

ANNEX I: REFUGEE EMERGENCY RESPONSE SCALE-UP PROTOCOL

Background

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees³⁵ is the centrepiece of international refugee protection³⁶, laying out minimum standards for their treatment. States hold the primary responsibility for protecting refugees. UNHCR, governed by the General Assembly, is the UN agency³⁷ accountable for providing protection and assistance and seeking solutions for refugees. The 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)³⁸ reiterated the call for a multi-stakeholder and partnership approach to reach these objectives, and for UNHCR to play a catalytic and supportive role therein, to complement and augment the level of assistance provided on the host countries' request.

In November 2018, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals endorsed protocols on the Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Activation. These protocols are a set of measures designed to enhance the humanitarian response in the face of major sudden-onset crises and/or the substantial deterioration of a humanitarian situation. The IASC protocols underscore those agencies with a specific mandate, such as UNHCR, are accountable for ensuring a robust, inclusive and effective response. The protocols note UNHCR's mandated role to prepare, lead and coordinate refugee and returning refugee responses.³⁹

Purpose and Scope

Based on its mandate and inter-agency commitments, UNHCR updated the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM) in 2024 and introduced the Refugee Emergency Response Scale-up Protocol (hereafter referred to as the "Refugee Protocol"). The purpose of this Refugee Protocol is to clarify the roles and principles of collective action and allow for a more predictable and inclusive joint response to refugee emergencies.

In exercising his or her mandated responsibilities, the High Commissioner for Refugees can activate the Refugee Protocol to scale up an inter-agency emergency response in situations:

- characterized by significant refugee flows; or
- that cause loss of life and/or other serious harm, or significantly affect the rights or well-being of refugees or refugee returnees unless immediate action is taken; and
- where the existing capacity to lead, coordinate and deliver – together with relevant authorities, humanitarian and development actors, and civil society – does not match the scale, complexity and urgency of a situation without additional financial, human and material support.

Activating the Refugee Protocol is a call for all relevant stakeholders⁴⁰ to mobilize additional capacities and resources for the collective response to refugee and host community needs, in line with the RCM and the GCR's whole- of-society approach. UNHCR will support the host government(s) in leading and coordinating the response in a predict-

35. UN General Assembly, [Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#), 28 July 1951, United Nations, and UN General Assembly, [Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees](#), 31 January 1967, United Nations.

36. In conjunction with the UN General Assembly, [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), 10 December 1948, art. 14, that recognizes everyone's right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution.

37. UN General Assembly, [Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#), 14 December 1950, A/RES/428(V).

38. [Global Compact on Refugees](#), affirmed by the General Assembly on 17 December 2018, A/RES/73/151.

39. IASC Standard Operating Procedures, Humanitarian System-wide scale-up activation, [Protocol 1: Definition and Procedures](#), footnote 7.

40. As per the Global Compact on Refugees, stakeholders include but are not limited to: international organizations within and outside the United Nations system, including those forming part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement; other humanitarian and development actors; international and regional financial institutions; regional organizations; national and local authorities; civil society, faith-based, and refugee-led organizations; academics and other experts; the private sector; host community members and refugees themselves.

able, transparent and inclusive way.⁴¹ The Refugee Protocol automatically expires after six months, with the possibility of a three-month extension in exceptional situations.

Activation of the Refugee Protocol

To inform the decision on activating this Refugee Protocol, within 72 hours of a refugee influx or a dramatic deterioration of the situation, the UNHCR country representative will provide the UN High Commissioner for Refugees with an initial assessment of refugee protection and humanitarian needs, and a recommendation on activating the Refugee Protocol, following inclusive consultations with response partners⁴² and relevant stakeholders.⁴³ To facilitate decision-making, the initial assessment should take into account:

- **Scale:** the number of new refugee arrivals, including in relation to the existing refugee population in the host country.
- **Urgency:** critical protection risks and the level of access to basic services and life-saving assistance.
- **Complexity:** overlapping crises; humanitarian access and security risks; social, economic and political factors; and the threat to the civilian character of asylum.
- **Capacity:** host government and local community absorption capacities; presence of local and international organizations with refugee expertise; and the availability of human and financial resources for immediate response.
- **Risk of failure to deliver effectively and at scale** to refugees and host communities.

Pending the initial assessment and decision to activate the Refugee Protocol, an immediate inter-agency, protection-centred emergency response should be initiated. The assessment and decision-making should be guided by the principles of ‘do no harm’ and ‘no regrets’ to ensure a timely, effective and efficient emergency response.

Upon deciding to activate the Refugee Protocol, the High Commissioner for Refugees will:

- Designate a Refugee Coordinator, usually UNHCR country representative. For situations with multiple refugee-hosting countries, the High Commissioner will appoint a Regional Refugee Coordinator;
- Notify the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), IASC Principals, UNSDG Chair, and other relevant UN bodies and stakeholders of the Refugee Protocol activation and the designation of a Regional Refugee Coordinator, where applicable. The notification should also clarify geographic coverage and target population;
- Keep stakeholders informed of evolving protection risks and needs, galvanizing inter-agency resource mobilization; and
- Notify the ERC, IASC Principals, UNSDG Chair, and those involved in the response, in case of an exceptional three-month extension of the Refugee Protocol.⁴⁴

Implications of Refugee Protocol activation

Upon activation of the Refugee Protocol, the **(Regional) Refugee Coordinator’s** responsibilities include:

- Consulting immediately with relevant national authorities at the highest level, RC/HC and with the members of the UN Country Team / Humanitarian Country Team on effective ways to bolster operational capacity and to build on existing coordination mechanisms, in line with the RCM.⁴⁵
- Leading the collective refugee response in support of national authorities. This involves:
 1. establishing the coordination system and designating agencies to coordinate sectors, mobilizing local and international partners with appropriate expertise, operational capacity and geographical presence, and ensuring meaningful participation of refugees and

41. In line with the UNHCR [Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response](#) (UNHCR/HCP/2023/01).

42. Response partners are stakeholders with operational response capacity on the ground, such as UN agencies, national and international NGOs, among others.

