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Update on the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service

Executive summary

The United Nations Humanitarian Air Service managed by WFP provides passenger and light cargo air transport services to enable the entire humanitarian and development community to provide timely and effective humanitarian response in emergencies and protracted crises. The service also facilitates the medical and security evacuation of aid workers, including from deep field locations. Without it, millions of people across the world would be more vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity, conflict, climate-related shocks and health emergencies.

By facilitating the effective implementation and monitoring of emergency responses and recovery projects, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service indirectly serves the beneficiaries of these interventions, thereby ultimately supporting national capacity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. It coordinates with local authorities and partners, supports relevant capacity building activities and plays an essential role in facilitating airport and airfield rehabilitation work that facilitates connectivity and improves access to isolated communities.

There is an increasing focus on the environmental sustainability of the service's operations. In 2021, the WFP Aviation Service established an environmental programme to define aviation-specific principles, objectives and outcomes and to improve the efficiency of processes in order to reduce the environmental impact of WFP air transport services.

In 2021, UNHAS continued to provide crucial support for the coronavirus disease 2019 response by transporting health workers and coronavirus disease 2019 test samples and medical cargo, including vaccines, in the majority of its operations.

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According to ACAPS,¹ humanitarian access deteriorated in 2021 compared to 2020. Reduced access and greater vulnerability led to the opening of new United Nations Humanitarian Air Service operations in Equatorial Guinea, Guinea and Madagascar. In total, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service managed 23 operations; all were continuously reviewed to assess access requirements against existing fleets and the capabilities of cleared commercial airlines. Based on this analysis, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service was able to discontinue its operation in Equatorial Guinea and reduce the fleets used for other operations.

Introduction

1. Established at the request of the United Nations High-Level Committee on Management in 2003, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) managed by WFP provides passenger and light cargo air transport services to enable timely and effective humanitarian response in emergencies and protracted crises. UNHAS also facilitates the medical and security evacuation of aid workers, including from deep field locations.
2. UNHAS enables the humanitarian community to reach populations affected by natural hazards, conflicts, epidemics and food insecurity whenever access constraints (such as poor road networks, long distances and insecurity) hamper emergency and recovery interventions. It provides critically needed air transport services to the entire humanitarian and development community, including United Nations entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and diplomatic representatives involved in aid delivery to crisis-affected populations, enabling them to reach programme implementation sites. Without UNHAS, millions of people across the world would be more vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity, conflict, climate-related shocks and health emergencies.
3. By facilitating the effective implementation and monitoring of emergency responses and recovery projects, UNHAS indirectly serves the beneficiaries of these interventions, thereby ultimately supporting national capacity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. UNHAS also contributes to these results by coordinating with local authorities and partners and providing capacity building that supports adherence to aviation safety standards in all areas of operation.
4. In collaboration with partners, UNHAS also plays an essential role in facilitating airport and airfield rehabilitation work that facilitates connectivity, improves access and enables cost-efficient operations by reducing reliance on helicopters in place of airplanes, thereby ultimately improving the well-being of isolated communities.

Overview of UNHAS operations and key activities in 2021

5. In 2021, UNHAS operated in 23 countries: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea,² Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, the Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

¹ ACAPS. 2021. [Humanitarian Access Overview](#).

² In Equatorial Guinea, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service was only operational between April and September 2021.

UNHAS in numbers	2020	2021
Passengers	248 026	325 112
Cargo (<i>mt</i>)	3 975	5 862
Evacuations (medical, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), and security evacuations)	1 373	3 015
User organizations	800	800
Destinations	400	496

