



## INTERNAL AUDIT DIVISION

### REPORT 2019/040

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Audit of emergency preparedness at  
the Office of the United Nations High  
Commissioner for Refugees

There was a need to strengthen the  
established emergency preparedness  
requirements and reinforce compliance with  
those requirements so as to provide  
reasonable assurance regarding the  
effectiveness, efficiency, timeliness and  
accountability of emergency responses

14 June 2019  
Assignment No. AR2018/167/02

# **Audit of emergency preparedness at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of emergency preparedness at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The objective of the audit was to assess whether the emergency preparedness requirements established by UNHCR were adequate and complied with, so as to provide reasonable assurance regarding the effectiveness, efficiency, timeliness and accountability of UNHCR's emergency responses. The audit covered the period from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2018, and covered higher and medium risk areas pertaining to emergency preparedness in refugee and mixed (i.e., refugees and other persons of concern) situations, including: (a) risk analysis, early warning and emergency preparedness planning; (b) activation and deactivation of emergencies; (c) standby teams, emergency rosters and standby partnerships; and (d) monitoring and evaluation of emergency preparedness.

There was a need for UNHCR to enhance: (a) the corporate early warning system to support real-time reporting and regional coverage of emergency preparedness, as well as to ensure adequate capacity to manage the system; (b) accuracy of reporting on emergency preparedness; (c) the emergency preparedness support by increased engagement with regional bureaux and headquarters divisions; (d) the process of activation and deactivation of emergencies; (e) the management of emergency rosters and deployments; and (f) the delivery of Joint Senior Level Missions and real-time reviews in accordance with relevant standards.

OIOS made six recommendations. To address issues identified in the audit, UNHCR needed to:

- Review its current capacity to maintain the corporate early warning system and assess the feasibility of establishing an enhanced and integrated system between headquarters and the field that supports real-time reporting of early warning indicators and escalation of emergency risks, as well as regional coverage of emergency preparedness.
- Correct errors and improve the accuracy of its reporting on the level of emergency preparedness of country operations in the High Alert List for Emergency Preparedness (HALEP).
- Ensure that emergency preparedness gaps reported by country operations in HALEP are reviewed and, where necessary, escalated to regional bureaux and/or headquarters divisions for relevant actions.
- Enhance the process of activation and deactivation of emergencies by clarifying the criteria for Level 1 emergency declarations, assessing the feasibility of implementing automatic deactivation of emergencies, and detailing the procedures for emergency declarations and deactivations.
- Enhance the management of emergency rosters and deployments by regularly replenishing existing rosters, undertaking an annual review of the needs and opportunities for new rosters, prioritizing emergency deployments to recently declared emergencies, and implementing monitoring and reporting.
- Enhance the delivery of Joint Senior Level Missions and real-time reviews by clarifying the leadership and ownership arrangements, agreeing on standard guidance for these reviews, establishing a process to follow-up on recommendations from the reviews, and compiling lessons learned and relevant indicators from the reviews and other oversight reports to assess recurrent issues.

UNHCR accepted all recommendations and has initiated action to implement them.

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# **Audit of emergency preparedness at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

## **I. BACKGROUND**

1. The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of emergency preparedness at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

2. UNHCR defines a humanitarian emergency as any situation in which the life, rights or well-being of refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR will be threatened unless immediate and appropriate action is taken. Emergency preparedness is of crucial importance to ensure: that governments and humanitarian actors respond quickly and effectively to emergencies so that lives are saved and the affected populations receive the assistance and protection that they need; and to reduce the humanitarian, social, economic and environmental impact of an emergency. With the proliferation of major humanitarian emergencies since 2011, the humanitarian system had the need to evolve. In December 2011, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) rolled out its Transformative Agenda, which established protocols for leadership, coordination and communication in humanitarian emergencies, and, in December 2013, UNHCR launched the Refugee Coordination Model, which established a framework for leadership and coordination in refugee emergencies.

3. In July 2017, UNHCR issued a new Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response (hereinafter referred to as “the Policy”), which aimed to: (a) reinforce focus on preparedness; (b) strengthen field orientation; (c) sharpen provisions on leadership and accountabilities; (d) improve and simplify access to resources; and (e) reinforce partnerships and inclusivity. The new Policy also reviewed the previously existing levels of emergency (i.e., from Level 1 to Level 3; the higher the level, the higher the complexity and scale of the emergency) and institutionalized the Level 1 emergency as “proactive preparedness”, to emphasize the need for preparedness prior to a likely humanitarian emergency and to ensure adequate support from headquarters to the field. Furthermore, the Policy formalized the use of the High Alert List for Emergency Preparedness (HALEP). In 2018, UNHCR revised other tools supporting emergency preparedness, specifically the Emergency Handbook and the Preparedness Package for Refugee Emergencies (PPRE), with the objective of clarifying processes and simplifying several of the templates.

4. The High Commissioner, supported by the Senior Executive Team, has the overall accountability for UNHCR emergency operations, and the Assistant High Commissioner (Operations) is accountable for overseeing emergencies. Headquarters divisions, regional bureaux and country operations have different and complementary accountabilities and responsibilities in emergency preparedness, as follows: (a) country representatives are accountable for implementing emergency preparedness in their respective operations; (b) regional representatives are accountable for providing support to and oversight of emergency operations in their regions; (c) regional bureaux are accountable for securing effective emergency preparedness within their respective regions, by providing strategic direction, reporting and updates to the Senior Executive Team, managing resources and coordinating support at headquarters; and (d) different divisions at headquarters are accountable for providing technical support in their respective areas of responsibility, including technical capacity, guidance and expertise.

5. The Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS) is the “owner” of the Policy and is accountable for: (a) providing analysis, capacity-building, guidance and support to country operations, headquarters divisions and regional offices and bureaux in the implementation of the Policy and supporting tools; and (b) managing all emergency rosters and strategic partnerships. DESS delivers these responsibilities through the Emergency Service, comprised of the Emergency Policy and Capacity

Development Section (including the eCentre in Bangkok) and the Emergency Preparedness, Partnerships and Deployments Section.

