



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

Executive Committee Summary

Country : Saudi Arabia

Planning Year : 2006

2006 Saudi Arabia Country Operations Plan

Part I: Executive Committee Summary

(a) Context and Beneficiary Populations

Political context

The estimated population of KSA amounts to 23 million including some 7 million foreign workers. It is the number one oil exporter in the world. Both history and geography in addition to proven oil reserves have endowed it with great potentials. Being the custodian of the two most Holy Mosques, Saudi Arabia assumed a leading role in the Islamic world.

Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE and Oman have an estimated population of over 4 million in addition to several millions expatriate workers including more than three hundred thousand Palestinians. Besides, there are Bedoons (stateless persons) mainly in Kuwait (113,000) and KSA (about 70,000) who live under precarious situation emanating from lack of legal status.

The huge oil wealth of the Gulf Countries and need for more expertise in various fields led to the recruitment of millions of workers from all over the world. Moreover, the region became a place of choice for persons seeking better opportunities. With its geographic proximity to the less privileged hotbeds in Southwest Asia, Middle East and the Horn of Africa, the GCC States resorted to extremely restrictive immigration policies to control illegal immigration.

The presence of millions of migrant workers has led to demographic disproportion in KSA and other Gulf countries. This has in turn, generated a deleterious effect on policies regarding asylum. The presence of refugees is being perceived as a destabilising as well as a pull factor due to the geographic proximity to hotbeds in Africa and Southeast Asia.

During the last few years, KSA and other GCC States have demonstrated added interest to channel humanitarian assistance to refugees through UNHCR taking into consideration that 54% of the world refugees were then Muslims. The GCC States have provided hundreds of millions US dollars in bilateral assistance to refugees and displaced persons in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kosovo, Iraq, Liberia, Sudan, Somalia and other parts of the world. The bilateral delivery prompted UNHCR to persuade local donors (governments, NGOs and the private sector) to channel their assistance through multilateral channels.

Due to the peculiarities of the Gulf countries in terms of their demographic profile and vast wealth, KSA and other GCC countries have adopted very strict immigration policies. As a result, naturalisation of foreigners has been extremely limited. There are therefore almost no opportunities for local integration for the refugees that are under UNHCR's mandate. The search for durable solutions is further made complicated because these countries are not party to any of the international instruments governing refugees. Thus the stay of recognised refugees is only temporarily tolerated, pending the identification of a durable solution, i.e. repatriation or resettlement.

Protection issues

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Sultanate of Oman have not yet acceded to the 1951 Convention or to the 1967 Protocol relating to refugees. Consequently, there are no legislative or administrative provisions governing asylum. The oil wealth of the Gulf Countries and lack of expertise in various fields led to the recruitment of millions of workers from all over the world. Moreover, the region became a place of choice for persons seeking better opportunities. With its geographic proximity to the less privileged hotbeds in Southwest Asia, Middle East and the Horn of Africa, the GCC States resorted to restrictive immigration policies to control illegal immigration.

The presence of millions of migrant workers has led to demographic disproportion in KSA and other Gulf countries. This in turn generated a deleterious effect on policies regarding asylum. The presence of refugees is being perceived as a destabilising as well as a pull factor due to the geographic proximity to hotbeds in Africa and Southeast Asia. Therefore, the strategic objective of the Regional Representation in Riyadh was to continue to encourage Gulf countries' respect to adherence to refugee law principles and the improvement of international protection conditions, accession to the 1951 Convention and ultimately the promulgation of domestic refugee laws. Efforts in this respect have led to an increasing understanding of international protection principles and UNHCR's mandate among Governments and NGOs. This has also been instrumental on UNHCR's ability to have access to increasing numbers of asylum-seekers and to ensure better respect of refugee's basic rights.

UNHCR's role

UNHCR will focus on the following protection issues:

- Promotion of Refugee Law principles and foster protection culture in the Region;
- Continue to seize any opportunity to encourage GCC countries to accede to the international instruments regarding refugees;
- Safeguard the favourable asylum conditions in the GCC countries;
- Continue to work closely with the Saudi authorities regarding the Rafha residual caseload;
- Continue to disseminate refugee law and promote principles of international protection among law enforcement officers and diplomatic institutes in the region;
- Organise a regional EMTP for Gulf NGOs and government representatives.