6. With the easing and removal of COVID-19 related restrictions over the course of the year, UNHAS performance gradually returned to pre-COVID levels, with key performance indicators (KPIs) recording higher values for 2021 compared to 2020. On average, more than 27,000 passengers and 488 mt of light humanitarian cargo were transported monthly through the 23 operations, using a fleet of more than 100 aircraft, of which 75 percent were fixed-wing and 25 percent rotary aircraft. Passengers from 800 organizations were transported; 54 percent were from NGOs, 39 percent from United Nations entities, 5 percent from other partners and media, and 3 percent from the diplomatic community.
7. The number of people needing humanitarian assistance and protection continued to increase in 2021, resulting in higher demand for UNHAS services in support of the entire humanitarian and development community. Following the launch of three new UNHAS operations in 2020,³ growing needs in 2021 resulted in the opening of three additional operations in Equatorial Guinea, in response to a sudden-onset emergency, in Guinea, in response to a humanitarian and health emergency, and in Madagascar, in response to a food and nutrition emergency driven by drought.
8. UNHAS also rapidly responded to escalating needs in countries with existing operations, scaling up its activities in Ethiopia in response to requests from the humanitarian community for access to the Tigray region and in Haiti in the aftermath of the 14 August earthquake to enable the transport of medical and humanitarian supplies and access to all programme sites for frontline workers supporting relief efforts. In Yemen, UNHAS reinforced its fleet and added regular connections to Marib following an escalation of conflict in the area.
9. UNHAS played a vital role in the response to the Afghanistan crisis following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, promptly relocating its aircraft to Islamabad, Pakistan and reinforcing its fleet to meet growing demands from the humanitarian community in Afghanistan, adding a helicopter and a fixed-wing aircraft during the most acute phase of the emergency. In the autumn, aviation security risk assessments were completed for all Afghan locations, which allowed UNHAS to gradually reopen the 20 pre-crisis domestic destinations and add two international airbridges one to Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in November and to Doha in December.
10. Given the operational adjustments required by the Afghanistan emergency, including the reconfiguration and repositioning of the fleet, a significant budget increase was needed to allow UNHAS Afghanistan services to continue. A large part of the augmented costs related to higher aircraft insurance premiums caused by the security situation. In fact, an analysis of the war risk insurance premiums paid before and after 16 August 2021 shows a significant increase: USD 302,677 was paid until 27 August, whereas USD 5,065,401 was paid following the resumption of UNHAS services to Afghanistan (on 28 August) until the end of the year. The accrued expense – USD 5 million – was for six aircraft (five fixed-wing and one rotary)

³ In the Syrian Arab Republic, Burkina Faso and Mozambique.

operated by three WFP-chartered air carriers. This is very high considering that premiums for all other UNHAS operations in 2021 stood at USD 2.5 million for 64 aircraft operating in 14 countries, including Yemen and the Syrian Arab Republic.

11. Despite the extreme challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHAS has continued to serve the humanitarian and development communities by transporting medical samples from remote locations, transporting medical equipment and carrying out 50 COVID-19 in-country medical evacuations in 2021. During the year, 14 UNHAS operations also provided significant support for national efforts to transport and distribute COVID-19 vaccine.
12. In February 2020, WFP signed an indirect management delegation agreement with the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) for a project entitled "Provision of Air Services in Support of DG ECHO-funded and other humanitarian aid projects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali and Kenya", previously known as ECHO Flight. The project is under review in 2022 under the updated title of "Vol humanitaire de l'UE – EU Humanitarian Aid Flight" (EU-HAF). The project is managed in a coordinated manner that ensures continued coordination of UNHAS and EU-HAF services and leverages the experience and existing partnerships of the two services to optimize operational outputs and offer effective and efficient air services for humanitarian communities across the three countries. In 2021, a total of 12,075 passengers and 208.5 mt of cargo were transported on WFP-managed EU-HAF flights in the three countries.

UNHAS and the United Nations Humanitarian Booking Hub

13. Following the successful use of the United Nations booking hub web platform for the WFP Global Air Passenger Service, in 2021 the collaboration was expanded to launch UNHAS operation web pages manageable in self-service mode at the country level. The pages provide updates on the services and activities implemented by UNHAS for the benefit of all who use UNHAS services.
14. Since 2021 WFP Aviation has been working on using the United Nations booking hub to offer a more user-friendly booking process. Currently, users can book their flights on the hub for seven UNHAS operations; the roll-out of the new booking system for the remaining 15 operations is in progress.
15. Other initiatives being developed with the booking hub web platform are a passenger database and a registration portal for organizations that require UNHAS services.

