

UPDATE: Spontaneous return of Congolese refugees from Angola to DRC

20 September 2019



Since 18 August, thousands of Congolese refugees **spontaneously left Lóvua refugee settlement** in Angola to make their way back home in the DRC.

A **Tripartite Agreement** was subsequently signed on 23-24 August between UNHCR and the Governments of Angola and DRC, in order to start an organized Voluntary Repatriations movement.

As of 17 September, UNHCR had completed a verification exercise in the Kalamba Mbuji border crossing point, and in the Notre Dame site in Kananga, the provincial capital of Kasai Central. A total of **11,506 people were verified as holding refugee status**, in both locations (2,817 households).

Background

Back in 2017, the outbreak of violence in the Kasai region of DRC triggered the displacement of some 1.4 million people, and the flight of over 35,000 refugees to Lunda Norte Province, Angola.

Spontaneous returns from northeastern Angola are linked to the presidential elections in DRC, and follow recent discussions between visiting DRC officials and refugees in Angola, where refugees were briefed about improvements in the security situation in Kasai Provinces. Some refugees subsequently approached UNHCR, expressing their wish to return to DRC. UNHCR and partners conducted “intentions surveys” in May, showing that 85% of the refugees in Lóvua settlement were willing to return to DRC.

On 23 August, UNHCR engaged in tripartite discussions with Angola and DRC to put in place mechanisms for voluntary, dignified and sustainable returns. It was agreed to launch the voluntary repatriation operation in September. In the meantime, over eight thousand Congolese refugees started walking from Lóvua settlement towards the DRC border.



Current situation

As of 6 September, according to DRC immigration authorities (DGM), over **14,000 people**¹ arrived in **Kalamba Mbuji**, a border entry point in DRC's Kasai Central Province. No additional convoys from Angola were reported since then.

In the other border town of Kamako, around **693 people** (158 households) have crossed according to authorities, with no additional crossings recorded since early September².

The Provincial Government of Kasai Central is transporting returnees from Kalamba Mbuji to Kananga. They are mainly staying in the unfinished **Notre Dame** church building, where overcrowding is posing health and protection risks. As of 19 September, an estimated **9,000 people were transported to Kananga** according to authorities.

In addition, since 14 September, the Provincial Government has started transporting returnees from Kananga to **Nkanji**, a temporary government site situated 17km from Kananga. Living conditions in Nkanji are critical.

UNHCR collected and mapped returnees' **final destinations**. Most claim they want to go to Kananga or other large cities, and do not want to go back to their places of origin in Kasai. Indeed, villages have been destroyed and many Kasaians still dread discrimination based on ethnicity.

¹ Figure might include expelled Congolese from Angola.

² This is in addition to the wave of expulsions that took place in Angola in October 2018, following which over 43,000 Congolese expelled from Angola are still in and around Kamako to this day, according to UNHCR's verification exercise.

UNHCR's response

- **Tripartite Agreement:** UNHCR and the Governments of DRC and Angola **signed a Tripartite Agreement** on 23-24 August, to agree on the legal framework to cover the voluntary and dignified repatriation of the Congolese refugees. UNHCR is planning to transport returnees from Angola's Lóvuá settlement to DRC, and to provide cash assistance.
- **Verification exercise:** As of 17 September, UNHCR and authorities³ verified that **11,506 people** in Kalamba Mbuji and Kananga (2,817 households) held refugee status in Angola.
- **Kalamba Mbuji:** UNHCR and partner AIDES are **constructing a transit center** in Kalamba Mbuji. As of 17 September, 5 shelters, 22 latrines and 22 showers were completed. A further 4 shelters, 4 latrines and 4 showers are under construction, as well as administration buildings, such as a reception/screening center, a refectory, a kitchen, etc.
- UNHCR provided six tarpaulin sheets to WFP, for food distributions and nutrition activities in Kalamba Mbuji. UNHCR's partner AIDES is carrying the food distributions in makeshift camps in Kalamba Mbuji.
- **Mugamba:** UNHCR and partner AIDES are constructing a transit center in Mugamba. Both this transit center and the one in Kalamba Mbuji are expected to be completed on 22 September, for a capacity of 500 people each.
- **Nkanji site:** UNHCR provided **250 tarpaulin sheets** to authorities, to improve conditions in the site.
- **Kananga:** UNHCR's partner War Child UK is conducting **protection monitoring** in Kananga, as well as Nkanji site.

Other actors' response

- **WFP** and implementing partners started food distributions and nutrition activities in Kalamba Mbuji. The same quantity of rations are given for all family sizes and for five days. WFP has 20 tonnes of food and over one tonne of biscuits.
- **Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)** provided ADRA with two 2,500-litre bladders to be installed in Nkanji site, but the two NGOs lack resources to install them.
- **MSF** built 3 latrines near its mobile clinic in Kalamba Mbuji. As of 17 September, 9 deaths were reported among returnees in Kalamba Mbuji. They were caused by malaria, diarrhoea and tetanus.
- **Unicef** provided one 10,000-litre bladder, 100 plastic slabs for latrines, and water purification products for the transit centres in Kalamba Mbuji and Mugamba, as well as in Nkanji (purification products)
- **UNFPA** is addressing reproductive health issues and gender-based violence throughout the Kasai region, including in Kalamba Mbuji, Kananga and Nkanji.

Remaining gaps

- Lack of appropriate **water and sanitation** facilities at Nkanji site, creating health and protection risks.
- Insufficient **accommodation** in Nkanji site to host those who were transferred there.
- **Protection needs** for vulnerable people who were transferred to Nkanji site.
- The collect of firewood and water, in villages neighbouring Kalamba Mbuji and Nkanji, may cause **tensions between returnees and locals**.
- **Security** risks and risks of **epidemic** in Kananga and Nkanji due to overcrowding.
- Need for **durable solutions** in Kananga, including Housing, Land and Property rights, self-reliance activities and peaceful coexistence, as most returnees expressed the wish to remain there, despite it not being their place of origin.

Contact

Fabien Faivre, Associate External Relations Officer, UNHCR Regional Representation Kinshasa, faivre@unhcr.org, Tel: +243 825 443 419

Ibrahima Diane, External Relations Officer, UNHCR Kananga Sub-Office, cussigh@unhcr.org, Tel: +243 819 2235 519

Alexandra Stenbock-Fermor, Associate External Relations & Reporting Officer, UNHCR Regional Representation Kinshasa, stenbock@unhcr.org, Tel: +243 822 253 121

[DR Congo Emergency page](#) | [UNHCR DRC operation page](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

³ Namely the National Refugee Commission (CNR) and the migration authorities (DGM).