

Humanitarian evacuations by humanitarian organizations in situations of armed conflict

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Key points

- In contexts of armed conflict, humanitarian evacuations entail the large-scale relocation of civilian populations within a conflict zone who face an imminent threat to their lives to safer locations where they can be more effectively protected.
- A humanitarian evacuation is an exceptional, high-risk protection measure. It should be pursued only when other efforts have failed and, considering all factors, it is judged both feasible and the most viable option, within circumstances, to safeguard lives and protect civilians.
- Humanitarian evacuations are complex exercises, presenting risks and dilemmas, sometimes to be decided under time constraints when lives are at stake. They require careful analysis of timing, feasibility, operational capacity, and risks, including reputational ones. Thus, UNHCR should not act alone but rather under country humanitarian leadership and in cooperation with other actors, including Peacekeeping Operations, where existing, and authorities.
- Humanitarian evacuations should be based on the voluntary decision of the affected populations and be non-discriminatory. The civilian population should be consulted and provided necessary information on the timing, process and the destination, in the most inclusive way under the prevailing circumstances.
- Humanitarian evacuations should be carefully planned, well-coordinated and based on a detailed operational plan, clearly outlining roles and responsibilities, security and logistical aspects, and contingency measures. UNHCR should coordinate closely with all participating humanitarian agencies, local authorities, affected communities, and host communities in relocation areas.
- Attention must be given to at-risk groups—including children, minorities, older persons, and persons with disabilities—whose specific needs must be considered in planning, during, and after evacuations. Prevention of family separation and supporting reunification is a must.
- The evacuation process must be continuously monitored, including through regular consultations with affected people, to ensure it is proceeding as planned.

- The evacuation plan should also include adequate assistance for evacuees and receiving communities to prevent tensions and mitigate risks. UNHCR and other humanitarian actors should continue monitoring relocation areas and assess evacuees' intentions, including potential return to pre-evacuation areas.
- Post-evacuation evaluations should be conducted with all stakeholders to identify lessons learned.

1. Overview

UNHCR generally understands “humanitarian evacuations” as the large-scale relocation of civilians who face an imminent threat to their lives within a conflict zone to safer locations where they can be more effectively protected.

In conflict situations, sieges or active hostilities may trap civilians, creating imminent threats to their safety, lives and access to life-saving goods and services. Likewise, security or logistical constraints and bureaucratic impediments may block humanitarian actors from accessing these populations. In these situations, when reasonable efforts to access and protect civilians have proven unviable and immediate life-saving action is necessary, humanitarian evacuations can be considered.

Humanitarian evacuations share key protection goals and some operational features with other population movements—such as relocations within asylum countries to improve protection and aid (e.g., from borders to inland settlements), or movements in response to disasters and environmental hazards. However, humanitarian evacuations differ in context and complexity, as they occur in conflict-affected settings. They pose challenging choices and risks for humanitarian actors, including reputational ones, since International Humanitarian Law generally prohibits forced displacement of populations unless required for civilian safety or imperative military reasons.

As a high-risk protection measure, humanitarian evacuations must be carefully conceived and executed by mitigating inherent risks, through coordinated activities and an agreed operational and logistics plan. Key steps include identifying safe relocation areas in agreement with local authorities and communities; ensuring these areas are adequately serviced; assessing and consulting, as much as feasible, with the population to be evacuated; preparing a detailed plan with defined roles and responsibilities, covering logistics, security and assistance en route including for those with specific needs; communicating with communities about the relocation process; and monitoring relocation areas post-move to reduce tensions and explore return options.

UNHCR never acts alone when advocating for or supporting evacuations. It coordinates with other humanitarian actors under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator and in consultation with partners and affected communities.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Humanitarian evacuations can play a critical role in UNHCR's emergency response in situations where there is an immediate threat to the lives of civilians, including refugees, internally displaced persons and other individuals under UNHCR's mandate.

Although humanitarian evacuations are exceptional measures, based on the emergency context, UNHCR should consider whether to incorporate them into preparedness plans and protection strategies, guided by a context-specific protection risk assessment. Humanitarian evacuations should be coordinated with relevant actors through a well-defined operational plan.