6. There are no specific budget and expenditure allocations for emergency preparedness at UNHCR, as emergency preparedness is expected to be integrated in sectoral budgets.

7. Comments provided by UNHCR are incorporated in italics.

## **II. AUDIT OBJECTIVE, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY**

8. The objective of the audit was to assess whether the emergency preparedness requirements established by UNHCR were adequate and complied with, so as to provide reasonable assurance regarding the effectiveness, efficiency, timeliness and accountability of UNHCR's emergency responses.

9. This audit was included in the 2018 risk-based work plan of OIOS because emergency preparedness is critical to assist UNHCR operations in predicting emergency scenarios and in planning for appropriate resources, capacity and coordination mechanisms with internal and external actors, in order to ensure an effective and rapid emergency response.

10. OIOS conducted this audit from October 2018 to February 2019. The audit covered the period from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2018. Based on an activity-level risk assessment, the audit covered higher and medium risk areas pertaining to emergency preparedness in refugee and mixed (i.e., refugees and other persons of concern) situations, which included: (a) risk analysis, early warning and emergency preparedness planning; (b) activation and deactivation of emergencies; (c) standby teams, emergency rosters and standby partnerships; and (d) monitoring and evaluation of emergency preparedness.

11. The audit methodology included: (a) interviews of key personnel; (b) review of relevant documentation, including mission reports, country and regional preparedness action plans and contingency plans, overall reporting in HALEP and country diagnostic reports, dashboards, standard operating procedures, standby partnership agreements, real-time review reports, emergency declarations and respective reviews; and (c) delivery of questionnaires to five regional bureaux and 12 country operations included in HALEP, selected based on their emergency preparedness ratings and their geographical location, so as to ensure representation of all regions where UNHCR operated. The questionnaires collected inputs on relevant aspects of emergency preparedness in the field and at headquarters. OIOS obtained nine responses (53 per cent response rate), including from seven country operations and two regional bureaux.

12. The audit was conducted in accordance with the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing.

## **III. AUDIT RESULTS**

### **A. Risk analysis, early warning and emergency preparedness planning**

There was a need to develop an integrated early warning system that supports real-time reporting and regional coverage of emergency preparedness, and to ensure adequate capacity to manage the system

13. It is essential for UNHCR to have effective early warning and monitoring mechanisms in place, supported by fluid communication channels between the field and headquarters, so that it can proactively anticipate and prepare for emergencies. UNHCR's policy framework for emergency preparedness requires

that: (a) country operations conduct a risk analysis and ongoing risk monitoring; (b) operations with assessed medium or high risks of emergency are included in HALEP; and (c) DESS supports and oversees the reporting in HALEP and undertakes global horizon scanning for new displacement emergencies. Moreover, when an anticipated emergency is likely to affect several countries, regional representations and bureaux need to consider the suitability of regional preparedness approaches and information sharing.

14. Seven respondents to the OIOS questionnaire to country operations reported that they had established different mechanisms for risk identification and monitoring, including: collection of data on the security situation and movements of populations of concern; border monitoring; reliance on specific country disaster management platforms; use of informal networks; establishment of inter-agency taskforces; and regular communication with UNHCR regional representations and country teams. Most of the responses focused on data collection and respective sources for risk monitoring, and very few provided details on systems established, including the definition of early warning indicators and of monitoring responsibilities, to ensure timely detection and communication of risks.

15. Two regional bureaux noted that the use of HALEP as an early warning system was minimal, when compared to regular direct communications with country operations. One bureau reported that it was difficult for country operations to keep HALEP up-to-date. In OIOS opinion, the requirement for country operations to update HALEP semi-annually if “insufficiently” or “partially prepared” and annually if “sufficiently prepared” through the submission of HALEP diagnostic reports may result in a system that is unable to adequately reflect fast moving emergencies. On the other hand, OIOS acknowledged that due to resource constraints it may be challenging for country operations to update HALEP, either with the current or shorter reporting periods, especially when dealing with rapidly evolving emergencies. As at 31 December 2018, out of 85 country operations included in HALEP (some of them were listed more than once under different situations), 6 (or 7 per cent) had not submitted their diagnostic reports and 23 (or 27 per cent) had submitted outdated information, which may be an indicator that they were having difficulties with the tool. In terms of coverage, the HALEP tool did not support early warning and reporting on emergency preparedness at the regional level, which would be particularly relevant in the context of the ongoing regionalization process at UNHCR.

16. HALEP was developed internally by DESS with little investment and resources and maintained by one staff member alone working on a non-exclusive basis on the system. Therefore, there were practical limitations in enhancing it in becoming a real-time integrated platform for the identification and reporting of emergency risks and in generating and tracking alerts based on early warning indicators monitoring. As a result, HALEP compiled, to a great extent, outdated information on emergency risks in the Organization and was not optimized to work as a proactive early warning and communication system to disseminate timely information and generate alerts on unfolding emergencies.

