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What remains of humanitarian aid?

Focus: Crises are escalating, but donors are cutting funds **Opinion:** Why Africa and Europe should place trade at the center of their relations **Opinion:** What Venezuelans need right now is support for their democratic civil society **Around the world:** After decades in Pakistan, Afghan families are being forced to leave with little notice

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In Venezuela, people are taking enormous risks to stand up for democracy, p. 9.

Photo: picture alliance/ZUMAPRESS.com/Jimmy Villalta

Photo: Aqsa Younas

Thousands of Afghan families have already left their homes in Pakistan, often under pressure and with little time to prepare, p. 15.

31 — Focus — What remains of humanitarian aid?

Artwork: Muthoni Nderitu

Cover by Muthoni Nderitu (see p. 4).

Humanitarian aid worldwide is facing a dangerous disparity: only a fraction of the funds needed are available, while more and more people are dependent on support. Many donor countries are making massive cuts to their budgets, with immediate consequences for the supply of water, food, medicine, shelter and psychosocial support. Where funding gaps are growing, aid organisations are forced to weigh up basic needs against each other. This undermines the very essence of humanitarian aid: to protect human lives and preserve dignity – regardless of politics and interests.

10

Days.

That's how long it took for the wealthiest one percent of the global population to exhaust their CO_2 budget for the entire year. In order to meet the 1.5 °C target, the United Nations states that no more than 2.1 tonnes of CO_2 per capita may be emitted annually – a limit that, according to Oxfam's calculations, the super-rich had already exceeded by 10 January.

The calculations not only include private lifestyles but also the emissions caused by companies in which the super-rich invest. In addition to stronger taxation of emissions-intensive luxury goods, Oxfam therefore calls for a global tax on the profits of oil, gas, and coal companies. This tax could generate up to $400 billion annually, thus compensating for at least part of the economic damages caused by climate change.

The good news

In 2025, three countries – **Georgia, Timor-Leste and Suriname** – were declared **malaria-free** by the World Health Organization (WHO). Suriname became the first country in the Amazon region to join the *list of now 47 countries* which, according to the WHO, are free of the disease.

WHO officials credited the three countries for their **resolute action against the disease**, including early detection and treatment, community engagement and efforts to prevent its spread. However, maintaining this status requires ongoing efforts to prevent the **reintroduction of malaria**.

Photo: Muthoni Nderitu

ARTIST

Muthoni Nderitu ("Blu")

Muthoni Nderitu ("Blu") is a self-taught Kenyan contemporary artist whose practice moves between symbolic, psychological and mixed-media expression, extending into poetry and multidisciplinary forms. Her work is rooted in the understanding that inner transformation shapes outer reality. Through symbolism, fragments of text, and layered compositions, Blu explores memory as both source and language: a personal and emotional thread that connects the inner world to the wider human experience.

Working across acrylic, collage, ink and mixed media, Blu uses material layering as a metaphor for consciousness and lived experience. Alongside her studio practice, she has facilitated art workshops with children and art therapy sessions informed by her background in counselling psychology.

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Tanger Med container port in Morocco.

Photo: picture alliance/Zoonar/Nando Lardi

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Africa and Europe should put trade at the centre of their relations

When global leaders gathered in Addis Ababa at the 39th African Union Summit in mid-February to set and align priorities in key areas, the headlines and discussions focused on geopolitics, security and climate. But beneath these urgent themes lies a quieter, transformative opportunity: trade. If approached with ambition and balance, trade can become one of the most powerful levers for a new era of collaboration between Africa and Germany and, eventually, across the entire Africa–Europe partnership.

BY MOSES VILAKATI, MATHIAS MOGGE AND DEBISI ARABA

At a time when the European Union is negotiating wide-ranging trade agreements with Mercosur and India, the absence of a similarly bold, future-oriented framework with Africa is striking. Africa is home to the world's youngest population, some of the fastest-growing markets, holds vast deposits of critical minerals, possesses enormous agricultural potential and has a booming agri-tech ecosystem. Yet, it remains largely locked into a pattern of exporting raw commodities and importing processed foods and inputs. This imbalance, which exacerbates water and food insecurity, is not inevitable. It is an outcome that can be changed.

And the stakes are high. Africa's agricultural exports have tripled over the past two decades to $90 billion in 2023, while imports have grown even faster, reaching almost $120 billion in 2023, thus leaving the continent a net food importer and highly vulnerable to global price shocks. And while intra-African agricultural trade more than tripled to $20 billion between 2003 and 2023, it still accounts for less than one fifth of total trade, far below levels seen in Europe or Asia.

"Leaders on both sides should commit to a new trade narrative with Africa not as a source of raw materials, but as a partner in value creation."

A forward-looking Africa-Germany trade partnership that is nested within a broader Africa-EU vision could help close these gaps. While trade between Africa and Germany has remained modest thus far, the complementarities are clear: Africa's growing food markets and Germany's interest in sustainable, reliable value chains. This will require a deliberate shift from a donor-recipient mindset to a co-investment model that builds productive capacity, strengthens regional markets and aligns trade with food security, climate goals and job creation among member states in both unions.

"The EU's negotiations with Mercosur and India demonstrate that European countries are willing to pursue comprehensive trade frameworks."

When paired with investments in rural infrastructure, social protection, equitable land tenure, education and processing capacities, trade can significantly bolster food security and drive the transformation of agrifood systems. It can also facilitate the implementation of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). This is critical, as sub-Saharan Africa continues to record the highest hunger levels globally.

BUILDING ON AFCFTA

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is the foundation for such a shift. With 54 countries having signed the AfCFTA Agreement, it is already the largest free trade area in the world by membership. Its promise is immense: removing tariffs and non-tariff barriers, harmonising standards and stimulating regional value chains that make African producers more competitive at home and abroad. Its implementation must be accelerated, however. Too few countries are trading under AfCFTA preferences, and bottlenecks in infrastructure, customs procedures and sanitary and phytosanitary systems continue to hold back cross-border commerce. The institutional capacity of regional economic communities and the AfCFTA Secretariat also needs sustained support so that reforms are coordinated, monitored and enforced effectively.

Strengthening AfCFTA is not only in Africa's interest. A more integrated African market would make Africa a stronger, more reliable trading partner for Germany and

Europe. It would also create the scale and predictability that European investors and manufacturers need to engage more deeply in African value chains.

The examples are already there. In West Africa, the ECOWAS "Milk Offensive" shows how coordinated regional policy, blended finance and investment in cold chains and standards can stimulate demand for advanced technologies. The initiative also reduces dependence on imported milk powder while raising incomes for pastoralists and processors. In East Africa, targeted upgrades of border laboratories have slashed clearance times for food imports and exports, protecting food security while reducing non-tariff barriers. In Uganda, sustained public-private investment in the coffee sector, combined with early action on traceability and sustainability standards, has boosted export value and deepened mutually beneficial trade with Europe.

THE AGRIBRIDGE NETWORK

A powerful illustration of Africa-Europe collaboration is the AgriBridge Network, an African-German "network of networks" connecting research institutions, private-sector actors, farmer organisations and civil society. By creating structured spaces for dialogue, AgriBridge fosters the mutual understanding and trust essential for enduring partnerships and informed exchange with policymakers.

> "Africa and Germany should scale up partnership-based investments that prioritise local value addition."

Its recent Policy Note on trade provides clear, actionable recommendations to strengthen agricultural value chains, accelerate AfCFTA implementation, expand inclusive financing and support women, youth and SMEs, demonstrating how evidence-based, multi-stakeholder collaboration can deliver tangible trade outcomes.

These experiences point to a clear agenda for action. First, Africa and Germany should scale up partnership-based investments that prioritise local value addition. This means supporting agro-processing zones, renewable energy for agribusiness, climate-smart technologies and skills development. Blended finance can de-risk early-stage investments and crowd in long-term, patient funding. Second, crucially, all such partnerships must adhere to strong environmental and social safeguards, ensuring that trade contributes to the right to food, decent work and green growth. Third, any deeper Africa-Europe trade agenda must be inclusive by design. Smallholder farmers, women, youth and small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of Africa's agrifood economy, yet they are often excluded from formal trade opportunities. Expanding access to affordable finance, technologies, tailored skills development and digital tools can help these groups participate more fully in regional and international value chains. For Germany, this means aligning catalytic development finance, private-sector engagement and technical cooperation to deliberately prioritise those who are most often left behind.

In this context, the new reform plan of the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, which emphasises economic collaboration, presents an opportunity. Sustainable economic development can form the foundation for thriving economies, eradicating poverty, creating much-needed employment opportunities and ensuring long-term food and nutrition security. For this to happen, economic cooperation must not be driven solely by export or investment interests but rather be accompanied by robust corporate due diligence obligations and be firmly anchored in the progressive realisation of the human right to adequate food.

Finally, Europe must think bigger. The EU's negotiations with Mercosur and India demonstrate that European countries are willing to pursue comprehensive trade frameworks that go beyond tariffs to cover standards, services, investment, innovation and sustainability. Africa deserves a similarly ambitious approach that recognises the AfCFTA as the continental anchor and builds towards a wide-ranging Africa-EU trade partnership over time.

This is the right moment to set this vision in motion. Leaders on both sides should commit to a new trade narrative

with Africa not as a source of raw materials, but as a partner in value creation, not as a recipient of aid, but as a co-investor in shared growth and prosperity.

From Addis Ababa to Berlin, the message should be clear: the future of Africa-Europe relations is witnessing a renewed momentum. What is needed now is the political will to seize it.

LINKS

Welthungerhilfe: AgriBridge Network.
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welthungerhilfe.org/news/publications/detail?tx_cart_product%5Bproduct%5D=2365&cHash=38a2993c0f-ca9932b6842b6e91d582ad

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DEMOCRACY VS AUTOCRACY

The kind of solidarity Venezuelans need right now

Venezuelans have entered a new phase of the same crisis they have been struggling with for many years. International reactions that confuse solidarity with paternalism are not helpful. Instead, pro-democratic civil society actors deserve more support.

BY LAURA VIDAL

Photo: picture alliance/ZUMAPRESS.com/Jimmy Villalta

Protests in Caracas against electoral fraud following the 2024 presidential elections.

Since the United States under Donald Trump captured Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro on 3 January using military force, everything has changed and nothing has changed in the country. Delcy Rodríguez, who has been the vice president since 2018, now leads what historian and political analyst Margarita López Maya describes as a "de facto government, but under tutelage". Much is happening, yet little can be predicted with certainty. Events shift within days.

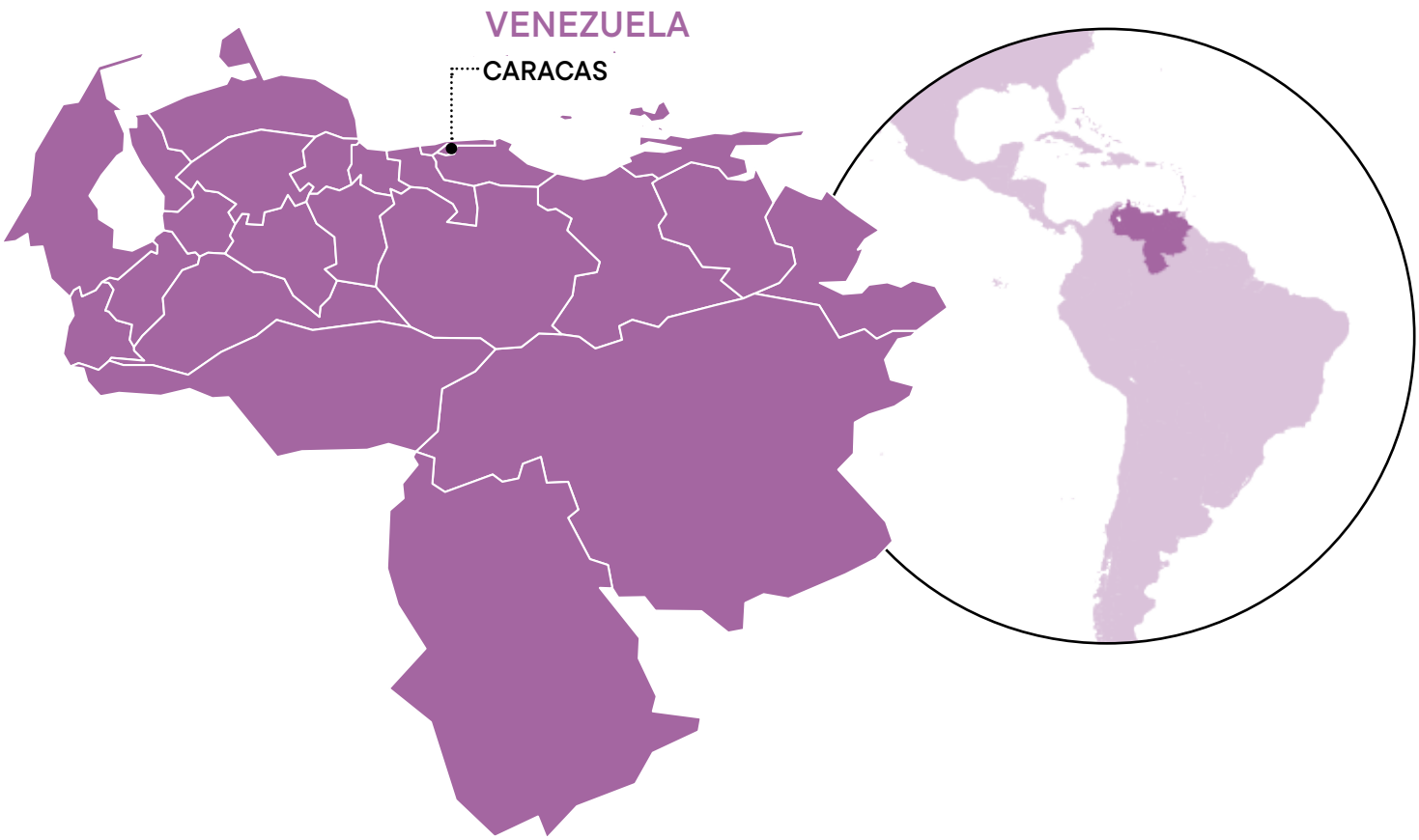
After weeks of intense debate that revived old binaries — "left" versus "right", "sovereignty" versus "international law" — it has become increasingly evident that Maduro was handed over by actors within his own circle of power. In an ironic plot twist, those who have long advanced a discourse of non-alignment and anti-imperialism have effectively opened the door to the Trump administration's presence in the region.

Following developments in Venezuela requires constant attention. Chaos is not incidental; it is structural. Context shifts rapidly, and pervasive propaganda obscures crucial layers.

After Maduro's capture, international reactions were swift and loud. Protests erupted across major cities defending Venezuela's territorial integrity. Anti-imperialist language returned with urgency. Yet many Venezuelans, inside the country and across the diaspora, watched these reactions with both relief and irritation. Not because concerns about international law are misplaced, but because something essential was missing: the perspective of Venezuelans themselves.

Venezuelan sociologist and human rights defender Rafael Uzcátegui describes this as a phenomenon he calls "minor colonialism": a form of symbolic domination that emerges when external actors assume the authority to interpret, rank and ultimately substitute the voices of those living through the violence. This stance presents itself as principled and progressive, yet it imposes narratives from above.

