

Real-time evaluation of UNHCR's response to the Afghanistan emergency

Bulletin No. 2

Summary

This bulletin focuses primarily on UNHCR's response to the Afghan refugee influx into Pakistan since the events of 11 September. It highlights a number of policy, protection and operational issues where immediate action can be taken to enhance UNHCR's performance and thereby to improve the welfare of Afghan refugees. The bulletin also identifies some general lessons learned in relation to UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response capacity, focusing on issues such as procurement and human resource management.

The evaluation mission

A UNHCR evaluation team travelled on mission to Pakistan from 9 to 25 November 2001, visiting Islamabad, Quetta, Peshawar, the Torkham border crossing as well as new refugee camp sites in the Khyber and Bajur Tribal Agencies. The team collected and reviewed relevant documents, interviewed UNHCR staff and other stakeholders, and witnessed the first relocation of refugees from the Jalozai camp to Kotkai.

A summary of the team's initial findings and recommendations were presented to the High Commissioner and other members of senior management as soon as the team returned to Geneva. The findings and recommendations were subsequently presented to permanent missions in Geneva, to UNHCR's Division of Resource Management, to the organization's Afghanistan Emergency Task Force and to NGOs.

One member of the evaluation mission also participated in a two-day planning meeting which brought together UNHCR Representatives from Central and South-West Asia. Such activities are intended to ensure that the findings of the evaluation mission are used in an effective and timely manner.

The real-time evaluation process will continue, and is likely to include a mission to Afghanistan, and possibly to other countries in the region, in early 2002. The next phase of the process will hopefully include a discussion of inter-agency issues, which are not examined in this bulletin.

Overall assessment

There is a broad consensus within and outside UNHCR that the organization has performed effectively in the Afghanistan crisis. UNHCR has clearly been galvanized by the need to avert the perceived shortcomings of the organization's performance in the 1999 Kosovo emergency. Its capacity has also been considerably strengthened by the emergency preparedness and response plan of action which the organization has implemented during the past two years.

It is important to note that the influx into Pakistan (currently estimated at between 150,000 and 200,000) has not been as sudden or as large as was originally anticipated. At the beginning of the crisis, it should be recalled, contingency plans for an exodus of up to 1.5 million Afghans were prepared by the United Nations.

The refugees themselves have facilitated UNHCR's task, the majority of them finding accommodation with their compatriots in old refugee villages and in urban centres. Pakistan, it must be remembered, continues to host the world's largest refugee population: up to 3.2 million Afghans, some of whom have been in the country since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan 22 years ago.

Asked to assess UNHCR's role in the crisis to date, staff members and other stakeholders interviewed by the evaluation mission drew particular attention to the speed of the organization's response to events after 11 September, the high profile and visibility attained by UNHCR, as well as the quality and quantity of information it has provided to partners. UNHCR's ability to mobilize and deploy large numbers of appropriately skilled personnel is noted as a particular strength of the operation.

As a result of its effective response to the crisis, coupled with its mandate and longstanding involvement in the country, UNHCR is clearly recognized as the leading international actor in relation to the refugee situation in Pakistan. There is also a broad acknowledgement within the international community that UNHCR has a substantive role to play within Afghanistan. Currently, however, the exact nature and extent of that involvement remains to be determined.

The evaluation mission encountered relatively few direct criticisms of UNHCR's performance.

Some actors in Pakistan, not least the local media, have expressed frustration with UNHCR as a result of the organization's insistence that fleeing Afghans be admitted to the country. According to this critique, UNHCR's call for open

borders did not take due account of Pakistan's legitimate security concerns, its inability to absorb any additional refugee flows, and the failure of the international community to assume its proper share of responsibility for the Afghan refugee population during the past decade.

More recently, UNHCR has been criticized for its hesitation in becoming operationally involved in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) on the Afghan side of the frontier, which, according to some actors, might avert the need for people to enter Pakistan.

In the opinion of the evaluation mission, neither of these criticisms are warranted. Given UNHCR's statutory responsibility to safeguard the principle of asylum and to provide protection to refugees, it has a duty to call upon states to keep their borders open to people whose life and liberty are at risk.