**(1) The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should review its current capacity to maintain the corporate early warning system and assess, in coordination with the Division of Information Systems and Telecommunications, the feasibility of establishing an enhanced and integrated system between headquarters and the field that supports real-time reporting of early warning indicators and escalation of emergency risks, as well as regional coverage of emergency preparedness.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 1 and stated that DESS would: (a) assess the feasibility of establishing an enhanced system integrated between headquarters and the country operations together with the Division of Information Systems and Telecommunications (DIST). If this was found to be feasible, they would map the steps and resources necessary to establish such an enhanced IT tool for monitoring of risks and preparedness status; (b) collaborate with the Division of Human Resources to ensure that preparedness activities are integrated into the job descriptions of the*

*regional managers; and (c) revise the HALEP Standard Operating Procedures to ensure endorsement of the reports by the regional managers prior to issuance. Recommendation 1 remains open pending receipt of: (a) a business case supporting the design of an enhanced early warning system together with evidence of concrete steps taken to establish the enhanced system; and (b) evidence of a review of the suitability of DESS capacity to manage the (enhanced) early warning system and concrete steps taken to address any resource needs.*

There was a need to enhance the accuracy of reporting on emergency preparedness

17. As per the Policy, in order to adequately prepare to respond to an emergency, country operations are required to designate preparedness focal points and: (a) develop Minimum Preparedness Actions as part of their annual planning; (b) in case they assessed the risk of new or escalated emergencies as medium or high, develop Advanced Preparedness Actions and conduct a self-diagnosis on their level of preparedness in HALEP; and (c) if deemed necessary, develop scenario-based contingency plans outlining the response strategy for the first three months of an emergency. DESS should monitor implementation of the Policy regarding the above requirements and to report accordingly to the Assistant High Commissioner (Operations).

18. All seven operations that responded to the OIOS questionnaire advised that they had developed preparedness actions that included the identification of risk scenarios, together with government counterparts, partners, and other agencies and/or in inter-agency settings. They also advised that they had subsequently developed/updated contingency plans, mostly on an annual basis. DESS monitored and reported on their compliance with the Policy, but only in the area in relation to the country operations' obligations to report in HALEP. DESS also reviewed, upon request of operations, preparedness action plans and contingency plans.

19. The HALEP diagnostic report provided a reasonable snapshot on the key elements of emergency preparedness that country operations needed to comply with and constituted a fair monitoring and reporting tool for DESS. According to information in HALEP as at 31 December 2018, out of 85 countries, 8 were "insufficiently prepared" (9 per cent), 53 were "partially prepared" (62 per cent), 20 were "sufficiently prepared" (24 per cent) and 4 (including two countries where UNHCR did not have a presence) were not assessed (5 per cent). However, the level of accuracy of the assessment was impacted by the subjectivity implicit in the self-assessed ratings and, as mentioned in paragraph 15 above, by non-submitted or outdated reporting from 29 countries. OIOS also noted the following gaps in relation to HALEP:

a. **Outdated information and errors:** The HALEP (Excel version) dated 31 December 2018 included outdated information on country emergency focal points and several errors and inconsistencies regarding dates of submission of diagnostic reports by country operations and respective preparedness ratings. According to the standard operating procedure (SOP) on HALEP, DESS needed to change preparedness ratings previously reported by country operations to "not assessed" if: (i) operations rated "insufficiently" or "partially prepared" did not submit diagnostic reports for the last 12 months; and (ii) if operations rated "sufficiently prepared" did not submit reports for the last 18 months. DESS applied this rule inconsistently, since several countries that had not submitted diagnostic reports for more than 12 or 18 months were not marked as "not assessed" in the system. Even if the rule was applied consistently by DESS, in OIOS' opinion it contributed to the existence of outdated emergency preparedness information in HALEP because 12 or 18 months seemed like long periods without any system update.

b. **Gaps in the diagnostic reports:** The "yes" or "no" answers provided by country operations to some of the questions in their diagnostic reports without further context or background information did not clarify whether they were meant as preparedness gaps. The difference between

operations that were non-compliant and those that were outdated in terms of their submissions of the HALEP diagnostic reports was also unclear. Furthermore, UNHCR had not defined responsibilities for reporting on HALEP for those operations where it did not have a presence.

c. **Low risk operations included on watch:** Eight country operations that had reported low levels of emergency risks as at 31 December 2018 (all except one had their reporting in HALEP up-to-date and six of them were rated as “sufficiently prepared”) remained on HALEP even though there was no longer a requirement for their inclusion on the watch list. Either DESS was unable to follow the process for the removal of countries from the watch list defined in the SOP on HALEP, or its outlook analysis was a determinant factor to keep these countries on watch. If it was the latter case, there were no explanations provided on why the DESS analyses differed substantially from the country operations’ own risk assessments.

20. As explained in the previous section of this report, the errors in HALEP were due to lack of staffing capacity, inconsistent application of the SOP on HALEP and lack of clarity in some procedures contained therein, as well as the need to run HALEP on a manual system that was not only susceptible to errors but also had missing fields of information and/or functionalities. As a result, DESS reported inaccurately on the level of preparedness by country operations.

**(2) The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should improve the accuracy of its reporting on the level of emergency preparedness of country operations by: (a) reviewing the accuracy of information reported and correcting outdated information and errors in the High Alert List for Emergency Preparedness; (b) assessing the system’s potential for greater automation in reporting to reduce reliability on manual tasks and risks of errors; and (c) revising related standard operating procedures to address current gaps.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 2 and stated that DESS would: (a) undertake a comprehensive cleansing exercise [of HALEP] and inform OIOS on the corrections made. DESS would also review the SOP on HALEP to ensure that necessary data quality checks were incorporated and regularly undertaken; (b) assess the feasibility of the ICT system enhancement together with DIST; and (c) review the SOP on HALEP comprehensively. Recommendation 2 remains open pending receipt of: (a) evidence that the reported errors in HALEP have been corrected; (b) a business case supporting the design of automated reporting features on emergency preparedness or, alternatively, evidence of the introduction of a review process over the information reported in HALEP prior to its publication; and (c) the revised SOP on HALEP addressing the reported gaps.*

There was a need to enhance the emergency preparedness support through an effective use of alerts and escalation mechanisms to relevant regional bureaux and headquarters divisions

21. DESS and regional bureaux are required to actively support country operations in their preparedness efforts, engaging as necessary other divisions at headquarters. In order to detect and prioritize needs of support in the field, including those of UNHCR and partners, DESS and the Regional Bureaux need to: (a) review jointly the preparedness ratings reported in HALEP; and (b) assess the specific preparedness support needs of country operations after the declaration of Level 1 emergencies.