> "Yes, military interventions do set dangerous precedents. But so does the systematic dismantling of democratic institutions under the protective cloak of sovereignty."



This dynamic becomes visible when Venezuelans are told how to interpret their own crisis. Solidarity then turns pedagogical. Observers abroad demand geopolitical maturity and narrative discipline but ignore or diminish what victims have seen with their own eyes.

VENEZUELAN STATE VIOLATES HUMAN RIGHTS

The devastating human rights situation in Venezuela has not improved. The record of abuses is becoming clearer. As fear loosens its grip and prisoners are gradually released, testimonies begin to surface. Horrors long suspected are confirmed. Others, previously unimaginable, come to light. Organisations devoted to transparency and documentation remain at work despite legal harassment, resource constraints and exile. Political prisoners remain the most visible symbol of repression.

Yes, military interventions do set dangerous precedents. But so does the systematic dismantling of democratic institutions under the protective cloak of sovereignty. So does a state that antagonises its own population, captures courts, hollows out elections, criminalises civil society and weaponises opacity. These, too, are precedents. They create power vacuums and normalise impunity long before any aircraft or military boots appear.

Venezuela's crisis did not begin in January. The latest events are the culmination of nearly 20 years of institutional erosion and repression. Take the 2024 presidential elections, for example. Despite conditions that were neither free nor fair, millions queued to vote, fully aware that fraud was likely. For many, voting was the last remaining democratic mechanism. When it became clear that transparency was lacking once again, international condemnation followed, but institutions did not act decisively. The Organization of American States (OAS) failed to pass a resolution demanding transparency. Hesitation became the answer to those crying for help.

VENEZUELANS ARE FIGHTING FOR CHANGE, NOT BOMBS

As democratic backsliding accelerates globally, Venezuela shows that the real issue isn't simply "sovereignty vs foreign intervention". It is the struggle between an authoritarian government tightening its grip and people trying to defend democracy.

When ideology matters more than people's suffering, solidarity becomes selective. And when institutions fail, victims can feel pushed towards acts of desperation. Most Venezuelans did not ask for the Trump administration to bomb the country and remove Maduro by force as a way out of Chavismo. Instead, they voted, protested and organised under extraordinary risk to pursue democratic change.

While many Venezuelans describe the intervention as shameful and alarming, some also admit they are relieved that a seemingly immovable system cracked. Complexity here is not a contradiction, but the reality of a prolonged crisis in which Venezuelans were systematically left alone.

For an international community uncertain about where to place its solidarity, the answer is not abstract. It lies with civil society organisations, groups and networks that have documented abuses under threat, often from exile, and now face severe funding cuts. International partnerships grounded in listening will understand that supporting Venezuela — and helping prevent similar crises elsewhere — depends on strengthening these actors rather than speaking over them.

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Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Sam Mednick

Former child soldiers stand in line waiting to be registered with UNICEF to receive a release package, in Yambio, South Sudan.

CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

Child soldiers are still a reality in South Sudan

In South Sudan, children continue to be recruited and used in the country's ongoing conflicts. A UN report details violations of children's rights by both state and non-state actors and calls on the South Sudanese government to improve its protection efforts.

BY MAMER KUOT

South Sudan has been struggling with ongoing violence for decades, which has turned civilians, including children, into victims of displacement, disease and hunger. Many have assumed responsibility for feeding their families, while others are being used in the fighting.

The UN's Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding the involvement of children in armed conflict, which was adopted by the General Assembly on 25 May 2000 and went into effect on 12 February 2002, seeks to safeguard children from being recruited and utilised in hostilities. It prohibits its 173 member nations, including South Sudan, from recruiting individuals under the age of 18 as soldiers or using them in armed conflict in any way.

South Sudan ratified the protocol on 27 September 2018, shortly after signing the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, which aimed to end the civil war that devastated the country from 2013 to 2018.

Despite this commitment, the ongoing conflict between government forces and opposition groups is still putting children's rights in jeopardy throughout South Sudan. In a report to the UN Security Council on 27 May 2025, UN Secretary-General António Guterres indicated that children remain at extremely high risk of becoming the victims of serious rights violations, both at the hands of state and non-state actors.

The report indicates that there were 630 violations of children's rights throughout South Sudan during the period from 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2024, including abductions for recruitment, sexual violence during the abductions, as well as killing and maiming following the abductions.

It notes that Western Equatoria State had the highest number of violations, totalling 141; Upper Nile State followed with 137 cases, while Jonglei State reported 120 violations against children.

DRIVERS OF CHILD RECRUITMENT

Decades of civil war, current conflicts, climate shocks and a severe economic downturn are all factors that make South Sudanese children vulnerable to exploitation. In connection with this UNICEF estimates that 65% of school-aged children in the country do not attend school.

Wanga Emmanuel, the chairperson of Western Equatoria's Network for Civil Society Organisations, believes that in addition to the conflicts and the difficulty of upholding the rule of law, the government's inability to address the problem of street children is a major factor driving recruitment. As South Sudan's then-Minister of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, Aya Warille Benjamin, explained in 2024, some children are forcibly abducted, but there are others that join armed groups to escape poverty. The UN report indicates that children are sometimes coerced to enlist with promises of financial compensation. Solana Jeremiah Chuei, the chairperson of Upper Nile State's Civil Society Network, furthermore points out that mistreated children also sometimes turn to violence as a survival tactic.

> "Young boys were allegedly arrested for committing crimes, but locals believe that recruitment was the true motivation for their detention."

Increased security tensions appear to go hand in hand with increased child-rights violations. Progress in implementing the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict has been limited, and ongoing conflicts have led to fighting between armed youths as well as to the child-rights abuses that the UN report lists. Of the 630 violations that the country task force was able to verify, non-state actors were responsible for 45%, government security forces for 31%, and 24% remained unattributed.

Peter Ngwojo, the Minister for Information in Upper Nile State, has stated that the government now has a strict policy against the recruitment of child soldiers and denies witnessing any continued use of them in state forces. John Bariona , the Minister for Cabinet Affairs in Western Equatoria, similarly claims that the government of his state has a definite strategy to protect children from exploitation, but admits that recruitment continues, even though he says he cannot identify who is behind it.

The UN report acknowledges that some progress has been made, but emphasises that low accountability is enabling and perpetuating sexual violence by government forces, for example. Secretary-General Guterres calls on the government to increase accountability, oversight and training of armed forces to prevent child-rights violations. He also calls on all parties to the peace process to fully implement the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict, including its provisions relating to children.

SUCCESSES AND CONTINUED CHALLENGES

The UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), UNICEF and national partners have worked together on numerous occasions to secure the release of children associated with both state and opposition forces. As recently as December 2025, 22 children who had served with the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF), the country's official military, were handed over to child protection authorities in Western Equatoria. They will receive psychosocial support, be reunited with their families and enrolled in vocational training to help them reintegrate into civilian life.

> "UNICEF estimates that 65 % of school-aged children in the country do not attend school."

Despite such successes and the government's expressed commitment to ending the use of children in the conflict, troubling reports continue to emerge. In an interview, Chuei, the civil-society activist, reported possible cases of recruitment in Malakal, the capital of Upper Nile State, in August 2025 at a UNMISS Protection of Civilians site and within the city. Young boys were allegedly arrested for committing crimes, but locals believe that recruitment was the true motivation for their detention. Ngwojo, the Minister for Information in Upper Nile State, also reported that the spiritual leader Makuach Tut, who commands the Nuer White Army militia group, recruited children to serve as soldiers in a planned assault on Malakal. Ngwojo points out that the government has no control over rebel operations in regions where they hold significant sway – a reminder that children will likely remain at risk for as long as hostilities continue.

Chuei calls on the government to provide ample educational resources to prevent children from engaging in or being affected by violence. "Those of us in civil society are raising our voices for children to be treated well and for their human rights to be respected," he said.

Secretary-General Guterres also underscores the need for better access to education, as well as robust legal frameworks, peacebuilding efforts, long-term sustainable development and concerted action by the South Sudanese government and the international community to address the causes of the serious violations currently impacting the country's children.

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INVOLUNTARY MIGRATION

The harsh fate of Afghan families pushed out of Pakistan

After decades of building lives in Pakistan, Afghan families are being forced to leave with little notice. Their homes, jobs and social ties are being abruptly erased. Personal stories from the city of Sialkot show how deportation policies are turning long-term residents into "outsiders" overnight.

BY AQSA YOUNAS

For Sumandar Khan, Sialkot, in northeastern Pakistan, was never a temporary stop. It was home. For more than 20 years, the Afghan citizen lived in the narrow lanes of the Pak Pura neighbourhood, raised eight children, ran a small shoe shop and buried both his parents in the local graveyard. His eldest son earned a living from a shawarma stall a few streets away. The family's life was shaped by work, school and neighbourhood ties. Pakistan was not a place of refuge for them: it was the only country they knew.

That certainty collapsed when authorities began enforcing tighter measures against undocumented Afghan nationals. Police notices appeared and arrests increased. The message spread quickly through neighbourhoods like Pak Pura: leave on your own or be taken away. For families who had lived quietly for decades, the shift was abrupt and devastating. They had paid rent, sent children to school and contributed to local economies. Overnight, they were labelled outsiders.

When Sumandar Khan's family began packing, the reality set in. Furniture, appliances and household items were sold at throwaway prices. Buyers knew these families had no leverage. Each sale felt like a small surrender. The final days were marked by silence and unanswered questions. The children struggled to understand why they had to leave. They were born in Pakistan. Their memories were tied to schoolyards, local markets and friends next door. Afghanistan existed only in stories told by their elders.

A few streets away lived Bakhto Khan, an Afghan citizen like Sumandar. Bakhto ran a modest vegetable shop, selling tomatoes, potatoes and fruit to neighbours who had known him for years. His seven sons were all born in Pakistan. All worked wherever work was available, as helpers in workshops, loaders in markets or assistants in small shops.

Bakhto had never imagined that decades of residence could be erased because of a lack of documents. Like many others, he lived quietly, avoided trouble and focused on feeding his family. When enforcement intensified, he closed his shop without notice. His sons left their jobs without explanation. There were no farewells, only hurried packing and fear of arrest.

MORE THAN 150,000 AFGHANS ARRESTED

Across Pakistan, similar scenes are unfolding daily. Afghan families are leaving homes they have known for generations, often under pressure and with little time to prepare. Many are departing from urban centres such as Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Sialkot and Peshawar, where Afghan communities had long blended into city life.

The numbers reveal the scale of the crisis. In 2025, more than 150,000 Afghan nationals were arrested or detained in Pakistan, according to data compiled by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). From 25 to 31 January 2026, more than 1500 Afghan nationals were arrested, most of them in the province of Balochistan and in Islamabad Capital Territory.

"Many are departing from urban centres such as Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Sialkot and Peshawar, where Afghan communities had long blended into city life."

Photo: Aqsa Younas

Afghan refugees leaving Pakistan at the Torkham border crossing in November 2025.

Authorities have repeatedly cited security concerns, pointing to cross-border militancy and attacks allegedly originating on Afghan soil. Afghan authorities reject these claims, yet civilians in Pakistan are still suffering severe consequences. Their options for legal protection are narrowing: policies that initially focused on undocumented migrants have now expanded to include Afghan Citizen Card holders as well.

Islamabad is framing the deportations as matters of law, security and sovereignty. But on the ground, people are experiencing them as loss and displacement. For families who spent decades contributing to Pakistan's informal economy, the distinction between documented and undocumented feels detached from their lived experience.

Sumandar Khan's journey highlights what statistics cannot capture: the fear of a knock on the door at night, the humiliation of selling belongings at a loss or the quiet grief of leaving parents' graves behind. These experiences unfold away from cameras and official statements, yet they define the crisis more clearly than any data point.

For families like the Khans, the decision to leave cuts to the core of their identities and sparks fears for their future survival. Afghanistan, though familiar by name, is unfamiliar in reality. Many returnees have no property, no employment prospects and no support networks waiting for them. They arrive in Afghanistan with little more than clothes and memories, entering regions where jobs are scarce and aid is limited.

Children bear a disproportionate burden. Their education is interrupted and their social ties are severed. Often, their first language is Urdu, Pakistan's national language. Many face an uncertain future in schools where the curriculum, language and culture are unfamiliar. For them, crossing the border is not a return but a forced departure from everything they know. For girls and young women, the flight means the premature end of their education. In Afghanistan, they are only allowed to attend school up to the sixth grade. The human rights situation for women in Afghanistan is generally disastrous.

At border crossings such as Torkham and Spin Boldak, the human cost becomes visible. Long lines stretch for hours. Elderly parents sit by the roadside. Mothers carry infants bundled up against the cold. Teenagers stand silently, clutching small bags that hold their entire lives. Some families choose unofficial routes through provinces like Helmand and Paktika, risking violence, landmines and exploitation.

AFGHAN COMMUNITIES UNDER PRESSURE

Humanitarian organisations warn that Afghanistan is ill prepared for the scale of returns. The Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) reported record daily arrivals in November 2025, which strained its capacity to provide food, shelter and medical care. Combined with returns from Iran, which has also deported hundreds of thousands of Afghans in recent years, the pressure on local communities has reached a breaking point.

"At border crossings such as Torkham and Spin Boldak, the human cost becomes visible. Long lines stretch for hours. Elderly parents sit on the roadside."

Across Afghanistan, returnees struggle to rebuild in an environment already stretched thin. Housing shortages, limited healthcare and fragile education systems leave families vulnerable. Many feel trapped between two countries, unwelcome in one and unfamiliar in the other.

The displacement of Afghan families from Pakistan is not a temporary disruption but a long-term humanitarian challenge. Balancing security concerns with human obligations remains a test not only for Pakistan but for the international community as well. Support for returnees and protection of children's rights and dignity will shape how this chapter is remembered.

For Sumandar Khan, Bakhto Khan and many others like them, the road to Afghanistan is more than a journey across a border. It is a passage through loss, memory and forced reinvention. Home, once defined by streets and neighbours, has become an idea they carry with them. The cost of losing it will impact their lives long after the border fades from sight.

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HUMAN RIGHTS

Inside El Salvador's prison system

Donald Trump has openly admired El Salvador's modern high-security prisons. But in most of the country's prisons, the conditions are appalling, and the death rate among inmates is rising. The government of Nayib Bukele likes to present its approach to security as a model, but it conceals one detail: it is based on a policy of oppression and torture.

BY JULIA GAVARRETE

Photo: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Salvador Melendez

A guard stands in front of a prison cell at the CECOT high-security prison in Tecolotzco, El Salvador.

"You're doing incredibly for your country," US President Donald Trump said to Salvadorian head of state Nayib Bukele when the former received him in the Oval Office in mid-April 2025. "We appreciate working with you because you want to stop crime, and so do we."

Since then, the infamous collaboration between the two countries has created headlines worldwide: El Salvador agreed to accept and detain a group of more than 200 Venezuelans without evidence in one of its high-security prisons. In return, it received $ 6 million from the USA.

The Trump administration accuses the Venezuelan migrants of being members of the criminal gang "Tren de Aragua", though only a few of them have been convicted of a crime. Following their arrival, pictures from CECOT, El Salvador's so-called "Terrorism Confinement Center", travelled around the world; US Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem even had her picture taken in front of inmates.