Similarly, because of its continuing concerns about the security and civilian character of the IDP camps established inside Afghanistan, UNHCR's hesitation in relation to its involvement with these camps is entirely legitimate. It should also be noted that UNHCR's position on this issue has not prevented the organization from offering to provide cross-border assistance to internally displaced and other Afghans living outside the camps in question.

Another criticism of UNHCR has been made by a small number of international NGOs, who oppose the relocation of new and recent arrivals to camps in the border areas, believing that these locations are insecure, and that the establishment of expensive new camps so close to the frontier (less than 10 kilometres) could be a prelude to the deportation of the refugees.

As later sections of this bulletin will suggest, the concerns expressed with regard to the security of the new camps should be taken very seriously. In that respect, it should be noted that some UNHCR staff members argue that the organization agreed too readily to the establishment of camps in the border area, and that it should have offered to support the new arrivals by strengthening the infrastructure and providing assistance in existing refugee villages and urban centres.

Similarly, some UNHCR personnel believe that the organization was ill-advised to keep large quantities of non-food items stockpiled in Pakistan when they could have been distributed in locations populated by the so-called 'invisibles' - Afghans who have crossed the border (many of them illegally) to seek safety but who are hidden amongst the much larger population of 'old caseload' refugees. Local populations who have been affected by the refugees' presence might also have benefited from such a strategy.

Whether such strategies would have been acceptable locally, however, remains a matter of some dispute. For since the beginning of the current crisis, the authorities have been eager to avert any initiatives that would attract new arrivals from Afghanistan to areas which already have a large-scale refugee presence. In the words of one government minister: "humanitarian assistance provided through neighbouring countries must not serve as a pull factor."

The Pakistan programme

During the past two and a half months, UNHCR and its partners have responded effectively to the movement of Afghan refugees into Pakistan. At the time of the evaluation mission, the key elements of UNHCR's response to the refugee influx in Pakistan were proceeding efficiently and according to plan. On one hand, new arrivals in Baluchistan were being transferred from the Killi Faizo transit centre at the Chaman frontier crossing to new sites such as Roghani in the border area.

At the same time, new and recent arrivals living at the Jalozei refugee camp near Peshawar in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) were being relocated to camps near the border such as Kotkai in the tribal agency of Bajur. Steps were also being taken to organize the relocation of refugees from Peshawar to the new camps. The removal of the Jalozei camp, where new and recent arrivals from Afghanistan live in extremely difficult conditions, will represent a major step forward if it can be accomplished.

Since the evaluation mission returned to Geneva, the relocation operation has encountered a serious incident. On 4 December 2001, two UNHCR vehicles were shot at by gunmen when leaving the Bajur Agency. One vehicle was hit two or three times, although no-one was injured. As a result of this incident the relocation operation has been temporarily halted, pending an investigation into the incident and a review of security measures.

Repatriation planning

It is difficult to predict the future of a country such as Afghanistan, and the situation in the south of the country continues to give particular cause for concern. Nevertheless, the risk of a large-scale exodus from Afghanistan seems to be receding, while the prospects of large-scale repatriation appear to be growing. Indeed, limited returns are already taking place.

The consensus within Pakistan is that mass returnee movements are unlikely to begin until the spring of next year, partly because of the harshness of the

Afghan winter, and partly because the vast majority of refugees will adopt a 'wait and see' attitude during the next few months.

This provides UNHCR with an important window of opportunity to undertake some detailed repatriation and reintegration planning, a process that should evidently be carried out in close cooperation with the many other actors who will be involved in the task of reconstructing Afghanistan, not least the refugees themselves. Indeed, a primary objective for UNHCR must now be to develop a more detailed profile of the Afghan population in Pakistan, identifying, for example, the areas to which they intend to return, the routes they will take, as well as the repatriation and reintegration strategies which they are devising.

At the same time, and as suggested elsewhere in this bulletin, UNHCR must recognize that repatriation is likely to prove a long-term process, especially if the peace proves elusive. Recent events have highlighted the difficulties experienced by 'old caseload' refugees in Pakistan, and their needs must not be neglected.

