

**Bullet point summary of the Strategic Presentation on
UNHCR's Operations in Central Asia, South West Asia, North Africa and Middle East
(CASWANAME)**

**26th meeting of the Standing Committee
4-6 March 2003**

I. INTRODUCTION

- For more than two decades now, UNHCR's work in the CASWANAME region has been torn between two competing priorities: addressing the operational needs of successive emergencies, while striving to enhance protection conditions and support to governments in building their respective asylum systems.
- The long-standing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the situation in Afghanistan, the atmosphere of uncertainty resulting from the tragic events of 11 September 2001, as well as the continued controversy over Iraq have led to the emergence of national security as a predominant concern throughout the region, with negative effects on refugee-related policies. In this context, and with the risk of adverse humanitarian consequences in the event of further military confrontations in the region, UNHCR has endeavoured to maintain a high level of emergency preparedness, despite political and financial constraints.
- CASWANAME is a region of many protracted refugee situations: Somali refugees in Yemen, Iraqi refugees in Rafha, Saudi Arabia, Sudanese refugees in Egypt, Saharan refugees in Algeria, Iranian refugees in Iraq, Iraqi refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and over two million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran - all still in need of durable solutions.
- It is also, however, a region where there is hope. Since the 23rd meeting of the Standing Committee in March 2002, over 1.7 million Afghan refugees have returned home in conditions of safety and dignity, largely thanks to the generous assistance of the international community through its support of the UN system and the nascent national structures for the return and reintegration of Afghan refugees.

**II. PROGRESS ON GLOBAL OBJECTIVES AND
AGENDA FOR PROTECTION:**

Support governments in the provision of protection and assistance (*Strategic Goal 1*)

- **In Afghanistan**, no major problems occurred with respect to the physical safety of returning refugees, despite the magnitude of the repatriation. The situation in Afghanistan nevertheless remains fragile, and the central Government has difficulty in establishing an effective outreach in provinces where local leaders still play a significant role. Security in some areas is still precarious and volatile, and limits access and implementation of reconstruction programmes. The very slow pace of stabilization and establishment of Government outreach poses a major challenge to UNHCR and others in helping the Government to build an effective protection capacity and human rights regime in the country, inter alia through the loan of staff to key line ministries. Returnee monitoring by UNHCR's field staff continues, and joint initiatives are underway aimed at building the capacity of local and central authorities to deal with protection issues. They include measures to reinforce Government Ministries as well as civic and professional society, and to establish the Return Commission through local leaders in the North.

- UNHCR will continue to act as secretariat to the Consultative Group on Displacement within the Government. Internally displaced populations (whether displaced by drought or by conflict) will be supported under a strategy that aims at providing assistance and protection to those seeking to return to their places of origin, as well as to those who are unable to return. As part of the work of the Consultative Group, specific attention will be paid to durable solutions through relevant government ministries for the hundreds of thousands of persons displaced by drought in the southern part of the country.
- **In Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran**, UNHCR will continue to play an active role vis-à-vis development agencies to increase the establishment of programmes in refugee-affected areas in both of these countries, alleviating the impact of long-term refugee presence. The governments will continue to receive support in providing assistance and protection to those refugees who have not yet returned to Afghanistan.
- **In Central Asia**, UNHCR 's efforts continue to focus on establishing effective national structures to deal with asylum-seekers, refugees and stateless persons. UNHCR provides mainly technical assistance and legal advice to governments in the region, of which four have acceded, to the 1951 Convention. UNHCR is currently reviewing its operations in Central Asia and preparing a multi-year strategy, that takes stock of the experience of ten years of presence in the region, and re-visits its participation in the CIS process. The events of 11 September 2001 have resulted in more restrictive attitudes by some governments in Central Asia towards asylum-seekers and refugees. Despite this trend, progress in building national asylum-systems and refugee protection has been made. A leading example is Kyrgyzstan where Tajik refugees of Kyrgyz origin are fully integrated and have been granted Kyrgyz citizenship.
- **In the Middle East and North Africa**, one of the major objectives of UNHCR is to support governments' efforts in upholding international protection and establishing comprehensive asylum systems. UNHCR is providing technical support and legal advice in the preparation of asylum legislation and the organization of training sessions targeting national officers. In Yemen and Mauritania, draft laws are now being processed for approval. UNHCR has also discussed with the Lebanese authorities provisional arrangements for the treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees, and a Letter of Understanding will be jointly signed in the coming weeks. UNHCR is hoping to sign similar cooperation agreements with the Syrian Arab Republic and the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya in the near future.
- Since that asylum issues are inextricably intertwined with migration issues, UNHCR has expressed an interest in establishing partnerships with both European Union Member States and with non Members in the Mediterranean basin, in order to establish legislation and build capacities to address refugee challenges in a spirit of responsibility-sharing and solidarity.
- Meanwhile, UNHCR strives to provide international protection through refugee status determination and the provision of limited material assistance to the most vulnerable among the refugee populations. However, financial constraints experienced in 2002, resulted in significant reductions in assistance activities planned for the second part of the year, with negative effects on the living conditions of refugees.
- UNHCR continues to promote the access of refugees to safe conditions and registration, as well as their protection against abusive detention. A major registration exercise covering Somali refugees in Yemen has been recently concluded in cooperation between the authorities and UNHCR, and covered over 30,000 refugees who now hold identification cards, maintaining their dignity and ensuring their legal stay in the country.