22. In addition to reviewing country preparedness ratings in HALEP, DESS delivered the following support to country operations: (a) carried out seven advanced preparedness missions from May 2017 to May 2018, including to two country operations following Level 1 emergency declarations under the new policy, and followed up with country operations on the implementation of recommendations; (b) based on requests from countries, provided remote support through emails, teleconferences, and webinars for advice



on specific products (e.g., contingency plans and preparedness action plans) and/or processes (e.g., workshop agendas, structure of contingency planning processes, simulation exercises); and (c) participated in regional contingency planning meetings.

23. HALEP, however, did not include a functionality to trigger specific alerts or direct requests of support from country operations to regional bureaux and headquarters divisions and to record specific recommendations or actions and respective follow-ups. The preparedness recommendations included in HALEP were generic and not followed up on, which reduced their usefulness. For example, one country operation had assessed itself in September 2018 as “insufficiently prepared” and had reported several gaps to be able to respond effectively to an emergency situation. These included lack of staffing and logistical capacity of UNHCR and of the government to be able to deal with a 40 per cent increase of asylum applications, as well as inability to provide necessary support to persons of concern such as shelter and core relief items. These preparedness gaps indicated the need for concrete material and technical support, instead of just a generic recommendation on HALEP for the country operation to “continue implementation of preparedness actions”.

24. The regional bureaux also did not have designated emergency preparedness focal points that reviewed preparedness activities of country operations. Considering the limited capacity at DESS i.e., 1.5 staff (the Chief of Section at the P-5 level and one Associate Information Management Officer at the P-2 level), extending the use of HALEP or another relevant platform to regional bureaux and other divisions would not only have been beneficial for complementing this capacity, but would have also promoted the effective coordination and discharge of responsibilities in emergency preparedness within the Organization in accordance with the emergency preparedness policy framework.

**(3) The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should ensure that emergency preparedness gaps reported by country operations in key areas in the High Alert List for Emergency Preparedness are reviewed and, where necessary, escalated to relevant regional bureaux and/or headquarters divisions for relevant actions.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 3 and stated that while the online HALEP tool was already accessible by all UNHCR staff, DESS would undertake to share on a bi-weekly basis the list of newly submitted HALEP reports with the concerned regional and divisional focal points. Recommendation 3 remains open pending receipt of evidence of a process and/or suitable functionalities in HALEP implemented for the review by regional bureaux and/or headquarters divisions of emergency preparedness gaps reported by country operations and the recording of relevant actions undertaken to address those gaps.*

## **B. Activation and deactivation of emergencies**

### There was a need to enhance the process of activation and deactivation of emergencies

25. The Policy defines the conditions for the activation of the different levels of emergency by the High Commissioner or by the Assistant High Commissioner (Operations) depending on the capacity of the country operation and/or regional bureau to prepare (Level 1 emergency) or to respond (Levels 2 and 3) to an emergency. The Policy also requires that Level 2 and 3 emergencies are reviewed under the direction of the Assistant High Commissioner (Operations) up to six months after the declaration of each emergency, to determine if they can be deactivated, and hence promote a more effective allocation of resources.

26. As of 14 February 2019, a total of 27 countries were under emergency declarations at different levels (three under more than one emergency declaration), including three countries under Level 1

emergencies, 20 under Level 2, and four under Level 3 (including two IASC Level 3 system-wide emergencies). OIOS observed the following related to the activation and deactivation of emergencies:

a. **Level 1 emergency declarations:** Whereas for Level 2 and 3 emergencies OIOS identified similarities between UNHCR's activation criteria and IASC's scale-up activation criteria for Level 3 system-wide emergencies, the Policy was not clear on the definition of specific criteria for activation of Level 1 emergencies, and on the overall process and timing for activation of all emergencies. Also, advanced preparedness missions undertaken by DESS in 2017 and 2018 to two country operations following a Level 1 emergency declaration under the auspices of the Policy had mixed successes in terms of improvement in emergency preparedness for the respective country operations. While in one country operation there was an effective investment on preparedness activities, in the other the support obtained was used to address ongoing gaps in the emergency response and there was little impact on preparedness. Follow-up on the preparedness action plan was not given adequate attention by this operation, since the role had been delegated to junior staff in the office. At the time of the audit, the operation remained under Level 1 emergency, declared on 10 September 2017. This contradicted the spirit and usefulness of the revamped Level 1 emergency declaration as it did not seem logical that the operation, in coordination with DESS and the respective regional bureau, had not yet mobilized resources for emergency preparedness, 15 months after the emergency declaration.

b. **Review and deactivation of emergencies:** As at 14 February 2019, the duration of active UNHCR emergencies was on average 17 months. UNHCR had 22 emergency declarations active for periods longer than six months, including the protracted emergencies of Syria (since 3 August 2012) and Yemen (since 1 July 2015). DESS provided examples of reviews of active emergencies that it carried out during 2018. However, such reviews were not carried out systematically, and when they were carried out the justifications for the maintenance of emergency declarations did not always reflect objective assessments of the existing capacity to respond *vis-à-vis* unaddressed gaps. Also, there were no defined standards for the duration of extensions of emergency declarations. In OIOS opinion, an automatic deactivation process with the maintenance of emergency declarations by exception, incorporating elements of the IASC approach, would be a more effective option for UNHCR. The IASC scale-up activation procedures established that Level 3 emergencies would last for up to six months, with the possibility of an extension on an exceptional basis for an additional three months, followed by the implementation of a transition strategy. The IASC procedures also contemplated an assessment of the effectiveness of the scale-up activation through the measurement of the response against specific benchmarks, e.g. number and location of surged staff, establishment of empowered leadership, effective national and subnational coordination, and expected response outputs compared to humanitarian needs.

27. The issues cited above were due to omissions in the Policy and the lack of operational guidance on activation and deactivation of emergencies. As a result, UNHCR was exposed to the risk of failure to activate and deactivate emergencies correctly and in a timely manner, leading to inadequate prioritization of emergencies and sub-optimal allocation of emergency resources.

