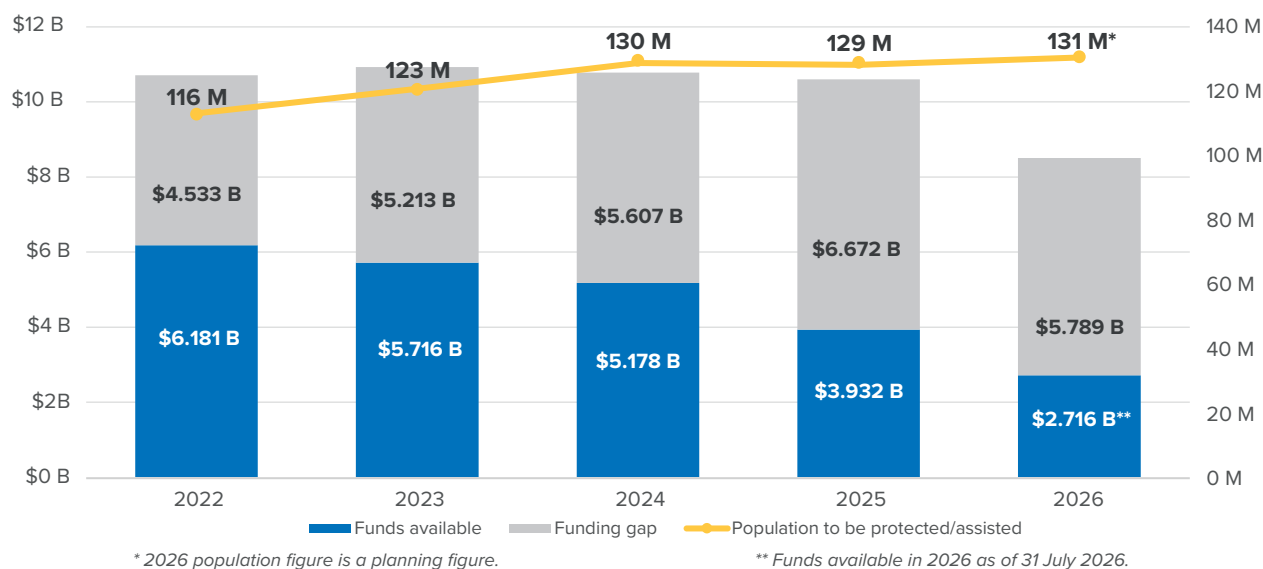
Registration and documentation, asylum procedures, gender-based violence prevention and response, child protection, self-reliance and economic inclusion, and voluntary return and reintegration – these are the key building blocks of protection and solutions, which UNHCR is endeavoring to prioritize. However, the scale and persistence of the funding crisis mean that even these prioritized areas are now experiencing significant reductions in capacity.



An estimated **8.3 million** people forced to flee are at risk of losing access to direct assistance in 2026 due to lack of funds.

² All funding figures and data are valid as of 31 July 2026, unless otherwise stated.

Funds available, funding gap and population growth | 2022-2026



The risk is not just that fewer services reach fewer people – it is the gradual erosion of the systems that make protection possible in the first place. Once these protection systems are broken, people fall through the cracks: refugees who have crossed borders remain undocumented and are more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation; survivors of violence are not reached with support and remain trapped in cycles of violence, unaccompanied and separated children are not reunited and may be trafficked or married off, and families are kept in aid dependency instead of becoming self-reliant.

Reduced investment in these systems can reverse years of progress, increase social exclusion and protection risks, place additional pressure on host communities, and ultimately result in higher long-term humanitarian and development costs for governments and the international community alike.

This challenge strikes at the heart of UNHCR's 50 by 35 vision, which aims for more than half of aid-dependent refugees in protracted situations to move towards self-reliance or durable solutions by 2035. Achieving that ambition requires sustained investment in national systems, inclusion, livelihoods and pathways to solutions. The current funding crisis risks pushing progress in the opposite direction, prolonging dependency, weakening resilience and leaving fewer people able to build sustainable futures.

UNHCR has the experience, the technical knowledge and the partnerships required to preserve critical protection systems and keep open pathways towards self-reliance, inclusion and lasting solutions. However, doing so requires sufficient, flexible and predictable funding, enabling UNHCR to create lasting change for people forced to flee.

Shrinking resources, growing constraints: The reality of the current funding landscape

Despite concerted efforts to diversify funding, UNHCR’s capacity to assist people forced to flee and to support governments in strengthening protection and solutions systems is being constrained by both a decline in overall funding and an increase in tightly earmarked funding.