"We're very eager to help. We know that you have a crime problem and a terrorism problem that you need help with," Bukele answered immediately, visibly flattered by Trump's words. Bukele knew that he had done more than attract global attention. With his efforts to "fight crime", he had also won Donald Trump as an ally.

THE CECOT HIGH-SECURITY PRISON

Even before Trump took office, CECOT was one of the most important symbols of Nayib Bukele's security strategy. The modern mega-prison was built in record time and can hold 40,000 people. The government promoted it as a model internationally and attracted the interest of politicians from other Latin American countries who are also struggling with high crime rates. Bukele's administration even caught the eye of some influencers and generously opened CECOT's doors to them. They filmed there as if they were taking a tour of the prison. Videos of prisoners with shaved heads, all supposedly criminal gang members, became part of the government's marketing.

But CECOT by no means provides a realistic impression of what is really going on in El Salvador's prisons. Because of the country's high crime rate, the government declared a state of exception in March 2022, after a particularly violent weekend in which at least 87 people were murdered. Since then, about 85,000 people have been imprisoned, most of them without evidence that they committed the crimes they have been accused of. These measures did reduce violence on the streets, but they also curbed citizens' basic rights.

Nayib Bukele now boasts that El Salvador has become one of the "safest countries in the Western hemisphere". But the list of the human rights violations committed by his government is long. It not only condoned torture in Salvadorian prisons, it also contributed to the disappearance of hundreds of people. They were presumably arrested – without evidence of the crimes they are accused of, without a trial and without contact with their families.

DEATHS IN PRISONS

"I wouldn't have known how he was if I hadn't seen him on social media," a mother told me. Her son was arrested after the state of exception was declared, and she hadn't heard from him since – until one day she saw photos on Facebook of him receiving medical care in a hospital. Such stories are no longer rare in El Salvador today.

Since the state of exception was declared, Salvadorian prisons have been denounced as torture centres. People waiting for trials here can become victims of all kinds of atrocities, as statements by former inmates indicate. These have been documented by human rights organisations and the press: prisoners being tortured and suffocated, people's bodies being returned to their families with signs of hangings and beatings that the state does not account for.

> "Even before Trump took office, CECOT was one of the most important symbols of Nayib Bukele's security strategy. The modern mega-prison was built in record time and can hold 40,000 people."

In 2024, Cristosal, one of the most important human rights organisations in El Salvador, made a detailed list of the deaths that have occurred in prisons. From 2022 to July 2024, an estimated 244 men and 17 women died in state custody. The organisation states that after collecting hundreds of witness statements, it has also been able to document the deaths of four children. Two had lived in prison with their mothers; two were miscarriages.

Since then, the numbers have risen: according to the human rights organisation Socorro Jurídico, by mid-2025, the total number of deaths had climbed to over 430. In their most recent report, published in January 2026, Socorro Jurídico reported 470 deaths, 94% of which

weren't gang members. Cristosal and Human Rights Watch report that during the first year of the state of exception, most of the deaths occurred in the prisons La Esperanza, known as Mariona, and Izalco.

STATEMENTS BY FORMER DETAINEES

"I told [my family] very little. It's difficult to talk about this. There are things that you can't say. Sometimes people arrived vomiting blood because they had been beaten. Others who were sick screamed 'there's someone sick in here'. Sometimes help came. If it didn't, it was God's will," a person told me who had been arrested and brought to Mariona at the beginning of the state of exception.

The coordinator of the Movement for the Victims of the Regime in El Salvador (MOVIR), Samuel Ramírez, reports that most prisons in El Salvador are overcrowded and unhygienic. According to him, the detainees die due to "a lack of food and medical care". MOVIR was founded in the initial months of the state of exception, when hundreds of people were being arrested without a warrant and subjected to torture in prison. Since then, the organisation has advocated for innocent people who have been arrested and received the 2025 Human Rights Award from the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) in recognition of its efforts.

"A humanitarian crisis is unfolding in the prisons," Ramírez says. The reason is obvious: El Salvador has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. According to data from the Institute for Human Rights at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (IDHUCA), the state of exception has exacerbated overcrowding in El Salvador's prisons. The prisons were already operating at around 119% of capacity prior to the declaration, and overcrowding is now at over 350%. According to IDHUCA, 2.6% of El Salvador's adult population is incarcerated.

Even now, almost four years after the declaration of the state of exception, "they have done nothing to remedy the situation," Ramírez comments, "even though we have repeatedly pointed out the violations and deaths that are occurring in the prisons." In a report from 2024, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights described Bukele's policies as repressive, arbitrary and in violation of international conventions. Without his absolute control over the government, such policies would not be possible.

A SECURITY MODEL BASED ON FEAR

At his meeting with Donald Trump in the Oval Office, Bukele had a request too: as the Washington Post reported, he wanted the return of nine leaders of the MS-13 gang who were in US custody. They included Elmer Canales Rivera, alias "El Crook", who was arrested in Mexico and facing trial in the US.

But why did Bukele want to have the gang leader under his control? There is evidence that he was trying to prevent the details of his government's secret negotiations with the most important gangs from becoming public. In these secret negotiations, Bukele was supposedly attempting to lower the country's homicide rate. In return for their cooperation, the government offered to release some of the leaders or help them leave El Salvador.

At the time of the Oval Office talks, however, the alleged pact between the government and the gangs had long since broken down – certainly since that violent weekend in March 2022 and the declaration of the state of emergency.

According to Ramírez, the security model that Bukele introduced is a "deceptive and hypocritical" model that is based on the suffering and fear of families who know nothing about their incarcerated loved ones. "We insist that this security model must be exposed," Ramírez says. He wants the world to know that implementing such a strategy poses a threat to society in any country.

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LATIN AMERICA

Who bows in the face of Trump's coercion?

Donald Trump has declared Latin America his zone of influence and has proved he means business by abducting Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro. But times have changed, and Latin American governments can turn to other partners as well. In the face of his coercive policies, they are seeking pragmatic resistance and cooperation.

BY ANDRÉ DE MELLO E SOUZA

Photo: picture alliance/ZUMAPRESS.com/Cris Faga

Picture of Donald Trump on a poster-covered wall in São Paulo, 2019.
The fact is: Brazil has not made any major concessions to the US.

The year 2026 started with a dramatic event: the US military abducted Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro. The act was a stark reminder of the last century, when US interventions in Latin America were frequent and had negative, long-lasting consequences for the countries involved.

However, the intervention in Venezuela was not the first offensive act against Latin American countries since Donald Trump took office. The US president has drastically increased tariffs on several countries' exports, especially those whose governments he does not consider his allies. Yet these measures were often reversed or altered at short notice, particularly when they drove up prices and production costs in the United States. At the same time, Trump has offered financial support to like-minded governments, most notably that of Javier Milei in Argentina. The suspension of most development aid also hit the region hard, especially its poorest countries.

Given the uneven and unpredictable nature of Trump's policies, it is not surprising that Latin American governments have reacted in very different ways. Overall, however, most have adopted a pragmatic stance. They acknowledge the enormous asymmetry in economic and military power between the United States and Latin America. Many have made counteroffers, such as granting access to natural resources or pledging stronger action against organised crime and migration in exchange for tariff relief. They have also sought allies among US companies and interest groups. For instance, Amazon, Coca-Cola, General Motors, Caterpillar, MedTech and the American Chamber of Commerce for Brazil have all supported the Brazilian government's efforts to revert tariffs imposed by Trump.

MEXICO: BETWEEN COOPERATION AND SOVEREIGNTY

Mexico has been the most frequent target of Trump's demands, which range from facilitating trade and combating organised crime to providing access to water at times of severe drought. Washington has even threatened military intervention to combat what it calls "narco-terrorism" near the border. Because of its geographic proximity and economic dependence on the United States, Mexico cannot simply dismiss these threats or announce retaliation.

At the same time, President Claudia Sheinbaum cannot afford to appear weak. All major political parties in Mexico maintain a strong nationalist stance towards the US, for obvious historical reasons. Sheinbaum has therefore pursued a dual strategy of offering cooperation while reaffirming Mexico's sovereignty. Her government has shared intelligence information and extradited more than 50 leaders of organised criminal groups to the United States. At the same time, she has repeatedly stated that she would never tolerate a US "invasion" aimed at fighting Mexican cartels. Renegotiation of the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which Trump is pushing for, is likely to be her next major challenge.

> "Given the uneven and unpredictable nature of Trump's policies, it is not surprising that Latin American governments have reacted in very different ways."

BRAZIL: A FIRM STANCE TOWARDS THE US

Brazil is far less dependent on the US economy and has succeeded in considerably reversing Trump's tariffs. It has established an open channel of dialogue with Washington on issues such as drug trafficking, money laundering and US policy towards Venezuela. Brazil has not made any major concessions to Trump because its large and diversified economy can withstand US tariffs, even though they undoubtedly hurt.

Trump's main political demand had been to ensure that former President Jair Bolsonaro would not be prosecuted and imprisoned for attempting a coup after losing the 2022 presidential election. However, Brazil's judiciary is independent of the executive and did not yield to US threats. Brazil is also in the process of regulating digital platforms, despite Trump's efforts to protect US big tech companies.

Trump's threats have even strengthened Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. He benefited from a "rally around the flag" effect and regained much of his lost popularity. Although tariffs were temporarily raised and talks stalled, Lula's firm stance paid off. Trump eventually realised that Bolsonaro, once imprisoned, could not return to office – and that the US risked higher meat and coffee prices as well as restricted access to Brazil's rare earths.

VENEZUELA: COPING WITH A GENUINE, PHYSICAL INVASION

The Trump administration has never recognised Nicolás Maduro as the legitimate leader of Venezuela. Throughout 2025, relations between the two countries became increasingly tense as Washington moved major aircraft carriers to

> "Despite intense pressure, South American countries are no longer as dependent on the United States as they once were. China offers an alternative."

the Caribbean, attacked several ships allegedly engaged in drug trafficking off the Venezuelan coast and in the East Pacific Ocean and seized oil tankers in the region. Following the US military's kidnapping of Maduro, his vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, took over government offices. While Venezuela has recently started exporting oil to the US – one of Trump's key demands – Rodríguez has called for respect for Venezuela's national sovereignty. Her attempts to appease Trump suggest the Venezuelan regime's anti-American and anti-imperialist ideology has clear limits and gives way to political pragmatism. Meanwhile, the opposition leader María Corina Machado has tried, to no avail, to gain Trump's support, going so far as to offer him her Nobel Peace Prize.

The effects are spreading throughout the region, with Venezuelan oil exports plummeting and affecting Cuba in particular. As oil supplies dwindle, the UN is warning of a possible humanitarian "collapse" in a country that was already struggling to power its electricity grid. Cuba has repeatedly been targeted by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who is of Cuban ancestry and had previously placed Cuba on a list of countries that do not cooperate in fighting terrorism. This rhetoric intensified in 2026.

COLOMBIA: NOT BACKING DOWN DESPITE SERIOUS THREATS

Despite being a long-time ally of the US in South America, Colombia has also been the target of military threats by Trump. His government recently designated the Colombian Gulf Clan cartel, considered to be the country's largest cocaine producer, as a terrorist organisation. In September, the US withdrew Colombia's certification as an ally in the fight against drugs. This decision, part of an annual assessment conducted since 1986, will result in the loss of approximately $ 380 million in annual aid.

Despite these retaliations, Colombian President Gustavo Petro remained one of the region's most vocal opponents of Trump's policies in South America. He also criticised the US for supporting Israel. After months of mutual insults, however, a White House meeting in February resulted in both heads of state adopting a friendlier tone. They announced their intention to cooperate, particularly with regard to export routes for Venezuelan gas, combating drug trafficking and resolving trade disputes between Colombia and Ecuador.

While Petro remains a largely unpopular leader, with December polls showing approval ratings of just 35 %, he is prohibited by law from running for re-election. The leftist candidate he is supporting, senator Iván Cepeda, is trying to capitalise on the nationalist and anti-American sentiment in Colombia. Just as happened in the 2025 legislative elections in Honduras, Chile, Bolivia and Argentina, it is expected that Trump will also support a candidate in Colombia's presidential election. After Maduro's fall, Colombian far-right candidate Abelardo de la Espriella declared that he considered the abduction "brilliant", while other opposition figures preferred to react with caution. Three polls released in November indicate that Cepeda is in the lead and is expected to advance to the second round, with voting intentions ranging from 24 % to 31 %. Espriella follows behind him with percentages ranging from 14 % to 18 %.

> "The US and Argentina signed an extensive trade and investment agreement that goes beyond US deals with other Latin American countries."

ARGENTINA AND TRUMP'S SOUTH AMERICAN ALLIES

Trump has granted preferential treatment to countries led by like-minded leaders. They are provided with electoral and financial support as well as being offered economic agreements. For example, Washington provided Argentina's government with $40 billion in loans. In the run-up to the midterm legislative elections, public support for President Javier Milei had been waning, as the country was facing dwindling dollar reserves and a rapidly depreciating local currency. Trump threatened to halt economic support if the opposition won.

Following Milei's surprising victory, both countries signed an extensive trade and investment agreement that goes beyond US deals with other Latin American countries. It opens the Argentine market to US companies, aims to validate US standards and patent law in Argentina and facilitates large-scale data transfers. The agreement also grants the US privileged access to Argentina's rare earths and other important minerals.

Trump has announced similar agreements with Ecuador, Guatemala and El Salvador. Bolivia and Chile, following recent political changes, may become his next partner countries.

CHINA AS AN ALTERNATIVE PARTNER

Despite intense pressure, South American countries are no longer as dependent on the United States as they once were. China offers an alternative. For more than two decades, Beijing has provided investment and credit in exchange for access to resources, largely without political conditions. It is now the largest trading partner and a major source of investment for most countries in the region.

Shortly after the US published its National Security Strategy in December 2025, China released its own comprehensive "Document on China Policy for Latin America and the Caribbean". The timing was no coincidence. Countering China's influence through military threats and economic coercion alone will be difficult for Trump.

THE USA'S COERCIVE POWER IS IN DECLINE

US presidents have used coercion before when national interests seemed at stake. But they employed negotiation and persuasion strategies as well, combining pressure with incentives such as loans, investment, market access and development aid. Trump has largely abandoned this strategy. His administration cuts aid, wages tariff wars and issues military threats in an attempt to tackle complex challenges like migration and organised crime.

In a region divided between left- and right-leaning governments, this approach risks deepening political instability and suppressing economic growth. It is also proving counterproductive. In the past year, Trump's political interference has strengthened leaders such as Lula and Sheinbaum, who stand their ground and denounce Washington's actions as imperialist and as violations of national sovereignty.

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LATIN AMERICA

Trump's vision to reclaim the "US backyard"

Donald Trump has never been one to conceal his intentions, and he was quite clear about his stance on Latin America in December 2025. His motives, however, often turn out to be quite different from what he claims.

BY ANDRÉ DE MELLO E SOUZA

Let's be honest: the US intervention in Venezuela – or to put it more clearly, the illegal abduction of Nicolás Maduro – didn't come without warning. On 2 December 2025, Trump announced in a Presidential Message that "reinvigorated by my Trump Corollary, the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well — and American leadership is coming roaring back stronger than ever before". In so doing, he made it abundantly clear that he wants Latin America to become part of the US sphere of influence once again.