Refugee protection

Pakistan's borders - like those of every other state in the region - are officially closed to new arrivals from Afghanistan. Recognizing the government's determination to avert a large-scale influx, UNHCR has attempted to open up a degree of humanitarian space by seeking informal understandings with the authorities on the issue of asylum and other protection concerns.

This strategy, described locally as "maximization under constraints", has been successful in a number of respects: vulnerable cases and other refugees continue to be admitted to Pakistan through recognized border crossings; a solution appears to be in sight for the Afghans accommodated at Jalozai; new opportunities have been created to support Afghans living in the old refugee villages and urban centres; and the authorities have acknowledged the presence and humanitarian needs of the 'invisibles', even if it does not recognize them as refugees.

Despite these achievements, there remain a number of important protection issues on which appropriate advocacy and action is required from UNHCR and its partners.

Admission to Pakistan. The authorities have stated that they will be "sensitive to the special problems of vulnerable groups who would wish to come to Pakistan on account of their specific problems." It is not yet clear, however, which Afghans fall within and outside this definition.

Deportation. Substantial numbers of Afghans have been deported from Pakistan in recent times, primarily from urban areas, and this practice appears to have continued on a small scale since 11 September. Members of the humanitarian community generally believe that the threat of large-scale deportation may grow if a degree of stability returns to Afghanistan.

Voluntariness of relocation. The relocation programme in NWFP is currently taking place on a voluntary basis, with impartial counselling provided to both refugee women and men by UNHCR. The organization must ensure that this continues to be the case.

Refugees who cannot relocate. The members of certain Afghan ethnic groups, especially those associated with the Northern Alliance, will be at risk if they are relocated to Pashtun tribal areas that are sympathetic to the Taliban. UNHCR must therefore ensure that these refugees are accommodated and supported in other locations.

Access and presence in new camps. In order to monitor the protection and welfare of refugees who have been relocated in new camps, UNHCR should have unimpeded access to those sites and the right to maintain a continuous international presence there.

Camp security. UNHCR should work in close consultation with the Pakistani authorities in order to ensure that the safety and civilian character of the new refugee camps is effectively maintained. Particular efforts should be made to meet the security needs of refugee women, especially those who lack male protection – an important consideration in Afghan society.

Freedom of movement. The authorities initially insisted that the new camps in NWFP would have to be fully fenced before any refugees were accommodated there. While this requirement has been dropped, there is a lack of clarity with regard to the extent that refugees will enjoy freedom of movement and the mechanisms that will be used to control the passage of Afghans in and out of the new camps. In Baluchistan, it should be noted, UNHCR staff generally agree that fencing the new camps will actually reinforce the security of refugees.

Legal status of Afghans. New and recent arrivals from Afghanistan continue to have the status of illegal immigrants. While UNHCR has suggested that this issue might be addressed by granting such people some form of temporary protection, no progress has yet been made on this issue.

Refugee women and children

UNHCR's activities in relation to displaced Afghans must evidently give due consideration to the special needs of specific refugee groups, including women, children and adolescents.

Unfortunately, the evaluation mission was unable to undertake a detailed review of the situation of such groups during its time in Pakistan. According to the child specialists and community services officers interviewed, however, there appear to be relatively few separated children or female-headed households amongst the new arrivals from Afghanistan, a reflection, perhaps, of that country's very strong family and community structures.

A number of recommendations can be made with respect to the refugee groups identified above.

First, it is imperative that the new camps be planned, constructed and administered with the needs of women, children and adolescents in mind. Those community services officers and the gender specialist who have been deployed in the operation should be fully involved in the process of site planning, and steps should be taken to ensure that the personal, social, educational and recreational needs of specific refugee groups are adequately addressed by UNHCR and its implementing partners.

Second, given the nature of their experience in exile and the circumstances they will encounter in Afghanistan, the needs and abilities of refugee women and children should be given special attention in the process of repatriation and reintegration planning.

At the same time, in its efforts to reinforce the services provided to 'old caseload' Afghans in refugee villages and urban centres, special efforts should be made to equip women and children for the day when they can return to their own country. In this respect, teacher training and other forms of vocational training for women, as well as primary education for girls, constitutes a particularly valuable investment.