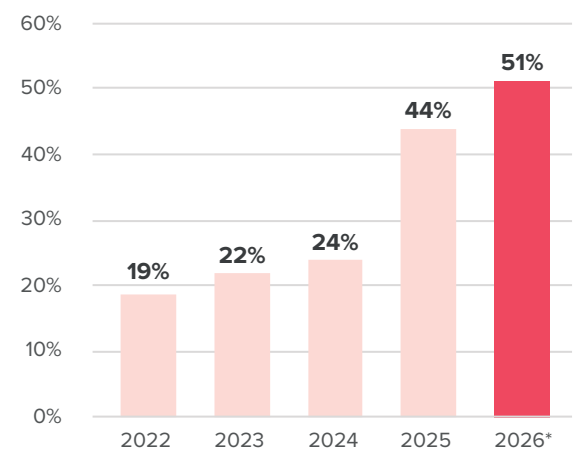
The proportion of tightly earmarked funding has risen significantly over the past five years, increasing from 19% of total contributions in 2022 to 51% by 31 July 2026. In practical terms, a growing share of resources can only be used for specific activities or projects designated by donors, reducing UNHCR's flexibility to direct funding to the most urgent priorities and address critical gaps.

While funding shortfalls are affecting all areas of UNHCR's work, this report focuses on six thematic areas that trace key points along the displacement journey, from initial displacement and access to protection, to protracted displacement and efforts towards inclusion and self-reliance, and ultimately, where conditions allow, voluntary and dignified return and sustainable reintegration.

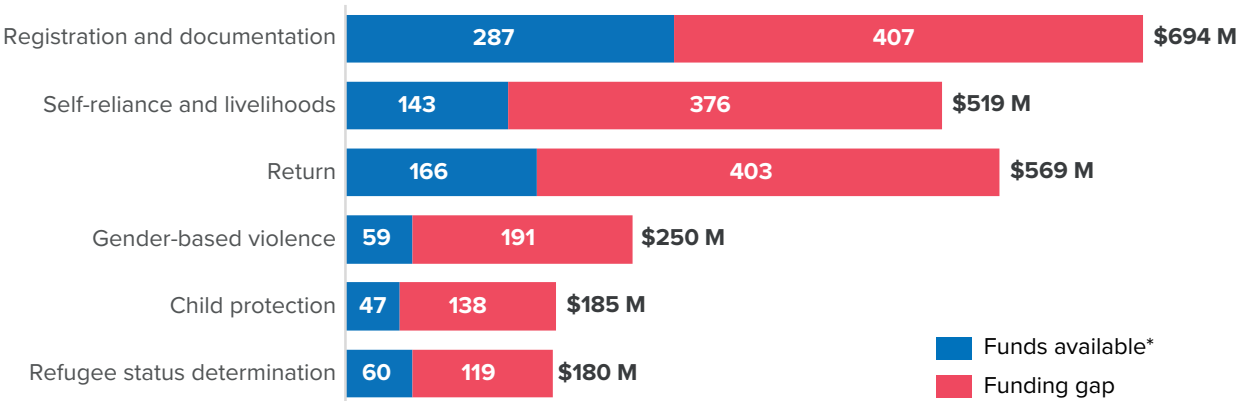
When funding is reduced at any point along this pathway, the consequences can extend far beyond the immediate loss of a service. As a result, short-term funding constraints can translate into longer-term protection risks, increased dependency on humanitarian assistance, and slower progress towards sustainable solutions.

As overall funding declines and earmarking increases, flexible funding becomes even more critical. UNHCR is deeply grateful to donors who demonstrate their trust through flexible funding, enabling the organization to direct scarce resources where they can have the greatest impact. Flexible funding allows UNHCR to respond rapidly to emergencies, sustain critical protection activities, close urgent funding gaps and support underfunded operations. Examples of how flexible funding has been used across operations in 2026 can be found in the [Flexible Funding Q2 Factsheet](#).

Growth of tightly earmarked funding in total contributions | 2022 - 2026



Funding gaps in key outcome areas | USD millions



*As of 31 July 2026



Refugees benefit from the registration services available at the One-stop-shop Community Centre in Zakho, Iraq, which also offers legal counselling, vocational training, community awareness and family activities. © UNHCR/Rasheed Hussein Rasheed



REGISTRATION AND DOCUMENTATION

The foundation of protection and access to rights

- Budgeted needs: **\$694 million** – Funding level: **41%**
- Contributions: **\$287 million**, of which **\$98 million** or **34%** is flexible funding

Registration and documentation services at risk

- **573,000** refugees and asylum-seekers will not be enrolled in the national biometric ID system in **Chad**.
- **500,000** refugees awaiting inclusion in the national digital ID system and **200,000** South Sudanese refugees and Eritrean asylum-seekers will remain unregistered in **Ethiopia**.
- **140,000** refugees and asylum-seekers remain unregistered in **Sudan**.
- **Up to 110,000** refugees and IDPs will lose access to registration services in **South Sudan**.
- **160,000** refugees awaiting registration in **Burundi**.

When people flee across an international border, receiving safe access to territory and receiving registration and documentation are essential first steps, from which all other forms of assistance flow. Without the establishment of legal identity and protection status, refugees lose access to life-saving aid, essential services as well as the ability to

access longer-term solutions. UNHCR's registration data is used not only by host countries but by other agencies for their own programmes. For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) uses UNHCR registration data to target, deliver, and track food and cash assistance for refugees. Without documentation other forms of life-saving aid collapse.