3. Main guidance

I. Legal underpinning:

Humanitarian evacuations are primarily governed by International Humanitarian Law (IHL), notably the Fourth Geneva Convention and its Additional Protocols, which protect civilians during armed conflict. Under Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, the forcible transfer or deportation of protected persons is prohibited, except when imperative military reasons or the safety of the population necessitate a temporary evacuation. Such evacuations must uphold the rights of those affected, ensuring safety, dignity, and family unity.

In practice, humanitarian evacuations are a last resort, used only when no other means exist to protect civilians from imminent threats to life or physical integrity. Humanitarian organizations undertaking these operations must carefully balance the imperative to save lives with the risk of contributing to forced displacement. All actions must be guided by humanitarian principles, and evacuations should be based on the voluntary and informed consent of those being evacuated.

II. Risks and dilemmas in humanitarian evacuations

While humanitarian evacuations are lifesaving measures, they present significant legal, ethical, and operational challenges. These must be carefully assessed by UNHCR and other humanitarian actors involved in both the decision-making and implementation processes. Ultimately, the decision to evacuate hinges on a risk-based assessment, guided by the imperative to protect individuals from severe threats to life.

Key challenges include:

- **Instrumentalization:** Parties to the conflict may exploit evacuations as a military or political tactic, used to avoid concessions on humanitarian access or to manipulate demographics. Some parties may arbitrarily target populations who choose not to evacuate, despite IHL obligations to safeguard those who stay behind.
- **Perception of neutrality and politicization:** Providing assistance to specific ethnic or minority groups, even for legitimate protection reasons, may be opposed or perceived as biased by authorities or other actors. This can damage the credibility, neutrality, and security of humanitarian organizations, and undermine their ability to operate effectively.

- **Fostering Ethnic Divisions:** Evacuations often involve marginalized communities with distinct ethnic or socio-economic profiles, often targeted by armed actors or other communities. If not managed with care, they may inadvertently entrench exclusion, contribute to forced demographic changes, and result in long-term displacement. These outcomes can have serious legal and political repercussions for the organizations involved and for the broader humanitarian system.
- **Consensus challenges:** While consultation with affected populations is critical, a full consensus from all segments of the community may not be always feasible — due to the necessity to act quickly to an imminent threat to life, communication barriers etc. Nevertheless, efforts must be made to inform and engage communities meaningfully.
- **Prioritization dilemmas:** Limited resources and time constraints may force agencies to make difficult choices about who is prioritized during mass evacuations, which can deepen tensions or create perceptions of unfairness.
- **Security risks during movements:** Evacuation convoys may face security risks such as targeted attacks (ambushes, airstrikes) or explosive ordnance. Armed actors may impose access constraints and obstacles during evacuation. These risks highlight the need for thorough planning, preparation, and adequate security measures, including dialogue with conflict parties or engagement with Peacekeeping Operations where present.
- **Challenges at destination:** Evacuation sites must be carefully chosen to ensure safety, service access, and host community acceptance. Engaging both evacuated and host populations, along with local authorities and civil society, is essential to prevent new protection risks or tensions.
- **Return challenges:** Evacuees may not be able to return to their original homes, leading to protracted displacement or the perception of permanent removal.

Given complexity and risk, humanitarian evacuations must be consensual, collective, well-planned, and coordinated. UNHCR should assess risks and opportunities in consultation with other humanitarian actors, especially those with field presence and IHL expertise like the ICRC, and engage the humanitarian leadership (HC/RC).

III. Key operational considerations

- **Humanitarian evacuations as exceptional measures for extreme circumstances:** Evacuation decisions must be based on context analysis, assessment of the threats justifying evacuation, and exploration of alternatives, and considerations of risk. Humanitarian actors should first consider options to ensure access, protection, and the respect of IHL by parties to the conflict without evacuation. If evacuation is deemed the only viable solution, under the circumstances, appropriate relocation sites must be identified.
- **Humanitarian evacuations must be well planned:** Due to their complexity, clear preparedness plans, Concepts of Operations, and SOPs should be established in advance. These must cover, among other, security and administrative arrangements, communication protocols (e.g., radios, satellite phones), logistics (transport, convoy management, fuel, rest stops, medical vehicles, escorts if needed), and assistance en route and upon arrival. Responsibilities should be assigned based on capacity, resources, and contextual knowledge.