Third, UNHCR should proceed with its current review of resettlement activities in Pakistan, especially those relating to women. The organization is currently inundated with requests for resettlement from Afghan refugees in Pakistan, to the extent that a substantial number of additional staff members have been recruited simply to open and acknowledge all of the applications received. A large proportion of these applicants come into a category of

people known as 'women-at-risk' - primarily those who have been deprived of male protection and support.

According to some UNHCR personnel, the women-at-risk resettlement programme does not represent an optimal use of resources, is prone to abuse and does not necessarily work in the best interests of the women concerned. Others point out that it has the support of the resettlement states, most notably the USA, that it is appreciated by Pakistan, which regards it as a welcome form of burden-sharing by the international community, and that numerous steps have been taken to ensure that it is not misused.

Operational structure

Under current arrangements, UNHCR's office for Pakistan and its office for Afghanistan are both located in Islamabad. With the eruption of the current crisis, the head of the office for Afghanistan also assumed the role of Regional Emergency Coordinator, covering relevant activities in Pakistan, Iran, the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan itself.

This operational structure has helped to ensure a common approach to a number of key policy and operational issues, including the management of key resources. But there is also a broad consensus within UNHCR that the structure has not been an optimal one in certain respects.

First, it confused establishing reporting lines, especially in the early days of the operation. Moreover, while the High Commissioner has expressed the need for UNHCR to establish "an integrated regional operation, with Afghanistan at its centre" the established operational structure has not always facilitated this task.

Second, the structure for regional coordination has placed a heavy burden on UNHCR's Afghanistan office, which has simultaneously trying to undertake a wide range of other tasks: keeping abreast of a very fluid political and military situation in Afghanistan; dealing with inter-agency aspects of the Afghanistan crisis; re-establishing UNHCR's presence and programme in Afghanistan; as well as performing many donor and media relations activities.

Finally, the terms of reference given to the Regional Coordinator were somewhat vague, lacked the necessary degree of authority and were complicated by issues of relative seniority.

According to some experienced UNHCR staff members, the early appointment of a roving Special Envoy or Regional Coordinator for the Afghan crisis, at the most senior level possible, could have averted the difficulties described above. It has also been argued that such an approach, which was used in the Persian Gulf, the Balkans and the Great Lakes region of Africa, might also have made UNHCR's response to the crisis more inclusive of Iran and the Central Asian republics.

Other staff members challenge this analysis, arguing that the Special Envoy model has its own shortcomings, that Iran and the Central Asian republics have been adequately incorporated in the planning and implementation of UNHCR's emergency response, and that Islamabad has been the inevitable centre of an operation relating to Afghanistan, given that the UN's coordinating body is based in that city.

Whatever the merits of these different arguments, the need for senior management to revisit the question of operational structure is reinforced by two other important factors: the imminent return of UNHCR's Afghanistan office to Kabul, and the impending establishment of a new United Nations entity (or entities) with regard to Afghanistan. In dealing with this matter, UNHCR should give particular consideration to the appointment of a Repatriation Coordinator in the Afghan capital, linked to Repatriation Officers in the neighbouring states.

Within Pakistan, the evaluation mission reached an initial conclusion that UNHCR's functions and human resources may be too heavily concentrated in the capital city of Islamabad and that some of those functions and human resources might usefully be relocated closer to the point of delivery, in Peshawar and Quetta. The presence of two community services officers in Islamabad - at a time when such personnel are urgently required in the field - is one case in point.

It is recommended that the Assistant High Commissioner, in association with the Representative in Pakistan, review the staffing of the Pakistan programme during his forthcoming mission to the region. While a strong UNHCR presence is evidently required in Islamabad for diplomatic, representational and inter-agency functions, operational functions could perhaps be more usefully deployed in areas of the country where large numbers of refugees are to be found.

Human resources

As indicated earlier, human resource deployment has been a particularly strong point of UNHCR's response to the Afghanistan crisis. The organization has been able to mobilize a large number of high quality

personnel, making effective use of its emergency officers, its emergency staffing roster and its standby arrangements with governments and NGOs.