The Monroe Doctrine dates back to 1823, when US President James Monroe claimed the Western Hemisphere as a US sphere of influence, opposing European colonial intervention. In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt expanded this idea through the "Roosevelt Corollary". He declared the US to be the guarantor of order and stability in the region, a claim which justified repeated US interventions and occupations in Central America and the Caribbean. This was the era when Latin American countries were commonly referred to as the USA's "backyard".

> "Trump made it abundantly clear that he wants Latin America to become part of the US sphere of influence once again."

Today, the Trump Corollary manifestly places relations with Latin America high on Washington's foreign policy agenda after what it calls "years of neglect". In practice, however, it is an unclear and inconsistent approach rather than a coherent strategy. It confuses hegemony with domination and militarises problems that are not military in nature, such as migration and organised crime. Trump's military intervention in Venezuela constitutes a blatant violation of international law.

The same holds true for Washington's new National Security Strategy (NSS), which was announced on 5 December 2025. With regard to Latin America, it focuses on irregular migration and drug trafficking. However, the document largely ignores Haiti's severe crisis, which is perplexing given the impact it is having on migration and regional stability. Relations with Brazil and Mexico, the region's largest economies, are likewise not addressed in the NSS.

After all, migration and drug trafficking do not seem to be the only motivation behind Trump's policies. It is true that narcotrafficking and trade deficits have been used to justify tariff increases in countries such as Mexico. However, the 50% tariffs imposed on Brazil were clearly politically motivated and aimed at supporting Trump's ally Jair Bolsonaro. Conversely, Trump has offered financial support to like-minded governments, most notably that of Javier Milei in Argentina.

Photo: picture alliance/Capital Pictures/RS/MPI

Like-minded heads of state are supported by Donald Trump: Argentina's President Javier Milei with the US President at the White House in October 2025.

SUPPLY CHAINS

Tracking cocoa from tree to trade

Ghana has tested a digital system that aims to make cocoa supply chains more transparent and help the sector meet EU sustainability requirements. Farmers hope to benefit as well.

BY NASTARAN ZARNEGARI AND FRANCIS DADZIE MINTAH

Photo: picture alliance/dpa/Christina Peters

Cocoa harvest in Ghana: For cocoa farmers, the billion-dollar market often does not yield much.

When you pick up a bar of chocolate in Europe, the story behind its cocoa is rarely visible. Yet the cocoa sector is at the centre of urgent global conversations about sustainability, fairness and transparency. This is especially true for West Africa, where around two thirds of the world's cocoa is produced. Issues such as deforestation, child labour and the struggle of smallholder farmers to earn a living income have long plagued the industry.

Efforts to address these challenges are intensifying. In 2023, the European Union enacted the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), which is set to come into full effect from January 2027 on. The regulation requires companies to prove that key commodities, including cocoa, are not linked to deforestation and that human-rights standards are being upheld. This puts direct pressure on producing countries, especially Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, to make their cocoa supply chains more transparent.

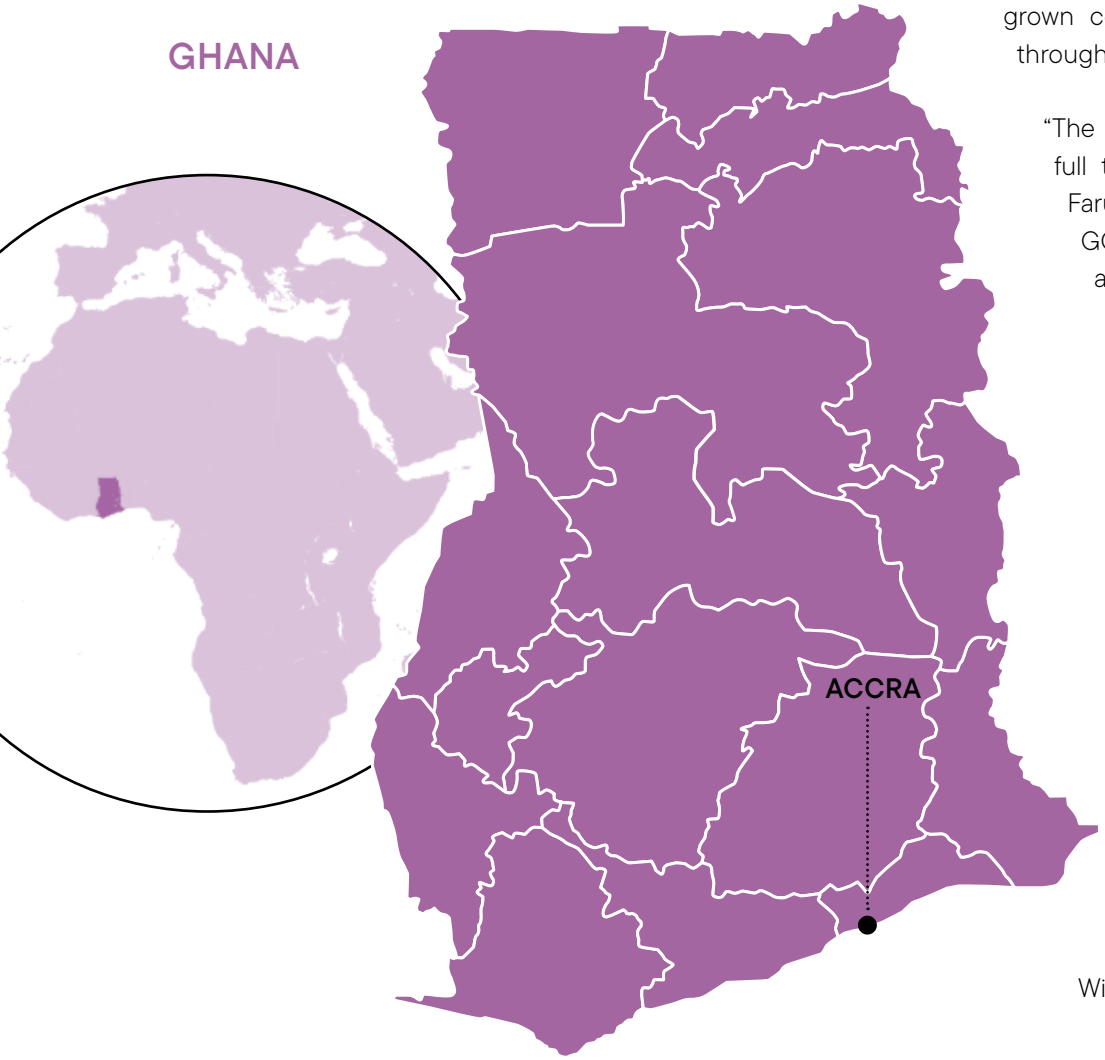
A DIGITAL BREAKTHROUGH

In response, Ghana has launched a digital solution that could mark a turning point for the cocoa industry. The Ghana Cocoa Traceability System (GCTS), developed by the Ghana Cocoa Board (COCOBOD) and piloted with support from Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, is designed to trace every bag of cocoa beans from the farm plot where it was harvested to the port where it leaves the country.

This project is part of the EU Sustainable Cocoa Initiative, a programme launched in 2020 that promotes fairer and more environmentally sound cocoa production. Funding comes from the European Union and Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), while COCOBOD leads the implementation in Ghana.

The GCTS collects and links detailed data on cocoa farms, farmers, production volumes and transport routes. Using digital tools such as GPS mapping, barcode-labelling and mobile data capture, the system enables the documentation and verification that cocoa production meets EUDR requirements. This helps export companies and regulatory authorities to demonstrate compliance with EU regulations.

In the pilot phase conducted in the Assin Fosu district, more than 40,000 farms were mapped, and over 20,000 farmers – 40 % of them women – were registered. During the 2023/2024 lean season, over 1230 bags (about 77 tonnes) of sustainably grown cocoa were sold and shipped through the system.



"The system has already proven that full traceability is achievable," says Faruk Nyame, technical lead on the GCTS Implementation Committee at COCOBOD. "Every bag of cocoa can be linked to a farm, a farmer and a specific plot of land. This is crucial not just for compliance, but for creating accountability across the entire supply chain."

FARMERS ARE BENEFITING

One of the most transformative aspects of GCTS is how it impacts the lives of farmers. Traditionally, cocoa farmers in Ghana have had limited visibility over how their cocoa is valued and sold, often leaving them vulnerable to unfair pricing and middlemen. With GCTS, farmers are registered

with unique digital IDs and can be more directly connected to purchasing and support systems. This creates transparency in the cocoa supply chain and opens opportunities for a fairer distribution of payments and farming inputs such as fertiliser and cocoa seedlings as well as access to pension schemes and agricultural advisory services.

"This is not just a technical upgrade," explains Nana Kwasi Ofori, the Central Regional Chief Farmer. "It's about recognising the farmer as a key actor in a global chain, not just a supplier at the margins."

The GCTS comes at a critical time. As European markets gear up to enforce stricter import standards under the EUDR, systems like this will play a key role in enabling companies to fulfill the necessary due diligence requirements for the EU market. Swiss and Dutch embassy officials, who recently visited the pilot sites, stressed that companies in their countries are depending on such traceability to meet their ethical sourcing targets.

"Traceability is no longer a nice-to-have; it's a must-have," says Celine Prud'homme Madsen, Programme Manager for Sustainable Agriculture and Cocoa at the EU Delegation to Ghana. "Ghana is showing that it can be a leader in sustainable sourcing – and that's good news for farmers and consumers alike."

PREPARING FOR NATIONAL ROLLOUT

As the pilot project has been deemed a success, the next steps are underway. Planning workshops have been held in Kumasi to evaluate the lessons from the pilot and prepare for a countrywide implementation. A "dry run", which involves eight Licensed Buying Companies (LBCs), which together account for 60 % of internal cocoa purchases, is being rolled out. A final round of data collection ensured that all remaining farmers are registered before the full rollout in the 2025/2026 cocoa season.

However, the full rollout was confronted with technical difficulties such as the unavailability of internet access in some communities and a lack of technical expertise among some purchasers. Therefore, GIZ supported COCOBOD to assist the LBCs in addressing these challenges.

Claudia Maier, Country Coordinator for the Sustainable Cocoa Initiative at GIZ Ghana, emphasises the importance of interoperability. "The traceability system must work seamlessly with payment systems and logistics chains. That requires ongoing collaboration with the private sector," she says.

Ghana's finance minister Cassiel Ato Forson emphasises that the GCTS "will ensure that Ghana is in full compliance with the due diligence requirements of the European Union Deforestation Regulations." The system places Ghana in a better position to supply cocoa that is traceable, deforestation-free, child labour-free and compliant with EU regulations, he says.

The Ghana Cocoa Traceability System is a model that could shape the future of the global cocoa trade. It shows how digital tools, when combined with policy pressure and farmer-focused design, can create meaningful change. For industry stakeholders – including chocolate manufacturers, consumer brands, regulators and NGOs – the system offers a reliable way to verify sustainability claims. For governments, it supports better monitoring of environmental impacts. And for the cocoa farmers who are too often overlooked, it may be the beginning of a more transparent and dignified participation in a billion-euro global trade.

LINK

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INCLUSION

This Malawian invention rewrites the rules for blind students

No Braille? No problem. At a school for the blind in central Malawi, an AI-based classroom tool is reshaping how students learn and participate and therefore reduces their reliance on constant support.

BY LAMECK MASINA

Until 2024, Yankho Maganga, a learner at Chilanga School for the Blind in Kasungu District in central Malawi, relied heavily on Braille books and constant assistance from teachers to keep up with her lessons. However, the 14-year-old visually impaired learner says, over the years, schooling was an uphill battle. "I used to struggle a lot," she says. "Sometimes I could not finish my work on time. My grades were very poor."

Today, however, her academic story has transformed. "My grades have improved. Now I'm among the top performers," says Yankho Maganga and points to a black computer sitting on a small wooden desk in front of her as the reason for the transformation.

Her teacher, John Makombe, explains that the computer runs an AI-powered learning system called Blind Classroom – an innovation developed by young Malawian innovator Staff Nyoni. Makombe is also an instructor for the Blind Classroom project at the school. He says the system is transforming how visually impaired learners access education by converting written lessons into interactive audio content.

"Instead of using tablets, learners navigate the system through a simplified three-button interface and voice commands," Makombe says. "The device talks to them, reads out lessons, asks questions and allows them to respond using their own voices." Yankho Maganga agrees. "I can repeat a lesson many times until I understand," she says. "I don't need to wait for someone or a teacher to help me read."

The system's developer, Staff Nyoni, says the idea was inspired by his childhood experiences watching his visually impaired father struggle to read. He also recalls a visually impaired girl in his community who dropped out of school because she could not cope with reading demands.

Malawi has more than 800,000 visually impaired individuals, yet only about 50,000 are currently enrolled in schools. Many drop out early due to a lack of accessible and user-friendly learning tools.

"When I later studied ICT, I saw it as an opportunity to create something that could address problems facing my community," Nyoni says. "In 2022, an opportunity came when Save the Children issued a call for applications. They organised a hackathon with partners where we pitched our ideas. I was selected for a two-year incubation programme at NextGen Labs to develop and refine the system."

Save the Children supported the piloting of the innovation, which is currently being implemented at Chilanga School for the Blind and St Joseph Resource Centre in Dedza District in central Malawi. Bright Chidzumeni, Innovation Manager at Save the Children Malawi, says the organisation supports the project because it aligns with its core thematic areas. "This innovation directly speaks to our work in education," Chidzumeni says. "Blind Classroom addresses key challenges that learners with visual impairments face, and that is why we stepped in to support it."

He adds that the organisation is now scaling up the innovation to reach more schools. "At the moment, we are scaling the innovation to 14 schools for the blind," he says. "We have released resources to purchase computers and other tools needed for the Blind Classroom to operate effectively. In financial terms, we have budgeted about € 18,000 for this innovation."

Despite the success, teacher John Makombe notes that one challenge remains. "Not all subjects are loaded into the system yet," he says. "Some important topics are still missing. We hope that in the future every subject will be available so that learners benefit fully." Innovator Staff Nyoni says that this is among the gaps they are currently addressing.

