



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

Executive Board
Annual session
Rome, 23–26 June 2026

Distribution: General

Agenda item 8

Date: 18 May 2026

WFP/EB.A/2026/8-C

Original: English

Operational matters

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

The year 2025 was marked by rising humanitarian needs amid increased global volatility, as conflict, instability and climate-related shocks converged. At the same time, access to affected people became increasingly constrained, reinforcing the critical role of the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service in enabling humanitarian responses in some of the world's most complex environments.

Despite a 32.3 percent decline in donor contributions compared to 2024, the air service remained operational across 21 operations, ensuring continued access to hard-to-reach and high-risk areas. Guided by quarterly aviation risk assessments, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service successfully managed 275 aviation security incidents, ensuring safe, secure and uninterrupted operations.

The United Nations Humanitarian Air Service implemented a range of efficiency measures in 2025, including fleet optimization, contract renegotiation and operational prioritization. These efforts reduced operational costs by more than 20 percent while maintaining safety and service continuity.

In 2025, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service transported nearly 240,000 aid workers and 2,500 metric tons of relief supplies to 362 destinations, supporting the operations of 682 partner organizations. It also conducted 2,222 medical evacuations and security relocations, providing a critical safety net for humanitarian personnel working in high-risk environments.

The United Nations Humanitarian Air Service continued to promote innovation and strengthen its partnerships, including through a landmark funding commitment by the Government of Guinea in support of in-country United Nations Humanitarian Air Service operations. In Madagascar, the deployment of unmanned aircraft systems complemented traditional air operations, enabling humanitarian actors to reach communities that could not otherwise be accessed, even by manned aircraft.

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Moving forward, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service will continue to prioritize efficiency, innovation and strategic investment in aviation infrastructure in order to sustain life-saving humanitarian access in an increasingly constrained operating environment.

Introduction

1. The year 2025 was exceptionally challenging for the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS), as it continued to fulfil its role as a critical enabler of humanitarian response despite a one-third decline in funding contributions compared to 2024. At the same time, insecurity intensified: UNHAS recorded 275 aviation security incidents, including GPS jamming, small-arms fire targeting aircraft, and drone-related incidents. On average, an UNHAS aircraft faced a security threat somewhere in the world every 31 hours and 30 minutes. War risk insurance premiums rose accordingly as UNHAS continued to operate in increasingly complex environments.
2. Despite these challenges, UNHAS remained agile and responsive to the needs of the humanitarian community. Throughout the year, it continued to facilitate the movement of personnel and the delivery of life-saving assistance to vulnerable populations. Notably, UNHAS conducted 1,639 security relocations, more than double the number recorded in 2024, reflecting both the heightened volatility of humanitarian settings and UNHAS's strong commitment to the safety and duty of care of aid workers. Guided by quarterly aviation security risk assessments, the service successfully managed the increased number of aviation security incidents, ensuring safe, secure and uninterrupted operations.

Highlights from 2025

3. Around the world, the humanitarian community faces an increasingly volatile operating environment in which conflict, instability, disasters and economic shocks continue to converge and deepen humanitarian needs. In 2025, the challenges faced by humanitarian actors became even more pronounced: while millions of people required assistance, access to affected populations became increasingly constrained. In that context, UNHAS remained a vital enabler, bridging the gap between those in need and the humanitarian workers striving to reach them.
4. Amid significant funding constraints, UNHAS adapted its operations while ensuring the continuity of life-saving services. UNHAS introduced a range of efficiency measures across field operations, including collaborative reviews of flight networks and prioritization of routes based on humanitarian impact; demand-driven adjustments to fleet size and composition; renegotiation of contracts, including those pertaining to war risk insurance; and strengthened collaboration with strategic partners. Collectively, these efforts reduced operational costs by more than 20 percent without compromising the safety and security of UNHAS operations.
5. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UNHAS played a critical role in supporting efforts to contain an outbreak of Ebola disease. Following the declaration of the outbreak, UNHAS rapidly enabled the deployment of medical personnel, vaccines and essential supplies to frontline areas where they were urgently needed. Humanitarian responders indicated that, without UNHAS support, the situation could have been far more severe, with significantly greater loss of life. As the security situation deteriorated in the eastern part of the country, UNHAS also facilitated the relocation of more than 1,300 aid workers and their dependants to safer areas, in line with its strong commitment to the safety and duty of care of humanitarian personnel.