WFP Aviation environmental and sustainability programme

16. WFP launched its aviation environmental and sustainability programme in May 2021 with the aim of operationalizing WFP's commitment to continuously improving its environmental impact and reducing the carbon footprint of its activities. The programme drives the Aviation Service to achieve further progress on climate and environmental issues through a series of objectives: to measure, report and reduce carbon emissions; to promote alternative fuels; to increase operational efficiency; to optimize flight procedures (CO₂ and noise reduction); and to develop a carbon offset strategy in synergy with the WFP corporate carbon offset initiative.
17. In 2021, key achievements of the programme included:
 - the development of strategic environmental KPIs to automatically measure CO₂ emissions for WFP-chartered aircraft;
 - the integration of environmental clauses into all fuel and aircraft charter agreements;
 - the inclusion of environmental parameters in the procurement process;

- the review of donor proposals and periodic reports with the aim of embedding in them an environmental component;
 - including the use of an environmental management system as a minimum contracting requirement for all chartered air carriers starting from 1 January 2023; and
 - the launch of environmental awareness-raising campaigns.
18. In addition, a case study was conducted to assess opportunities to minimize aircraft fuel usage and emissions as defined by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) (Doc 10013). The analysis of emissions and relevant KPIs resulting from the implementation of ICAO technical measures applied by selected air operators on five WFP-chartered aircraft for three months showed a decrease in fuel consumption of 2 percent compared to previous months. If these fuel saving margins were maintained for all aircraft, it would yield an annual net saving of USD 1 million in fuel purchased. The study is being expanded to cover 50 percent of the long-term chartered fleet, with the results expected in autumn 2022.
19. Organized and chaired by WFP, the first humanitarian aviation environmental summit was held in March 2022 in Cairo and was attended by more than 60 high-level delegates from civil aviation authorities, international organizations, aircraft manufacturers, air operators and fuel providers. Technical and panel discussions explored opportunities and innovative ways to improve the environmental sustainability of humanitarian aviation, along with related challenges.

UNHAS funding overview

20. The budget for UNHAS operations in 2021 was USD 343.2 million. UNHAS is a demand-driven common service for the entire humanitarian and development community that depends on voluntary donor contributions from countries and multilateral funds to sustain its operations.
21. The need to promptly reconfigure, reduce or scale up operations based on evolving humanitarian needs on the ground requires continuous review and assessment of the requirements for humanitarian access and the ability of the existing UNHAS aircraft fleet to meet those requirements, as well as the availability and capacity of commercial airlines cleared by the Department of Safety and Security.
22. As humanitarian access deteriorated in 2021, a consequent increase in demand for UNHAS operations and capacities created funding challenges for most operations. A detailed overview of the 2021 financial situation of all UNHAS operations and the 2022 funding requirements will be presented to the Executive Board during its 2022 annual session.
23. Any gaps in resourcing for UNHAS will lead to a reduction in services provided or a complete suspension of air operations, leaving the humanitarian community with limited, unsafe or no options to reach remote locations where humanitarian activities are needed. Unless action is taken to improve the sustainability of funding for UNHAS, financial unpredictability will continue to affect the service and threaten humanitarian access to the most vulnerable people and communities.
24. To tackle this issue WFP is setting up a centralized mechanism for direct multilateral contributions to UNHAS operations, from which funds can be reallocated to country strategic plans using a transparent process approved by the Deputy Executive Director. Through this approach, the Aviation Service would propose an allocation of funds to a particular country strategic plan following an in-depth financial and operational review of all UNHAS operations to prioritize funding allocation. The allocation would be presented for approval to the Director of the Supply Chain Operations Division; upon approval of the proposed allocation the funds would be reallocated. The mechanism, developed in consultation and coordination with the Corporate Finance, Corporate Planning and

Performance, Public Partnerships and Resourcing, and Supply Chain Operations divisions, is in the final stages of testing.

