

**Update on UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa
Executive Committee 2009**

Part A: Major developments

- Iraqi displacement continues to feature as a major challenge in the Middle East region. Over 1.4 million Iraqis have been displaced within their country (post-2006), while hundreds of thousands have taken refuge in neighbouring countries. The decrease in the level of violence observed in Iraq in late 2008 and early 2009 has resulted in a noticeable reduction in departures from Iraq and a slight increase in returns. However, an increasing number of refugees are choosing to repatriate spontaneously without taking advantage of the facilitation offered by UNHCR under its individual repatriation management scheme. This is mainly explained by the desire of refugees to maintain a presence in the asylum country while they assess the sustainability of the conditions of return in Iraq. Almost 2,000 persons have benefited from UNHCR's repatriation assistance during the first half of 2009.
- The number of Iraqi refugees registered with UNHCR in the region, and whose cases are still active, dropped from 310,000 in October 2008 to 295,300 in July 2009. Resettlement departures and return to Iraq are the prime reasons for this decrease. The number of beneficiaries of UNHCR's direct assistance programmes in the two major host countries, the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan, has stabilized at 130,000 and 32,000 persons respectively. The Governments of these countries continue to show genuine hospitality towards Iraqis. However, as their economies struggle with the effects of the global economic crisis, the burden of hosting hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees, in addition to large numbers of Palestinian refugees, is becoming increasingly difficult to cope with.
- The Office has enhanced its presence inside Iraq to respond to the protection and humanitarian needs of the returnees, as well as to prepare the ground for a possible large scale voluntary repatriation. Thirty-seven international posts have been established throughout Iraq, including six in Baghdad. Of these, 22 positions have been filled.
- Thanks to the more active engagement of resettlement countries, over 2,500 Palestinian refugees stranded in the Iraqi-Syrian border area, are regaining hope. Most of them have had their cases submitted for resettlement, many have received initial acceptance and some have already departed. In the meantime, these refugees remain dependent on the basic humanitarian assistance provided by UNHCR and its partners, to survive.
- UNHCR is actively pursuing efforts towards enhancing partnerships with governments, regional organizations and civil society institutions in the Middle East and North Africa region. In July 2009, a conference of Arab parliamentarians, which was organized jointly by UNHCR, the League of Arab States and the Provisional Arab Parliament, was held in Tunis and focused on the issue of asylum and migration in the Arab world. This was preceded by an Arab experts meeting to review and update the 1994 Arab Convention on refugees. An amended draft was produced and is currently under review by the Secretariat of the Arab Parliament, prior to its submission to members of the Arab League for consideration.
- The operational environment for humanitarian actors in Yemen has become challenging in recent months. The volatile security situation hampers access to persons of concern in some parts of the country, while the continuous increase in the number of new arrivals, mostly Somalis, across the Gulf of Aden is straining the national asylum system and posing additional challenges for the Government and aid agencies. Since the beginning of the year, over 35,300 new arrivals have landed on Yemen's shores. Moreover, the internal conflict, which broke out in the Saadah region in the northern part of the country in 2004, escalated

significantly in mid-August 2009, leading to a humanitarian emergency with additional sizeable internal displacements, bringing the number of IDPs in the region to around 150,000 persons. UNHCR, together with its partners, has moved swiftly to provide relief to the displaced.

- In Egypt, the protection climate continues to be affected by the movement of mixed groups of migrants and asylum-seekers, many of whom originate from Eritrea and Sudan, attempting to cross the Egyptian/Israeli border illegally. UNHCR's access is restricted to those among these groups who have registered with the Office previously. UNHCR is pursuing the matter with the Government of Egypt, seeking ways to establish protection-sensitive mechanisms to deal with these movements.
- The mixed migration phenomenon continues to pose serious challenges for governments and humanitarian agencies in North Africa. The protection scene in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya has been dominated in recent months by "push-backs" from European shores of hundreds of migrants and asylum-seekers from various African countries intercepted at sea. UNHCR has deployed additional resources to the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya to help the Government deal with the situation. This "push-back" practice risks violating the *non-refoulement* principle and is undermining the very fragile progress achieved in the forging of partnerships and the development of asylum space in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.
- A comprehensive needs assessment conducted in 2009, has revealed important gaps in the international community's response to the humanitarian needs of Sahraoui refugees in the Tindouf camps in Algeria. UNHCR is enhancing its assistance programme with a view to bridging these gaps.
- The Office has submitted to the parties as well as to the refugee-hosting country a proposal for expansion of its Confidence-Building Measures, including the use of the road transport option for family visits, joint summer camps for children, and visits for special family events, such as weddings.

Part B: Progress on implementation of UNHCR's global strategic objectives

- The organized voluntary repatriation of Mauritanian refugees from Senegal is nearing completion, with over 14,000 refugees having returned to date. By the end of 2009, the remaining refugees will have either returned home or found an alternative durable solution, including local integration in Senegal. Meanwhile, the implementation of the reintegration programme in the areas of return is gaining momentum and will be the main focus of the Office's efforts in the coming period. Procedures for the repatriation of Mauritanian refugees from Mali are still being discussed.
- In July 2009, the Office signed a cooperation agreement with the International Organization for Migration to address mixed migration issues in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Also, a number of refugee law training workshops were organized in Morocco, targeting officials from law-enforcement and governmental bodies as well as the judiciary.
- In Israel, following a series of UNHCR-run training sessions and workshops targeting Israeli immigration officials, the process of registration and status determination of asylum-seekers was handed over to the relevant government structures in July 2009. Moreover, the "Hadera - Gadera" visa, which prohibits the presence of asylum-seekers and refugees in the central part of Israel, was eliminated in August 2009, representing a positive development.

- A workshop on asylum organized in Damascus, in the Syrian Arab Republic, in August 2009, was attended by a number of high ranking government officials. A series of refugee law/protection training activities are being undertaken in other countries in the region.
- With conditions in Iraq not being fully conducive to large-scale organized voluntary repatriation, UNHCR's strategy in the context of the Iraq operation will continue to aim at: a) preserving the protection space and providing assistance to vulnerable refugees and their host communities; b) enhancing the Office's capacity inside Iraq including expanding its activities in dealing with the reintegration of returnees and preparing for further returns; c) pursuing assistance and protection activities inside Iraq, targeting refugees and IDPs; and d) maintaining resettlement as an important component of the operation, targeting the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees. The cases of over 23,700 Iraqi refugees were submitted for resettlement in the period from January to end of July 2009, bringing the number of resettlement referrals from the beginning of the resettlement operation in 2007 to almost 77,750.
- A UNHCR-sponsored book on, "The Right to Asylum in Islam and International Refugee Law – A Comparative Study" was launched, jointly with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and Naif University, in June 2009 in Riyadh. The Office's efforts to foster partnerships with Gulf States and civil society institutions are yielding results. A significant financial contribution to UNHCR's programme in Pakistan was made by the Sheikh Khalifa Bin Hamad Foundation of the United Arab Emirates in July 2009.

*UNHCR
September 2009*