**(4) The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply, in coordination with the regional bureaux, should enhance the process of activation and deactivation of emergencies by: (a) clarifying the criteria for Level 1 emergency declarations; (b) assessing the feasibility of implementing automatic deactivation of emergencies and standards for extensions of emergency declarations based on objective analysis; and (c) detailing the procedures, interlocutors and timelines for emergency declarations and deactivations.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 4 and stated that DESS would: (a) revise the Emergency Policy to inter alia clarify the criteria for emergency activations, including Level 1 activations; (b) ensure that the revised Policy determines the duration of emergencies and their automatic deactivation after six months as a default. In exceptional cases the revised Policy would allow for the request of extensions for three months and, as a result, it would not be necessary to define benchmarks for the deactivation of emergencies; and (c) review the existing soft guidance on criteria and procedures for Level 1 to Level 4 activations to determine if it needed to be enhanced and clarified. Deactivations will be automatic. Recommendation 4 remains open pending receipt of evidence that the Policy on Emergency Preparedness and/or existing guidance have been reviewed and formally approved, and that they: (a) clarify the criteria for Level 1 emergency declarations; (b) define automatic deactivation of emergencies and standards for extensions of emergency declarations based on objective analysis of prevailing gaps; and (c) detail the procedures, interlocutors and timelines for emergency declarations and deactivations.*

### **C. Standby teams, emergency rosters and standby partnerships**

#### There was a need to enhance the management of emergency rosters and deployments

28. In order to meet immediate human resources needs of country operations to respond to emergencies, the Policy requires DESS to ensure the timely deployment of experienced emergency staff. To meet this objective, DESS needs to: (a) manage all emergency rosters, including the selection of roster members based on deployment trends and language, gender and geographical considerations; (b) explore new partnerships and maintain standby partnership agreements for emergency deployments and service packages; (c) define and agree on deployment procedures and criteria in coordination with senior management and relevant divisions; and (d) review and process deployment requests against deployment options and resources available.

29. UNHCR had the following five key rosters in place for deploying emergency staff or service packages when needed: (a) three full-time multifunctional emergency standby teams as part of DESS, led by Senior Emergency Coordinators and supervised by a Principal Emergency Coordinator; (b) the Senior Corporate Emergency Roster (SCER) for deployments of senior roles at P-5 and above levels; (c) the Emergency Response Team (ERT) roster for deployments of staff from GS-5 to P-4 levels covering to the extent possible all profiles; (d) functional rosters, co-managed by DESS and other divisions at headquarters, for deployments of specialized staff at P-3 and P-4 levels; and (e) emergency standby partners, for deployments of external staff or service packages (i.e., for services and infrastructures). As at November 2018, the SCER, ERT and functional rosters included 108 active staff. The DESS standby teams included 12 staff. UNHCR had in total 13 standby partners providing deployments of staff and other six providing service packages under specific conditions defined in partnership agreements. From January 2017 to October 2018, UNHCR deployed 283 staff from internal rosters/teams, and 169 external staff from standby partners to 42 countries.

30. OIOS noted the following issues related to the management of emergency rosters and deployments:

a. **Replenishment of rosters:** DESS replenished the ERT roster three times a year based on an analysis of trends in deployments by functional profiles *vis-à-vis* the current composition of the roster and applying selection and prioritization criteria of candidates. The identification and selection of candidates for the functional rosters were based on specific needs communicated by DESS to the divisions. OIOS observed that as at October 2018 the numbers of persons in the ERT and functional rosters were misaligned with the needs as represented in the deployment trends for specific functions in 2017 and 2018. For example, the rosters had five field staff against 51

deployments in the preceding two-year period, and three shelter staff against 60 deployments. OIOS understands that there was a generalized gap in the availability of some specialized functional profiles in the Organization (e.g., shelter) and that an increased demand in specific categories would inevitably deplete the roster. This situation was worsened because the roster period for the ERT was nine months despite the high investment made in selecting candidates, due to the reluctance of supervisors to release staff.

OIOS also observed a reduced representation in the rosters of professional level staff (only 25 members) and a predominance of English, Arabic and French speakers, with low or non-existent number of Spanish and Portuguese speakers, respectively, in the ERT/functional rosters, despite the high demand of deployees for countries under the Venezuela situation. This pre-existing language gap led the Regional Bureau for the Americas to identify in December 2018, in coordination with the Division of Human Resources, a list of 13 staff with the required language skills to complement the standard rosters. However, the Bureau did not coordinate with DESS prior to establishing the list and these staff did not meet the basic requirements defined for the standard rosters, which could in practice prevent their deployment. These basic requirements included: commitment of staff to deploy during the roster period, approval from their supervisors, insurance coverage in emergencies, and completed emergency training.

Furthermore, UNHCR deployed 173 staff who were not included in rosters, through direct negotiation with the releasing divisions or operations facilitated through the Human Resources Cells.<sup>1</sup> However, UNHCR had not defined standard conditions for these deployments. Considering the roster replenishment issues mentioned above, uncoordinated initiatives within UNHCR for the establishment of parallel sources of deployment, and the high number of deployments outside the existing rosters, DESS risked not meeting some forthcoming deployment needs.

b. **Duration of deployments:** The average duration of deployments from staff outside existing rosters was 3.5 months; 2.5 months for deployments from the ERT, SCER and standby teams against the standard of 2 months (extendable up to 3 months); and 5.4 months for deployments from standby partners. Out of the 283 internal emergency deployments from existing rosters/teams, 22 (or 8 per cent) exceeded the standard duration on average by an additional 1.4 months. There were 71 emergency and surge deployments to country operations without emergency declaration and 175 deployments to 19 emergency operations nine or more months after the respective emergency declarations (e.g., Uganda, with 93 deployments to attend to the South Sudan situation). Even though the Policy stipulates that deployments may be sought at any time for a declared emergency, arrangements needed to be made at an early stage for the transition to more stable staffing arrangements. An excessive use of emergency deployments was an indication of inadequate planning and could be used to circumvent normal recruitment processes and inevitably had a destabilizing effect on the operations due to the high turnover of staff.