6. In Guinea, the Government agreed to fund in-country UNHAS operations throughout 2026. This landmark agreement marks the first time that a host government has financed UNHAS operations domestically and reflects growing recognition of the value of the service in supporting national priorities and communities. It also reflects broader efforts towards localization and strengthened national ownership of humanitarian action. The agreement has helped to ensure continuity of service in 2026, reducing the risk of funding disruptions and safeguarding the ability of humanitarian and development actors to reach those most in need.
7. In Madagascar, the WFP Aviation Service achieved another important milestone with the successful launch of humanitarian deliveries using unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) in the southeast of the country, where access has long been severely constrained. The initiative, which was carried out in collaboration with the Government, demonstrated both the technical reliability of UAS and their capacity to transport significant humanitarian payloads beyond the limited scope typically associated with such platforms. The use of UAS enhances overall humanitarian access by extending the delivery of aid to communities that cannot be reached even with manned aircraft. When combined with traditional UNHAS operations, UAS form part of a multi-layered system that ensures humanitarian assistance reaches the “last mile”.
8. Building on its experience in Madagascar, WFP worked with the International Civil Aviation Organization and the United Nations Department of Operational Support to launch the United Nations Unmanned Aviation Coordination Forum. This platform brings together United Nations entities to harmonize and advance the use of UAS across the United Nations system. The WFP Aviation Service will continue to expand its UAS capabilities in order to strengthen last-mile delivery and improve access to hard-to-reach communities.
9. In Haiti, UNHAS remained a vital lifeline for the humanitarian response in 2025. It operated amid widespread violence that had largely cut off the capital and rendered road transport increasingly unsafe. As UNHAS remained the only reliable means of transporting aid workers and humanitarian cargo into and out of Port-au-Prince, demand for its services doubled in 2025 compared to the previous year. Throughout 2025, UNHAS maintained a high operational tempo and relied primarily on a helicopter fleet to ensure flexibility and access to remote, restricted and high-risk areas. UNHAS also played a critical role in the response to Hurricane Melissa in late 2025 by facilitating the rapid deployment of humanitarian personnel and assistance. Its continued presence in Haiti has been essential to ensuring that humanitarian workers can operate safely and deliver life-saving support.
10. In Mali, UNHAS began 2025 with a fleet of three aircraft – a Beechcraft 1900, a Dornier 228 and a Dash-8 – providing critical access to remote and underserved areas. In response to a funding shortfall in March, operations were streamlined to align with available resources, including through the withdrawal of the Dash-8 from service. Despite a 50 percent reduction in seat capacity, UNHAS was able to meet 95 percent of booking requests, demonstrating strong operational resilience and a sustained commitment to humanitarian access despite significant funding constraints.
11. In Chad, UNHAS introduced operational changes in July 2025 aimed at reducing costs and making the most efficient use of available resources amid declining funding. The fleet was optimized through a transition to three Dash 8 (37-seater) aircraft, allowing greater efficiency through fleet standardization. The transition allowed UNHAS to maintain seat capacity and reduce the operational budget by 24 percent without compromising its duty of care, including the provision of critical medical evacuations. To further safeguard humanitarian access, WFP invested in aviation infrastructure by rehabilitating the Adré airstrip and undertaking essential improvements in Bol to ensure safe operations during the rainy season.