LINK

Blind Classroom: *blindclassroom.com*

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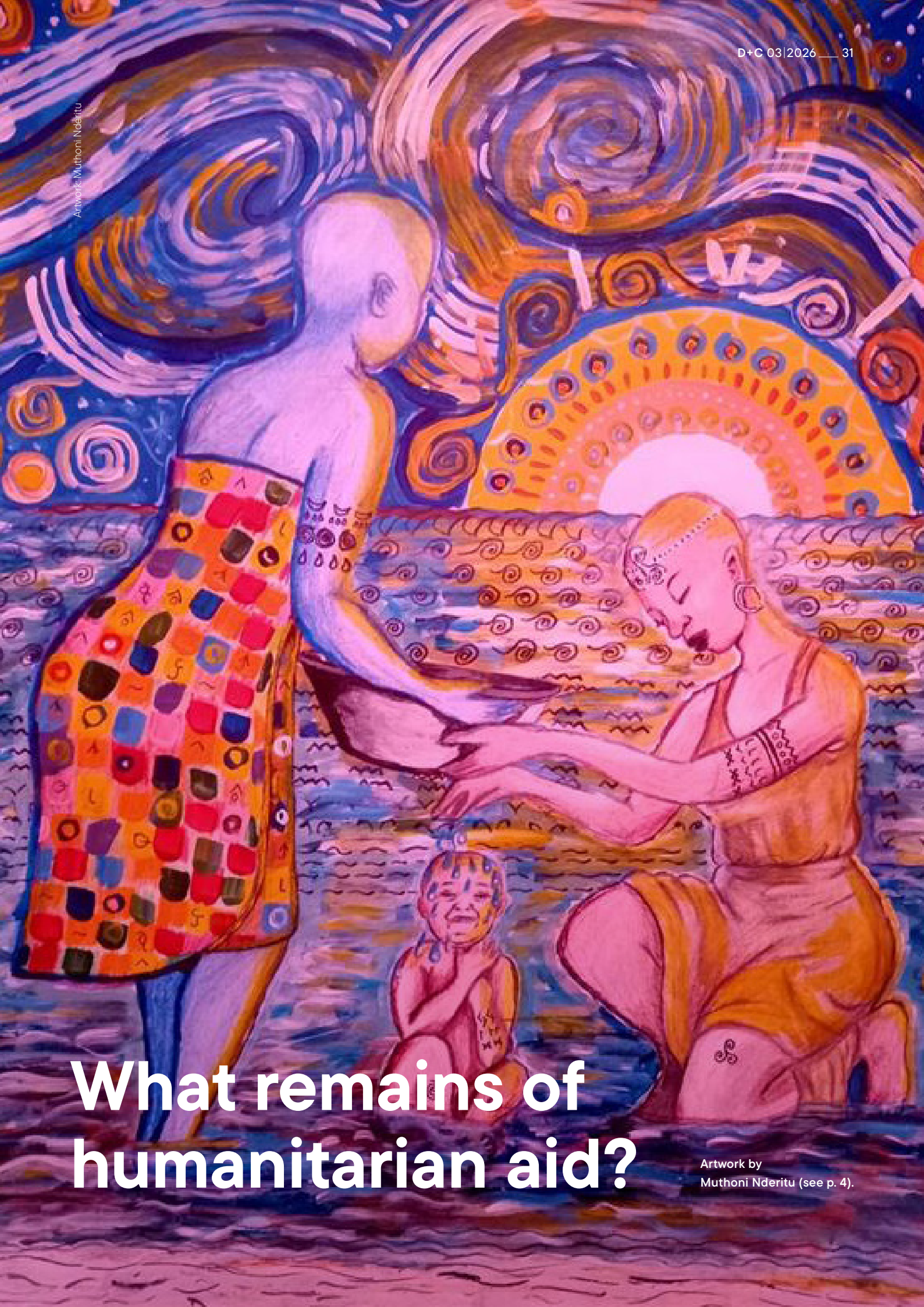

Artwork: Muthoni Nderitu

What remains of humanitarian aid?

Artwork by Muthoni Nderitu (see p. 4).

So little money for so much suffering is scandalous

Only about a quarter of the world's planned aid projects are sufficiently funded. The consequences can be seen, for example, at the border between Chad and Sudan: the global community is violating its own humanitarian principles.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

Every day, people arrive at the hut made of straw mats and tarps that the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has built in the sand of the Chadian border town of Adré. They are all fleeing the brutal war in Sudan. Almost 1000 refugees registered here every month, then the Chadian government closed the border at the end of February "until further notice."

I travelled to that border region in Chad in January. While accompanying the International Rescue Committee (IRC), one of the largest humanitarian aid organisations in the world, I visited refugee camps, health centres and reception sites (a detailed report can be found in the focus section of this issue).

People often cross the border with nothing but the clothes on their backs and severely traumatised. Their despair is almost unbearable when they talk about how their children died in bombings and women were raped while fleeing. On Chadian soil, their lives now depend on aid organisations such as UNHCR and IRC. Chad itself is extremely poor and has been unable to provide for the many refugees since the outbreak of the war in 2023.

The problem is that aid organisations will soon be unable to do so either. The budget cuts imposed by most Western governments, especially the US, are too severe. The despair at the border extends to the organisations' offices in Chad's capital N'Djamena, where employees no longer know how they will continue their programmes beyond the first quarter of this year.

According to the UN, 239 million people could require humanitarian aid in 2026 – a figure that many NGOs consider to be too low. At the same time, the UN states that only about 23 % of planned international aid projects had been financed by the end of October 2025.

ONE BILLION FOR AID, 50 FOR THE MILITARY

Germany's humanitarian aid budget amounts to around one billion euros, less than half of what it was in 2024. For comparison: in December, the German parliament approved orders for military equipment worth € 50 billion. The situation is similar in many Western countries.

In concrete terms, that means: less clean water, less food, fewer doctors, fewer midwives, less housing and less psychological counselling for the people who need all of these things most urgently because wars, natural disasters or other crises have left them in desperate straits.

The four humanitarian principles of the UN are "humanity," "neutrality," "impartiality" and "independence." One look at eastern Chad shows that when a lack of funding forces humanitarian actors to weigh basic needs against each other and make cuts in essential areas, even the first principle is no longer being fulfilled.

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WAR AND FLIGHT

Seeking refuge in one of the poorest countries in the world

Almost 12 million people have been forced to flee since the outbreak of the war in Sudan three years ago. About a million of them have sought refuge in neighbouring Chad – one of the poorest countries in the world. Nevertheless, it has repeatedly taken in people from the conflict-ridden region of Darfur over the past 20 years. The humanitarian situation in the border region is rapidly deteriorating, in part due to global cuts to humanitarian aid budgets. An eyewitness report.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

Toma Adani says that her childhood was happier than her daughter Ihsan's is likely to be. Ihsan is 16 months old and severely malnourished. She is receiving inpatient care at a clinic for malnutrition in the Chadian town of Farchana, around 50 kilometres from the Sudanese border.

Adani is from Sudan; 22 years ago, she fled from Darfur to Chad when the Darfur conflict first broke out. Various ethnic groups in the region had called for greater participation in the Sudanese government, and the repression of the uprisings culminated in a genocide.

There was much more to eat then, international organisations distributed cash more often, and there were fewer problems in general, Adani reports. However, when the war broke out in 2023 between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF; a paramilitary force that arose from the militias that were responsible for the genocide in Darfur) over control of Sudan, many people were once again forced to flee. Now, Adani says, all the refugees are lacking many necessities.

The 26-year-old lives in Farchana in a refugee camp that has existed since 2004 and has now developed into its own little community, more than doubling the population of the original community. She attended school here, though her education was repeatedly interrupted by periods when she had to work in the fields. Her 13-member household, consisting of her husband, daughter, two sisters and their families, still lives primarily on what they harvest: millet and nuts from a field they lease from a Chadian family. They have to give the owners either cash or a portion of the harvest.

On good days, during the rainy season, the family can eat twice, usually millet with a variety of vegetables. Sometimes they can sell a surplus. On bad days – and during the dry season, every day is a bad day – they cannot work in the field and are completely dependent on aid from the international organisations. Adani herself is not considered malnourished, but she does not have enough breast milk for Ihsan.

Adani's mother, Halimé Yaya, has come to visit the stifling hospital room that Adani and Ihsan share with other moth-

ers and their malnourished children. She is also worried about her grandchild's future – her own children had it better after they were forced to flee, she recalls. Nowadays, many of the increasingly scarce resources go directly to new arrivals, she says; water, for example, is becoming less and less available.

AROUND 700 PATIENTS A DAY – AND ONE DOCTOR

The clinic is part of the health centre of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Farchana. In addition to malnutrition, it focuses on maternal and reproductive health. There is a maternity ward, and patients can receive gynaecological treatment as well as general health screenings and psychological counselling. Immunisation is another important component of the work: every day, 60 to 70 children are immunised, partly in cooperation with the vaccine alliance GAVI. The centre serves the two refugee camps in the area as well as the local community (see next article).

Every day, between 600 and 700 people come to the centre for treatment. Five nurses and a single doctor have to cope with this volume. Moussa Gamané, the coordinator of the IRC health centre, says that the staff is stretched to breaking point. The centre lacks not only doctors but also medicine, reliable electricity, water and a stable infrastructure. Since last year, there has also been a health centre in Farchana that is financed entirely by the state. Treatment there costs money, however, which is why it is not visited nearly as often. The nearest true hospital is located in Adré on the Sudanese border. The health centre only has one ambulance. Gamané says that until recently, other organisations had helped supply medicine, for example. But since funding for humanitarian aid was cut and many organisations started running out of money, IRC has been shouldering the costs more or less alone.

Mahamat Albachir, the doctor at the health centre, says that they most frequently treat respiratory diseases caused by the pervasive Sahara dust and non-weatherproof tents, as well as diarrhoeal diseases caused by poor hygiene and dirty water. All of these factors contribute to and exacerbate the ubiquitous malnutrition and undernourishment. Almost all of the children who arrive in Farchana are malnourished, Albachir says, as are many of those who have lived here for a long time.

"Almost all of the children who arrive in Farchana are malnourished, as are many of those who have lived here for a long time."

Photo: ko

Toma Adani fled Sudan for Chad 22 years ago and still lives in a refugee camp. Her daughter Ihsan is malnourished.

REFUGEES AS MEDICAL PERSONNEL

Refugees suffer from mental health issues as well. In every IRC health centre, there is one person who is responsible for mental health – not necessarily someone with a psychology degree, but trained staff. In Farchana, that person is Nidal Shamshadine Abdallah. Abdallah herself fled Sudan as recently as 2023. She is a trained psychologist and was able to join IRC after completing an internship.

The aid organisations want to make more use of refugees' human capital. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), for example, has started recognising Sudanese degrees – not least because medical care in Sudan before the war had been much better than in Chad. Many Chadians regularly travelled to the neighbouring country for treatment. At the same time, the Chadian government is raising its eyebrows at the employment of refugees and making qualification recognition processes more difficult because it would rather see Chadian staff on the payrolls of the international organisations.

Abdallah says that the majority of arriving people have been traumatised. She and her colleagues from other camps report spontaneous epilepsy, memory loss, speech disorders, PTSD, depression, psychosis and sleep disturbances. Abdallah sees between five and 15 patients per day. She herself witnessed violence as she fled Sudan. Her mother was shot at but survived. Young women disappeared from her group and returned having been abused. Working at the centre gives her strength, as does the omnipresent help from the organisations and local communities. "But the most important thing is simply to be in safety," she says.

THE CAMPS ARE MORE COMFORTABLE THAN THE VILLAGES

The health centre is located on the way to both refugee camps: the "old" camp and "Farchana Extension". A total of around 55,000 refugees live there. 21,000 of them have arrived since 2023. Whereas the old camp now resembles its own village, with a mosque, a school and many mud brick buildings, the new camp remains a tent city, with rows of one white UNHCR canvas after another.

On the drive to the border city of Adré in January, it becomes clear that the refugees are probably living more comfortably, even in their tents, than the local Chadians. There are almost no roads in the area; the route leads over sandy tracks and through dry riverbeds. These wadis conduct so much water during the rainy season that the route becomes completely impassable – travel along many routes in Chad would then require an airplane or is not attempted at all. The houses in the villages along the way are built of straw and brush; there is neither electricity nor

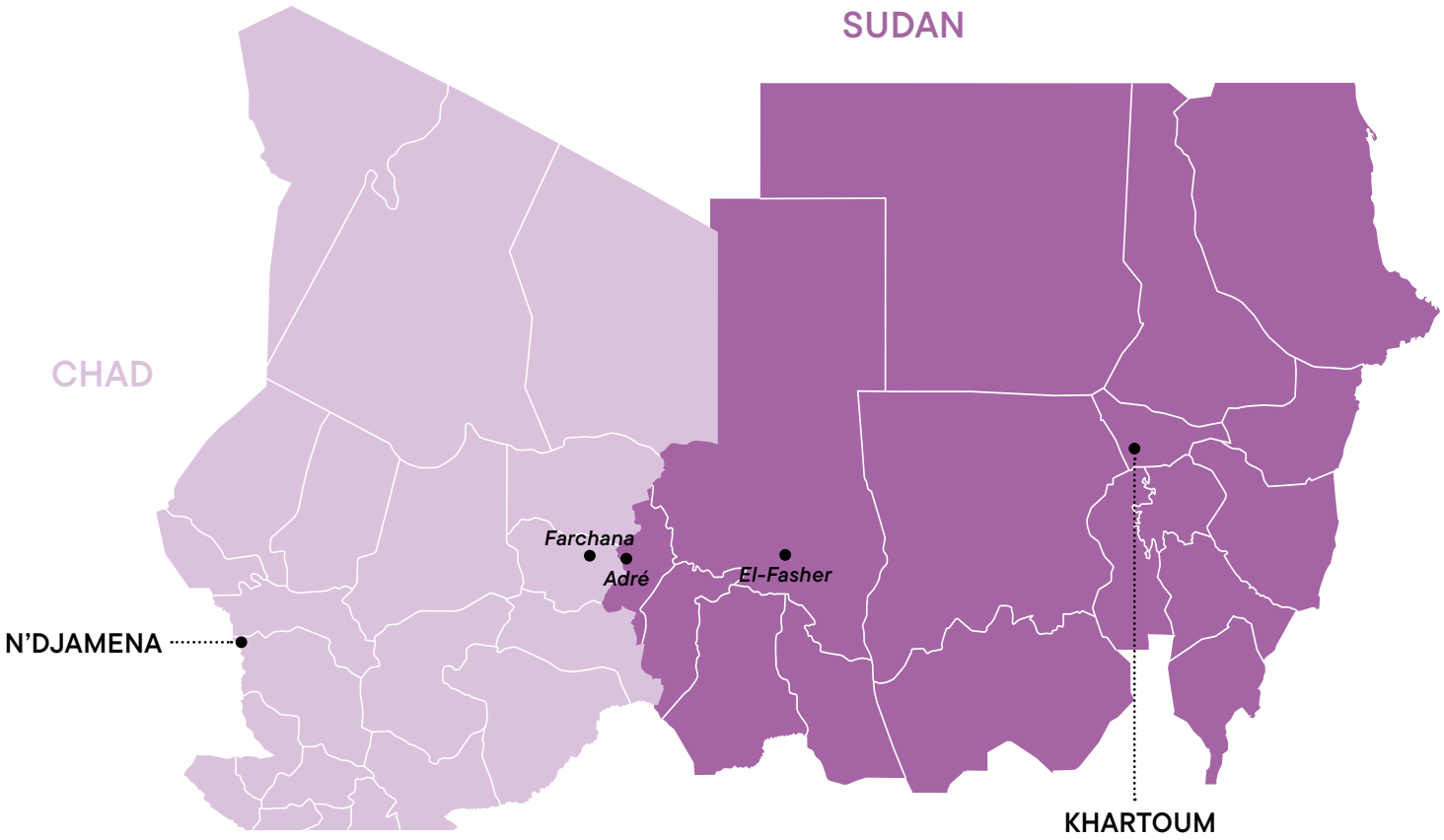

Photo: picture alliance/dpa/Belga/Benoit Doppagne

Trade between Chad and Sudan flourished even during the war until the temporary closure of the border at the end of February.

running water. People travel either on foot or on donkeys, sometimes on horseback. Nomads drive their camel herds through the area. The crime rate is high, not only because of the proximity of the war zone in Sudan – attacks are frequent, particularly against women as they collect firewood in the bush, for example.