In **Sudan**, refugee registration activities were suspended during the first five months of 2026, leaving approximately 140,000 refugees and asylum-seekers – 16% of the population – unregistered by mid-year. Only 22,500 identity documents had been issued or renewed against an annual target of 120,000.

In **Uganda**, funding shortfalls from mid-October 2026 will halt registration for an estimated 20,000 newly arrived asylum-seekers, while also jeopardizing protection services such as the identification and targeted assistance of people with specific needs across settlements hosting more than 2 million refugees.

In addition, without legal identity documents, refugees and asylum-seekers cannot access education, healthcare or livelihood opportunities and also face heightened risks including arrest, detention, exploitation, and even refoulement.

In **Chad**, nearly 319,000 refugees and asylum-seekers will face delays in registration and documentation due to reduced staffing capacity, limiting access to assistance and humanitarian services. More than 573,000 refugees and asylum-seekers will not be enrolled in the national biometric identification system that enables them to access banking and public services like healthcare and education.

Similarly, in **Lebanon**, funding shortfalls will leave up to 11,000 refugees without timely registration, restricting access to specialized services, health care and education while also limiting their freedom of movement and increasing exposure to protection risks.

Where technical and operational support to national registration systems is reduced, parallel processes persist, increasing costs and affecting refugees' ability to integrate into their communities and become self-reliant.

In **Ethiopia**, without additional funding beyond September, approximately 200,000 refugees from South Sudan and previously unregistered Eritrean

asylum-seekers will not be registered. In addition, more than 500,000 refugees await verification and inclusion in the national Fayda digital ID system, which would allow them to open bank accounts, register mobile phone numbers, access education and healthcare, and obtain other services.

Without additional funding to sustain government-led registration and documentation activities, backlogs will increase, and ongoing verification processes will be suspended.

In **South Sudan**, an estimated 90,000 to 110,000 refugees and internally displaced people will lose access to timely registration and documentation services, while a further 30,000 individuals in Jonglei and other displacement-affected areas require civil documentation like national identity cards and birth certificates to reduce risks of statelessness and facilitate access to education and basic services.

Resource constraints in **Burundi** are also threatening the continuity of refugee registration services across all hosting areas, at a time when the response to the mass influx of refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo is placing additional pressure on registration and documentation systems. Approximately 160,000 refugees require ongoing registration and documentation support.

These examples show that reduced investment in registration and documentation does more than create administrative backlogs. It leaves people without legal recognition, reduces the capacity to identify and address specific needs, and limits referrals to specialized support including cash assistance, legal aid, and psychosocial support. As a result, their exposure to protection risks rises, while their ability to benefit from national systems declines. In some situations, it can even contribute to onward movement or further displacement. Where support to government-led systems is reduced, parallel processes may persist, increasing costs and limiting efficiency, sustainability and inclusiveness of protection and documentation systems.



Vumi Bahati, a 38-year-old refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, holds her one-year-old son, Lungwe Maala, during a visit to Field Post 2 in Kakuma to complete documentation that recognizes her legal status in Kenya after fleeing conflict with her eight children. © UNHCR/Eric Bakuli



REFUGEE STATUS DETERMINATION

Strengthening national asylum systems

- Budgeted needs: **\$180 million** – Funding level: **34%**
- Contributions: **\$60 million**, of which **\$30 million** or **49%** is flexible funding

Increasing asylum backlogs and delaying access to protection

- **229,000+** asylum-seekers await decisions in **Kenya**, with **3.5+ years** waiting time.
- **173,500** asylum claims pending, with processing time doubled to **2 years** in **Mexico**.
- **60%+** reduction in refugee status determination staffing since 2024 in **Malaysia**.
- **4,000** asylum-seekers await decisions in **South Sudan**.

For people fleeing persecution and violence, an asylum decision can be the difference between finding protection and being sent back into danger. When asylum systems cannot keep up, people are left in limbo – sometimes for years – without a clear pathway to safety. Refugee status determination, or asylum procedures, determine whether a person who has crossed

an international border qualifies for refugee protection. Today, 118 countries have operational asylum procedures, with UNHCR providing technical assistance and legal guidance. UNHCR may also conduct refugee status determination when a State is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and/or does not have a fair and efficient national asylum procedure in place.

However, asylum systems are under strain. Limited resources are creating backlogs and lengthening waiting times, while in some countries people are facing greater barriers to accessing asylum in the first place. This increases the risk that people who need protection are left without it or returned to danger.

Underfunding is also threatening asylum systems meant to benefit both people seeking protection and the countries that host them. When asylum systems are funded and supported, they help governments identify who needs international protection, manage arrivals in an orderly and fair way and provide refugees and asylum-seekers with a clearer pathway to safety and stability. When they do not, people can remain undocumented and unable to access basic rights, while governments face growing backlogs and pressure on already stretched systems.

