

REGIONAL STRATEGIC PRESENTATION SUMMARY
41ST MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE
(4-6 March 2008)

Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa

Part A: Introduction

This summary provides an update on key developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since the publication of UNHCR's 2008-2009 Global Appeal. The reporting will focus on selected situations, which will be addressed by the Bureau Director in his strategic presentation to the Standing Committee at its 41st meeting. In Part B, reference will be made to areas of progress in relation to UNHCR's Global Strategic Objectives for 2008-2009.

Despite significant improvement in the security situation in recent months inside **Iraq**, the overall conditions have not reached a level whereby returns can be encouraged. Nevertheless, UNHCR will continue to support the Government in providing assistance to those who, despite the prevailing circumstances, express willingness to return. In the meantime, UNHCR is urging the Government of Iraq to start preparing the ground for large-scale, safe and dignified returns.

Asylum space for Iraqi refugees has expanded in neighbouring hosting countries. During his recent mission to the region, the High Commissioner noted new signs of commitment on the part of some Governments not to force Iraqis to return home, despite the irregular status of many of them. The assistance programme for Iraqi refugees has matured and continues to expand, albeit dependent on the availability of funds.

The MENA region continues to be the scene of violence and extremist activities, posing serious threats to the lives and well-being of humanitarian workers. The tragic incident on 11 December in **Algiers**, which resulted in the total destruction of both the UN House and UNHCR's office, claiming the lives of 17 United Nations staff and other personnel, is a case in point. This attack has had a serious impact on UNHCR's operation for urban refugees in Algiers, and has prompted a comprehensive review of the security arrangements for UNHCR operations in the region.

Two major positive developments are under way in **Mauritania**:

- the voluntary repatriation programme for Mauritanian refugees from Senegal has been launched; and
- the national asylum procedure has started to operate. A first group of 38 asylum-seekers have been granted refugee status under the nascent Mauritanian asylum system.

In **Israel**, the UNHCR office in Tel Aviv has recently been overwhelmed by hundreds of asylum-seekers, mainly from Eritrea, Sudan and sub-Saharan African countries crossing through Egypt, putting UNHCR's limited capacity in the country under serious strain.

Yemen continues to witness an increasingly tragic transit phenomenon, involving asylum-seekers and refugees, as well as migrants, who arrive in small boats from the Horn of Africa, fleeing insecurity, persecution and precarious living conditions. In addition, a growing IDP situation in the north of the country is adding a further challenge to UNHCR operations.

The reconfiguration of the former CASWANAME Bureau in early 2007 and its conversion into a new Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa has helped to reflect current operational realities better and to make the Office more responsive to emerging needs and priorities.

Part B: Progress on UNHCR's Global Strategic Objectives

Preserving and building asylum

There is an evident consolidation of asylum space in countries of the Middle East hosting Iraqi refugees.

- The Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan are showing a commitment not to force Iraqis back to their country, despite the heavy burden their presence continues to impose on local economies and societies.
- In Jordan, the daily cumulative fines for overstay of visas have just been waived for those who wish to return to Iraq and the five-year ban on re-entry to Jordan has been lifted. Similarly, the penalty for overstay for those who wish to regularize their status has been reduced by 50 per cent.
- A breakthrough has been reached in Lebanon, with the decision of the authorities on 12 February to release nearly 600 detained Iraqis and to allow them, as well as other Iraqis staying illegally in the country, to regularize their situation. (*GSOs 1 and 3*)
- However, the Governments of the region continue to call upon the international community to show additional solidarity and burden sharing, especially in light of anticipated challenges related to growing economic pressure, rising global prices of basic commodities, and unease with the increasing burden on their citizens.
- UNHCR continues to expand its activities to a large number of destitute Iraqis. One of the Office's priorities in 2008 is to decentralize its presence further in the countries hosting large numbers of Iraqis outside the capitals and to undertake additional activities that would help in reaching out to the most vulnerable.
- Iraqi women and children, both inside Iraq and in neighbouring countries, continue to be of particular concern in view of their vulnerability to various forms of violence and exploitation; hence, they are being given priority in UNHCR's assistance programme in 2008. (*GSOs 1 and 3*)
- For internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq, under the overall coordination of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), UNHCR's 2008 programme is designed to improve the living conditions in affected communities through community-based projects targeting primarily shelter, water and sanitation, health and education. Protecting IDPs' legal rights and safety, and enhancing national capacity to respond to displacement, including emergencies, are also important components of UNHCR's programme. (*GSOs 1 and 3*)

In **Israel**, an increasing number of Eritrean and Sudanese as well as nationals of other sub-Saharan countries are approaching UNHCR seeking asylum. The Office is strengthening its presence to support the Government with registration and refugee status determination. Noteworthy is the recent decision of the Government to grant asylum to Sudanese asylum-seekers from Darfur as well as temporary work permits to Eritreans upon their release from detention.

In terms of capacity-building activities, a series of regional workshops have been organized jointly in cooperation with Naif University and the League of Arab States, in addition to a number of national workshops to disseminate the principles of international protection in the region.

Protracted situations

- **Egypt** continues to host large numbers of Sudanese refugees - one of the most protracted refugee situations worldwide. It also continues to be one of the main destinations for an increasing number of Somali and Iraqi nationals seeking asylum. The tolerant attitude of the Government towards refugees and asylum-seekers, combined with recent positive developments in Sudan, has permitted UNHCR to shift its strategic focus from protracted care and maintenance programmes

towards promotion of local self-reliance, community-based assistance and durable solutions through an ongoing repatriation programme to Southern Sudan.