After the two-hour drive, Adré looks like a metropolis. The border to Sudan is visible from a long way off. There is a lot of traffic; donkey carts and lorries still carry goods back and forth between the two countries. Everywhere there are small stands where refugees and locals alike sell food, clothing and other items.

> "On the drive to the border city of Adré, it becomes clear that the refugees are probably living more comfortably, even in their tents, than the local Chadians."

At this point in time, it is difficult to believe that not far away, a brutal war is raging. So far, the violence has come only rarely to Chad. There was a single incident in this part of the border region recently in which drones struck a small mobile fuel depot in Adré in December. Nine people died. The RSF and their militias accept the border, but there are very few places where it is fortified. Therefore, it has certainly happened that the fighting has spilled over onto Chadian soil more or less by accident – forcing a few villages to flee in January, for example. The Chadian military has remained calm so far, but it is also barely trained and poorly equipped. The most stabilising factor in the eastern part of the country is probably the fact that both the Chadian government and the RSF receive support from the United Arab Emirates. Officially, Chad is neutral towards both parties to the Sudanese conflict and has received the leadership of both the Sudanese army and the RSF in the capital N'Djamena. At the end of February 2026, as violence in Darfur escalates once again and the war continues to draw closer to the border, it is nevertheless closed for the time being. No one knows how long it will remain that way.

AROUND 900 REFUGEES PER MONTH

In January, the only other sign of the war on the Chadian side of the red-and-white border arch are the UNHCR

tents and all the people sitting around them, staring off into space in the heat – young men on one side, women and children on the other. These are new arrivals: people who fled Sudan just now or a few days ago and now find themselves in the initial reception machinery of the aid organisations. There is a mix of responsibilities: the Red Cross is on site distributing packets with blankets, soap and pots, for example; UNICEF offers psychosocial counselling; UNHCR handles registration and distribution; the IRC and Doctors Without Borders conduct medical screenings and deliver immunisations; Acted hands out nutritional supplements.

Like most people, Zerab Adam came over the border in early January with nothing but the clothes on her back. The 25-year-old is from the city of El-Fasher, which fell to the RSF after heavy fighting in October 2025. Terrible atrocities have been reported there in the aftermath. Her husband had already died in the war in the middle of last year. When the situation became unbearable, she fled with her four children and her parents on foot to the city of Nyala, an important trading centre that is somewhat more stable. There she managed to earn money by doing laundry, which she used to finance transportation to the Chadian border. But it was only enough for her – she had to leave her children and parents behind, which she calls "unforgivable".

She says she is happy to be in safety now and thankful for the initial help that she has received from various organisations in the form of basic services – but her thoughts constantly circle around her children in Sudan. She wants to leave the initial reception camp, where she shares a small compartment in a large tent with three other Sudanese women, as soon as possible and earn money so she can bring her family over. She has already begun; every day she follows in the footsteps of other refugee women and goes back over the Sudanese border to sell food, coffee or whatever other provisions she can find.

She is one of 605 refugees who crossed the border in Adré between 1 and 21 January. According to UNHCR, about 900 people come every month. Chad doesn't send anyone back. Some people turn up twice, for example because they are looking for their families or have left other camps when the humanitarian situation there also became unbearable.

This situation will deteriorate further this year in light of the massive cuts to humanitarian aid budgets of most Western countries (see interview with Alain Rusuku, p. 40). Benjamin Bach, the deputy director of programmes for IRC in Chad, can already cite concrete impacts: "In some areas in the west of the country, we simply have to stop working. In other areas we have to scale back services – for instance, instead of having six midwives in Farchana, we now only have three. That means, among other things, that there is no midwife there overnight anymore."

At the same time, efforts are being made to give greater consideration from the outset to the so-called "nexus" between humanitarian aid and development cooperation (see interview with Katharina Valjak, p. 53). "There are refugees who have been dependent on the humanitarian system since the first Darfur crisis in 2003. Attempts are being made to address that by establishing more economic activity in the camps, sharing more land with local communities and thereby creating more opportunities for exchange," Bach says. But that only works in some areas, he concedes; if organisations had to withdraw from the education sector, for example, there would be an immediate teacher shortage.

Ihsan and her mother Adani probably don't care whether the assistance their family urgently needs is called development cooperation or humanitarian aid. The situation in Sudan and Chad is already dramatic. In the long term, the cuts to Western aid budgets will lead people who have survived the hell of war to die because of the lack of access to basic resources.

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RESOURCES

The fact that life in eastern Chad works is nothing short of a miracle

The influx of refugees from Sudan brought a number of international aid organisations to eastern Chad, a region that is almost entirely cut off from any infrastructure. With them came hospitals, schools and markets – but also conflicts over resources that were already scarce. Feelings on the ground are correspondingly mixed.

BY KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

Abdoulay Abdessalam is the representative of the chef de canton of the Chadian border city Adré, where refugees arrive daily from Sudan. The office of chef de canton dates back to colonial times and serves as an intermediary between the administration and local communities.

In the eastern Chadian province of Wadai, to which Adré belongs, all state administration is far away; there are hardly any hospitals, streets or goods traffic and certainly no running water or electricity in the villages scattered across the dry savannah. The chef de canton actually seems to mediate in a triangle between the international aid organisations, refugees and local communities.

"On the one hand, prices have increased as a result of the many new arrivals – the price of a chicken has doubled over the last three years, for example – and so have the diseases. On the other hand, we as a local community now have much more access to free services through the aid organisations, which never would have come here without the refugees," Abdessalam says.

Photo: ko

Patients wait in front of the IRC health centre in Farchana in eastern Chad.

He also reports that the larger number of people has led to a rise in crime: there is more theft, more aggression, more chaos in the small city, which had a population of around 40,000 before the influx of refugees. The people who are being housed in the initial reception camps and in the large camp on the outskirts of the city have swelled that number to around 200,000 (see previous text).

At the same time, Abdessalam says, the community's healthcare in particular has improved thanks to the presence of the refugees, as has access to water – and there are more opportunities for the local youth to earn money by selling them goods. "The relationship between the refugees and the local community is generally good; there have already been many mixed marriages. The only potential for conflict is land use – the people gave the refugees space in their fields because they assumed that the guests would be gone in three weeks. Now it has been three years, and disputes arise especially at harvest time," he explains. According to Abdessalam, the UNHCR promised compensation for the occupied fields at the time, but it still has not arrived. His community is receiving no state support in response to the influx of refugees – the locals are simply allowed to use the free services provided by the international aid organisations.

The local community in Adré expects more from them: "Our young people are very frustrated that they are so little involved in the organisations' work. Short-term jobs are offered here and there, but the important long-term positions go to foreigners – even though many people here have university degrees and went to the university in the capital, for example." Some organisations are trying to include local people, he says. But the young people are frustrated about unemployment, especially since there are very obviously potential employers here. "Sometimes I think that we're standing on the brink of a revolt of the young people against the NGOs," Abdessalam says.

COMMITTEES ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION

"The local people here have asked us repeatedly over the past 20 years whether we want to go home," says Tahir Ismail, who came to Chad from Sudan in 2007. "But we kept saying that this conflict is far from over – and the outbreak of war three years ago proved us right." Since last year, Ismail has been the president of the refugee camps in Farchana – both the camp that has been here since 2004 and the newer camp that was built in 2023. The teacher has continued to teach in the camps and has long been a central figure in the refugee community.

In response to the question about the relationship to the local community, he spoke of a committee that was founded with help from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in which refugees and locals work together to solve conflicts. "The committee makes the people in the villages aware that we didn't come here voluntarily – and that we have the same needs as they do. We need wood, water and food. But we also emphasise that we have brought good things to the region, like the local health centre," Ismail says.

CHOLERA OUTBREAK HIGHLIGHTS DISPARITIES

Generally speaking, one hears little about conflicts between refugees and locals in the area – if anything, it is about land. Sometimes nomadic camel herders buy alcohol in the refugee camps that the Sudanese have brewed and create problems when they get drunk. Shots have occasionally been fired. But the bush surrounding the camp, where women in particular have to collect firewood, is feared above all. Many have reported violent, sometimes sexual, assaults.

Yet many call it a miracle that in this desperately poor region, which has now taken in hundreds of thousands of traumatised and desperate people, there has not been much more unrest. On the contrary, many report receiving a warm welcome and feeling a sense of cohesion. Part of the reason is likely that many people on both sides of the border belong to the same ethnic group, the Zaghawa. The ethnicity dominates in many of the camps as well, and people try to be housed with other Zaghawa from their region.

The cholera outbreak in July 2025 in Wadai and the neighbouring province nevertheless highlighted the disparities in services. In the local villages, the disease raged mercilessly, employees of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) reported. There is no state aid or functioning health or hygiene infrastructure in the straw-hut settlements. IRC responded with basic cholera kits, immunisations and mobile stations. In the refugee camps, however, the outbreak was contained relatively quickly and in an orderly manner, thanks to the presence and infrastructure of multiple international aid organisations – the camps, after all, have a water supply and health centres.

Photo: IRC

Humanitarian organisations work closely together in Chad, especially in light of global aid cuts. A medical team with IRC and UNHCR staff at an initial reception centre in the border town of Adré.

HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS

“How do we prioritise among priorities?”

The war in Sudan is more than a national disaster – it threatens the stability of the entire region. Chad, itself a fragile country marked by severe poverty in many parts, is home to hundreds of thousands of refugees. Humanitarian organisations on the ground face a devastating situation: the need is enormous, but available resources are shrinking dramatically in light of global aid cuts. We asked the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) country director at the end of January how things can move forward now.

ALAIN RUSUKU IN AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHARINA WILHELM OTIENO

Since the outbreak of war in Sudan in 2023, hundreds of thousands of people have fled to eastern Chad from the Darfur region. What is the current situation in the border region?

People have arrived in Chad with nothing, fleeing violence and destruction. The humanitarian community – the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and its partners – mobilised quickly to provide for basic needs. They established camps along the border in addition to those already existing since the first Darfur crisis, which started in 2003. However, the pressure on resources is enormous. The border region is almost desert-like, with limited water and arable land.

At the same time, the cost of living is rising, especially in communities near the refugee camps. Prices for basic goods have increased sharply, creating additional hardship for local populations who were already struggling. The war in Sudan has disrupted the social fabric along the Chad-Sudan border. Some ethnic groups live on both sides of the border and used to cross it freely to trade, maintain social ties, or seek medical treatment. Sudan has a reputation for good doctors and hospitals, and people relied on specialised health services there. That option no longer exists.

> "Think about the Chadian people who have been receiving these refugees. They should not bear the burden alone. They still need support to be able to provide support."

How have the local communities responded to hosting such large numbers of refugees?

The Chadian people have shown remarkable hospitality. Despite our initial fears that tensions might escalate into open conflict, there has been widespread acceptance and generosity from host communities – people providing food for refugees who have just crossed the border, for example. Serious conflicts over resources remain rare, though isolated incidents do occur. However, we cannot predict how long local populations will be able to sustain this level of tolerance.

What about the government? Do they provide support?

We are truly thankful that the government grants us physical access to those communities and people, and that it allows humanitarian actors who are still working in Darfur to cross the border. However, the Chadian government faces severe resource constraints and governance challenges. It struggles to provide basic services to its own population, making it nearly impossible to adequately support the new refugee arrivals. This is why the humanitarian community has mobilised so extensively to provide assistance.

But this situation creates its own problems. There is a disparity between refugees and host communities. Local villages often lack water, health centres, schools and other basic infrastructure. In contrast, refugee camps – while far from ideal – typically have at least a school, a health centre and other services. When host community members see large NGO vehicles driving past their villages to the camps, they can feel abandoned and resentful. These feelings could grow if the disparities persist.

How are international humanitarian organisations dealing with this situation?

Humanitarian actors have recognised that the traditional approach of isolating refugees in separate camps is not sustainable, especially given declining funding. They are now attempting a strategic shift. Instead of creating new camps, they aim to integrate new refugee arrivals closer to existing villages. When they build a school or health centre, it serves both refugees and host communities.

This approach also seeks to attract development partners who can invest in local infrastructure. The logic is clear: if refugees eventually return to Sudan, the infrastructure will remain and benefit Chadians. Investing millions in camps that might be abandoned makes little sense. However, this shift faces significant obstacles.

Can you give an example?

Near existing villages, there is no available land. Community members already own the land, and they are reluctant to give it up. Everyone remembers that some refugees have been in Chad for more than 20 years. If you give land to newcomers, you may never get it back. That is why authorities must identify specific locations where land is available and can accommodate 20,000 to 30,000 people at once. This makes planning and integration extremely difficult.

At the same time, the government is officially supportive, but its strategy is not realistic everywhere. While authorities may provide land and space for refugees in some areas, they rarely allow full integration into existing com-

munities. Instead, refugees are placed in small annexes near villages – which recreates the same disparities in treatment and assistance levels.

How does the humanitarian situation differ from previous displacement situations in Chad, especially the one after the first Darfur crisis over 20 years ago?
The situation has deteriorated, primarily because of funding availability, media coverage and competition between different crises. When the Darfur crisis started in 2004, there was extensive international attention. The world spoke about the genocide in Darfur. High-profile figures like George Clooney visited the region. Funding was still limited then, but it was far greater than what we can mobilise now, and we could offer far more services.

I remember when new refugees arrived, UNHCR could mobilise different partner organisations within three to four months. Now, with the budget cuts, it is extremely difficult to react. We are one of only two health partners in the entire east of Chad. UNHCR gave us money to work for just three months this year – from January to March. After March, we do not know what we will do. This is the first time this has ever happened.

Do the experiences of the people arriving today differ from those who arrived 20 years ago?
When you talk to people, their stories are almost the same in terms of brutality and the way they have been hurt in their villages. There is rape. There is fire. They kill men. Families arrive broken. They walk for 10, 20 days – I do not know exactly how long – to reach the Chadian border. But they have no choice.

What is different now is the means of warfare. Before, there were intercommunal clashes where one group attacked another, burned villages, killed animals and destroyed food stocks. Now they come in vehicles, with drones and equipment I cannot even name. But again, entire ethnic communities are targeted.

What are currently the most urgent humanitarian needs of Sudanese refugees in Chad, and what support can the IRC offer?
We have been grappling with a question that has become a nightmare for us: How do we prioritise among priorities? We can see the enormous needs, but the resources we have after the global budget cuts are extremely limited.

In Chad, we work primarily in the health sector. This includes the full range of services: primary healthcare, nutrition, maternal and child health and mental health. We also have some funding for WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene). When refugees have just arrived, water must be provided immediately, so we use trucks to bring water to identified points and provide it to people directly.

> "Another strategy is to work with government services, but they also have limited resources, even for their own population."

Another priority is shelter, which our partners provide, yet they too lack resources. Some refugees stay for more than six months without anything. They are sleeping under trees. And of course, food is also critical. The IRC does not distribute food, but we run nutrition centres especially for malnourished children, as part of our health programmes.