In **Mexico**, a backlog of 173,500 asylum claims has accumulated due to persistent underfunding reducing government personnel supported by UNHCR from 175 in 2025 to 45 in 2026, and doubling the processing time for asylum claims from one to two years. This delay affects people's access to protection and ability to integrate into their communities, increasing the likelihood that asylum-seekers will move onwards to try to seek safety elsewhere.

In **Malaysia**, where UNHCR conducts refugee status determination under its mandate, resource constraints have reduced UNHCR's refugee status determination staffing by over 60% since 2024, limiting timely access to protection for people already facing risks of arrest, refoulement and restricted access to rights and services. It has also limited UNHCR's capacity to support the Government in developing a national asylum framework.

In **Kenya**, important progress made by the Government to strengthen the asylum system is now at risk. Support to the Government for asylum fell by 43% between 2025 and 2026, alongside a substantial reduction in UNHCR technical support. The asylum system faces a backlog of over 229,000 asylum-seekers, with waiting times exceeding 3.5 years. For many, this means years without refugee documentation, limiting access to healthcare, work rights and inclusion opportunities, while increasing physical protection risks.

In **South Sudan**, nearly 4,000 asylum-seekers await decisions in the national asylum system which relies heavily on UNHCR for admission, registration, documentation and claim adjudication. Only a third of funding needed to support these systems has been received, placing additional strain on South Sudan's ability to respond to a growing number of asylum-seekers.

When asylum systems are underfunded, the consequences are not simply longer waiting times. People can remain in uncertainty for years, protection decisions are delayed, and the risk of refoulement and onward movement increases. Investing in these systems helps countries manage arrivals fairly and efficiently and prevents temporary backlogs from becoming long-term protection crises.



Newly arrived Sudanese refugees are being transported from Yida Reception Centre and Pamir Transit Centre to Ajoung Thok and Pamir refugee sites in South Sudan. There, they gain access to basic services including emergency shelter, clean water, education for their children and specialized protection services, including prevention and response to gender-based violence.

© UNHCR/Reason Moses Runyanga

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE Preventing and responding to gender-based violence

- Budgeted needs: **\$250 million** – Funding level: **24%**
- Contributions: **\$59 million**, of which **\$21 million** or **35%** is flexible funding

Women and girls losing access to gender-based violence programmes

- **200,000 women and girls** will lose access to safe spaces and prevention programmes in **Chad**.
- **175,000 refugees** will lose access to prevention and response services in **Uganda**.
- **129,500 people** will lose access to gender-based violence programmes in **Ethiopia**; medical assistance for survivors of gender-based violence fell from **59% to 24%** in the first half of the year 2026 and only **13** safe spaces remain in 2026, compared to **29** in 2025.
- **80,000 women and girls** will lose access to specialized services and **120,000** to women and girls' safe spaces services in **South Sudan**.
- **80,000 women and girls** will be left without access to dignity kits, cash assistance and specialized services in **Burundi**.
- **50,000 survivors** will lose access to specialized medical services in **Sudan**.
- **13,800 refugee women and girls** will be left without essential gender-based violence interventions in **Lebanon**.

Displaced and stateless people face heightened risks of gender-based violence, with serious and lasting consequences for their safety, health, well-being and dignity. When gender-based violence programmes are underfunded, specialized services close, referral pathways break down, survivors become harder to identify, and violence goes unreported, leaving survivors without the support needed to recover and rebuild their lives.

In **Sudan**, conflict-related sexual violence remains widespread, particularly in Darfur and Kordofan, where UNHCR-supported facilities are often the only source of life-saving post-rape care. By mid-2026, approximately 22,900 individuals had accessed specialized gender-based violence services; however, without additional funding, more than 50,000 survivors could lose access to specialized medical care, legal aid and psychosocial support. Community-based prevention and response mechanisms, including women and girls' safe spaces, may be disrupted or forced to close, leaving women and girls unable to report violence against them or to receive appropriate support services. In addition, 15,000 women and girls will be forced to travel longer distances to collect firewood, increasing their exposure to sexual and gender-based violence.

In **Ethiopia**, funding cuts have significantly reduced the availability of specialized services. The number of safe houses has more than halved, from 29 in 2025 to just 13 in the first quarter of 2026. Safe houses are no longer operational in Gambella, Amhara, Melkadida and Jigiga, leaving survivors of violence with nowhere to turn for specialized support. Between the first and second quarters of 2026, access to medical assistance for survivors of gender-based violence fell from 59% to 24% while access to legal and protection services declined from 25% to 13%. Without further support, an additional 129,500 people could lose access to critical gender-based violence prevention and response programmes by the end of the year.

Underfunding of prevention activities is increasing exposure to violence and making environments less safe for everyone. In **Chad**, without additional resources, UNHCR will be unable to provide 45,000 forcibly displaced women and girls with prevention and response services, while up to 200,000 women and girls will lose access to safe spaces and prevention programmes that help mitigate risks and promote safety, empowerment and community cohesion.

In **South Sudan**, more than 80,000 women and girls will lose access to specialized services, including case management and psychosocial support, while over 120,000 could lose access to women and girls' safe spaces. In addition, 30,000 dignity kits will not be distributed.

