



World Food Programme
Programme Alimentaire Mondial
Programa Mundial de Alimentos
برنامج الأغذية العالمي

Executive Board
Annual session
Rome, 24–28 June 2024

Distribution: General

Agenda item 12

Date: 15 May 2024

WFP/EB.A/2024/12-C

Original: English

Other business

For information

Executive Board documents are available on WFP's website (<https://executiveboard.wfp.org>).

Update on the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service

Executive summary

In 2023 the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service operated in 21 countries across three continents, transporting over 388,000 passengers and 4,500 mt of cargo for 647 organizations. These achievements were made possible by steadfast support from donors, a strategically positioned fleet of 144 aircraft and a diverse and agile workforce.

Managed by the WFP Aviation Service, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service provides a lifeline for the international humanitarian community. In regions affected by conflict, climate-related disaster or other emergencies, the air service transports aid workers and delivers supplies to areas that cannot be reached through commercial transportation. The service encompasses scheduled and ad hoc flights and emergency evacuations, as well as the transport of critical light cargo – non-food items used by aid workers.

In a context of protracted crises, natural disasters and funding constraints, the service has adapted to increased demand. It has established air bridges, facilitated evacuations, supported assessments in disaster zones and deployed assets to conflict-affected areas, including in the Niger and the Sudan. In collaboration with other actors, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service supported various emergency response efforts in 2023.

WFP and the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service maintain the highest standards of safety and security for all operations over or near conflict zones. As part of efforts to improve environmental sustainability, the Aviation Service has launched a comprehensive training course, cabin waste management guidelines and an exploration of sustainable aviation fuel.

To ensure continuity and adaptability, WFP Aviation Service has a centralized funding mechanism designed to strengthen the ability of the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service to respond effectively during sudden-onset emergencies.

Focal point:

Mr F. Frimpong

Chief

Aviation Service

email: franklyn.frimpong@wfp.org

Introduction

1. *Establishment and strategic role of the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service.* The United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) was established in 2004 by WFP and provides passenger and light cargo air transport services. Those services enable the implementation of effective humanitarian and recovery operations in emergencies and protracted crises when commercial flights are unavailable and ground transportation is unsafe or road infrastructure is poor. UNHAS flights ensure the safe and timely access of humanitarian actors to people affected by food insecurity, conflict, climate-related hazards or health emergencies, connecting isolated communities with life-saving support.
2. *Operational and strategic achievements in 2023.* UNHAS reliably facilitated passenger and cargo transport, medical and security evacuations, rapid assessments and the swift delivery of humanitarian aid in 2023. UNHAS also supported national capacity building and the broader strengthening of aviation infrastructure in support of humanitarian operations. Strategic priorities included sustainable transport solutions, fleet diversification (including through the use of helicopters), route and infrastructure optimization strategies, environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion, flexible financing models and digital transformation. Robust aviation security risk management remained a core focus across all UNHAS operations.

Overview of 2023 UNHAS operations

3. The year 2023 was marked by protracted humanitarian crises and new emergencies. Many country operations experienced access constraints and witnessed outbreaks of new large-scale conflicts – all in a period of reduced funding. Key UNHAS operations during the year include the following:
 - a) After the outbreak of conflict in the Sudan, UNHAS created air bridges to reach conflict-affected zones in the country and facilitated security evacuations to Nairobi and Entebbe, while also transporting life-saving cargo to the United Nations hub in Port Sudan.
 - b) UNHAS maintained vital air bridges through Doha, Dubai, Dushanbe and Islamabad to support humanitarian operations in Afghanistan including to assist Afghan deportees at the main border crossing point with Pakistan.
 - c) UNHAS deployed a new fleet of high-visibility orange helicopters in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to enhance operational safety. This initiative, along with ongoing access negotiations and community engagement efforts, strengthened its commitment to safely delivering critical assistance to those in need.
 - d) In the Niger, although most cargo is transported by road, when air transport is needed UNHAS is often the only option, especially for remote locations such as Tahoua, Maradi and Diffa. During the crisis in July, UNHAS organized domestic flights to relocate humanitarian staff and their dependents.
 - e) In 2023 Haiti experienced a surge in displacement sparked by violence. UNHAS transported over 16,000 aid workers (25 percent more than in 2022) and 119 mt of light cargo in the form of non-food items used by aid workers, while also supporting medical evacuations.
 - f) South Sudan's aviation sector is hampered by poor infrastructure and limited capacity. UNHAS deployed a fleet of nine fixed-wing aircraft and three helicopters in the country to maintain access amid these challenging conditions. In 2023 UNHAS provided safe transport to 57 humanitarian locations and relocated staff while prioritizing airstrip rehabilitation to improve efficiency.