Taking into account that the region has its own historic, political, economic and cultural specificity, RO Riyadh continued to mobilise resources with the view to enhancing local capacities and promoting a common vision for the entire region. In addition, UNHCR continued its representations to governments to secure improved treatment for asylum seekers and refugees in terms of better protection conditions and understanding of their rights and for increased co-operation with UNHCR and strongest funding support for its operations world-wide.

The safeguarding and whenever possible expanding of the asylum space in the GCC countries including access to all asylum seekers and the promotion of alternative arrangements in accordance with the local immigration regulations remain UNHCR priority while encouraging GCC states to accede to international instruments regarding refugees and stateless persons. UNHCR assist the governments to deal with

asylum seekers and refugees in line with international standards through training and local capacity building.

UNHCR will ensure continued protection and monitoring of the care and maintenance programme provided to the residual caseload of Iraqi refugees in Rafha and will pursue durable solutions for refugees facilitating or organizing (if circumstances permit) and in particular repatriation programmes for Iraqi refugees and those in refugee like situation. Of the initial 5,261 population in Rafha camp, only 440 refugees remain, the others having voluntarily repatriated in 2002-2003.

RO Riyadh will continue in 2006 on strengthening the public awareness and fund raising activities within its long-term regional integrated and systematic strategy especially in light of the humanitarian crises in Iraq and Darfur, the continued repatriation and reintegration requirements in Afghanistan and Africa and the implementation of the repatriation and reintegration program in Southern Sudan. This has wielded marked interest of public opinion and decision-makers in UNHCR's mandate and activities in the region.

UNHCR Riyadh will further strengthen its co-operation with regional organisations based in Saudi Arabia such as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in particular for the preparation of the OIC/UNHCR conference scheduled to take place either at the end of 2005 or early 2006.

Overview of beneficiary populations

At the beginning of 2005, there were 1,831 urban refugees and 434 urban asylum seekers registered with HCR offices in the Gulf region (152 refugees/170 asylum seekers in KSA, 1,521 refugees/158 asylum seekers in Kuwait, 105 refugees/52 asylum seekers in UAE, and 53 refugees/54 asylum seekers in Qatar, Bahrain and Oman).

Also there were 440 Iraqi refugees who remained hosted at Rafha camp where UNHCR closely monitors the situation in the camp (protection and assistance). The political and security situation in Iraq was neither conducive for the return of the residual Iraqi caseload still hosted in Rafha camp nor for UNHCR to organize or promote voluntary repatriation.

UNHCR is also closely monitoring the situation of Palestinians living in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. Given the fact that the Gulf region is outside UNRWA's area of operation, Palestinians are under international protection and covered by the Mandate of UNHCR.

Besides, there are Bedoons (stateless persons) mainly in Kuwait (about 113,000) and KSA (about 70,000) who live under a precarious situation emanating from lack of legal status. The statelessness is being politicised because of demographic imbalance, volatile political, security, economic and social situations. Nevertheless, KSA has amended in 2004 its naturalization legislation opening the door for the potential naturalization of a large number of stateless persons (Bedoon) and expatriates.

The urban refugee/asylum seekers caseload registered at HCR office in Saudi Arabia and the neighbouring Gulf are as follows:

Country of Asylum	Urban Refugees	Urban Asylum Seekers
Saudi Arabia	152	170
United Arab Emirates	105	52
Kuwait	1,521	158
Qatar	46	24
Sultanate of Oman	7	24
Bahrain	0	6
Total	1,831	434

Resettlement

Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries accept the presence of refugees on their territory on temporary basis only. With the lack of possibility of local integration and as voluntary repatriation is not feasible or foreseeable within an acceptable time frame, resettlement is considered as a vital durable solution and an instrument of protection.