WFP Aviation operational key performance indicators

25. In 2021, all operational indicators registered an improvement compared to 2020:
- *Cost efficiency:* the operational cost per passenger kilometre⁴ decreased from USD 1.86 in 2020 to USD 1.72 in 2021, demonstrating improved cost efficiency. The higher operational cost per passenger kilometre recorded in 2020 resulted from COVID-19 travel restrictions in force during the peak of the pandemic.
 - *Environmental efficiency:* in 2021, total CO₂ emissions for all WFP-chartered aircraft were 160,333 mt, a decrease from the 2020 figure of 184,559 mt, mainly due to the reduced activity of the Global Air Passenger Service.⁵ As recently as 2018, total CO₂ emissions stood at 252,112 mt, showing the significant progress made by WFP in reducing the carbon footprint of its aviation activities.
 - *User satisfaction:* passenger satisfaction survey (PSS) and provision of access satisfaction survey (PASS) rates are aggregated at the global level. The overall user satisfaction for UNHAS services in 2021 stood at 94 percent, based on PSS and PASS conducted at the country level. This shows a significant increase compared to the 2020 user satisfaction of 83 percent, which mainly resulted from the disruption of UNHAS services due to COVID-19.

UNHAS operation	User satisfaction rate	
	PASS – Provision of access satisfaction survey	PSS – Passenger satisfaction survey
Afghanistan	94%	99%
Burkina Faso	91%	90%
Cameroon	88%	96%
Central African Republic	89%	90%
Chad	92%	97%
Democratic Republic of the Congo	93%	97%
Ethiopia	96%	97%
Guinea	100%	92%
Haiti	94%	92%
Kenya	88%	96%
Libya	96%	92%
Madagascar	100%	94%
Mali	100%	77%
Mauritania	100%	97%

⁴ The operational cost per passenger kilometre is calculated for each flown passenger. For each aircraft contract costs are calculated per block hour. The actual fuel consumption of the aircraft and the fuel price at the location where the aircraft is based are used to calculate the fuel costs per block hour.

⁵ Note that environmental efficiency does not take into account ad hoc charter contracts for WFP headquarters.

UNHAS operation	User satisfaction rate	
	PASS – Provision of access satisfaction survey	PSS – Passenger satisfaction survey
Mozambique	100%	93%
Niger (the)	91%	91%
Nigeria	90%	97%
South Sudan	97%	96%
Somalia	100%	94%
Sudan	100%	100%
Syrian Arab Republic	100%	99%
Yemen	92%	90%
Overall/average	95%	94%
Overall user satisfaction with UNHAS services	94%	

Progress on external audit recommendations

26. In line with corporate requirements, an external audit of WFP Aviation was carried out from 19 July 2019 to 31 January 2020. The audit focused on WFP Aviation headquarters in Rome and aviation field operations in Mali, Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan. Audit activities included physical visits by the External Auditor to those locations at various times during the audit process.
27. The External Auditor made 16 recommendations, all of which WFP fully or partially accepted. WFP has taken concrete steps on all 16 recommendations. To date, 12 recommendations have been formally closed and the implementation of the remaining four recommendations is under way.
28. The external audit highlighted the importance of aviation activities for the United Nations and the wider humanitarian community. It concluded that an aviation operations policy document should be developed to define the scope of WFP's mandate, applicable flight coordination mechanisms, identification criteria for user registration with UNHAS and for benefitting from aviation services, the relationship between the Aviation Service and the Aviation Safety Unit and applicable funding rules.
29. The draft aviation policy sets out the vision, objectives, principles and partnerships that frame WFP Aviation/UNHAS operations and describes the aviation governance framework. The policy is grounded in the humanitarian principles and WFP's commitment to provide common services to all humanitarian actors. The policy states the objectives of WFP aviation services, namely to provide common, specialized and on-demand aviation services to the humanitarian community and critical partners such as other United Nations entities, NGOs and the diplomatic community; to act as a facilitator between aviation and humanitarian stakeholders in aviation emergency preparedness and response; and to strengthen aviation systems and capacities at the regional and national levels. The policy also describes the role of essential enablers – partners, sustainable funding and knowledge and skills – in achieving the policy objectives and outlines next steps in implementation and monitoring. The draft policy is currently in its final phases of internal clearance, following which it will be shared with the Executive Board.

Acronyms

COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
EU-HAF	European Union Humanitarian Aid Flight
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
KPI	key performance indicator
NGO	non-governmental organization
PASS	provision of access satisfaction survey
PSS	passenger satisfaction survey
UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service