12. In Nigeria, UNHAS operated throughout 2025 in a highly challenging environment marked by persistent insecurity, access constraints and frequent blockades. With a fleet of three helicopters and one fixed-wing aircraft, the service provided flexible coverage across 14 regular and 2 ad hoc destinations. In response to funding pressures, a cost-efficiency assessment was conducted mid-year, resulting in a temporary reduction of the helicopter fleet from three to two aircraft for a period of three and a half months, while maintaining access to priority locations. Fixed-wing services were also discontinued in September 2025. These adjustments reflect UNHAS's continued efforts to make efficient use of available resources while sustaining critical humanitarian access.
13. In the Sudan, UNHAS remained a vital lifeline for humanitarian operations throughout 2025. Despite significant challenges – including airspace restrictions, widespread GPS jamming and spoofing, and the high cost of war risk insurance – UNHAS continued to provide safe, reliable and efficient air transport for humanitarian personnel and light cargo. Operating primarily from Port Sudan on the Red Sea, UNHAS also positioned aircraft in Cairo, Jeddah and Nairobi in order to increase operational flexibility and support rapid response capacity. UNHAS also re-established internal flights between Port Sudan, Dongola and Kassala, helping to sustain humanitarian access as conditions within the Sudan continued to deteriorate.
14. In South Sudan, UNHAS provided access to 44 hard-to-reach destinations across the country in support of the humanitarian community. Flood response remained an operational priority, with UNHAS facilitating access to affected areas during the rainy season despite significant logistical constraints. To strengthen operations in such conditions, a DHC-6 Twin Otter aircraft was introduced, given its suitability for short and unprepared airstrips. This improved access to remote locations. In parallel, UNHAS supported the response to an outbreak of cholera by transporting essential health and protection supplies, further reinforcing its role as a critical enabler of emergency response.
15. By the end of 2025, UNHAS had transported nearly 240,000 aid workers and 2,500 mt of relief supplies to almost 400 hard-to-reach destinations in support of 682 organizations delivering assistance to people in need. In addition, UNHAS carried out 2,222 medical evacuations and security relocations, supporting humanitarian personnel operating in high-risk environments by ensuring that assistance was available when needed. While demand for UNHAS services increased in some operations, such as those in Haiti and the Sudan, it declined in others. Reduced funding and the resulting reduction in fleet size as part of efficiency measures contributed to an overall decrease in passenger and cargo volumes compared to 2024.

Operational key performance indicators

16. Throughout the year, UNHAS operated in 22 countries: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, the Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Operations in the Republic of the Congo were managed from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and primarily supported the voluntary repatriation of refugees. Key data relating to UNHAS operations between 2023 and 2025 are provided in the following table.

UNITED NATIONS HUMANITARIAN AIR SERVICE: KEY OPERATIONAL INDICATORS 2023–2025			
Operational indicator	2023	2024	2025
Passengers	>388 000	>355 000	>240 000
Cargo (<i>mt</i>)	4 500	>4 900	<2 500
User organizations	647	612	682
Destinations	437	394	362
Medical evacuations and security relocations	1 555	1 455	2 222
User satisfaction (%)	96	97	96
Environmental efficiency (carbon dioxide emissions generated by WFP chartered aircraft (<i>mt</i>))	140 159	129 244	68 774*

* This reduction is attributed to a reduction in fleet size and in the use of heavy helicopters.

WFP Aviation Service efficiency measures

17. UNHAS is a model of system efficiencies, providing one common air service for the entire humanitarian community and thereby avoiding the need for multiple agencies to maintain separate air operations. UNHAS continues to prioritize efficiency through operational performance assessments, fleet optimization, asset sharing and a cost-recovery model.
18. However, the challenges faced in 2025 demanded both resilience and reinvention from UNHAS. Humanitarian needs continued to rise while donor contributions declined sharply. Compared to 2024, UNHAS received 32.3 percent less funding. This represented a major shortfall for a service that is fundamental to humanitarian access in some of the world's most insecure and isolated regions.
19. In response, UNHAS introduced a range of measures to sustain its life-saving operations while also improving efficiency. Efforts focused on making the most efficient use of available resources and maintaining operational continuity. Key measures included the following:
 - Fleet optimization: UNHAS conducted a comprehensive review of its operational fleet, resulting in a reduction in the number of aircraft of approximately 20 percent. The process was undertaken in consultation with the steering committees for each operation in order to minimize the impact on humanitarian interventions.
 - Contract renegotiation: the WFP Aviation Service renegotiated agreements with air operators and service providers, achieving a reduction in overall operational expenses.
 - Operational performance reviews: in coordination with stakeholders from the broader humanitarian community, UNHAS carried out in-depth assessments of its operations, resulting in revisions to routes and destinations in line with operational priorities. Where appropriate, larger aircraft were replaced with smaller and more efficient ones, while every effort was made to balance trade-offs between range and coverage.
 - Cost savings and risk management: additional savings were achieved through the renegotiation of key contracts and war risk insurance premiums, drawing on the aviation security expertise of WFP.
 - Financial management: cost-recovery mechanisms were reviewed and adjusted in order to better align available resources with operational requirements and donor expectations.

- Partnerships and resource mobilization: UNHAS strengthened its engagement with donors and strategic partners in order to help address funding gaps. This included outreach to Member States during the United Nations General Assembly. In addition, private sector donors provided direct support to UNHAS operations for the first time.
20. These measures were implemented without compromising the safety or quality of the air services provided. By the end of 2025, UNHAS had reduced operational costs by more than 20 percent. UNHAS will continue to review contractual and procurement arrangements while benchmarking its practices against those of the United Nations system and the wider aviation industry.

