

**REGIONAL STRATEGIC PRESENTATION SUMMARY
TO 38th STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING (6-9 March 2007)**

Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa

Part A: Introduction

The escalating violence in Iraq continues to force Iraqis into massive internal and external displacement and to represent a challenge for UNHCR's operations. As of mid-February 2007, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have been forced out of their homes after the Samarra bombing a year ago, has risen to over 700,000, bringing the total to around 1.9 million persons. Should internal displacement continue at the present pace, UNHCR estimates that the total number of IDPs rise to 2.7 million by the end of 2007. The number of refugee returns to Iraq is now virtually zero, as more and more Iraqis leave the country. An estimated 2 million Iraqis have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, mainly in the Syrian Arab Republic, Jordan and, to a lesser extent, in Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and beyond. Those seeking refuge are more likely to go further afield as they are faced with an already congested situation in neighbouring countries.

Among the 50,000 refugees in Iraq, who have been equally affected by the violence and the deteriorating humanitarian situation, Palestinians have been targeted in particular, for a variety of reasons including their perceived preferential treatment by the former Iraqi regime. Out of the 34,000 Palestinian refugees who lived mainly in Baghdad before the war, only an estimated 15,000 have remained. Over 800 are now stranded in very precarious conditions at the Iraq-Syrian border, awaiting a solution.

This crisis has prompted UNHCR to shift from focusing on reintegration and rehabilitation activities and searching for durable solutions in Iraq, to providing protection and humanitarian assistance for the increasing numbers of Iraqis in neighbouring countries, the internally displaced and the (non-Iraqi) refugees in Iraq. A Supplementary Appeal for US\$ 60 million has been issued in early January 2007 and UNHCR's presence and activities in the region are being enhanced. The High Commissioner visited Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic in February 2007 and has called upon the international community to move in a resolute manner to support countries hosting Iraqi refugees. The High Commissioner has also called for an international conference on "Addressing the humanitarian needs of refugees and IDPs in Iraq and the neighbouring countries" to be held on April 17 and 18 in Geneva.

In early February 2007, the High Commissioner visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the State of Kuwait to establish a high-level dialogue, as part of his plan to effectively engage the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council in a solid, comprehensive and sustainable strategic partnership with UNHCR. The High Commissioner is planning to visit the region during April 2007 for the same purpose.

UNHCR is in the process of establishing a Liaison Office in Tel-Aviv, Israel, in order to address the protection needs of a growing number of mostly sub-Saharan African asylum-seekers and refugees and to further support the State of Israel in building a comprehensive asylum system.

As part of the Office's objective to support governments in addressing mixed movements of migrants and asylum-seekers in North Africa and within the framework of UNHCR's "10-Point Plan of Action" launched in June 2006, UNHCR continues to enhance its presence in North African countries and to seek adequate cooperation arrangements with the concerned governments and NGOs.

Yemen is witnessing an increasingly tragic transit phenomenon. The country continues to receive refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants who arrive in boats from the Horn of Africa, fleeing insecurity and precarious living conditions. In 2006, more than 25,800 arrivals from Somalia have been recorded in Yemen; by the end of February this year, there have already been more than 2,500 new arrivals.

At least 530 people have died trying to make the perilous journey and nearly 300 have gone missing. More international support and assistance is urgently needed to help Yemen to effectively manage this complex protection situation.

There has been a positive development with regard to the Western Sahara operation. The family visits component of the confidence-building measures which facilitate person-to-person contacts between the Saharawi communities in the Tindouf camps in Algeria and those in the Territory resumed in November 2006, after family visits were put on hold in May. The telephone service continues to run smoothly. However, the programme is in urgent need of funds beyond March 2007. UNHCR launched an appeal for US\$ 3.5 million, in the beginning of 2007, but no new contributions have been announced to date. The rate of anaemia among children and pregnant/lactating women in the Tindouf camps remains high and comparable to that registered in 2005. WFP and UNHCR are working closely to seek corrective responses to this endemic situation.

Following an internal organizational review, the former CASWANAME Bureau has been reconfigured and converted into a new Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) without additional costs. The Bureau for Asia and the Pacific now encompasses the whole of Asia, including Central and South-west Asia. This reconfiguration better reflects current operational realities and makes the Office more responsive to current and emerging needs and priorities.