- g) In Burkina Faso UNHAS successfully scaled up operations and expanded its fleet to meet rising demand. Since 2020 UNHAS helicopters have been the only safe option for reaching some conflict-affected destinations in the country.
4. To meet environmental and sustainability commitments, WFP launched key initiatives in 2023 such as the implementation of cabin waste management guidelines to assist UNHAS contracted air carriers in defining and harmonizing cabin waste management processes. WFP also ran an environmental sustainability training programme for UNHAS staff.
 5. UNHAS partners with the European Union's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations to provide humanitarian flights in Burkina Faso, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali and Somalia. This partnership leverages UNHAS infrastructure for increased efficiency and adaptability, ensuring safe and cost-effective air support for humanitarian projects funded by the European Union.
 6. WFP has established a centralized funding mechanism to enable immediate resource allocation to UNHAS and thus strengthen its ability to respond to sudden-onset crises. This has allowed UNHAS to provide timely and flexible support where needed the most, made possible by contributions from France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. Allocations from the funding mechanism to field operations are guided by standard operating procedures and are made on a quarterly basis.
 7. In 2023 UNHAS transported more than 388,000 passengers and 4,500 mt of humanitarian cargo, providing staff members from 647 organizations with access to 437 destinations in remote and hard-to-reach areas. This was enabled by WFP's fleet of 144 aircraft, which includes both fixed and rotary wing assets. Organizations served included national and international non-governmental organizations (56 percent), United Nations entities and international organizations (39 percent), representatives from the donor and diplomatic communities (2 percent) and other partners, including the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (3 percent). UNHAS also operated special flights for needs assessments, project monitoring and high-level ad hoc missions (table 1).

TABLE 1: UNITED NATIONS HUMANITARIAN AIR SERVICES: KEY OPERATIONAL INDICATORS, 2021-2023			
Operational indicator	2021	2022	2023
Passengers	325 112	> 395 000	> 388 000
Cargo (<i>mt</i>) (mostly non-food items used by aid workers, transported on UNHAS aircraft)	5 872	> 7 000	4 500
Evacuations (medical and security)	3 015	1 547	1 555
User organizations	800	732	647
Destinations	496	540	437

8. Support from and partnerships with key stakeholders remain essential to the continued provision of safe, effective and efficient humanitarian air services. These stakeholders include the donor community, governments, the International Civil Aviation Organization, civil aviation authorities, the International Air Transport Association, contracted air carriers and user agencies.

UNHAS and the United Nations Booking Hub

9. Offering services in English and French, the United Nations Booking Hub has been enhanced with self-service features and increased accessibility through commonly used devices, including laptops and mobile phones. This ensures flexibility and reflects the requirements of airfield operations. Key developments in 2023 include the availability of multi-fare options that cater to the varying needs and budgets of user organizations and the standardization of user organizations in the hub to match those in Takeflight, an aviation management software platform.
10. The United Nations Booking Hub is a comprehensive online booking platform for all UNHAS flights, accessible to the entire United Nations system and the global humanitarian community. All 21 UNHAS field operations now use the hub for bookings. The platform will continue to evolve and expand in 2024 to keep pace with changing needs in humanitarian air service operations.

WFP Aviation environmental and sustainability programme

11. WFP is committed to reducing the environmental impact of UNHAS operations through its environmental and sustainability programme, which drives continuous improvement across three key pillars:
 - We measure: comprehensive measurement of carbon footprint and environmental impact.
 - We reduce: proactive initiatives to minimize fuel burn, emissions and waste.
 - We offset: strategic offsetting of unavoidable emissions.
12. Following completion of the "we measure" pillar, significant progress on the "we reduce" pillar was achieved in 2023:
 - a) Environmental management systems: 69 percent of long-term contracted air operators now successfully implement environmental management systems standards, a core contracting requirement.
 - b) Procurement focus: Environmental performance is now a factor in aircraft procurement decisions for UNHAS operations.
 - c) Electric ground power units: A pilot project is under way to replace emissions-producing units with electric ground power units, which help reduce the emissions and the noise produced by UNHAS flights.
 - d) Cabin waste management: Comprehensive guidelines for UNHAS-contracted carriers on optimizing cabin waste processes have been developed.
 - e) Environmental e-learning: A training course primarily for UNHAS staff and air carrier personnel but accessible to all WFP staff has been developed to promote awareness and the adoption of sustainable practices.
 - f) Sustainable aviation fuel: WFP is analysing the market feasibility of sustainable aviation fuel, exploring procurement opportunities and advocating the use of such fuel for UNHAS operations and the aviation sector in general.
13. The WFP Aviation Service will continue to seek innovative ways to reduce the environmental footprint of UNHAS, supporting the achievement of WFP's broader sustainability goals.