We also prioritise protection, which includes prevention and mental health support – specifically psychosocial services for victims of sexual and gender-based violence. Most women crossing the border have been victims of this kind of violence at some point.

The budget cuts are a fact, and if we look into the future, it does not seem to be getting any better. With that reality on the ground – how do you plan to manage the humanitarian situation in the longer term?
This is a very difficult question. Different things have been tried and explored by different actors, but none of them can be a standalone solution.

One is the "villagisation" approach I mentioned earlier – placing people close to existing villages. Another strategy is to work with government services, but they also have limited resources, even for their own population. We already know this is not sustainable.

Another approach some are trying now is to mobilise development actors – the World Bank, UNDP and other organisations that are not specialised in humanitarian assistance. But these actors struggle to mobilise resources as

they face funding cuts in their areas as well. We also look to non-traditional donors – private sector donors. All we can do is keep trying. Money, unfortunately, is key to our work.

How did the IRC deal with the sudden funding cuts, especially from the US?
There was a stop-work order, and we had to halt our work in different camps around the world. However, the IRC mobilised some private funding for Chad, and we were able to keep our services running. Not one nutrition centre was closed, even for a single day here. For me, the way the IRC responded globally was remarkable. The organisation said: "Okay, whatever decision is coming, these are very critical services for us. We need to continue." Because, first of all, we are humanitarians.

> "Do not forget. There are so many people, so many stories, so many lives that are affected by this conflict."

Would you venture to predict the future of the region in light of the war in Sudan?
I can tell you what I hope: that the conflicting parties will find a way to reach common ground; otherwise, this will never end. The two protagonists in the conflict are both strong and supported by various alliances. But the conflict will not be resolved solely through military means. Diplomacy needs to prevail in order to reach a peace agreement and ensure lasting peace.

If it lasts longer, there is a significant risk that this conflict will contaminate eastern Chad. It happened already a few weeks ago, when we had an attack on neighbouring villages. The Chadians did not fight back. They chose to stay calm. But this can escalate very, very quickly.

What key message would you like to deliver to the international community?
Do not forget. There are so many people, so many stories, so many lives that are affected by this conflict. It is easy to say: "Last year our government supported with one million euros, so we are good." But people here are still suffering. To all those people out there who still have the heart and the mission to support: they should continue. We know the situation is very hard. There is competition between different crises and needs in many countries.

The Sudanese crisis has been going on for so long. Some people may be tired – it can feel exhausting that after so many years people are still crossing the border: new refugees, same needs. But again, try to think about the Chadian people who have been receiving these refugees. They should not bear the burden alone. They still need support to be able to provide support.

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Photo: Ben Michael

Food aid in Kakuma is now only available to people who have been classified by the WFP as belonging to the relevant categories.

REFUGEES

Ending up in the last category means no food at all

Cuts to international aid funding have plunged Kakuma, one of the world's largest refugee camps located in Kenya, into a worsening humanitarian crisis. With food rations reduced to a fraction of the minimum requirement and basic services collapsing, residents face an impossible choice: either endure worsening hardship in the camp or risk their lives by returning to their conflict-torn home countries.

BY ALBA NAKUWA

Located in north-western Kenya, Kakuma Refugee Camp is both a testament to human resilience and a monument to international neglect. According to figures released by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in October 2025, this huge settlement is home to over 200,000 people who have fled violence in South Sudan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, among other places. Many residents have spent decades in Kakuma, attempting to rebuild their lives amid extreme deprivation.

Last year, donor governments slashed their aid budgets, forcing international organisations to curtail operations throughout the camp. The impact is evident everywhere: water supplies have dwindled, food rations have shrunk and cash transfers have been drastically cut. These reductions have pushed an already vulnerable population deeper into crisis.

The World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR, the two principal agencies sustaining Kakuma, can no longer deliver the support they once did. Both multilateral bodies rely on contributions from donor governments to fund their work. The US alone previously supplied roughly 70% of WFP's operational budget in the camp.

WFP's Nairobi office reported that rations had been slashed to roughly one third of the minimum food basket in May last year. The agency subsequently introduced a "differentiated assistance" model, prioritising the most vulnerable refugees with rations covering 60% of their needs while cutting off the least vulnerable entirely. WFP now reports modest improvements thanks to fresh funding and expresses cautious optimism that rations may increase further in the coming months.

The new distribution system has four categories:

- Category 1: Labelled "vulnerable", includes households headed by children, elderly persons or people with disabilities, as well as those with high dependency ratios for other reasons. This category represents approximately 29% of all households in Kakuma.

- Category 2: Households with limited capacity to meet basic needs, still facing high dependency ratios and minimal income. This group accounts for 40% of households.

- Category 3: "Partially self-reliant" households, where one or more members engage in employment or livelihood activities. They make up 16% of the camp population.

- Category 4: "Self-reliant" households, includes those with sufficient income to cover more than their basic needs – traders, business owners and individuals who have voluntarily withdrawn from humanitarian assistance. This group represents four percent of households.

According to WFP, another 11% of households remain uncategorised. Unaccompanied children may fall into either group 1 or 2, depending on their circumstances.

In August, the New Humanitarian published findings indicating that two thirds of Kakuma households were surviving on one meal per day or less. Average calorie intake had likely dropped below 1650 kilocalories per person daily – barely enough to sustain an adult and insufficient for many to maintain their health.

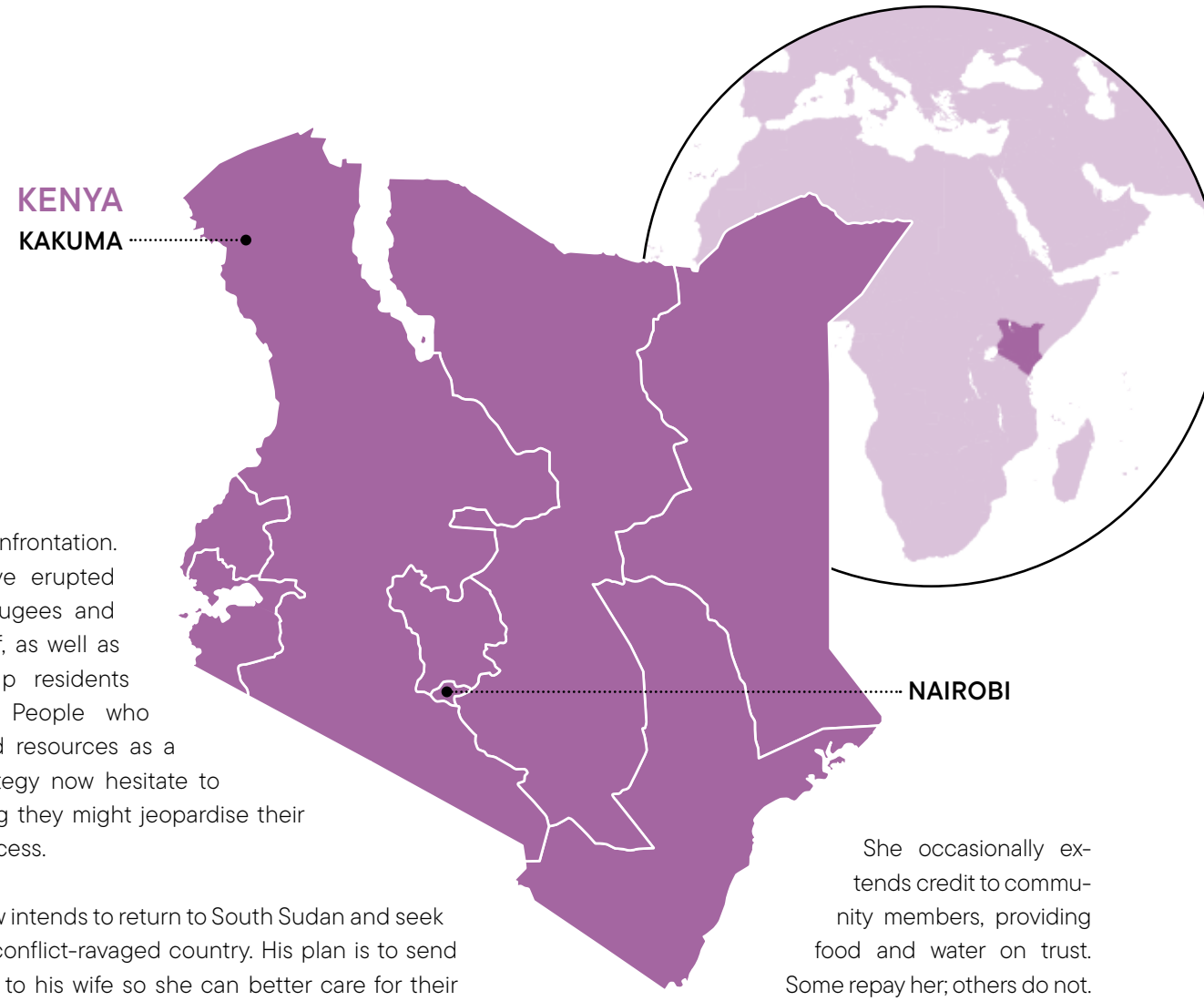
Kenya's Interior Minister Kipchumba Murkomen warned in March 2025 that funding cuts had delivered a "sudden and severe" blow to the country's ability to host approximately 800,000 refugees and asylum seekers. He cautioned that shrinking humanitarian budgets would impose unbearable socioeconomic pressure and called on wealthy nations to shoulder their share of responsibility. While the national government continues to provide security and administrative infrastructure in Kakuma, it simply does not have the financial resources to offset the collapse in external support.

> "The absence of clear communication has further sparked confusion, anger and at times violent confrontation."

VOICES FROM KAKUMA

Dominic Longolol, a Kakuma resident, previously earned a living as an interpreter for the Kenya Red Cross until budget cuts eliminated his position. Longolol considers the WFP system deeply unjust. His family landed in Group 4, the "self-reliant" category, even after he lost his income. They now receive no food assistance whatsoever. "No one explained the criteria," he says. "We just woke up one day and were told we belong to a certain category."

He reports that hunger and anxiety are fuelling quarrels, theft and other crimes. The absence of clear communication has further sparked confusion, anger and at times vi-



olent confrontation. Clashes have erupted between refugees and UNHCR staff, as well as among camp residents themselves. People who once pooled resources as a survival strategy now hesitate to share, fearing they might jeopardise their own food access.

Longolol now intends to return to South Sudan and seek work in the conflict-ravaged country. His plan is to send money back to his wife so she can better care for their children in Kakuma. For now, the family survives on rations shared by Dominic's mother, who qualified for Group 2 as an elderly person and splits her allocation with them.

Susan Adit is a volunteer at several camp clinics. She observes caseloads climbing as resources dwindle. Malnutrition, inadequate water supply and deteriorating hygiene are driving preventable diseases, she notes, while stress-related conditions are also on the rise. Child nutrition programmes have been gutted. "Before, children would receive peanuts and milk to supplement their nutrition," Adit explains. "Now these programmes are collapsing."

She is equally troubled by the erosion of education services. Kakuma has always offered relatively robust schooling opportunities – Adit herself completed a community health diploma in the camp. Yet as donor contributions dry up, families are now being asked to cover some costs themselves. "My younger siblings were told that every parent must now pay something," she says. "My parents cannot afford it, and I cannot help because I do not have a paying job."

Lucy Peter, another South Sudanese refugee, operates a small shop in Kakuma selling different things like food and clothing. The single mother of four has been placed in Group 4 and thus no longer qualifies for food assistance. She struggles to support herself and her children and says that business has slowed considerably this year.

She occasionally extends credit to community members, providing food and water on trust. Some repay her; others do not. She does not hold it against them, given the dire circumstances everyone faces. According to Lucy, cash was always scarce in Kakuma, but the funding cuts have made survival exponentially harder.

In Kakuma, people wait – for food, for water, for some sign that the world has not abandoned them entirely. A growing number of them are now so desperate that they are willing to return to their home countries, even though the situation they originally fled has not improved. For many, the calculated risk of going back now seems preferable to the slow deterioration they face in the camp.

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MULTILATERALISM

The UN's plan for humanitarian action in times of dwindling funds

Escalating conflicts and the impacts of the climate crisis meant that more than 300 million people required humanitarian assistance last year. At the same time, funding shrank dramatically, leaving almost two thirds of those in dire need without assistance. This enormous shortfall prompted the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher to propose a new reform process: the Humanitarian Reset. Yet while a reform is much needed, it cannot make up for underinvestment.

BY MARTIN OHMS, JESSICA KÜHNLE AND MATTHIAS AMLING

Photo: picture alliance/Anadolu/Abuukar Mohamed Muhidin

Camp for internally displaced people in Mogadishu, Somalia, 2025.

Two trends have increasingly constrained the international humanitarian system. First, needs have risen sharply. Intensifying violence and the accelerating climate crisis have driven the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance from 77.9 million in 2015 to 305 million in 2025, according to the Global Humanitarian Overview, the UN's annual assessment of global humanitarian needs and how best to respond to them.

Second, funding has persistently lagged behind these needs. Although humanitarian financing increased until 2022, it consistently remained far below what was required. In 2024, funding from public donors fell by 10 %, one of the largest percentage drops and the largest absolute decline on record at that time. As a result, many actors were forced to scale back or suspend programmes.

Since then, the crisis has deepened. In 2024, the US still accounted for roughly 40 % of global humanitarian funding, but under President Donald Trump, spending on humanitarian assistance fell by about 75 % in 2025. Trump also closed the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the principal government agency responsible for administering foreign aid. These moves seem to have set a concerning precedent. Across many capitals, defence spending was prioritised while official development assistance (ODA), including humanitarian funding, was reduced.

> "Even with efficiency gains, a system that was already underfunded cannot meet rising needs with shrinking resources."

Germany, which in recent years had been a major pillar of humanitarian financing, cut its respective budget by 53 %. Similar reductions were implemented by the UK and other donors, compounding the global shortfall. The results could be devastating: a startling report published in The Lancet estimates that the US funding cuts alone could result in over 14 million additional deaths by 2030.

The international humanitarian system has also been facing a set of structural challenges, including how to manage power relations between different groups of actors. Local and national actors (LNAs), for example, are indispensable to effective humanitarian action: they understand the local context, speak local languages and are embedded within affected communities. Yet they remain structurally marginalised within the international aid architecture and have limited access to funding and decision-making authority. Despite the long-standing consensus on the need to strengthen local leadership and financing, progress has been slow. This marginalisation persists in part because prevailing funding and compliance systems favour UN agencies and other international actors. Complex bureaucratic requirements and risk-averse donor practices disadvantage local organisations.

THE HUMANITARIAN RESET

In response to these pressures, Tom Fletcher, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Response Coordinator (ERC), announced the Humanitarian Reset initiative in February 2025. Citing a "profound crisis of legitimacy, morale and funding", Fletcher urged the humanitarian community to shift power to local humanitarian leaders, improve flexibility and efficiency and prioritise urgent life-saving measures. Throughout the year, various workstreams were established to tackle the reforms while safeguarding humanitarian principles and operational space. Most of these workstreams have yet to produce concrete results, but there have been a few notable exceptions.

Among them is the "hyper-prioritised" Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO), which re-prioritised and drastically reduced the number of people eligible to receive humanitarian assistance. While presented as a pragmatic response to funding constraints, this approach has been criticised as creating a new, even lower baseline and as giving the impression that the humanitarian system has been operating on the basis of inflated figures.

