

The Middle East

Major developments

In mid-2002, UNHCR started working with other UN agencies and concerned governments on updated contingency plans in view of a possible outflow of refugees from Iraq to neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, UNHCR's regular protection-oriented work continued in all country offices.

Since 11 September 2001, some countries have imposed additional restrictions on resettlement, thereby slowing down the process. Consequently, although UNHCR's own efforts to clear the backlog of refugee status applications continued, the list of people waiting to be resettled grew even longer. While they wait, these growing numbers of individuals are entitled to basic assistance from UNHCR: at a time, unfortunately, when funding continues to decline.

After lengthy negotiations between the Governments of Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran, the voluntary repatriation of Iranian refugees in Iraq began in mid-2002. By the end of the year, more

Bahrain
Egypt
Iraq
Israel
Jordan
Kuwait
Lebanon
Oman
Qatar
Saudi Arabia
Syrian Arab Republic
United Arab Emirates
Yemen



than 1,100 Iranians had returned from Iraq with assistance from UNHCR. More than 500 Yemeni refugees were helped to repatriate from Egypt and Syria. Spontaneous repatriation of Iraqi refugees from Iran also continued.

Challenges and concerns

Although only a few countries in the Middle East are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the presence of asylum-seekers and refugees is generally tolerated while their status is being determined.

The situation in Iraq was the overriding concern throughout 2002. Living conditions of the entire population, including refugees, continued to deteriorate as a result of the sanctions imposed on the country, and Iraqi nationals continued to leave.

Funding shortages, coupled with an increase in the number of people entitled to assistance from UNHCR, have stretched the organisation's capacity to provide assistance. As the resettlement process

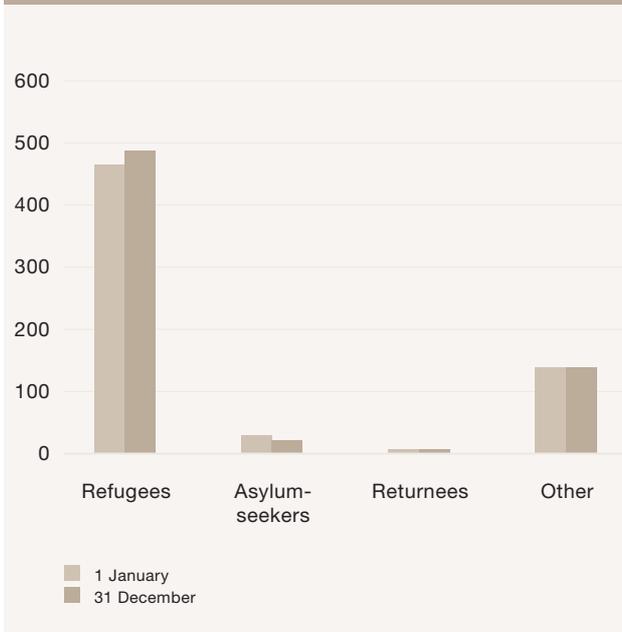
has slowed down, an additional burden has fallen on countries of asylum in the region. This may, in turn, have a negative impact on UNHCR's efforts to preserve and expand asylum space in the Middle East.

Although voluntary repatriation is the preferred durable solution, it is not always a feasible option for those who have sought asylum in the region. The situations in Iraq, Sudan and Somalia, for example, are not conducive to voluntary return.

Progress towards solutions

UNHCR continued to promote accession by the governments in the region to the 1951 Refugee Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The High Commissioner visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Yemen in October 2002, encouraging governments in the region to accede to those international instruments and to enter into a closer partnership with UNHCR to alleviate the plight of refugees. In this context, a memorandum

Persons of concern to UNHCR (in thousands)



of understanding is about to be signed between UNHCR and the Gulf Co-operation Council Secretariat, which aims to raise the importance attached to asylum, humanitarian assistance and other related refugee issues in the region.

Throughout the Middle Eastern region, the strengthening of refugee status determination procedures reduced waiting periods between initial submission of asylum applications, and status determination. In Egypt, for example, the process of status determination was dramatically accelerated following the engagement of a team of highly qualified staff, working as United Nations Volunteers. A total of 1,723 refugees were resettled from Egypt during 2002.

Operations

In **Egypt**, a total of 10,000 refugees fell under the protection mandate of UNHCR in 2002. Egypt is party to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol but lacks any comprehensive legal framework governing asylum issues. UNHCR's role is therefore to assist the Government in refugee status determination and in ensuring the protection of refugees pending the identification of durable solutions. UNHCR provided monthly subsistence allowances, medical and educational assistance and counselling to

approximately 7,000 refugees. Particular attention was paid to the specific needs of refugee women, children and other vulnerable individuals, through, for example, education assistance for children and literacy and vocational training opportunities for female refugees. A group of 123 elderly stateless persons was also assisted.

Forced to balance insufficient funding against increased demand from refugees and asylum-seekers, UNHCR had to undertake a series of prioritisation exercises, which led to a reduction in both the numbers of refugees benefiting from the programme and the level of assistance. More than 100 Yemeni refugees repatriated voluntarily during 2002. UNHCR also continued to work to enhance refugees' self-reliance.

In **Iraq**, UNHCR continued to provide international protection and complementary assistance to some 20,000 Iranian, 13,000 Turkish and 200 other refugees. More than 1,100 Iranian refugees were repatriated in 2002. Another group of some 8,000 Iranian refugees applied for voluntary repatriation in 2002; at year's end they were awaiting clearance by the concerned authorities. More than 300 Iranian refugees (100 from the northern parts of the country and 200 from the Al Tash Camp) were resettled.