Operational key performance indicators

14. As shown in tables 1 and 2, most aviation-related key performance indicators registered improvement in 2023 compared with 2022:
- Environmental efficiency:* In 2023, CO₂ emissions from all WFP-chartered aircraft including UNHAS totalled 140,159 mt, down from 142,620 mt in 2022.
 - User satisfaction:* The satisfaction rates derived from passenger surveys of UNHAS are aggregated at the global level. The user satisfaction rate for UNHAS operations in 2023 was 96 percent. The rate has been steadily increasing from a 2020 low of 83 percent, which was attributable to the disruption of UNHAS services due to restrictions introduced during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic.
 - Cost efficiency:* The operational cost per passenger kilometre increased in 2023 compared to the previous year (from USD 1.86 to USD 2.08), due to global factors such as increased contracting costs and fuel prices.

Operational indicator	2021	2022	2023
Cost efficiency (operational cost per passenger kilometre) (USD)	1.80	1.86	2.08
Environmental efficiency (CO ₂ emissions from WFP-chartered aircraft) (mt)	160 181	142 620	140 159
User satisfaction (percentage of WFP Aviation Service users satisfied and very satisfied with the service)	94	95	96

Funding overview

- As a mandated common service for the entire humanitarian and development community, UNHAS collaborates closely with donors and is demand driven. As demand for humanitarian air services increases, and given that UNHAS must frequently adjust and scale up operations, UNHAS needs consistent, predictable and adequate funding.
- The total budget for the UNHAS implementation plan for 2023 was USD 410 million. The budget for the 2024 implementation plan stands at USD 382 million, with a shortfall of USD 198 million, as of February 2024.
- In 2023 UNHAS received USD 251 million in contributions from 24 donors, representing 53 percent of total funding. Carry-over balances from 2022 totalled USD 132.9 million, or 28 percent of total funding, and cost recovery generated USD 92 million, or 19 percent of total funding.

Centralized funding mechanism

- As noted above, WFP has operationalized a centralized funding mechanism, which offers enhanced flexibility in funding for UNHAS operations globally, swifter response to urgent needs, improved predictability of resources and greater UNHAS operational efficiency. The mechanism empowers the WFP Aviation Service to strategically assess UNHAS field operations requiring support, including those with lower visibility. In addition, the mechanism facilitates rapid deployment of assets for emergencies in countries where UNHAS operations are absent or underfunded under country strategic plans.

19. The funding mechanism features a robust resource allocation process led by the Aviation Fund Application Review Committee under the authority of the WFP Supply Chain and Delivery Division Director. Country offices have the primary responsibility for mobilizing contributions for UNHAS activities, following corporate procedures.
20. In 2023 the centralized funding mechanism received contributions from France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. Allocations from the mechanism are made on a quarterly basis in accordance with standard operating procedures. Notably, during the fourth quarter of 2023 allocations were made to nine UNHAS field operations.

Future air transport solutions

21. In collaboration with the Kenyan Civil Aviation Authority, in December 2023 UNHAS participated in a demonstration of a "MiniFreighter" – an unmanned cargo aircraft system capable of transporting and airdropping 160 kg of humanitarian cargo. This could prove to be a milestone in improving WFP's capacity to deliver aid to areas with limited accessibility.
22. Partnerships with civil aviation authorities, among others, play a critical role in enhancing UNHAS response capability. In November 2023, the WFP Aviation Service signed a memorandum of understanding with the Sharjah Civil Aviation Authority of the United Arab Emirates. This collaboration will facilitate capacity building for UNHAS staff in key areas. More partnerships are envisaged with the Dubai Civil Aviation Authority of the United Arab Emirates and the United Arab Emirates General Civil Aviation Authority.

Aviation security

23. UNHAS missions operate in complex environments with threats ranging from armed conflict to improvised explosive devices. WFP Aviation Service's Security (AVSEC) unit analyses and identifies aviation security risks in all UNHAS field operations, provides assessments and mitigates existing risks, reducing exposure to security-related incidents. This includes the provision of specialized support enabling immediate access to populations in need.
24. Progress was made in risk management with the roll-out of the new AVSEC Annex G Dashboard, which provides assessments for over 400 destinations across all UNHAS missions. Other advances in this area included regular aviation risk management risk assessments conducted for all 21 UNHAS operations, with ad hoc assessments conducted in response to crises. New AVSEC standard operating procedures were released in May 2023 and ensure compliance with United Nations aviation standards for peacekeeping and humanitarian air transport operations and other key regulations.
25. UNHAS continues to collaborate with key partners on the ground, engaging in capacity building initiatives throughout the year. In 2023 this included enhanced cooperation with internal and external partners (national authorities, WFP Security Division, humanitarian access and humanitarian-military interaction staff and the United Nations Department of Operational Support) and the conduct of AVSEC training courses covering diverse security topics for 1,392 individuals.