In **Lebanon**, an estimated 13,800 refugee women and girls will be left without essential gender-based violence interventions, including safe shelter and individual support services that play a critical role in recovery and resilience.

In **Uganda**, funding gaps will disrupt gender-based violence prevention and response services for approximately 175,000 refugees, leaving them without case management, psychosocial support and referrals and leaving survivors more exposed to exploitation or abuse.

In **Burundi**, funding shortages have constrained the provision of dignity kits, cash assistance and specialized services, leaving 80,000 women and girls without access to such life-saving support.

Sustained investment in gender-based violence prevention and response is not only critical to protect survivors and reduce immediate risks, but also to support recovery, uphold dignity, strengthen resilience and help build safer, more inclusive communities.

From doctor to gender-based violence advocate: Standing with survivors

For many years, Zahra N. worked as an obstetrician-gynecologist, treating women and girls who had survived gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and rape. While she could care for their physical injuries, she saw many return to the same unsafe environments where the violence had occurred.

That experience led her to join humanitarian work. Today, as a Senior Gender-Based Violence Associate with UNHCR in Libya, she helps survivors access safety, support and protection.

“I realized that I was treating the physical consequences, but at the end of the day, many of these women had no safe home to return to. Healing cannot happen if someone goes back to the same environment where the violence started,” Zahra explains.

Today, her work focuses on supporting survivors, coordinating referrals and helping communities prevent violence before it occurs. But funding cuts are shrinking the protection system survivors depend on.

“It is difficult to capture the reality unless you see it yourself: the number of cases arriving daily, people waiting at the gate with nowhere to sleep and the growing issue of homelessness,” says Zahra.

Access to safe shelter and specialized services has been reduced and teams are increasingly forced to prioritize only the most urgent cases. Livelihood support and community outreach have shrunk, while many survivors carry multiple layers of trauma.



© UNHCR

“Cuts translate directly into fewer services, fewer options and fewer pathways for people who are already carrying so much trauma,” Zahra says. *“We are forced to prioritize only the most urgent, life-saving cases, while knowing that many other survivors still need protection, stability and longer-term support.”*

Despite these challenges, moments of hope continue to drive her work. One case that remains with her was an Ethiopian boy who had been trafficked for almost two years after being separated from his family. When he reached UNHCR, he was extremely traumatized and had experienced multiple forms of abuse. Through coordinated support, he received psychosocial care and was eventually reunited with his family in Sweden.

For Zahra, the case is a reminder of what protection can make possible – and what is at stake when those systems are weakened. Survivors need more than immediate assistance: they need somewhere safe to go, access to care and support to rebuild their lives. When those services are cut, the risks do not disappear. People are left with fewer places to turn and fewer pathways out of violence, exploitation and homelessness.



UNHCR's foster children program in Iridimi refugee settlement in Chad provides care and protection for unaccompanied and separated children by placing them with foster families, ensuring they grow up in a safe, supportive, and family environment. Mohamed Salih lost track of his family and now lives with Fatine and her two daughters. © UNHCR/Ala Kheir



CHILD PROTECTION

Protecting children from harm and preserving their futures

- Budgeted needs: **\$185 million** – Funding level: **25%**
- Contributions: **\$47 million**, of which **\$15 million** or **32%** is flexible funding

Funding shortfalls threaten child protection services

- Up to **233,000** at-risk children will not receive child protection services in **Chad**.
- **140,000** refugee children and their caregivers will be affected by disruptions to child protection services in **Uganda**.
- Safety and access-to-justice services coverage reduced by up to **85%** (14,000 children reached vs 95,000 planned) in **Ethiopia**.
- **19,000+** children will lose access to child protection services in **Sudan**.
- Up to **14,000** at-risk children will lose access to protection services in **Niger**.
- **10,000** children will be left without protection services in **South Sudan**.

Children who are displaced, or born into displacement, face heightened protection risks during critical stages of their development, with lasting impacts on their mental health and well-being. Many children experience family separation, disruption to education, and increased exposure to exploitation, child labour, child marriage and other forms of abuse.

UNHCR works closely with UNICEF and other partners to ensure that displaced children can access essential services, and support coordinated identification, referral, family tracing and reunification, and other specialized protection responses.

Despite the scale of needs, protection capacity is severely constrained. In **Sudan**, the active conflict is exposing children to severe protection risks including separation, forced recruitment, trafficking and forced marriage. Underfunding for child protection services is forcing families into negative coping mechanisms, with nearly one-fifth of displaced households reporting sending children to work due to poverty. Despite the enormous needs, by mid-year, UNHCR could only reach 2,750 refugee children and caregivers with child protection case management and psychosocial support services. Without additional funding more than 19,000 children will lose access to even limited support including case management, family tracing and reunification, and alternative care.

In **Ethiopia**, funding shortfalls are translating into major reductions in child protection coverage. Coverage of best interest procedures and case management has declined by 33%, while psychosocial support services have been reduced by 29%. Support for unaccompanied and separated children through alternative care has decreased by 47%, and family-strengthening interventions by 46%. Most critically, safety and access-to-justice services are expected to reach only 14,000 children, against a planned 95,000 – an 85% reduction in coverage.