c. **Performance monitoring and reporting:** DESS had recently launched an interactive dashboard of emergency declarations (<http://bit.ly/emergencydashboard>), including information of the number of emergency deployments per country of destination and source of deployment. However, it did not report on performance aspects related to the management of deployments, e.g., extent to which: deployment requests received were addressed (DESS informed that standby partners were not able to meet approximately 20 per cent of UNHCR requests); targets defined for the mobilization periods of deployed staff were met (requirement for 72 hours for deployments

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response, a Human Resources Cell is a “specialist cell” which may be activated after an emergency declaration to coordinate headquarters support for country operations in relation to human resources matters.

from the ERT, SCER and standby teams; one to two weeks for deployments from the functional rosters, and 72 hours to two weeks for deployments from standby partners); and the standard duration of deployments was met. This monitoring and reporting would fall under DESS' responsibilities to report on compliance with the Policy. DESS was constrained at the time of the audit with the use of heavy Excel files to manage rosters and the deployments which prevented adequate reporting. It was in the process of considering a new system to replace the Excel databases.

**(5) The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should enhance the management of emergency rosters and deployments by: (a) regularly replenishing the existing rosters and, in collaboration with relevant divisions, undertaking an annual review of the needs and opportunities for new functional rosters; (b) prioritizing emergency deployments to recently declared emergencies; and (c) implementing adequate monitoring and reporting arrangements, including on significant variances in relation to the duration and timing of emergency deployments to relevant stakeholders.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 5 and stated that DESS would: (a) establish an annual schedule for the review of functional rosters with the divisions concerned; (b) include data on the number of deployments within the first three months after an emergency declaration in the annual deployment statistics; and (c) make available annual deployment statistics and include data on duration and timing of deployments. Recommendation 5 remains open pending receipt of: (a) relevant guidance issued relating to the management of emergency rosters and standby teams, as well as documentary evidence on the implementation of such guidance; and (b) evidence of the development and delivery of relevant reporting on deployments.*

## **D. Monitoring and evaluation of emergency preparedness**

There was a need to ensure timely delivery of Joint Senior Level Missions and real-time reviews in accordance with relevant standards

31. In order to assess the timeliness, appropriateness and effectiveness of the operational response to an emergency, the Policy requires that: (a) JSLM, composed of the Directors/Deputy Directors of the Bureau and DESS, and the Regional Representative, take place within the first two weeks following an emergency declaration (Level 2 and 3 emergencies); (b) DESS and the relevant regional bureaux undertake jointly a real-time review after three months of an emergency declaration (Level 2 and 3 emergencies); and (c) the Evaluation Service undertakes an evaluation within 18 months (Level 3 emergencies). Such reviews and evaluations should be carried out in accordance with relevant objective indicators/criteria and take stock on lessons learned to address gaps on emergency preparedness. OIOS observed the following issues related to the delivery of real-time reviews and evaluations:

a. Due to lack of clarity regarding leadership and ownership, JSLM were not carried out systematically, they were mostly not documented, and their conclusions did not feed into the real-time reviews.

b. As at October 2018, UNHCR had not conducted the required real-time reviews on 10 emergency operations and evaluations on four operations. DESS explained that there had been constraints that had prevented the timely delivery of real-time reviews, including: mission fatigue of emergency operations; unavailability of bureaux staff; the fact that real-time reviews were not seen as a priority by key stakeholders; and lack of capacity within DESS.

c. In relation to the only two real time reviews that UNHCR delivered from January 2017 to May 2018, these reviews were carried out timely by DESS, the Division of International Protection and the respective regional bureau. The methodology included a mix of desk reviews and meetings held in Geneva and field visits to the concerned countries. However, DESS and the bureaux had not agreed on guidance for the reviews, including standards, formats and scope, and therefore the two reports differed substantially from each other and covered emergency preparedness to very different extents, and the recommendations were not addressed and followed up.

32. The two real-time review reports referred to gaps in preparedness that impacted negatively the response. Considering the low number of real-time reviews so far, DESS had not compiled any lessons learned and relevant indicators that enabled it to systematically identify gaps and recurrent issues in emergency preparedness *vis-à-vis* the effectiveness, efficiency, timeliness, and accountability of emergency responses. This information was relevant for DESS to target corrective or preventive actions and mitigate risks of inadequate preparedness and response. UNHCR evaluations, the Inspector General's Office desk reviews and OIOS field audit reports, including on several emergency operations, also constituted relevant sources of information, which would be relevant for DESS analysis.

**(6) The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should enhance the process of delivery of Joint Senior Level Missions (JSLM) and real-time reviews by: (a) clarifying the leadership and ownership of JSLM; (b) agreeing, in coordination with regional bureaux, on standards and scope for the reviews, as well as advanced planning for their timely delivery; (c) establishing a process to follow-up on recommendations from these reviews; and (d) compiling lessons learned and relevant indicators from the reviews and other oversight reports to assess recurrent issues and address gaps in emergency preparedness.**

*UNHCR accepted recommendation 6 and stated that the use of JSLM and real-time reviews and the related roles and responsibilities, standards, scope and processes, including a more efficient DESS oversight role in UNHCR's "three lines of defense", would be considered as a part of the revision of the Emergency Policy. UNHCR would also develop a soft guidance detailing benchmarks/processes to increase the synergies between the JSLM and the real-time reviews and to advocate with the bureaux for structured follow-up processes. DESS would also publish once a year an overview of recurrent emergency related issues. In 2018, the Policy and Capacity Development Section had already elaborated an overview of recurrent issues/gaps drawing on the findings/recommendations of real-time reviews. Recommendation 6 remains open pending receipt of: (a) guidance issued to address parts (a) to (c) of the recommendation, as well as documentary evidence of implementation of such guidance; and (b) a compilation of and evidence of dissemination of lessons learned and relevant indicators from the reviews and other oversight reports to assess recurrent issues and address gaps in emergency preparedness (part (d) of the recommendation).*

#### IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

33. OIOS wishes to express its appreciation to the management and staff of UNHCR for the assistance and cooperation extended to the auditors during this assignment.