43. Such as relevant authorities, the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC), the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) if present.

44. Based on stakeholder consultations and recommendation from the (Regional) Refugee Coordinator (see Heading IV of this Refugee Protocol).

45. 2024 [RCM guidance](#).

affected host communities (based on the intersection of age, gender, and diversity) in all stages of the refugee response; and

2. incorporating cross-cutting priorities and ensuring that refugee response principles and commitments are upheld, including but not limited to the centrality of protection, ‘do no harm’, the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, Accountability to Affected People, gender-based violence, localization, and the sustainability and engagement of development actors from the start.

- Ensuring collective engagement in needs assessments; gap analysis; data and information management; the implementation of programmes that support public service providers; and resource mobilization and advocacy, including on protection, which also informs the (Regional) Refugee Response Plan (RRP).
- Overseeing, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, the development of an emergency inter-agency RRP in the first week of the crisis to cover the first three to six months. An RRP sets out the comprehensive protection, multisectoral assistance and solutions strategy for the refugee response based on the feedback of refugees and affected communities; priority areas of intervention; comprehensive financial requirements; and a reporting, monitoring and evaluation framework. If multiple countries are affected, a regional RRP will be issued. If the situation persists, the RRP should be reviewed and extended.

In line with the 2024 RCM guidance,⁴⁶ **stakeholders contribute to the collective response** through:

- **Needs assessments:** engaging in joint participatory needs assessments and gap analyses across and within sectors, taking into account the views of people of different age, gender and diverse characteristics, to inform response strategies and priorities, advocacy, and fundraising for the refugee response.
- **Coordination system:** collectively supporting the establishment of a national-level coordination mechanism, co-led with the government and adapted to the context. This includes a strategic

Refugee Coordination Forum (RCF); sector-specific working groups at the national level as needed, including a protection working group, as well as at sub-national level if needed; an inter-sector technical coordination forum, where needed, that is attended by cross-cutting task forces or working groups, where sector-coordinating agencies are represented at a technical level. If the Refugee Protocol concerns multiple countries, regional-level coordination should also be considered.

- **Response planning, monitoring and resource mobilization:** coordinating the development of a comprehensive inter-agency RRP centered on the Protection and Solutions Strategy; monitoring and report on the response implementation and impact; raising the profile of the crisis through a common communication strategy to attract necessary political, financial⁴⁷ and technical support, including through dissemination events; and tracking contributions received for the RRP.
- **Promoting protection mainstreaming across the refugee response:** ensuring that protection remains central to the response and support all sectors in their mainstreaming protection, including by being accountable to forcibly displaced and stateless people and by considering age, gender and diversity in all response activities.
- **Information management:** establishing or reinforcing data and information management capacity and, where possible, anchoring it in existing statistical and census mechanisms. Ensuring the development and dissemination of high-quality information products that use reliable data on population figures, needs and the response.
- **Advocacy and information sharing:** Regularly engage, update and coordinate with the RC/HC and UNCT/HCT, where present, and ensure regular advocacy and information sharing with donors and government counterparts as well as refugees, affected host communities and the public at large – particularly regarding maintaining the protection space.

46. 2024 [RCM guidance](#), section on Leadership and Coordination Accountabilities.

47. For new or rapidly deteriorating refugee situations, UN agencies may call upon the top UN official in the country to facilitate the release of urgent allocations from pooled funds.

Expiration of the Refugee Protocol

The Refugee Protocol automatically expires after six months. Before the expiration, the (Regional) Refugee Coordinator(s), in consultation with the Refugee Coordination Forum(s), may recommend a three-month extension to the High Commissioner for Refugees. This recommendation should be based on exceptional circumstances, such as significant constraints on the response in the initial period or a further deterioration of the situation. In the event of a Refugee Protocol extension, the High Commissioner notifies the Emergency Relief Coordinator, IASC Principals and other key stakeholders accordingly. The (Regional) Refugee Coordinator, with the support of the RCF(s), will provide clear messaging on the Refugee Protocol expiration.

The expiration of the Refugee Protocol does not imply that the crisis it relates to has come to an end. Rather, it could indicate that the coordination structure has been set up and that the inter-agency operational response has been scaled up and stabilized. The RCM and the (Regional) RRP can be prolonged under the leadership of the (Regional) Refugee Coordinator beyond the expiration of the Refugee Protocol, until other coordination mechanisms with the host government ensure refugee inclusion in multi-year instruments or frameworks with longer-term objectives that emphasize solutions and socioeconomic inclusion.

REFUGEE PROTOCOL TIMELINE