- Regarding **Western Sahara**, the implementation of the family visits component of the confidence-building measures programme is progressing smoothly. The pursuit of talks between Morocco and the POLISARIO, under the auspices of the United Nations, represents an important development and a source of hope for ending this protracted situation. However, the confidence-building measures programme is suffering from a serious funding gap that threatens to bring it to a halt.
- The residual Iraqi refugees in the old Rafha camp in **Saudi Arabia** continue to repatriate, following the increase of the repatriation grant by the Saudi authorities. A total of 45 persons returned to Iraq recently, bringing down the number of those remaining in the camp to 192.

Attaining durable solutions (GSO 5)

The significant decrease in the level of hostilities in Iraq in recent months has encouraged a number of Iraqi refugees to opt for **repatriation**, albeit in far from favourable conditions for sustainable return.

- UNHCR's position today is that while prevailing conditions in Iraq are not conducive for promoting, encouraging or organizing returns, the Office will continue to assist those refugees and IDPs who are willing to return under the framework of the "United Nations Rapid Return Plan", designed in coordination with the Iraqi authorities.
- In the meantime, UNHCR has urged the Iraqi Government to start preparing the grounds for large-scale, safe and dignified return movements, including through the adoption of mechanisms for property restitution/compensation, alternative housing arrangements, access to public distribution systems and other basic services.
- UNHCR has submitted a proposal to the Government of Iraq to conduct a joint return assessment mission to evaluate the present conditions and identify the gaps that will need attention before massive returns can take place.
- In view of the importance of the return issue as well as the need to pursue building the capacity of relevant Iraqi institutions, the High Commissioner has decided to place his new Representative for Iraq in Baghdad, as opposed to Amman, and to increase the number of international staff in Baghdad from two to five. These staff are expected to work closely with the Government of Iraq on a number of issues, including the Plan of Action for future returns.

In 2007, UNHCR's **resettlement** target of 20,000 for Iraqi refugees was exceeded by some 2,000 submissions. The Office continues to strive for similar results in 2008, in the hope that the rate of departures will be more commensurate with the rate of submissions. In 2007, only 21 per cent of the Iraqis submitted for resettlement departed.

A tripartite agreement, involving Mauritania, Senegal and UNHCR was signed on 12 November 2007, providing an opportunity for some 24,000 Mauritanian refugees to return to their country in conditions of safety and dignity. The first convoy involving 103 returnees took place on 29 January 2008 and the movement is expected to continue throughout the year.

Protection in mixed population flows

The phenomenon of mixed migratory movements continues to be a major feature in North Africa and the Gulf of Aden, with an estimated 60-100,000 arrivals, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, reaching North African countries in an irregular manner every year. The framework introduced by UNHCR 10-Point Plan of Action, designed to address various aspects of refugee protection in mixed migration movements, is gradually gaining momentum and becoming a reference in reconciling the imperative

of refugee protection with States' migration management interests. In this connection, recent positive developments in some of the North African countries are noteworthy:

- In **Mauritania**, a national asylum procedure has been established and has started to operate. A first group of 38 asylum-seekers has been granted refugee status under the recently developed asylum system. This is a major step forward in the establishment of a responsive asylum system in Mauritania and an indication of this State's strong commitment to refugee protection. It is hoped that this positive example will be followed by other countries in the region.
- Likewise, progress has been achieved in the **Libyan Arab Jamahiriya**, where a draft refugee law is under consideration by the National Legislative Committee, and where a tripartite agreement between UNHCR, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the International Organization of Peace Care and Relief (IOPCR), on mixed migration movements, is expected to be signed in the near future.
- It is also noteworthy that a UNHCR country agreement ("Accord du Siege") was signed with the authorities of the Kingdom of **Morocco** in July 2007. The Moroccan Government is presently active in reviewing other experiences in dealing with asylum issues as part of designing its national system. It is hoped this will further advance the Government's efforts aiming at the establishment of national asylum institutions consistent with international standards.
- In **Yemen**, large numbers of people, mostly Somalis fleeing fighting and instability in their country, as well as Ethiopians, continue to arrive across the Gulf of Aden and, more recently, through the Red Sea; with reports of hundreds of deaths and instances of torture, abuse and exploitation by smugglers along the way. The Government of Yemen has traditionally maintained a hospitable attitude and an open-door policy towards Somalis, granting them refugee recognition on a *prima facie* basis. While some Ethiopians are fleeing persecution, the majority appear to be transiting Yemen in search of better living conditions in other countries. In this context, UNHCR is seeking the collaboration of all stakeholders to develop and implement the 10-Point Plan of Action to address mixed migration flows. A regional conference on mixed migration movements and the implementation of the 10-Point Plan of Action will be organized in May 2008 with concerned countries. Furthermore, UNHCR's programme in Yemen has been significantly increased for 2008 with the aim of supporting the Government further in dealing with the humanitarian consequences of this situation.

Developing dynamic partnerships (GSO 6)

- While promoting accession to the international refugee instruments by member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), UNHCR continues to engage these governments and civil society to assume more responsibilities for the protection of refugees and other persons of concern. To that end, UNHCR has embarked on the implementation of a comprehensive, three-fold partnership strategy with the GCC countries, including the humanitarian, political and financial dimensions.
- UNHCR also strives to enhance partnerships with other regional intergovernmental bodies, notably with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and with the League of Arab States (LAS).
- UNHCR has signed Memoranda of Understanding with regional institutions and national Red Crescent Societies, such as the Saudi Red Crescent, aiming at promoting strategic partnerships in the region.
- UNHCR hopes that its public information strategy for the Middle East and the Gulf region will significantly increase awareness on refugee matters as well as on the Office's roles and principles.

UNHCR
28 February 2008