- **Humanitarian evacuations must be voluntary, well-informed and non-discriminatory:** They must rely on individuals' voluntary and informed consent. Planning and decision-making must engage affected populations from the start, ensuring they are clearly informed throughout about relocation options, associated risks, procedures, timelines, and destinations.

Information must be communicated in formats and languages accessible and understandable to all community segments. As much as possible, children, including unaccompanied, separated, and at-risk, should be given the chance to express views on decisions affecting them, with their opinions considered based on age, maturity, and capacity.

Individuals must be free to decline to be part of an evacuation. Attention should be given to those unable or unwilling to evacuate, as they may face increased risks, including misidentification as combatants.

Clear guidance must be provided on evacuation routes, safety procedures, hazards, and the importance of carrying essential personal and family documents to ensure service continuity and legal recognition. Preparing "if asked" lines for humanitarian teams can help ensure message consistency.

- **Evacuations must maintain a civilian character:** Ensuring the civilian nature of evacuation movements is vital for the safety and protection of evacuees. A clear distinction between civilians and combatants must be upheld throughout all phases. Humanitarian evacuations concern only civilians, and armed elements must be prevented from joining convoys. Maintaining a perception of a strictly civilian and humanitarian operation helps reduce the risk of being targeted by parties to the conflict. The use of armed escorts for security must be carefully assessed during planning to avoid increasing risks of attacks to convoys.
- **Destination areas should be carefully selected:** Safe relocation areas must be identified based on security conditions, availability of basic resources and services (including shelter, food, water, and healthcare), the presence of authorities, conditions of access for humanitarian actors, and the acceptance of host communities.
- **Population identification and profiling:** The registration/manifest of the population to be evacuated is a critical operational step for planning logistics (means and modalities of transport), preventing family separation (see below), and organizing specialized services en route and at destination.

At minimum, registration should include family composition and identify individuals with specific needs or profiles—such as persons with disabilities, older persons, those with specific medical conditions, pregnant or breastfeeding women, child-headed households, separated or unaccompanied children, and individuals at risk of being targeted during evacuation, including minority groups.

- **Preservation of family unity:** Evacuations must consider the wishes of parents/caregivers and children, with the child's best interests as a primary consideration. As part of the planning, practical measures must ensure families stay together—including

siblings of children without parental care—and prevent separation in all phases.

Registration must occur before transfers, and families, including as far as possible children, should be informed about timing, routes, and destinations. Institutionalized children should be evacuated together, ideally into family-based care, with proper planning and support. If separation inadvertently occurs, it must be brief, with swift reunification based on the child's best interests. Assistance procedures must avoid incentivizing deliberate family separation (e.g., targeting unaccompanied children). On the "best Interests Procedure in evacuation setting", please see Section 3.7.2 in the [2021 UNHCR Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child | Refworld](#).

- **Safe access to basic assistance and protection services during the evacuation:** Civilians must have access to essential services during evacuation, including transport, food, water, medical care (including maternal care and medications), hygiene supplies, and psychosocial support. Mobile teams with medical staff, social workers, interpreters, and protection personnel should accompany convoys as part of the operational plan. Where culturally appropriate and logistically feasible, transport of personal belongings and livestock should also be considered.
- **Ensuring smooth convoy and movement management:** During the evacuation, a convoy manager should be appointed to oversee the movement, including staging, departure, transit, and arrival. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) need to be developed and implemented, covering route planning and timing, check-in and manifest systems, contingency for emergency scenarios during movement, and communication protocols. It is important to determine early whether evacuees can use their own vehicles or if agency-managed transport is needed, as both options carry specific risks and logistical requirements.
- **Support in areas of arrival/destination:** Adequate assistance and services must be provided in destination areas. This may entail immediate support upon arrival and short- and long-term area-based assistance to prevent overburdening host communities or fueling tensions. Depending on the size of the evacuated population, strengthening local services and infrastructure may be necessary. These measures are typically discussed with local authorities during selection of the destination area.
- **Securing referral or transfer of cases/personal information:** For cases managed by UNHCR partners before the evacuation, any necessary referral or transfer of cases and related documentation to other actors/ partners after the evacuation should be carried out in a timely, secure, and confidential manner.
- **Properly resourcing of humanitarian evacuations:** These complex operations involve preparation, communication, transport, security, assistance, and protection during both the evacuation and relocation phases. Adequate resources must be secured by UNHCR, its partners, and other UN agencies and stakeholders. This should be factored into the preparedness phase.
- **Communicating with external stakeholders:** To obtain support, including resources, and reduce reputational risks, clear and consistent messaging is essential with host governments, donors, diplomatic actors, media, and the public. Communications should emphasize the humanitarian nature of the operation and avoid politicization. Preparing Q&A briefings in advance can help address effectively inquiries about the evacuation's purpose, scope, and safeguards.
- **Consult and advice:** Humanitarian evacuations are sparsely documented and each