Policy issues

The past two years were remarkable in terms of extending the protection umbrella, implementing spontaneous return in a swift and successful fashion and marked increase on fund raising activities and networking with regional NGOs. The onset of hostilities and the unfolding situation have prompted the majority of Rafha caseload to return. This partnership is all the more relevant in this region taking into consideration that 54% of the world refugees are or hailing from Muslim or Arab countries. UNHCR's strategic objective in the Gulf region remains to foster such strong partnership with the local governments, which would result in widening the protection space in the Gulf region. In order to achieve these objectives, UNHCR Riyadh plans to continue to pursue an integrated approach in undertaking promotion of Refugee law and capacity building, improvement of protection conditions, fund raising, enhancing of UNHCR's capacities in the Gulf region and finding of durable solutions.

Linkages to other country operations

Capacity and presence of partners

The Gulf region has an immense fund raising potential and is increasingly involved in the international humanitarian aid mainly through bilateral channels. Since the early nineties, the Gulf countries showed greater interest in assisting refugees worldwide. During this period, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE and Qatar channelled large contributions in assistance to refugees and displaced persons.

Gulf NGOs capacity and social influences remain of good potential for cooperation. Also, their interest in playing an enhanced role in international humanitarian aid and assuming larger visibility continued to deepen despite restructuring measures and stricter code of conduct applied by local governments in line with UN resolutions on international terrorism. Therefore, RO Riyadh will further strengthen and improve the effectiveness of its co-operation with local NGOs within the context of the Gulf NGOs Network process to encourage further involvement of NGOs in funding UNHCR programs.

Given the strategic importance of assistance funds associated with regional organizations such as the OIC Islamic Solidarity Fund (ISF) and Afghanistan Assistance Fund (AAF) in addition to governmental and regional development funds/institutions like: the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED), Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD), Saudi Development Fund (SDF) and Abu Dhabi Fund, RR Riyadh will increase its efforts to develop appropriate methods for channelling assistance from these institutions to UNHCR 4Rs projects and programs.

Presence and roles of other UN and international organisations

Cooperation with other UN agencies operating in the Gulf region is limited due to the specificity of UNHCR mandate that is focusing on non-nationals. UNHCR is however actively involved in issues that are common to all country team UN agencies. In that respect, UNHCR is regularly attending the Security Management Team (SMT). UNHCR is also sharing the cost of the security arrangement of a common compound together with UNICEF.

In addition to the UN agencies referred to above, RR Riyadh maintains working relationally with the Organisation of the Islamic Conference OIC and with the Islamic Development Bank IDB. The other international Organisations present in the region include ICRC, the Arab Fund For Economic and Social Development, Arab Planning Institute, Arab Centre For Medical Literature and the Gulf Arab States Educational Research Centre. There are also financial institutions such as the Inter-Arab investment Guarantee Corporation and the Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) which could be a source of support for capacity building and training.

UNHCR Riyadh would further expand its co-operation with OIC, IDB and GCC in new areas of common interest including promotion of Refugee Law and provision of assistance to refugees. It is expected that the co-operation with the above mentioned Islamic and Arab organisations will continue to be reinforced and strengthened in the coming year.

(b) Selected Programme Goals and Objectives

Operational goals and potential for durable solution

- The Global strategic objectives for RO Riyadh are as follows:
- Advocate for, and support governments in the Gulf in the creation and maintenance of an international protection regime, and the provision of protection and assistance, pursuant to the Agenda for Protection.
- Promote alternative arrangements for Rafha caseload other than keeping the refugees in a closed camp. Should the Saudi authorities agree to this proposal, RO Riyadh will subsequently promote refugee self-reliance for the Rafha residual caseload in line with the Framework for Durable Solutions and Convention Plus initiatives. This would be a critical step in the pursuit of durable solutions for this protracted refugee situation.

- Strengthen national capacities and regional preparedness of States and NGOs in the Gulf in order to broaden the asylum/protection space and response to emergencies (emergency training and the building of national capacities of partners in the Gulf).
- Continue to monitor and improve the situation of refugee women and children in Rafha camp and in urban locations.
- Pursue external relations activities in order to raise awareness on refugee issues among key partners, media, civil societies, NGOs and governments.