- While significant progress has been achieved by some UNHCR offices in the Middle East to clear the backlog of pending asylum applications and harmonize internal criteria and procedures, further effort is required to clear pending applications in Egypt, where the number of asylum-seekers far exceeds the human resources capacities of the Regional Office. Consultations are to be held on this issue with the Egyptian authorities.
- In Iraq, a new mechanism has been established, whereby the refugee status determination of asylum applicants in Northern Iraq is jointly conducted in Mosul by government officers and UNHCR staff. 746 cases have so far been processed under this mechanism, in a smooth and efficient manner.
- In October 2002, UNHCR issued to its field officers a note on the applicability of the 1951 Convention to Palestinian refugees, in order to clarify the status of Palestinians living outside the UNRWA area of operations. Further guidance will be provided in 2003 on the implementation of this note.
- **As regards the potential crisis in the Gulf area**, the UNHCR continues to support the efforts of the United Nations Secretary-General to resolve the current situation through diplomacy and the inspection process. In co-ordination with other United Nations agencies, UNHCR has nonetheless undertaken preparatory measures to address the potential humanitarian impact in the event of a conflict. UNHCR's contingency plan is based upon a planning figure of 600,000 persons of concern. The response strategy is modular, allowing a rapid contraction or expansion according to the protection and assistance needs of the affected populations.
- Whereas neighbouring States would bear the primary responsibility to provide security to refugees and maintain the civilian and humanitarian character of refugee-hosting areas, UNHCR is committed to supporting their preparedness efforts. UNHCR is discussing a partnership with the International Federation of the Red Crescent and National Red Crescent Societies, aimed at maximizing response capacity. UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross are also coordinating issues related to their respective mandates. UNHCR has ordered sufficient quantities of winter kits to respond to the needs of 350,000 persons, but has yet to reach the level of preparedness necessary for the planning figure of 600,000 persons. Additional resources would enable UNHCR to accelerate emergency procurement of relief items. Furthermore, UNHCR has pre-deployed 20 emergency response officers to the region, and identified sites that could host refugees in the event of a crisis.

Resolve refugee situations through voluntary repatriation and resettlement in third countries
(Strategic Goals 4, 6 and 7)

- Voluntary repatriation continues to be the preferred durable solution for refugees. It is all the more pertinent in CASWANAME, as economic and social constraints prevailing in the region do not allow the local integration of refugees, and resettlement opportunities are very limited.
- Following a year which witnessed one of the largest organized repatriations in the history of UNHCR, returns during 2003 to Afghanistan are expected to continue, albeit at a lower pace. In total, some 1.5 million refugees and internally displaced persons are expected to return. Whereas in 2002, Afghans returned in large numbers from urban centers in neighbouring countries, more significant returns will take place from the camps during 2003. No major "backflows" have been reported in spite of a harsh winter. The period leading up to the elections, scheduled in mid-2004, will be an opportunity for the Afghan Government to address, in close cooperation with UNHCR and other actors, many of the protection-related issues still preventing significant numbers of refugees in neighbouring countries from returning.