context is unique, therefore seeking input from experienced humanitarian actors involved in similar efforts can be valuable.

IV. Working with others:

Given the complexity of humanitarian evacuations in armed conflict, UNHCR cannot operate alone. These efforts require risk and capacity assessments, detailed planning, coordinated execution, and information exchange with multiple stakeholders. Thus, evacuations are typically inter-agency operations involving UN agencies, authorities, civil society, possibly Peacekeeping Missions, and affected communities.

In the decision-making process, exploring alternatives may involve engaging actors with influence over parties to the conflict—such as diplomatic missions, regional entities, and international stakeholders.

When evacuation is the only viable life-saving option, ensuring safety and feasibility demands proactive outreach to parties to the conflict to secure safe passage, reduce hostilities along evacuation routes, and uphold respect for humanitarian operations and personnel. UN and agencies' security personnel, Peacekeeping Operations, and civil-military coordination mechanisms play a critical role.

During the evacuation, convoy management, logistics, communication, en route assistance, and safety of populations and humanitarian staff must be collectively managed through clear procedures.

Given the number of actors involved, clear roles and responsibilities must be assigned, with one lead agency or coordination entity designated for overall planning and oversight, based on both mandate and operational capacity.

An Evacuation Working Group should be established, including key humanitarian stakeholders, authorities, and community representatives, with roles clearly defined, documented and regularly reviewed to ensure clarity and accountability.

Post emergency phase

During transition to the post-emergency phase, UNHCR and partners play a key role in ensuring continued protection and assistance for evacuated populations. This includes ongoing protection monitoring, consultations to address needs, fostering positive relations with local communities, and promoting resilience in destination areas. Based on the presence of local authorities, local services and programmes, as partially mapped already in the pre-evacuation phase, inter-agency coordination is needed to scale or adapt services, support coexistence with host communities, and prevent marginalization of the evacuated population.

Given the temporary nature of evacuations, evolving conditions in areas of origin or prior settlement should be monitored, and evacuees' intentions assessed. Where feasible, UNHCR can facilitate "go and see" visits to help communities make informed decisions about return.

It is also important for UNHCR and other humanitarian actors involved to document and evaluate the evacuation process to draw lessons and improve future policy guidance and interventions.

Critical Actions in a Humanitarian Evacuation

- Given the complexity of humanitarian evacuations and their highly contextual nature, this checklist is not exhaustive. Sources quoted in the Attachments and in the Links to this Entry provide more thorough SOPs/ Checklists.
- As part of an overall inter-agency dialogue, assess risks to civilians of evacuating vs. staying in the current area, and explore other protective and assistance measures.
- Within broader inter-agency discussion on capacities, roles and responsibilities, assess UNHCR's ability to protect and assist before, during, and after the evacuation.
- As part of an overall inter-agency dialogue, aim to secure evacuation agreement from authorities and other parties to the conflict, including on destination areas. Consult actors with access to political/military channels (e.g. ICRC, OCHA) for safe passage or negotiation options. If full consensus from parties to the conflict isn't possible, assess operational and security consequences for humanitarians as well as risks for the population to be evacuated.
- Seek support and engagement from the Humanitarian Country Team and leadership (RC/HC or SRSG).
- Consult actors with strong field presence and IHL expertise, especially ICRC or UN Missions.
- Seek advice and secure backing from Bureaux and UNHCR HQ and Bureaux (DESS, DIP, DRS) before engaging in any evacuation process.
- Preferably via an inter-agency Evacuation Working Group, assess and map human resources, materials, partner capacities, and available support pre- and post-evacuation.

