

Islamic Republic of Iran

Main objectives

- Facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Afghan and Iraqi refugees.
- Help to ensure asylum in the Islamic Republic of Iran for refugees who, for fear of persecution, are unable or unwilling to return to their countries.
- Promote the development of a legal framework to address the management of the situation of asylum-seekers and refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran.



Working environment

Recent developments

UNHCR has been actively facilitating the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees through the provision of information and a series of other activities. However, fewer returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2003 than in 2002 (a trend mirrored in Pakistan).

There are many reasons why Afghans may be reluctant to repatriate. Socio-economic conditions still appear to be better for refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran than in many areas of origin in Afghanistan. Despite rehabilitation and development efforts underway in Afghanistan, refugees are concerned about access to job opportunities, education, health and other basic services. The deterioration of the security situation in certain parts of Afghanistan, or for certain groups of Afghans, is an additional concern for some refugees. At the same time, other groups have, after 10-15 years' stay in the Islamic Republic of Iran, now integrated into Iranian society to the extent that they are reluctant to uproot themselves and their children and face the future in Afghanistan.

The low rate of repatriation in 2003 is clearly a major concern for the Iranian authorities and for UNHCR. It is hoped, however, that the political and development situation in Afghanistan will evolve, paving the way for a larger number of returns in 2004.

Planning figures

Population	Jan. 2004	Dec. 2004
Afghanistan (refugees) ¹	900,000	400,000
Iraq (refugees) ²	190,000	n/a
Total	1,090,000	400,000

¹ Based on official UNHCR figures. The Government estimates that there will be some 1.8 million Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran at the beginning of 2004.

² The situation in Iraq is so unpredictable that UNHCR cannot currently estimate how many refugees will return in 2004.

Total requirements: USD 20,930,693

Fortunately, the military intervention in Iraq in early 2003 did not trigger an influx of Iraqi refugees into the Islamic Republic of Iran, as feared. On the contrary, it raised hopes of repatriation for more than 200,000 Iraqi refugees already in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Following the end of the hostilities in May, UNHCR and the Iranian authorities began to explore that option. However, initial restrictions imposed by the coalition forces, and the deteriorating security situation in Iraq, have so far made it impossible for the Office to start any form of assisted voluntary repatriation of Iraqi refugees. Some refugees have nevertheless opted to return spontaneously from the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is hoped that in 2004 the security situation and the rehabilitation of basic infrastructure and public services in Iraq will improve sufficiently for an organised repatriation programme to start.

Constraints

The presence of a large Afghan refugee population is clearly an important issue on the domestic political agenda. There is significant unemployment in the country,

and there have been calls for an accelerated return of Afghans to their country and stricter enforcement of the laws governing their access to work and public services. With national elections expected in early 2004, this debate is likely to intensify.

The Government is taking measures to deport Afghans who are not officially registered with the authorities and are therefore considered to be illegal aliens. These deportations are expected to increase over the coming year. However, UNHCR and the Government have reached agreement on the establishment of screening facilities in the border areas so that those who have a fear of persecution if returned can be identified and accorded temporary asylum in a refugee camp.

UNHCR's programme is largely implemented through government departments, public institutions affiliated with the Government, and a few local non-governmental organisations. There are very few international NGOs present in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The authorities request that the international NGOs secure independent funding from sources other than UNHCR so that they bring an additional international contribution to the refugee programme.

Strategy

Protection and solutions

UNHCR continues to focus on phased, voluntary repatriation as the durable solution for the vast majority of the Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran. With this in mind, the Office has gradually reoriented its limited resources so as to provide increased support for assistance and services to returnees in Afghanistan, while decreasing its refugee assistance programmes in asylum countries.

At the same time, UNHCR is initiating discussions with the authorities to search for alternative solutions for those refugees who are unable or unwilling to return on account of their personal situation.

For the Iraqi refugee population, UNHCR is preparing to assist voluntary repatriation when the situation permits. Preparations include the setting up of voluntary repatriation centres, establishing basic structures in border areas for exit formalities and organising basic services for the returnees (health-screening and mine awareness training).

Assistance

The Afghan repatriation programme will continue to offer free transport for returnees and their belongings, medical

assistance in the voluntary repatriation centres, and mine awareness training at the border exit points. However, the food component (packages of food provided to returnees for the journey home) will be phased out in 2004.

Over the next year, UNHCR will also prioritise the funding and development of screening facilities for deportees in the border areas.

In line with the policy of focusing spending in Afghanistan and reducing it in asylum countries, UNHCR will, by June 2004, have phased out assistance to the relatively small number (some 32,000) of Afghan refugees currently residing in camps. It will also phase out educational activities in 2004 in line with repatriation objectives. In addition, the Office will reduce the scope of intervention by UNHCR Medical Referral Units (MRU) in 2004. MRU criteria will be more restrictive, and staffing levels will be reduced proportionally. UNHCR support to help camp refugees meet their hospital costs and settle refugee hospital bills in provinces not directly covered by MRUs will be phased out completely by January 2004.

UNHCR will also reduce the scope of the One Time Assistance (OTA) programme for vulnerable refugees through the introduction of more restrictive criteria.

The Office will, however, maintain basic assistance in the areas of water, health and education to some 7,500 Iraqi Kurdish refugees and 37,100 Iraqi Arab refugees residing in camps. UNHCR will strive to reorganise the basic services if spontaneous or organised returns to Iraq result in a significant shift in community structures within the camps.

Desired impact

The rationale for scaling down assistance programmes benefiting Afghan refugees is part of a strategy to achieve repatriation objectives and also to facilitate the exploration of new solutions for Afghans who cannot or do not wish to return. At the same time, by establishing a safety net, through the development of legal frameworks and institutions such as screening centres, UNHCR will address the protection needs of individual cases where there is a fear of persecution upon return.

Organisation and implementation

Management structure

The UNHCR Representative for the Islamic Republic of Iran is responsible for all aspects of the country programme. UNHCR maintains eight offices in Iran and



A refugee merchant selling dry goods at Gulshahr bazaar, Mashhad. UNHCR / A. Jamal

works with 189 staff (24 international, including one JPO, and 165 national).

Co-ordination

UNHCR's activities are closely co-ordinated with BAFIA, the department within the Ministry of Interior responsible for refugee matters, as well as with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The education and health components of the programme are co-ordinated with the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Health. The Office also maintains its long-term partnership with other United Nations agencies present in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in particular WFP and UNICEF.

Offices

Tehran

Ahwaz
Dogharoun
Kermanshah
Mashad
Orumieh
Zabol/Milak
Zahedan

Partners

Government agencies

Ministry of Education and Training
Ministry of Education and Training/Bureau of International and Scientific Co-operation
Ministry of Health
Ministry of Interior/Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs

NGOs

Iraqi Refugees Aid Council
Society for Protection of Children Suffering from Cancer
World Relief Foundation
Pooya Educational Research Association

Others

Trade Association of Passenger Transport Companies in Iran
Employees' Co-operative of the Ministry of Interior
Family Planning Association of Iran
Literacy Movement Organisation

Budget (USD)

Activities and services	Annual Programme
Protection, monitoring and co-ordination	4,666,114
Community services	585,492
Domestic needs	516,207
Education	452,612
Forestry	6,000
Health	3,294,790
Legal assistance	617,300
Operational support (to agencies)	521,542
Sanitation	144,248
Shelter / other infrastructure	462,869
Transport / logistics	7,057,502
Water	162,338
Total Operations	18,487,014
Programme support	2,443,679
Total	20,930,693