Although the Iraqi Government, under the oil-for-food programme, provided food, health, medical and educational services to refugees as well as the local population, the sanctions seriously depleted the resources available in the country, affecting refugees and local population alike. UNHCR thus continued its activities to complement this limited assistance and ensure basic protection of refugees and asylum-seekers. The assistance



programme included the construction of a secondary school in Al Tash in 2002, and the maintenance of 10 existing schools, with a special emphasis placed upon girls' education.

The Office also assisted government officials to attend overseas training courses on refugee and human rights-related issues.

In **Jordan**, international protection was provided to around 1,000 refugees, mostly of Iraqi origin. In 2002, 485 refugees were resettled and four voluntarily repatriated to their country of origin. For most of the refugees in Jordan, resettlement to a third country remains the only viable durable solution.

Within the framework of the 1998 MOU signed between the Government of Jordan and UNHCR, the organisation continued to host workshops and seminars. Government authorities and civil society participated in these events and continued to express a positive attitude towards asylum-seekers and refugees. Efforts are being made to identify suitably experienced NGOs already working in Jordan as implementing partners in order to ensure optimal use of available resources and as a part of local capacity-building.

In **Lebanon**, UNHCR provided protection and assistance to 2,450 refugees of mainly Iraqi, Sudanese and Somali origin. In the absence of



Iraq: Prefabs given by UNHCR to displaced persons and returnees who cannot go back home. UNHCR / A. Roulet

Lebanese asylum procedures, UNHCR carries out refugee status determination. Negotiations are now underway between UNHCR and the Government of Lebanon on an MOU, which would provide a solid legal framework for the temporary stay of refugees and asylum-seekers in the country.

In **Israel**, UNHCR provided protection and assistance to some 150 refugees, while some 250 asylum-seekers from Côte d'Ivoire were granted temporary protection by the authorities. Asylum-seekers provided with UNHCR documentation are authorised to work in the country. The national refugee commission or National Status Granting Body (NSGB) has been operational since January 2002 and holds monthly meetings to examine asylum applications based on interviews conducted by UNHCR.

In **Saudi Arabia**, UNHCR continues to ensure the protection of 5,200 Iraqi refugees and 100 Afghan Hazara refugees in the Rafha Camp. Roughly 3,000 of the refugees in Rafha Camp have expressed the desire to be resettled to third countries. The remaining 2,000 prefer to remain in Saudi Arabia pending conditions conducive to their voluntary repatriation to Iraq. The Government of Saudi Arabia has agreed to allow this group to stay until they are ready to repatriate, provided that the group that wishes to be resettled departs for third countries as soon as possible. Despite repeated appeals from UNHCR, and several meetings with resettlement countries and the national authorities, no progress has been made on this exit strategy.

In addition to providing international protection to refugees in Saudi Arabia, UNHCR's Regional Office in Riyadh also supervised UNHCR's operations in **Kuwait** and the **United Arab Emirates**. In these countries UNHCR has a limited presence for monitoring, and intervention as necessary, for the international protection of refugees and asylum-seekers. The Office also co-ordinates activities in the countries of the Arab Gulf Co-operation Council.

In the **Syrian Arab Republic**, UNHCR provided protection and assistance to some 3,000 refugees mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. Meanwhile, UNHCR continued to support the residual caseload of refugees in the Hassake governorate. Substantial progress was also made towards the finalisation of the MOU, which will formalise

and strengthen co-operation between UNHCR and Syria. The MOU is expected to be signed during 2003. Almost 400 Yemeni refugees repatriated during the course of 2002, while more than 500 refugees were resettled, mainly to Canada and the USA.

The Government of **Yemen** and UNHCR estimate that there are 70,000 Somali refugees currently in the country. The Government accepts the Somalis as prima facie refugees. In 2002, UNHCR focused on strengthening refugee protection and registration, and on promoting refugee law through training government officials. In addition, UNHCR assisted some 11,000 refugees living in Al Kharaz camp as well as the most vulnerable urban refugees. New arrivals and detained refugees were registered and had access to health care and other assistance.

Non-Somali refugees, notably Ethiopian, Eritrean, Iraqi and Sudanese asylum-seekers, continued to undergo refugee status determination. Capacity building of government counterparts was conducted in areas of refugee registration, and in seven governorates training was given on the 1951 Convention and its relation to international human rights. Following a request from the Government, UNHCR is striving to build the Government's capacity in dealing with refugee issues and assisting in the preparation of national refugee legislation, on which substantial progress is expected over the coming months.

Funding

The funding shortfall in 2002 reduced the overall assistance provided to refugees. Successive reductions in programmes have led to some refugees falling below the poverty line. The human consequences include eviction, children unable to attend primary school, and poor health, with a marked increase in the incidence of illnesses such as tuberculosis.

Voluntary Contributions – Restricted / Earmarked (USD)

Earmarking ¹	Donor	Annual Programme Budget and Trust Funds	
		Income	Contribution
Iraq			
	Japan	600,000	600,000
Saudi Arabia			
	Saudi Arabia	150,550	150,550
Yemen			
	Italy	140,845	140,845
Middle East			
	United States of America	4,690,000	4,690,000
	Sweden	2,824,882	2,824,882
	Japan Association for UNHCR (JPN)	5,793	5,793
	Private Donors Japan	17	17
Total		8,412,087	8,412,087

¹ For more information on the various earmarkings, please refer to the Donor Profiles.

Budget and Expenditure (USD)

Country	Revised Budget	Expenditure
	Annual Programme Budget and Trust Funds	
Egypt	3,063,452	2,871,678
Iraq	3,398,407	3,255,088
Israel	72,130	66,211
Jordan	1,539,623	1,405,521
Lebanon	2,352,865	2,193,075
Saudi Arabia	1,964,217	1,937,923
Syrian Arab Republic	2,073,649	1,887,201
Yemen	3,514,462	3,314,824
Total	17,978,805	16,931,521