Innovation

21. In 2025, the WFP Aviation Service piloted its first UAS operation for the delivery of humanitarian cargo. Conducted in an area in southeastern Madagascar where traditional access has long been severely constrained, the initiative demonstrated the potential of unmanned aircraft to support last-mile delivery of humanitarian assistance.
22. The inaugural flight, undertaken in close collaboration with the National Office of Nutrition, took place on 12 February 2025 and transported specialized nutritious food for malnourished children. By the end of 2025, more than 1,100 kg of relief items had been moved within Madagascar through UAS operations. The initiative underscores the role of innovation in fulfilling WFP's mandate, as highlighted in the strategic plan for 2026–2029. With access challenges increasing around the world, the adoption of technologies such as UAS is essential.
23. Following the success of the pilot project in Madagascar, WFP partnered with the International Civil Aviation Organization and the United Nations Department of Operational Support to establish the United Nations Unmanned Aviation Coordination Forum, bringing together United Nations entities to strengthen coordination in the use of unmanned aircraft across the United Nations system. This marks a major step towards the creation of common standards and shared capacities for UAS.
24. The WFP Aviation Service will build on this success to further expand the use of unmanned aircraft in humanitarian operations, improving last-mile delivery capabilities for the entire humanitarian community. While UNHAS primarily focuses on transporting humanitarian personnel and light cargo to remote locations, the use of unmanned aircraft enhances overall humanitarian access by extending the delivery of assistance to areas that cannot be reached with manned aircraft.

Funding overview

25. The year 2025 was challenging for UNHAS, reflecting the broader pressures faced by the humanitarian community. Donor contributions declined while access constraints and security risks continued to intensify. Despite these difficulties, UNHAS sustained operations in 22 countries, ensuring the delivery of life-saving assistance in contexts where traditional access routes were unavailable.
26. In 2025, total UNHAS funding requirements amounted to USD 279.8 million – a decrease of 27 percent compared to 2024. Meanwhile, humanitarian operations were highly prioritized in the face of a significant funding reduction. UNHAS received USD 168.5 million – 32.3 percent less than the amount received in 2024 – from 19 donors. For the first time, contributions were received from a private sector donor, the Minderoo Foundation, as a result of broader advocacy efforts to address funding gaps and sustain the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Carryover balances from 2024 totalled USD 155 million. Cost recovery generated USD 68.6 million, or 27.9 percent of total expenditure.

27. Budget requirements for 2026 currently stand at USD 278.3 million, with UNHAS facing a shortfall of USD 95.2 million as of the end of February.
28. Future advocacy will focus on promoting investment in aviation infrastructure to support the use of more cost-efficient air assets, such as fixed-wing aircraft. UNHAS will also continue to explore innovative ways to reduce costs further and improve operational efficiency.

United Nations Humanitarian Air Service centralized funding mechanism

29. The UNHAS centralized funding mechanism, established in 2023 and managed by the WFP Aviation Service, is a pooled funding mechanism designed to support UNHAS operations with greater flexibility, faster response times, predictability and improved operational efficiency across humanitarian crises.
30. Through the pooling of multilateral contributions into a single mechanism, donors can support UNHAS where needs are greatest, without tying funds to specific operations. This approach enables WFP to allocate resources depending on the most urgent needs, preventing the fragmentation of assistance and strengthening responsiveness and agility. Unlike traditional funding sources, the centralized funding mechanism was designed for speed and flexibility, meeting the growing need for rapid and efficient humanitarian action.
31. The mechanism has played an important role in maintaining essential funding levels and preventing pipeline breaks that could otherwise have grounded operations, as seen in Haiti in 2025. While the mechanism strengthens WFP's ability to respond rapidly, it is designed to complement rather than replace resource mobilization efforts by country offices.
32. Since its launch, the centralized funding mechanism has supported 18 of 21 operations, providing nearly USD 77.5 million as of the end of 2025. The governments of Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden contributed to the mechanism in 2025. Continued support will remain critical in 2026 as insecurity, operational complexity and the scale of humanitarian needs requiring UNHAS support continue to increase. The WFP Aviation Service will continue its outreach efforts with partners to mobilize support for the mechanism and for UNHAS operations globally.

Acronyms

UAS	unmanned aircraft systems
UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service