The deployment of technical coordinators and other specialists has also proven to be of considerable benefit to the programme, although the deployment of community services officers and a gender specialist has generally been somewhat slow. In future operations, community services and gender experts should be incorporated in emergency teams from the beginning of an emergency.

One must also take this opportunity to pay tribute to UNHCR staff (both national and international) in the Pakistan and Afghanistan offices, many of whom have been very working long hours in difficult and often dangerous circumstances. Their presence has clearly had a very positive impact in terms of UNHCR's operational effectiveness, coordinating capacity and visibility.

At the same time, a number of issues in the human resources sector require further reflection and appropriate action.

While UNHCR has been successful in deploying a substantial number of staff for the emergency, in future, more thought should be given to the functions that they will undertake (standard terms of reference would be useful), as well as the structures in which they work.

The vast majority of staff members deployed for the operation were of relatively junior and middle-level status. The 'senior emergency pool' concept, developed in the wake of the Kosovo crisis, does not seem to have been formally activated in Pakistan, although several of its members are centrally involved in the management of the operation. It also appears likely that Afghanistan will benefit from a number of senior emergency deployments.

In an emergency operation, it is imperative that newly-arrived staff become functional as soon as they arrive in a country. To achieve this objective, basic resources such as desks, computers, maps, GPS equipment and reference documents must be immediately available.

There is an inevitable tendency for tensions to arise in a situation where a small and somewhat routine UNHCR programme is suddenly confronted with a crisis and is inundated with large numbers of emergency personnel. While UNHCR's emergency training programmes already address this issue, there may be additional ways in which it could be resolved. In this respect, it should be noted that the Emergency and Security Service is currently drafting guidelines on the effective integration of emergency response teams.

There is a need to ensure that follow-up staffing plans are in place as quickly as possible. Many emergency staff are due to leave the region in the next few weeks. Others are keen to be home for the Christmas holidays or to leave the Pakistan programme and to join the operation in Afghanistan. If large-scale refugee movements were to take place during this period, UNHCR might find that it lacks the capacity to respond effectively.

In future emergency operations, UNHCR must be careful to ensure an appropriate balance between its own staff members and those who are seconded from other agencies. Seconded personnel now receive extensive training prior to their deployment with UNHCR. Even so, they should not normally be assigned to positions of authority.

As mentioned earlier, UNHCR staff in the Pakistan and Afghanistan offices are working extremely long hours in difficult and dangerous circumstances. It is for that reason that they should be required to take leave on a regular basis. In the current operational environment, this is unlikely to happen unless a clear instruction is sent out by senior management and compliance with that instruction is monitored at local level.

Finally, the evaluation mission observed that many of the UNHCR staff members deployed in Pakistan had been withdrawn from hard-pressed operations in other parts of the world, most notably in Africa. While the importance of an effective response to the Afghan crisis cannot be questioned, such an outcome should not be achieved at the expense of other refugees, many of whom are just as needy as those who have fled to Pakistan.

Procurement

UNHCR is currently close to reaching its initial target with respect to the procurement and delivery of non-food items for up to 400,000 refugees in Pakistan. But it has taken two and half months to reach that point, a longer time than the organization had anticipated.

This situation appears to be the result of several different factors. First, at an early stage of the operation, donor state pledges were not immediately converted into cash contributions, and funding for procurement was consequently in short supply for a brief period of time.

Second, once it became fairly clear that a massive refugee exodus was not going to take place, UNHCR decided to use sea rather than air transport for its non-food items, a far more efficient and economic way of delivering the goods.

Third, there is a general recognition in UNHCR that some of the organization's systems and procedures in the procurement area may be inadequate to meet the needs of a fast-paced emergency operation. On the recommendation of the real-time evaluation team, senior management have agreed that a review should be initiated, so as to reinforce UNHCR's capacity to assess and communicate needs, to request and release funds, to procure, stockpile and deliver non-food items for emergency operations.

Security

The evaluation mission found that the question of staff security is being taken very seriously by the UNHCR offices in Pakistan - an evident requirement in such a volatile and potentially hostile operational environment. The organization's personnel express some frustration, however, over the centralized control exerted by UNSECCORD in relation to this issue.