- While maintaining an adequate capacity to deal with large-scale returns, more emphasis will be placed on positioning UNHCR's intervention in a wider context of reconstruction, and empowerment of the Afghan authorities and civil society. As part of a multi-year, solutions-oriented strategy, specific operational linkages will be forged with multilateral and bilateral development actors. Efforts so far have not met with full success, and will be stepped up through cooperation at both the field and institutional levels. In all UNHCR's operations in Afghanistan, emphasis is being placed on sensitivity to gender issues through the mainstreaming of a country-specific gender strategy. A regional gender advisor, co-funded by UNHCR and the World Bank, has contributed to the adaptation of sectoral strategies (such as the shelter programme) to the needs of women and female-headed households. Efforts to enhance the protection environment for return are closely linked to ongoing activities to establish a sustainable human rights regime in the country and will focus on close cooperation with United Nations Administration in Afghanistan, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, civil society such as the National Lawyers Commission and with the newly-established Return Commission in the North.
- Notwithstanding the large number of returns expected in 2003 and subsequent years, some groups of Afghans may decide not to avail themselves of the option of voluntary repatriation, even if the situation in Afghanistan were to stabilize significantly. Discussions will be held with Governments concerned as well as development actors to explore the possibility of alternative durable solutions for Afghans in the region, other than repatriation and reintegration. To a limited extent, resettlement will be pursued as a durable solution for some individual cases in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, for whom voluntary repatriation is not an option.
- In the Middle East and North Africa, repatriation has been slow and involved only a limited number of refugees. 258 Yemeni refugees repatriated from the Syrian Arab Republic in the latter part of 2002; 1151 Iranian refugees in Iraq and 73 Iraqi refugees in Iran were able to return to their homes between July and December 2002. Hundreds of thousands of refugees, however, are still waiting for conditions conducive to repatriation. They include over 202,000 Iraqi refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 70,000 Somali refugees in Yemen and over 30,000 Iranian and Turkish refugees in Iraq, all in need of durable solutions. In Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, large numbers of Iraqi, Sudanese and Somali urban refugees are in need of durable solutions.
- Saudi Arabia continues to accommodate over 5000 Iraqi refugees who, despite the high standard of material assistance extended to them by the Saudi authorities, have been facing serious psychological challenges in their closed camp at Rafha. Discussions with the Saudi Arabian authorities and resettlement countries continue with a view to lasting solutions.
- Resettlement remains a major tool of protection and a visible burden-sharing mechanism in this sub-region where it is frequently the only durable solution available to many refugees. UNHCR remains concerned about the future policies of major resettlement countries and will continue to advocate more flexible policies on resettlement from the Middle East area, and to seek an early indication of expected resettlement quotas.
- In North Africa, Saharan refugees in the Tindouf camps continue to wait, after more than 26 years, for a political solution to the problem of Western Sahara. UNHCR's recent attempts, along with those of the Special Representative of the Secretary General, to implement confidence-building measures, including family visits between the Saharan communities in the Territory and in the Tindouf camps, have not been successful due to disagreement over the modalities for the selection of participants in the family visits programme. In view of the need for effective person-to-person contact between Saharans, UNHCR and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General will continue to seek ways to move forward on this project.

- Improving the situation of refugee women and children in the region in terms of protection and living conditions remains among UNHCR's priorities. With a few exceptions, the refugee populations in North Africa and the Middle East have an urban profile, requiring on the one hand, a community-based approach to the identification of needs and support structures and, on the other, a case-by-case approach to assistance and durable solutions. Following a review of the operational needs in this regard, it has been decided to replace the two Regional Advisor posts covering women and children by one Senior Community Services Officer post to be based in Beirut and three National Community Services Officer posts to be based in Cairo, Damascus and Jordan. This restructuring will allow the Senior Officer to focus on advocacy, training and networking and to create local capacity through national officers familiar with the local scene, focusing on resolving concrete problems facing refugee families in an urban environment. UNHCR will also continue to follow-up on implementing the High Commissioner's five commitments to refugee women as well as the guidelines on the prevention of exploitation of refugee women and children throughout its operations, while continuing to respect the different cultural contexts within which it operates.

Advocacy and Partnership (Strategic Goals 9 and 10)

- The CASWANAME Bureau will continue to widen the scope of knowledge about UNHCR's mandate in the region through the media and public presentations targeting selected audiences. In line with its renewed interest in fostering stronger alliances in the Arab World, UNHCR already launched a public awareness campaign in November 2002 aimed at mobilizing moral and financial support to UNHCR, as well as disseminating information on UNHCR's activities. In January 2003, a training session on the main elements of UNHCR's mandate and activities was held in Cairo for journalists from the main news agencies and daily papers. UNHCR's popular Good Will Ambassador for the Middle East has also been active in mobilizing public opinion about refugee protection through TV spots and other channels.
- During his missions to the region in June and October 2002, the High Commissioner delivered a clear message of partnership to UNHCR's counterparts in the region. He highlighted his interest in developing stronger and more comprehensive ties with the States of the region. On the civil society front, UNHCR has intensified its contacts with NGOs in the Arab world, and noted increased contributions to the Afghanistan programme, and potentially the Yemeni program. Relations with inter-governmental regional organizations also continue to develop, as joint seminars are planned with the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 2004 and the League of Arab States during the course of this year. A Memorandum of Understanding with the Gulf Cooperation Council is also under review and is expected to pave the way for wider discussions of the complex linkages between labor-migration and asylum in the Gulf area.
- As part of the 4Rs approach to Afghanistan, UNHCR has established close links with the Government in Afghanistan and those in countries of asylum, that are aimed at making the return process sustainable in terms of both protection and assistance. Operationalizing these links will be a major challenge in the next few years. The multi-year operational strategy that is being developed for the Afghanistan operation in close cooperation with the donors will provide a comprehensive action plan aimed at relevant Governments, civil society, bilateral and multilateral actors and donors.