(Signed) Eleanor T. Burns  
Director, Internal Audit Division  
Office of Internal Oversight Services

## STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

## Audit of emergency preparedness at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical <sup>2</sup> / Important <sup>3</sup>	C/O <sup>4</sup>	Actions needed to close recommendation	Implementation date <sup>5</sup>
1	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should review its current capacity to maintain the corporate early warning system and assess, in coordination with the Division of Information Systems and Telecommunications, the feasibility of establishing an enhanced and integrated system between headquarters and the field that supports real-time reporting of early warning indicators and escalation of emergency risks, as well as regional coverage of emergency preparedness.	Important	O	Submission to OIOS of: (a) a business case supporting the design of an enhanced early warning system together with evidence of concrete steps taken to establish the enhanced system; and (b) evidence of a review of the suitability of DESS capacity to manage the (enhanced) early warning system and concrete steps taken to address any resource needs.	31 December 2019
2	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should improve the accuracy of its reporting on the level of emergency preparedness of country operations by: (a) reviewing the accuracy of information reported and correcting outdated information and errors in the High Alert List for Emergency Preparedness; (b) assessing the system's potential for greater automation in reporting to reduce reliability on manual tasks and risks of errors; and (c) revising related standard operating procedures to address current gaps.	Important	O	Submission to OIOS of: (a) evidence that the reported errors in HALEP have been corrected; (b) a business case supporting the design of automated reporting features on emergency preparedness or, alternatively, evidence of the introduction of a review process over the information reported in HALEP prior to its publication; and (c) the revised SOP on HALEP addressing the reported gaps.	31 December 2019
3	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should ensure that emergency preparedness gaps reported by country operations in key areas in the High Alert List for Emergency Preparedness are reviewed and, where necessary, escalated to relevant	Important	O	Submission to OIOS of evidence of a process and/or suitable functionalities in HALEP implemented for the review by regional bureaux and/or headquarters divisions of emergency preparedness gaps reported by country operations	31 December 2019

<sup>2</sup> Critical recommendations address critical and/or pervasive deficiencies in governance, risk management or control processes, such that reasonable assurance cannot be provided with regard to the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

<sup>3</sup> Important recommendations address important (but not critical or pervasive) deficiencies in governance, risk management or control processes, such that reasonable assurance may be at risk regarding the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

<sup>4</sup> C = closed, O = open

<sup>5</sup> Date provided by UNHCR in response to recommendations.

## STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

## Audit of emergency preparedness at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical <sup>2</sup> / Important <sup>3</sup>	C/O <sup>4</sup>	Actions needed to close recommendation	Implementation date <sup>5</sup>
	regional bureaux and/or headquarters divisions for relevant actions.			and the recording of relevant actions undertaken to address those gaps.	
4	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply, in coordination with the regional bureaux, should enhance the process of activation and deactivation of emergencies by: (a) clarifying the criteria for Level 1 emergency declarations; (b) assessing the feasibility of implementing automatic deactivation of emergencies and standards for extensions of emergency declarations based on objective analysis; and (c) detailing the procedures, interlocutors and timelines for emergency declarations and deactivations.	Important	O	Submission to OIOS of evidence that the Policy on Emergency Preparedness and/or existing guidance have been reviewed and formally approved, and that they: (a) clarify the criteria for Level 1 emergency declarations; (b) define automatic deactivation of emergencies and standards for extensions of emergency declarations based on objective analysis of prevailing gaps; and (c) detail the procedures, interlocutors and timelines for emergency declarations and deactivations.	30 September 2019
5	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should enhance the management of emergency rosters and deployments by: (a) regularly replenishing the existing rosters and, in collaboration with relevant divisions, undertaking an annual review of the needs and opportunities for new functional rosters; (b) prioritizing emergency deployments to recently declared emergencies; and (c) implementing adequate monitoring and reporting arrangements, including on significant variances in relation to the duration and timing of emergency deployments to relevant stakeholders.	Important	O	Submission to OIOS of: (a) relevant guidance issued relating to the management of emergency rosters and standby teams, as well as documentary evidence on the implementation of such guidance; and (b) evidence of the development and delivery of relevant reporting on deployments.	31 December 2019
6	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should enhance the process of delivery of Joint Senior Level Missions (JSLM) and real-time reviews by: (a) clarifying the leadership and ownership of JSLM; (b) agreeing, in coordination with regional bureaux, on standards and scope for the reviews, as well as advanced planning for their timely delivery; (c) establishing a process to follow-up on recommendations from these reviews; and (d)	Important	O	Submission to OIOS of: (a) guidance issued to address parts (a) to (c) of the recommendation, as well as documentary evidence of implementation of such guidance; and (b) a compilation of and evidence of dissemination of lessons learned and relevant indicators from the reviews and other oversight reports to assess recurrent issues and address gaps in emergency preparedness.	30 September 2019



## STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

## Audit of emergency preparedness at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical <sup>2</sup> / Important <sup>3</sup>	C/ O <sup>4</sup>	Actions needed to close recommendation	Implementation date <sup>5</sup>
	compiling lessons learned and relevant indicators from the reviews and other oversight reports to assess recurrent issues and address gaps in emergency preparedness.				