Elsewhere, reduced funding risks leaving children without the systems designed to identify protection risks and refer for specific support including family reunification. In **Chad**, approximately 14,500 unaccompanied and separated children and 80,000 children with specific protection needs rely on services that will cease, while up to 233,000 at-risk children will not receive services, including best interest procedures, family tracing and reunification, and psychosocial support.

In **Burundi**, more than 2,500 recently arrived refugee children are identified as unaccompanied or separated from their families, underscoring the urgent need for timely identification, family tracing and specialized protection support.

In **Niger**, up to 14,000 at-risk children, including unaccompanied and separated children, will lose access to similar services.

In **South Sudan**, without additional funding UNHCR will be unable to provide 10,000 children with protection services, including case management, best interest procedures, family tracing and reunification, and psychosocial support, while almost 3,400 refugee children are at heightened risk of family separation, abuse, exploitation, recruitment, child labor, and child marriage. In addition, over 7,200 refugee and internally displaced unaccompanied and separated children require identification and support, particularly in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach hosting areas.

In **Uganda**, funding gaps will disrupt essential child protection services for approximately 140,000 refugee children and their caregivers, including family tracing, psychosocial support and community-based child protection mechanisms. Reduced capacity will increase children's exposure to neglect, abuse, exploitation, violence, and other protection risks, while weakening the identification, referral and follow-up of the most vulnerable children requiring specialized protection services. In **Mauritania**, reductions in support will leave 800 vulnerable refugee children without targeted assistance, while delaying efforts to strengthen national child protection systems.

Sustained investment in child protection is essential to prevent temporary funding gaps from becoming lasting harm. When family tracing stops, separated children remain separated. When case management capacity disappears, risks go unidentified and unaddressed. When national and community-based protection systems weaken, children who are already at greatest risk can disappear from view. The longer these gaps persist, the harder and more costly they become to close – making early investment in protection far more effective than trying to rebuild systems after they have broken down.



The UNHCR-supported carpet weaving centre in Afghanistan is a livelihood and skills-training initiative that helps returnees, and vulnerable Afghan women earn an income through traditional carpet production. © UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production



SELF-RELIANCE, ECONOMIC INCLUSION AND LIVELIHOODS

Building pathways out of humanitarian dependence

- Budgeted needs: **\$519 million** – Funding level: **27%**
- Contributions: **\$143 million**, of which **\$30 million** or **21%** is flexible funding

Reduced funding limits opportunities for self-reliance

- **395,000** refugees and host community members will lose access to livelihoods support in **Chad**.
- **350,000** refugees and asylum-seekers risk losing access to economic inclusion opportunities in **Iraq**.
- **40,800** people will lose access to livelihoods and employment support in **Niger**.
- **5,800** returnees and host community members have already lost access to livelihoods support in **Afghanistan**.

Refugees and internally displaced people can remain displaced for years, and in many cases for decades. Without opportunities to work, earn an income and participate in the formal economy, people can remain dependent on humanitarian assistance long after

their immediate emergency has passed. Supporting self-reliance and livelihoods enables people to rebuild their lives with dignity, reduces dependence on humanitarian assistance and strengthens their ability to withstand future shocks.

The consequences of underinvestment are particularly stark for people trying to rebuild their lives after displacement. In **Afghanistan**, nearly 4 million Afghans have returned from the region since January 2025, including more than 1 million people in 2026 alone. These returns are placing further pressure on communities already facing significant economic and humanitarian challenges. Funding shortfalls have deprived more than 5,800 returnees and host community members of access to livelihoods support such as vocational training, small-enterprise assistance and cash-for-work programmes. Nearly half of returnee household heads report having no occupational skills, and 78% have no formal education, significantly limiting their income-generating prospects. Women are particularly affected, as livelihoods programmes remain one of the few avenues for income amid restrictions on employment. Without such support, families risk remaining dependent on humanitarian assistance and being unable to contribute to the recovery and resilience of their communities. This economic hardship also increases the risk of onward movements.

Across other operations, funding gaps are putting livelihoods and economic opportunities at risk on a significant scale. In **Chad**, livelihoods support, vocational training and business development opportunities will no longer be available for approximately 395,000 refugees and host community members, limiting opportunities to strengthen household incomes, economic stability and resilience.

Economic inclusion also benefits host communities. When displaced and stateless people can access employment, market and financial services, they can contribute to local economies, strengthen social cohesion, and reduce pressure on humanitarian systems. In **Iraq**, UNHCR's advocacy, policy engagement and technical support help up to 350,000 refugees and asylum-seekers access national services, livelihood opportunities and social protection systems. Reduced funding risks their inclusion in the wider economy and increases the likelihood of parallel humanitarian structures.

In **Niger**, livelihood opportunities, vocational training, business grants and employment support enable refugees and vulnerable host community members to generate income, strengthen household resilience and contribute to local economic development. Without additional funding, up to 40,800 people will lose access to these life-changing opportunities.