AWARDING MORE FUNDS TO LOCAL AND NATIONAL ACTORS

Moreover, the workstream that has arguably received the most attention is the renewed emphasis on pooled funds, including but not limited to the Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Pooled funds aggregate resources at the country or regional level and allocate them to implementing actors. Under the Reset, the ERC proposes that, going forward, 50 % of the global humanitarian budget should be channelled through pooled funds, and up to 70 % of these funds should be awarded to LNAs. If realised, this would mark a fundamental shift in humanitarian financing. To be transformative rather than symbolic, pooled funds must deliver quickly and be flexible, transparent, anticipatory and genuinely accessible to local actors.

Furthermore, managing an abrupt and significant increase in the volume of funding for LNAs should initially build on structures of mutual support, allowing for capacity and risk sharing as well as accountability – roles that international NGOs and other partners are ready to offer. Moreover, CBPF reform alone will not be sufficient; complementary funding models at country level will be required to ensure that humanitarian assistance is delivered flexibly and in ways that are well suited to the local context.

Parallel to the Humanitarian Reset, UN Secretary-General António Guterres is leading a broader, system-wide reform of the United Nations: the UN80 Initiative. While the Humanitarian Reset focuses specifically on humanitarian action, UN80 covers the UN system as a whole, aiming to make it more agile, integrated and capable of responding to today's complex global challenges amid tightening resources.

ANTICIPATING INSTEAD OF REACTING

Enhancing the decision-making power and financing of LNAs is not only a matter of equity and justice but also key to creating a more efficient and effective system. Yet meaningful localisation requires those actors currently holding disproportionate influence to relinquish some control. This remains one of the core tensions of the Humanitarian Reset, which to date has largely been shaped by UN-led structures. Opportunities for systematic engagement by NGOs, especially local and national ones as well as by donors, have been limited, even though they will be decisive for the system's future. Broader, more inclusive participation is therefore critical if the Reset is to deliver lasting change.

At the same time, the current reform should be used to move the system from a predominantly reactive model towards a more anticipatory one. Humanitarian crises are becoming increasingly predictable, and evidence shows the (cost-)effectiveness of mitigating the impacts of predicted shocks before they fully unfold. Anticipatory action saves lives and livelihoods and strengthens resilience, making it a more dignified form of assistance. Mainstreaming anticipatory approaches that are locally led and grounded in local knowledge is therefore central to a future-fit humanitarian system.

Welthungerhilfe, one of Germany's largest private aid agencies, appreciates the opportunity to reform the humanitarian system that the Humanitarian Reset provides. As a champion of anticipatory action and localisation approaches, we advocate for a system that is locally led, people-centred and anticipatory wherever possible. Therefore, we argue that a fair, effective and efficient humanitarian system can only be achieved on the basis of inclusive consultations and decision-making that meaningfully involves all relevant stakeholders.

Ultimately, however, reform alone cannot close the funding gap. Even with efficiency gains, a system that was already underfunded cannot meet rising needs with shrinking resources. If humanitarian action is to remain principled and effective, significantly increased, predictable and multi-year funding is essential.

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Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Ebrahim Noroozi

A Taliban fighter stands guard as people receive food rations from China in Kabul, Afghanistan.

AFGHANISTAN

Looking the other way is (not) an option

In Afghanistan there is a vital need to provide help – especially to women and girls – and to strengthen the civilian population without legitimising the Taliban regime. Recent political developments in Germany are disastrous from a human-rights perspective.

BY SELMIN ÇALIŞKAN

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is not an abstract crisis but rather the result of a whole series of international failings. People are living in abject poverty; many do not know whether they will be able to feed their children from one day to the next. Women report that they can no longer access a doctor or midwife – the Taliban regime has even outlawed the use of mobile phones to consult a healthcare professional. Antenatal care has become an alien concept for many pregnant women.

Against this backdrop, the challenge facing the international community is to provide help without legitimising the Taliban regime. Whether such help has the desired effect will depend above all on the commitment shown by individuals on both sides: by international aid workers on the one hand and by local, more moderate members of the Taliban on the other. While the former actually deliver the help, it is up to the latter to allow this help to get through, often under the radar, to women and girls or indeed to at-risk regime opponents. Given the systematic gender apartheid in place in Afghanistan, this requires taking personal risks.

UN organisations, the EU and international NGOs play a crucial role because they have control mechanisms in place and can channel resources directly to those affected. However, to maximise impact, they need to better coordinate their goals and strategies – an all too familiar problem. As aid organisations from Germany and elsewhere report, the Taliban make it difficult for female aid workers in particular to operate in Afghanistan. The Taliban strictly monitor any online healthcare advice services for women, as these could also document the extent of violence against women. At the same time, everyone knows that without women involved, the help will not reach women and girls. This is the bitter reality.

> "While international sanctions, such as freezing assets and restricting payment transactions, are designed to exert pressure on the regime, they also make it harder for aid organisations to pay salaries and procure local resources."

SANCTIONS HARM BOTH REGIME AND AID WORKERS

While international sanctions, such as freezing assets and restricting payment transactions, are designed to exert pressure on the regime, they also make it harder for aid organisations to pay salaries and procure local resources. This shows that Richard Bennett, the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, is right when he warns against decoupling human-rights policy from humanitarian practice. Humanitarian exceptions, properly functioning financial channels and clear political signals from Berlin and Brussels are vital. Supporting the civilian population makes no concession to the Taliban.

What alarms me particularly are the effects of policies here in Germany. My work with exiled Afghan human-rights defenders makes it quite clear that foreign policy immediately becomes domestic policy when an anti-migration policy renders the democratic and human-rights compass null and void. And this is despite the fact that we are talking about political persecution here – not about migration.

These days, local Afghan staff who could flee to Pakistan are only flown to Germany under considerable public pressure, rather than at the invitation of the German government. Those under threat are being offered money if they renounce their promised entry. Before the Taliban seized power again, these workers had spent years supporting Bundeswehr troops or the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in Afghanistan. Now they face persecution by the regime.

The fact that the Taliban have taken over the Afghan embassy in Berlin and that Taliban representatives have been invited to help enforce Germany's deportation policy also raises genuine fears of further persecution by these radical Islamists in Germany. Women and men from Afghanistan now have to apply for passports and birth certificates from precisely those institutions they fled the country to escape.

This turns the worst nightmare of survivors of political persecution into reality: transnational persecution beyond borders – despite their protection status. People from Afghanistan are now experiencing something we are familiar with from Russia and some African countries.

Belgium and Austria refuse to accredit Taliban representatives as embassy staff – so why does Germany not?

GENDER APARTHEID AS A NEW CRIME

At the same time, exiled female campaigners for women's rights are abandoning neither women and girls nor their country. They negotiate tirelessly with EU member states, calling for gender apartheid to be recognised as a crime by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Their goal is to have the current rulers prosecuted for having stripped women of all their rights. While writing this article, the Taliban have just introduced a new legal regulation that divides society into free and enslaved persons. Women and girls belong to the latter. Defining gender apartheid as a crime against humanity would also make it harder for Western states that recognise the ICC to continue looking the other way. No small number of the women I work with hope they will be able to return to Afghanistan one day and use their expertise to help rebuild their country. Much the same happened following the end of the first period of Taliban rule.

Afghanistan teaches us that help provided in repressive contexts must be steadfast, based on human rights and politically astute. Looking the other way is not an option – but nor is naive normalisation, which also helps the anti-democratic forces here in our country.

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CRISES AND CONFLICTS

“The triple nexus needs to be more flexible and tolerant of error”

The humanitarian–development–peace nexus (HDP nexus), also known as the “triple nexus” for its three spheres of action, has long sought to more closely coordinate humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities. Katharina Valjak from the Catholic development aid agency Misereor explains why efforts to achieve this goal are faltering and where there is room for improvement.

KATHARINA VALJAK IN AN INTERVIEW WITH LEON KIRSCHGENS

Transporting medical patients in Khan Yunis, Gaza.

Photo: picture alliance/Anadolu/Saeed M. T. Jaras

Ms Valjak, it's nearly 10 years since the HDP nexus was officially introduced. These days, governmental and non-governmental organisations alike regard it as a routine part of their work. So, it is a resounding success, in other words?

It's true that the nexus has become something of a fixture in development cooperation. Dedicated departments have been established in ministries such as Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Federal Foreign Office; special coordination and exchange formats exist at the UN level and there's also a Nexus Academy where HDP professionals are trained in and sensitised to nexus approaches. Germany has also initiated the so-called nexus chapeau approach, intended to increasingly shape and fund humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and peacebuilding efforts under one strategic "umbrella". This allows actors, including non-government organisations, to join forces and form partnerships. Ministries also run complementary programmes and task their implementing organisations with more systematically combining these areas of activity. Clarity is still lacking in many areas, however. In practice, the triple nexus is not having the desired impact yet.

"We need to consider all kinds of questions from the outset: Who will benefit from the measures? Who might feel excluded? Is there a history of tensions between villages, ethnic groups or religious communities?"

What impact was the HDP nexus supposed to have – and what is its current status?

The overriding goal was to more closely connect short-term aid with long-term support. In other words, humanitarian assistance was supposed to consider the structural needs of development cooperation from the outset – and vice versa. This was expected to lead to new, more effective approaches. Perhaps the most groundbreaking innovation was the decision to place greater emphasis on promoting peace with the "P" in the HDP nexus, and to engage not only in "peacekeeping" but also in "peacebuilding", actively establishing structures to foster peace rather than simply maintaining the status quo.

However, the triple nexus has long been and remains one thing above all: a term used by Western think tanks, donor institutions and development agencies in projects to describe how crises, development shortcomings and violent conflict are interrelated. Admittedly, this is gradually changing, and nexus strategies have been implemented increasingly in recent years. Nonetheless, over time a common misunderstanding has often become entrenched, namely that the nexus follows a logical sequence in practice: first humanitarian aid, then development, then peace.

Yet this is not the case.

At least not always. The nexus is often more reminiscent of a triangle, where in different scenarios one or the other component may be more important or need to be prioritised: sometimes peacebuilding measures are needed to gain access to people or regions in the first place. In other cases, humanitarian aid, development activities and peacebuilding efforts will proceed in parallel. And indeed, this is exactly how many organisations, especially those at the local level, have been operating for years – without even being aware of the term. For instance, a priest in the Philippines who has been familiar with and part of local structures for decades will intuitively know how conflicts are related to natural disasters and poverty. It tends to be external actors who talk about the HDP nexus in an attempt to make it easier to grasp complex interactions and develop possible solutions.

In the HDP nexus, the emphasis is on the P – peacebuilding. And yet it was long assumed that development would eventually lead to peace of its own accord.

This is precisely the assumption that the HDP nexus wishes to debunk because it loses sight of the big picture. If, for example, a new well is built in a village without sufficient knowledge of the local circumstances or of the potential for conflict between Indigenous groups, it may ultimately do more harm than good. We need to consider all kinds of questions from the outset: Who will benefit from the measures? Who might feel excluded? Is there a history of tensions between villages, ethnic groups or religious

communities? Time and again, well-meaning development projects have ended up merely exacerbating conflicts and causing frustration, competition and – at worst – violence. This is exactly where the nexus comes in, postulating that peace is not a byproduct of development but a clear goal in its own right.

> "Local actors in particular play a key role because they are familiar with local circumstances and often keep track of several levels simultaneously."

That can be achieved by getting the conflicting parties together around the table?
It is much more than that. A fairly narrow interpretation of peace was long the norm: peace was regarded above all as the absence of violence – a ceasefire, for instance, or an agreement between elites. Many actors have meanwhile come to realise that peace involves a lot more than this and that the absence of violence per se is not equivalent to "achieving" peace. People's attitudes, prejudices and behavioural patterns must also be addressed long term – ultimately, this is about taking steps to prevent violence from escalating. This could mean initiating dialogue between different groups at the local level, be it between generations, women and men or ethnic groups. It is also about creating spaces in which people see themselves as part of a community – through something as banal as joint activities or religious practices. In a sense, it's more about the "small p" – everyday peacekeeping efforts.

Which brings us back to the three elements of the nexus. Most organisations focus on just one of them. But if the idea behind the nexus is to regard the elements as interrelated, shouldn't organisations act accordingly and take responsibility for all three?
That would not necessarily work in all cases. It may sound like a good idea in theory for a single organisation, especially a local one, to take care of all these different steps. However, it is rarely realistic in practice. Most agencies have a clear mandate for historical reasons and therefore enjoy the trust of the local population. A few organisations, such as Caritas, do attempt this kind of strategic "joined-up thinking" in countries like Burkina Faso or Ethiopia. Though fascinating to witness, very considerable capacities are required to make this successful. In many contexts, it makes more sense for different agencies with different areas of expertise to work together – provided they strategically coordinate their cooperation. Local actors in particular play a key role here because they are familiar with local circumstances and often keep track of several levels simultaneously. The challenge is to ensure that collaboration is flexible enough to react to changes so that the joint project does not remain a rigid construct. This is also something the nexus has made clear, even if it is still difficult to achieve.

Where do the difficulties lie?
Well, the flexibility the nexus approach requires to be truly effective is often absent – not only during the implementation stage but even when the project is designed. This is evidenced by the funding logic used in many donor institutions. Though the HDP nexus nowadays features significantly in the calls for tender issued by major donor organisations, their requirements for how a project should proceed remain fairly inflexible. Yet situations change very quickly during crises and other fragile contexts – be it because of the dynamic nature of the conflict, the security situation or the political circumstances. A nexus project needs to be able to respond just as quickly to such changes.

What does this mean in concrete terms?
It means, for example, allowing funds to be swiftly redeployed or the focus of the entire project shifted. However, applying for changes and realigning a project within a matter of weeks or months still entails a great deal of bureaucracy for local and international actors. If the worst comes to the worst, the entire nexus approach in a particular region will collapse as a result, with actors reacting instead of continuing to act strategically. This is what happened in Haiti and Myanmar, where humanitarian organisations, development projects and UN missions maintained a strong presence for a time – which should be the ideal prerequisites for the nexus approach. However, in practice many actors worked alongside one another in "silos" rather than interacting with one another. Hierarchies and competition often play a role in this context, too; what would help most would be to acknowledge the work done by local organisations, for instance by allocating them a fixed share of HDP nexus programme funding. When the situation deteriorated again and organisations left the country, virtually no strategic readjustments were undertaken to address questions such as: What is now needed most urgently? Who can make up the shortfall?

This illustrates how difficult it is to adapt the construct if it is not kept flexible from the outset.

What could be done to change this, apart from making funding more flexible?

Spaces are needed where actors can talk openly about mistakes and failed measures without having to fear reprisals. Far too often, projects are assessed internally and externally to determine whether they are reaching the goals that were defined at the beginning – even though the circumstances may have changed considerably and quite different goals should now be the focus. There is also a tendency to commit the "sunk cost fallacy", continuing blindly on despite changed circumstances because so much has already been invested and a change of course would be tantamount to starting over. Here, too, it is about the flexibility to rethink, in other words. Peacebuilding is a lengthy process that is difficult to measure. Many things do not work out – or at least not the way one intended.

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