

UN refugee agency scaling up support as 'horrific' violence in DR Congo drives thousands into Uganda

In the span of just three days – between 10 and 13 March – more than 4,000 people, mostly terrified women and children, have crossed into Uganda from crisis-gripped eastern provinces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the United Nations refugee agency said Friday.

Babar Baloch spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told reporters at the regular news briefing in Geneva that the agency is working with partner organizations in western Uganda [to support the influx](#), many who are exhausted, hunger and deeply traumatized by “horrific inter-ethnic violence and sexual abuse” they have reportedly endured.

Since the year began, an overwhelming 77.5 per cent of more than 57,000 refugees displaced by the violence in eastern DRC are women and children, according to the agency.

“These numbers are on a larger scale still than in 2017, when some 44,000 fled over the course of the entire year,” he continued. “UNHCR fears thousands more could arrive in Uganda if the security situation inside the DRC does not immediately improve.”

Mr. Baloch said that the majority continue to cross into Uganda via Lake Albert in rickety and unsafe boats from Ituri (province), “a journey that has already cost the lives of several refugees.”

“The situation has been even more dangerous in recent days because of bad weather,” he noted.

Although the lack of access means it is difficult to offer a detailed picture of the situation, UNHCR has received chilling accounts of violence – rape, murder and separation from family members.

“These are linked to the deteriorating security situation, internal conflicts and inter-communal tensions,” the spokesperson maintained, saying that armed men are reported to be attacking villages, looting and burning houses, indiscriminately killing civilians and kidnapping young men and boys.

A growing number of reports indicate that the violence is taking on ethnic dimensions as tribal groups engage in retaliatory attacks.

Dozens of refugees have recounted to UNHCR staff in Uganda, stories of the sexual violence and assaults they have endured – the vast majority of whom are women and girls, as well as some men and boys.

“These alarming reports have led the UN refugee agency and partners to strengthen the systems in place to identify and support survivors of sexual and gender based violence,” stressed Mr. Baloch.

UNHCR has deployed significant additional staff and resources to identify victims and strengthen support, including medical screening at Lake Albert landing sites, sexual and gender-based violence screening at the reception centres and making gender segregation spaces available.

“Working with partners, we have deployed additional staff specifically trained in psychosocial care to increase support to [sexual and gender based violence] refugee survivors and have conducted further outreach with community leaders and networks to ensure refugees are aware of what services are available to them,” he stated.

“We are also working with our humanitarian partners to save lives after a Cholera outbreak killed at least 32 refugees,” Mr. Baloch said, informing that the number of reported cases have significantly dropped from 668 to 160 since the February outbreak.

He pointed out that the nearly \$180 million refugee response funding appeal for Uganda remains poorly funded, “severely restricting capacities of humanitarian organizations to deliver vital aid and assistance.”

Within that appeal, only three per cent of UNHCR’s \$118.3 million requirement is funded.