# **APPENDIX I**

## **Management Response**

## Management Response

## Audit of emergency preparedness at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical <sup>1</sup> / Important <sup>2</sup>	Accepted? (Yes/No)	Title of responsible individual	Implementation date	Client comments
1	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should review its current capacity to maintain the corporate early warning system and assess, in coordination with the Division of Information Systems and Telecommunications, the feasibility of establishing an enhanced and integrated system between headquarters and the field that supports real-time reporting of early warning indicators and escalation of emergency risks, as well as regional coverage of emergency preparedness.	Important	Yes	Chief Emergency Preparedness	31-Dec-2019	The Division of Emergency Security and Supply (DESS) will assess the feasibility of establishing an enhanced system integrated between headquarters and the country operations together with the Division of Information Systems and Telecommunications (DIST). If this is found to be feasible, we will map the steps and resources necessary to establish such an enhanced IT tool for monitoring of risks and preparedness status.
				Chief Emergency Preparedness	30-June-2019	In addition, DESS will collaborate with the Division of Human Resources Management (DHRM) to ensure that preparedness activities are integrated into the job descriptions of the regional managers.
				Chief Emergency Preparedness	31-Dec-2019	The HALEP Standard Operating Procedures will be revised to ensure endorsement of the reports by the regional managers prior to issuance.
2	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should improve the accuracy of its reporting on the level of emergency preparedness of country operations by: (a) reviewing the accuracy of information reported and correcting outdated information and errors in the High Alert List for	Important	Yes	Chief Emergency Preparedness	31-Dec-2019	a) DESS will undertake a comprehensive cleansing exercise and inform OIOS on the corrections made.  In addition, DESS will review the standard operating procedures for the HALEP tool to ensure that necessary data quality checks are incorporated and regularly undertaken.

<sup>1</sup> Critical recommendations address critical and/or pervasive deficiencies in governance, risk management or control processes, such that reasonable assurance cannot be provided with regard to the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

<sup>2</sup> Important recommendations address important (but not critical or pervasive) deficiencies in governance, risk management or control processes, such that reasonable assurance may be at risk regarding the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

	Emergency Preparedness; (b) assessing the system's potential for greater automation in reporting to reduce reliability on manual tasks and risks of errors; and (c) revising related standard operating procedures to address current gaps.			Chief Emergency Preparedness	31-Dec-2019	b) Please see our response to recommendation 1 in which we undertake to assess the feasibility of the IT system enhancement together with DIST.
				Chief Emergency Policy and Capacity Development	31-Dec-2019	c) DESS will conduct a comprehensive review of the standard operating procedures for HALEP.
3	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should ensure that emergency preparedness gaps reported by country operations in key areas in the High Alert List for Emergency Preparedness are reviewed and, where necessary, escalated to relevant regional bureaux and/or headquarters divisions for relevant actions.	Important	Yes	Chief Emergency Preparedness	31-Dec-2019	While the online tool HALEP is already accessible by all UNHCR staff DESS undertakes to share on a bi-weekly basis the list of newly submitted HALEP reports with the concerned regional and divisional focal points.
4	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply, in coordination with the regional bureaux, should enhance the process of activation and deactivation of emergencies by: (a) clarifying the criteria for Level 1 emergency declarations; (b) assessing the feasibility of implementing automatic deactivation of emergencies and standards for extensions of emergency declarations based on objective analysis of agreed benchmarks; and (c) detailing the procedures, interlocutors and timelines for emergency declarations and deactivations.	Important	Yes	Chief of Policy and Capacity Development	30-Sep-2019	a) DESS will revise the Emergency Policy which will inter alia clarify the criteria for emergency activations, including the L1 activation.
				Chief Policy and Capacity Development	30-Sep-2019	b) The revised Emergency Policy will also determine the duration of emergencies and their automatic deactivation after 6 months as a default. In exceptional cases the revised Policy will allow for the request of extensions for 3 months. As a result, it will not be necessary to define benchmarks for the deactivation of emergencies.
				Chief Policy and Capacity Development	30-Sep-2019	c) The existing soft guidance on criteria and procedures for L1-L3 activations will be reviewed to determine if it needs to be enhanced

						and clarified. Deactivations will be automatic as described above.
5	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should enhance the management of emergency rosters and deployments by: (a) regularly replenishing the existing rosters and, in collaboration with relevant divisions, undertaking an annual review of the needs and opportunities for new functional rosters; (b) prioritizing emergency deployments to recently declared emergencies; and (c) implementing adequate monitoring and reporting arrangements, including on significant variances in relation to the duration and timing of emergency deployments to relevant stakeholders.	Important	Yes	Chief Emergency Preparedness	31-Dec-2019	<p>a) DESS will establish an annual schedule for the review of functional rosters with the divisions concerned.</p> <p>b) Data on the number of deployments within the first three months after an emergency declaration will be included in the annual deployment statistics.</p> <p>c) Annual deployment statistics will be made available and will include data on duration and timing of deployments.</p>
6	The UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security and Supply should enhance the process of delivery of Joint Senior Level Missions (JSLM) and real-time reviews by: (a) clarifying the leadership and ownership of JSLM; (b) agreeing, in coordination with regional bureaux, on standards and scope for the reviews, as well as advanced planning for their timely delivery; (c) establishing a process to follow-up on recommendations from these reviews; and (d) compiling lessons learned and relevant indicators from the reviews and other oversight reports to assess recurrent issues and address gaps in emergency preparedness.	Important	Yes	Chief Policy and Capacity Development	30-Sep-2019	The use of JSLM and RTR and the related roles and responsibilities, standards, scope and processes, including more efficient DESS oversight role in UNHCR's "three lines of defense", will be considered as a part of the revision of the Emergency Policy. For RTR, UNHCR will develop a soft guidance specifying detailed benchmarks/processes with the effort to increase the synergies between the JSLM and the RTR, to advocate with the bureaux for structured follow-up processes; and to publish once a year an overview of recurrent emergency related issues. In 2018, the Policy and Capacity Development Section had already elaborated an overview of recurrent issues/gaps drawing on the findings/recommendations of RTR.