According to many, the security phase system administered from New York is not sufficiently flexible and prevents UNHCR staff from undertaking operational activities that could be performed without undue risk.

While the frustration expressed by UNHCR staff is understandable, some caution is required in relation to the security issue. It is certainly true that large number of foreign journalists have made their way into Afghanistan in the past two weeks. But in view of the fact that at least eight of those journalists have been killed, it is not necessarily advisable for UNHCR to maintain a large presence in the country for the time being.

With regard to the issue of refugee security and the civilian character of camps - two important issues in the context of Pakistan's new refugee camps - the evaluation mission identified something of a disconnect between Headquarters policy and field practice. While the last two or three years have witnessed an intensive discussion in Geneva about the 'ladder of options', 'security packages' and the deployment of 'humanitarian security officers', none of these initiatives appeared to be under active consideration in Pakistan.

One reason for this lacuna might be the apparent confusion over responsibility for refugee security in the field, a function that seems to fall in a gap between UNHCR's field safety officers, who focus on staff security, and its protection officers, who tend to focus on the legal rather than the physical aspects of refugee security.

Visibility

One of the most notable characteristics of UNHCR response to the Afghanistan crisis has been the unusually high degree of international visibility achieved by the organization. Responding again to a perceived weakness in the Kosovo emergency, UNHCR has pursued a very active media relations strategy, spearheaded by the strong team of public information specialists deployed in Pakistan from the very beginning of the current crisis. As a result of this strategy, operational staff have had fewer demands made upon them by the media and have been able to focus on their regular functions.

According to UNHCR's public information specialists, high visibility is a prerequisite for organizational survival in the competitive humanitarian marketplace that has evolved over the past decade. And visibility does not just happen: information has to be carefully prepared and packaged; the media has to be cultivated; photo opportunities have to be created; and the organization's logo has to be prominently displayed. In each of these respects, UNHCR's performance scores very high marks.

At the same time, the evaluation mission observed a growing unease about visibility and media relations amongst operational staff. Indeed, about half of those interviewed expressed some reservations about the high profile attained by UNHCR in the Afghan crisis, many of them arguing that the organization should be judged by the quality of its programmes and not by the frequency with which it appears on CNN.

In order to avert any polarization on this issue amongst UNHCR staff, it is recommended that the organization engage in an open discussion on the question of visibility, focusing on its purposes (why do we seek it?), its forms (how do we seek it?) and upon its ethics (which visibility activities are acceptable and unacceptable?). The Director of Communication and Information has agreed to facilitate such a discussion early in 2002.

Assistance and standards

A major undertaking for UNHCR in the weeks and months to come will be to monitor and uphold standards in the new refugee camps of Baluchistan and NWFP. One of the sites visited by the evaluation mission, situated in a rocky, dry and isolated location in the Khyber Agency, did not seem capable of meeting the standards that would provide an acceptable home for a significant number of refugees.

The mission's concern was reinforced by a sense amongst some of the actors involved that the new camps will be temporary, that the refugees will return

to Afghanistan in the very near future, and that standards could consequently be compromised. UNHCR's history is littered with examples of 'temporary' refugee settlements which were still in existence five, ten or fifteen years after their establishment. It is therefore recommended that UNHCR's usual minimum standards be maintained and closely monitored.

Finally, the current crisis in the region provides UNHCR and its donors with an important opportunity to assess the nutritional and other needs of the 'old caseload' refugees in Pakistan, and to reinforce the services that it provides to them and their local hosts. For it is now quite clear that the withdrawal of assistance and services in the mid-1990s had the effect of pushing many refugees into urban areas, a development which also led to growing Pakistani hostility to the Afghan presence.

At the same time, UNHCR could play a valuable role in encouraging other UN agencies and development actors to invest in areas of Pakistan which have been affected by the drought, the country's economic difficulties and the longstanding refugee presence. With international attention shifting quickly to Afghanistan, there is a very real danger that one of the world's largest and oldest refugee-hosting countries will be neglected again.

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