Underfunding livelihoods is therefore not simply a reduction in economic assistance. It can delay the transition to self-reliance, while undermining progress towards longer-term inclusion and solutions. Without adequate investment, refugees, returnees and other displaced populations may face growing barriers to employment, entrepreneurship and access to national systems, leaving them less able to meet their own needs and more reliant on humanitarian support. For vulnerable households, declining access to livelihood opportunities can also increase exposure to harmful coping strategies, including child labour, early or forced marriage, survival sex, unsustainable debt and onward movement in search of opportunities.

With winter approaching, a returnee father in Afghanistan struggles to keep his children safe and warm

When Haji Mohammad Shafi returned to Afghanistan, he hoped to rebuild his life.

A father of five, Mohammad had spent 44 years living in Pakistan, but when pressure on Afghan families increased and he was forced to leave, he sold everything he owned and returned to Afghanistan with his family, arriving with almost nothing.

When Mohammad's family crossed the border back into Afghanistan, they received a one-off cash grant from UNHCR to help them meet their most urgent needs. While much more is needed to rebuild, a one-off payment can only help a family get through the immediate crisis. Without a steady income or the means to earn a living, families like Mohammad's cannot begin to rebuild their lives or become self-reliant.

Mohammad and his family now live in a makeshift shelter in Kabul Province. Unable to afford bricks, he filled parts of the walls with stones and covered the windows with plastic sheets. With no steady income and a leg injury that limits his ability to work, providing for his family is a daily struggle.

"I have no warm clothes for my children. No proper windows. Nothing to protect us from the cold. When there is little food, I give it to the children. If they are hungry, they cry," he says.

Despite his own hardship, Mohammad points out that some families around him have no shelter at all. Each day brings difficult choices as he tries to provide food and keep his children safe.



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As winter approaches, those challenges are becoming even more urgent. Mohammad has gathered a small amount of firewood, but the family has no heater, no winter clothing and little protection from freezing temperatures.

"We have nothing prepared for winter," he says.

"I have gathered a little firewood. If we had a heater, we could use it, but we don't. If someone helps, we can manage. If no one helps, we have nothing."

His story reflects the reality facing thousands of returnee families across Afghanistan, where many are trying to rebuild their lives while struggling to meet even the most basic needs as winter draws near. For families returning with few assets and limited opportunities to earn, immediate assistance is only the first step. Sustainable livelihoods are what can help them move from surviving the crisis to rebuilding a self-reliant future.



A general view of a camp near Kherbet Al-Jouz, rural Idlib, in the Syrian Arab Republic, close to the Syrian-Turkish border. The camp hosts displaced families living in temporary shelters and has been affected by flooding caused by heavy rainfall. © UNHCR/Hameed Maarouf

RETURN Supporting durable return

- Budgeted needs: **\$569 million** – Funding level: **29%**
- Contributions: **\$166 million**, of which **\$49 million** or **30%** is flexible funding

Reduced or suspended assistance for returned refugees

- **162,500** vulnerable internally displaced and refugee returnees will not receive cash assistance during the initial stages of return in the **Syrian Arab Republic**.
- **20,000** Ethiopian refugees who returned from Sudan remain without adequate reintegration support in **Ethiopia**.
- **15,000** refugees will be unable to access voluntary repatriation assistance in **Ethiopia**.
- **6,000** returnees still require transportation assistance and initial reintegration support in **Burundi**.

Without funding for solutions now, people stay in limbo for longer – and the system pays more later. When a refugee crosses a border back home, this is not in and of itself a solution. Without support to restore livelihoods, access services and rebuild stable lives, returnees can remain trapped in poverty and uncertainty, with vulnerabilities deepening and

reintegration becoming harder and more costly. When support is withdrawn at the point of return, the consequences do not disappear – they are deferred, often at greater humanitarian and development cost.

For people returning to extremely challenging environments, the risks are especially acute.

In **Afghanistan**, large-scale returns and deportations from the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan mean that many returnees arrive to communities where economic opportunities are scarce, women remain excluded from much of economic life, and girls face severe restrictions on education. Yet, funding constraints are severely limiting assistance for the 78,000 returnee households targeted for cash assistance in 2026. The return cash grant upon arrival for returnees has been reduced from \$375 per person to \$170 for the entire household. UNHCR is no longer able to provide reintegration grants to the same number of families, falling from 5,300 households in 2024 to just 175 households so far in 2026. Without sufficient support to rebuild their lives, returnee families may struggle to establish sustainable livelihoods and meet their basic needs, increasing the risk of onward movement, including attempts to return to the Islamic Republics of Iran, Pakistan or travel further afield through potentially dangerous and irregular routes.

In **Ethiopia**, funding shortfalls are putting both voluntary repatriation and reintegration at risk. Approximately 15,000 refugees will be unable to access voluntary repatriation assistance, including reception and transportation support, return packages and post-return monitoring. At the same time, more than 20,000 Ethiopian refugees who have already returned from Sudan under adverse circumstances remain without adequate reintegration support, limiting their access to essential services and sustainable livelihood opportunities and increasing vulnerability to poverty, food insecurity and protection risks.