Part B

Progress on UNHCR's Global Strategic Objectives (GSOs) for 2007 and implementation of the Agenda for Protection (AfP)

Ensure that international standards of protection are met for all persons of concern to UNHCR taking into account their age, gender or personal background, (GSO 1, AfP 6)

The dramatic situation in Iraq is producing a growing number of female-headed households among IDPs, as well as among refugees in the neighbouring countries. Increasingly, survival sex is becoming the sole source of income for some households. Women, as "soft targets", are often victimized and are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. In the countries neighbouring Iraq, coping mechanisms among refugees and host families are gradually being eroded as a result of the prolonged displacement, prompting an increase in survival sex among women and forcing children to look for work. UNHCR's plan for the Iraq situation in 2007 pays particular attention to these vulnerable categories, including through resettlement. The MENA Bureau will redouble its efforts to further mainstream gender, age and diversity issues into operations, not least because of the existing stereotypes in relation to the role of women in society in the region.

Age, gender and diversity mainstreaming (AGDM) has been rolled out in all countries in the Middle East and North Africa and continues to have a positive effect on the way UNHCR works. The participation of refugees in identifying needs and setting priorities, together with the multifunctional teams approach, have a positive impact on the overall conditions of refugees in the region. More work needs to be done to further associate governmental and non-governmental partners in this process, bringing together the combined skills of UNHCR, partner staff and refugee representatives.

Advocate for and support governments in the development and maintenance of an international protection regime, including its implementation at the national level (GSO 2, AfP 1,2)

In light of the developments in Iraq, UNHCR has developed a comprehensive strategy which focuses on addressing the protection and urgent humanitarian needs of the large number of people affected by the situation in Iraq. A series of legal positions, guidelines and operational arrangements have been developed and disseminated among staff and operational partners. UNHCR's Advisory on International Protection Needs for Iraqis outside the Country has been updated. In view of the state of generalized violence in Iraq, UNHCR is of the opinion that Iraqis who are outside their country, and are unwilling or

unable to return due to the prevailing circumstances, are in need of international protection and are, therefore, persons of concern to the Office. UNHCR advises against forced return as far as the central and southern governorates of Iraq are concerned. Claims submitted by Iraqis originating from the three northern governorates should be adjudicated on an individual basis in line with the relevant criteria of the 1951 Convention.

The Supplementary Appeal for US\$ 60 million is already receiving a great deal of donor support. Emergency teams have been deployed and a fast track process for appointing additional staff is under way. Registration and swift identification of persons with special needs are key components of UNHCR's strategy to address the protection requirements of Iraqis in the region. UNHCR is planning for the referral of 20,000 Iraqis with specific vulnerabilities for resettlement, in the hope that resettlement countries will respond generously.

The High Commissioner visited the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan to review progress in the implementation of UNHCR's programme and to discuss with the Governments, other partners, UNHCR staff and refugee representatives the best ways to ensure protection and assistance for the displaced populations. Despite the flexibility that regional governments are showing in admitting and allowing the stay of Iraqis, the overall protection situation remains fragile. Major host Governments, namely Jordan (750,000 persons) and the Syrian Arab Republic (1.2 million persons), have expressed serious concerns about the impact of the presence of such large numbers of Iraqis in socio-economic, security and political terms. UNHCR believes that unless the international community moves in a resolute and effective manner to help host countries cope with the burden, the existing protection system might collapse. The International Conference that will be convened by UNHCR in Geneva on 17 and 18 April will be an essential step in generating more awareness on this humanitarian crisis.

With regard to internally displaced Iraqis, whose number has now exceeded 1.9 million, UNHCR will pursue its cluster coordination role and will, together with other United Nations agencies, local entities and partners, focus on advocacy and the provision of assistance through remote management arrangements.

Among the 50,000 refugees in Iraq, an estimated 15,000 Palestinians are in a most dire situation and continue to be the target of attacks and serious violations of rights. In January 2007, UNHCR issued an Aide-Memoire calling for the enhancement of the protection of Palestinians in Iraq and for humanitarian solutions for those who were forced to flee their homes. The options of relocation in Iraq, or in the region, as well as resettlement, are being pursued simultaneously.

The protection situation in Yemen is of increasing concern. Overwhelmed by large numbers of Somalis fleeing insecurity and poverty in their country, Yemen is reconsidering its flexible policy towards refugees. This would be a serious setback and the international community needs to intervene in a robust manner to help Yemen uphold its good traditions. Many vulnerable refugees depend on this.

With regard to the development of asylum systems in the region, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya has tasked a high-level working group with the drafting of national asylum legislation in cooperation with UNHCR. In August 2006, Mauritania has enacted its national asylum regulations.

Positive developments have also been noted on the statelessness front. Syria is actively working on resolving the protracted problem of stateless Kurds, by taking steps to regularize the situation of certain groups.

While maintaining emphasis on the 1951 Convention, UNHCR is also engaging governments beyond the Convention, using human rights instruments adopted by countries in the region and building on local traditions and practices, as well as legal provisions embodied in the Islamic Sharia law with the aim of ensuring protection for persons in need of it.