- Ensure evacuation is voluntary through proper communication supporting informed decisions and by consulting affected communities beforehand, including diverse groups within the communities.
- Stay in touch with evacuees during and after to identify protection risks and assistance needs.
- Engage with and inform host communities about evacuees' origin, reasons for movement, and humanitarian goals.
- Preferably via an inter-agency Evacuation Working Group facilitate stakeholder consultations and develop a detailed Plan of Action/Concept of Operations, covering procedures (registration, convoy logistics, communication) and clear division of labour.
- Agree on who will facilitate civil-military dialogue (e.g. OCHA) and ensure the rules of engagement are well understood by all parties.
- Ensure preparedness training and info-sharing for all organisations involved. Establish a multi-functional operational inter-agency team with a team leader, and with other members with expertise in security, logistics, transport, communications, medical care (incl. mental health), and protection (including child protection and GBV).
- Maintain accurate registration/manifests with names, ages, medical/specific needs, and family composition to account for all individuals, to better prevent separation and dedicated support throughout the evacuation.
- Ensure provisions for individuals with specific needs including people with disabilities, older persons, pregnant/breastfeeding women, children, etc., during movement.
- Continue monitoring protection risks and access to services in relocation areas. After evacuation, consult evacuees and host communities to reassess protection and assistance needs and necessary interventions.

- Engage the population and relevant stakeholders to uphold evacuees' right to return and clarify the temporary nature of evacuation.
- Conduct a post-evacuation review with all participating actors.

4. Standards

Minimum standards for humanitarian evacuations

These standards are available in Module 6 of the Protection in armed conflict toolkit: [Protection in armed conflict - Module 6 - Humanitarian Evacuations \(unhcr.org\)](#).

Examples of SOPs for Humanitarian Evacuations

This useful example is included in the linked NRC Publication [Considerations for Planning Mass Evacuations of Civilians in Conflict Settings](#) (see links).

5. Policies, Guidelines and Useful Links

[UNHCR, Humanitarian Evacuations in Violence and Armed Conflict, 2016](#)

[UNHCR Toolkit: Humanitarian Protection in Armed Conflict, 2021](#)

[UNHCR, Guidance Note 9 Humanitarian Evacuations in the Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons](#)

[UNHCR, Guidance on Protecting People From Disasters and Environmental Change Through Planned Relocation, 2015](#)

[2021 UNHCR Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the B...](#)

6. Learning and field practices

Internal e-learning to enhance UNHCR staff's knowledge and capacity to make better use of international humanitarian law (IHL), international human rights law (IHRL) and international refugee law (IRL) in the context of armed conflict.

[Protection in Armed Conflict - Workday](#)

7. Links

[Evacuation - How does law protect in war? - Online casebook \(icrc.org\) Chatham House 2024 \(Evacuations Module Pages 21-31\): Enhancing the security of ... Humanitarian evacuations in armed conflict-Thematic Roundtable 2014 - Global Pr...](#) [Norwegian Refugee Council Explainer: Evacuations Norwegian Refugee Council: Considerations for Planning Mass Evacuations of Civi...](#) [UNHCR Emergency Handbook entry on transit centres ODI Global, Humanitarian evacuations: practice, guidance, research gaps and les...](#)

8. Main contacts

At country level, the first port of call is the UNHCR Deputy Representative (Protection) or the UNHCR Assistant Representative (Protection) along with other UNHCR Senior Management in the operation, notably the UNHCR Representative, who also represents UNHCR in high-level country-based humanitarian forums, such as the Humanitarian Country Team.

Contacts should also be pursued with senior protection staff at UNHCR Regional Bureaus (Head of Protection Pillar, Senior Protection Coordinator, Senior Regional Legal Advisor), and with Senior Emergency/Operation staff in the Bureau.

As required, the Bureau or country operation will liaise with relevant Services and Units in the Division of International Protection (Field Protection Services/ Emergency and Protection in Armed Conflict and Global Protection Cluster) as well as in the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (including Field Security Services).