The return process itself also depends on access to information, legal advice and documentation. Without clear information on their rights, return procedures and available support, refugees may be unable to make informed decisions or access the assistance and services available to them. Once home, returnees may face further barriers if they cannot restore civil documentation, reclaim housing and property rights, access education and healthcare, or secure livelihoods.

Sudan illustrates the scale and complexity of these challenges. By June 2026, 4.6 million people had returned to their areas of origin, including 820,000 from abroad. Many returnees lack civil documentation and support to address housing, land and property issues, while access to legal assistance remains extremely limited, preventing them from fully exercising their rights and increasing their vulnerability. As of mid-year, UNHCR has been able to provide just 360 individuals with such legal support, while an estimated 28% of households lack access to legal services. Returns are also straining already damaged health and water, sanitation and hygiene services, all of which have been significantly impacted by attacks on infrastructure.

Without adequate support, return can leave people facing poverty, exclusion and continued instability, undermining the sustainability of return and prospects for longer-term reintegration.

In **Burundi**, more than 98,000 refugees had returned by mid-2026, yet an estimated 6,000 returnees still require transportation assistance and initial reintegration support, including cash assistance to meet immediate needs.

In the **Syrian Arab Republic**, 162,500 vulnerable internally displaced and refugee returnees will not receive cash assistance during the initial stages of return, reducing their ability to meet basic needs and support their reintegration. This comes at a critical time for Syria's recovery – economic and social support is crucial to help the country rebuild after more than a decade of conflict.

Sustained investment in return and reintegration is essential to ensure that return is safe, dignified, informed and sustainable – and that people who go home have a genuine opportunity to rebuild their lives with dignity.

Coming home after more than a decade

When Hala returned to her hometown of Zebdin in Rural Damascus in July 2025, she hoped for one thing above all else: to bring her family back together.

After fleeing Syria in 2013, Hala spent years in Egypt, supporting relatives and caring for her niece and nephew, Lana and Khaled, who were orphaned during the conflict. As family members became scattered across countries, she never gave up hope of returning home.

But the reality she found was devastating.

“When I came back, nothing looked the same,” Hala recalls. “The house was destroyed. There were no doors, no windows, no electricity. We came back to nothing.”

The damaged apartment was cold, unsafe and barely habitable. At first, Hala questioned her decision to return. Then, through UNHCR’s shelter programme and thanks to donor support, the family’s home was repaired. Doors were replaced, sanitation restored, and essential repairs made to make the apartment safe again.

“It may sound simple, but for us it meant safety,” Hala says. “It meant we could close the door and sleep without fear.”

For families returning to homes damaged by years of conflict, this kind of support can make the difference between a return that is possible and one that is sustainable.



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Without safe shelter and other support to rebuild, returning families can face renewed insecurity and struggle to establish themselves again.

Despite the improvements, life remains difficult. At 50, Hala works whenever she can to support the family, while Lana hopes to continue her education after excelling in school in Egypt.

Still, having a home again has given them a chance to rebuild.

“I just want us to live like other people,” Hala says. “A little stability. A warm home. And for Lana and Khaled to go to school and grow with dignity.”

After years of displacement and loss, Hala is taking the first steps toward a new beginning, one day at a time. Her story shows that return is not simply about getting home. It is about having the safety and support needed to stay, rebuild and begin again.

Conclusion

The examples presented throughout this report demonstrate that funding shortfalls is not a future risk. It is already weakening protection systems, reducing access to essential services, limiting opportunities for self-reliance and inclusion, and undermining pathways to durable solutions for millions of forcibly displaced people.

Registration, asylum procedures, child protection, gender-based violence prevention and response, livelihoods support, and voluntary return and reintegration are all interconnected elements of a functioning protection system. When resources fall short, these systems erode. People wait longer for legal recognition, survivors are deprived of specialized support, children face heightened protection risks, opportunities for economic inclusion diminish, and families receive less support to rebuild their lives. The impacts are felt not only by people forced to flee, but also by host communities and national systems that are already under strain.

Sustained, predictable funding is therefore essential. Investing in protection, inclusion and solutions helps prevent crises from deepening, strengthens national systems, reduces long-term humanitarian costs, and enables people to rebuild their lives with dignity and contribute to their communities.

At the same time, the quality of funding matters as much as the quantity. Flexible funding, particularly unearmarked contributions, allows UNHCR to direct resources where needs are greatest, respond rapidly to emerging emergencies, sustain critical protection functions, and address gaps in underfunded operations and programmes.

Without adequate funding, years of progress can be reversed, protection gaps can widen, and people forced to flee can remain trapped in situations of vulnerability and dependency. At a time of near-record displacement and shrinking humanitarian budgets, every contribution matters, both to address urgent needs today and to preserve pathways to self-reliance, inclusion and lasting solutions for the future.



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