The mixed flows of migrants and asylum-seekers continue to be of great concern, notably those resulting in loss of lives in the Mediterranean Sea or in the Gulf of Aden. Despite some progress, UNHCR's work on the migration-asylum issues in North Africa is facing obstacles. Governments in the region continue to fear that they may become a “dumping ground” for people whom European countries do not want to admit, and they feel unable to provide adequate protection and assistance to those in need of international protection. There is an urgent need for North African countries, European countries and institutions, as well as UNHCR, to work closely together to dispel fears and build confidence among all. The common purpose is to protect the persons who need international protection and to find adequate solutions, including return to the country of origin, for persons who do not.

Despite repeated prioritization exercises, limited resources are having a negative impact on the overall protection conditions in the region. Hundreds of newly arriving Somali refugees in the Kharaz camp in Yemen are without adequate shelter, and the available stocks of non-food items are insufficient to address growing needs. With the exception of a small community centre, over 20,000 Somali refugees living in the Basateen area in Aden receive no assistance. A large number of Sudanese and Somali refugees in Egypt remain without assistance and face serious difficulties in sustaining themselves in an already impoverished environment. Very little assistance is made available to refugees in Morocco, a situation that fuels tension, often expressed through demonstrations and protests.

Redoubling efforts in the search for durable solutions (GSO 3, AfP 5)

Many of the complex political issues and situations of insecurity that have prompted the flight of most of refugees in the region are still at a stalemate and show no real prospects for swift peaceful settlement (i.e. Somalia, Western Sahara, Iraq and the Darfur region of Sudan). This is reducing the prospect of repatriation for many of the refugees. Similarly, given the high numbers of refugees combined with the lack of adequate socio-economic absorption capacity, local integration is difficult to achieve. As a result, resettlement and *de facto* self-reliance remain the only options that UNHCR can pursue for many groups of refugees in the region.

Nevertheless, in some situations repatriation is possible, although on a modest scale. In 2006 and the early months of 2007, UNHCR has facilitated the return of approximately 1,000 Sudanese from Egypt to Southern Sudan. In parallel, UNHCR, in close cooperation with the Egyptian authorities is facilitating access for Sudanese refugees to education and health care services. In addition, thanks to the cooperation of the Saudi authorities and resettlement countries, over 200 Eritrean refugees who landed on the Saudi Island of Jizan have been swiftly resettled. In November 2006, UNHCR welcomed the decision by the Government of Canada to resettle a group of Palestinian refugees from Iraq who have been suffering harsh conditions in the Ruwaished refugee camp in Jordan for over three years. Over 800 Palestinians, however, remain stranded in the No Man's Land between the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq.

Establish effective partnerships and frameworks for action for responding to the challenges of protecting and finding solutions for persons internally displaced due to conflict and abuses of human rights; protecting refugees in broader migration movements; and bridging the gap between relief and development (GSO 4, AfP 2)

UNHCR remains committed to supporting the collaborative effort in Iraq to comprehensively address situations of internal displacement as lead agency of the cluster on refugees, IDPs and durable solutions, together with the co-lead the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The migration-asylum nexus is at the centre of regional developments in North Africa. In line with the commitments reflected in the Agenda for Protection, UNHCR has developed new strategies to ensure that measures to combat irregular migration do not negatively affect the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees. The 10-Point Plan of Action sets out key areas in which comprehensive action is required to address issues of mixed movements in a coherent and practical way – in countries of origin, transit and destination. UNHCR's 10 Point Action Plan is a strategic working tool to identify persons with a well-founded fear of persecution in the mixed flow of people from sub-Saharan Africa and to implement

solutions for persons recognized as refugees. The Action Plan needs to be implemented in cooperation with the countries of destination (European Union Member States), countries in North Africa facing similar problems, the countries of origin (mainly in sub-Saharan Africa) and national and international organizations.

During the European Union/Africa Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development in Libya in November 2006, UNHCR stressed that the Office is not – and does not intend to become – a migration agency, but warned that asylum has to be given its proper place in the range of state responses to migration issues.

In Lebanon, the majority of the displaced have returned to their places of origin and have begun to rebuild their homes and livelihoods, following the displacement of up to 1 million persons during the conflict in summer 2006. As the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) cluster lead agency for protection and shelter, UNHCR has taken a community-based approach to assisting the most vulnerable persons in situations of continued displacement and of return. During 2007, UNHCR will continue to provide protection and assistance to some 30,000 returnees and internally displaced persons who have no access to basic assistance or services on an equitable basis. The main aims of UNHCR's programme are to provide legal assistance, establish protection monitoring and referral mechanisms and to ensure that beneficiaries, particularly vulnerable groups, have access to adequate services and assistance. The response capacity of Government institutions and civil society will be enhanced through confidence building projects and training for the social development centres, NGOs and other institutions.

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