Update on UNHCR’s operations in the Middle East and North Africa - 2011

A. Introduction – critical challenges

UNHCR’s 50th Standing Committee comes at a time of unprecedented volatility in the region. The historic proportions of recent events in countries such as Egypt, Iraq and Tunisia provide challenges as well as opportunities for the Office. While much has been achieved through decades of engagement with States in the region, it is obvious that much more still needs to be done.

UNHCR will continue to work with Governments and civil society to maintain the existing protection space, and expand it where opportunities arise. In this context and during this anniversary year, UNHCR looks forward to significant and practical steps in developing national protection systems, while continuing to strive for the accession by States to the refugee and statelessness instruments.

In 2011, UNHCR’s work in the region will focus on: enhancing contingency planning and emergency response capacity; putting into practice the urban refugee policy, taking into consideration lessons learned from recent reviews; and working to further develop solutions for protracted refugee situations. The Office will also continue its proactive approach to identifying persons of concern in mixed migratory flows who are particularly vulnerable.

Mauritanian repatriation

The voluntary repatriation of the remaining Mauritanian refugees from Senegal resumed in October 2010. Since the start of the repatriation operation in January 2008, more than 20,000 refugees have repatriated from Senegal, and a further 5,200 persons are ready to return voluntarily once their documents have been cleared by the Government. With the end of the repatriation in sight, UNHCR will increasingly focus its efforts on working with the Mauritanian authorities to consolidate the national asylum system.

Confidence Building Measures programme

Family visits by air between refugees living in the Tindouf camps and their families in Western Sahara successfully resumed in January 2011, after months of suspension. The 2004 Plan of Action on the Confidence Building Measures (CBM) programme was discussed by all parties and the United Nations during a meeting hosted by UNHCR in February 2011. The positive outcome of the meeting reconfirmed the full commitment of all parties to implement the CBM programme.

Tunisia

In Tunisia, UNHCR is in dialogue with the transitional Government and has reiterated its readiness to discuss cooperation and the establishment of a fully-fledged UNHCR presence in the country.
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya

At the time of reporting, UNHCR had been awaiting a reply from the Government of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya regarding the proposed draft cooperation agreement submitted last year, with the aim of formalizing its presence and activities in the country. However, unfolding events may change UNHCR’s priorities.

Egypt

In Egypt, some 40,000 refugees are residing in urban areas, many of whom live on limited resources and have become particularly vulnerable as a result of the recent instability in the country. During a brief period in which all UN premises were closed for security reasons, UNHCR staff continued to work from home. However, the UNHCR office has now reopened.

Situation at the Egyptian-Israeli border

Since November 2010, Israel has witnessed an increase in new arrivals, mainly Eritreans and Sudanese crossing the border from Egypt. The Government’s new measures to deal with the influx present specific challenges including the absence of access to services; deficiencies in the refugee status determination (RSD) process; the detention of rejected asylum-seekers; and the construction of a barrier along the border with Egypt. There are also continuing reports of the serious abuse of asylum-seekers during their journey to Israel at the hand of smugglers in the Sinai Peninsula.

Iraq situation

In Iraq, this is a time of opportunity for the new Government to address Iraqi displacement, including through closer cooperation with neighbouring countries. While continuing to provide protection and assistance to displaced Iraqis, UNHCR will work to engage the Government in finding a long-term solution to their plight.

In January 2011, UNHCR launched the Regional Response Plan for Iraqi refugees, including an inter-agency appeal for US$ 280 million. This new appeal aims to respond to the needs of over 190,000 Iraqi refugees still registered with UNHCR in 12 hosting countries in the region, including Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Turkey, and the six Gulf States. While the number of Iraqi refugees in the region has significantly decreased, tremendous needs still exist, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Between June and December 2010, some 500 Iraqis were deported to Baghdad from several western European countries. Among the deportees were families with young children and persons belonging to religious and ethnic groups who remain particularly at risk in Iraq. While UNHCR welcomes the decrease in the level of generalized violence, the Office reiterates its position that asylum-seekers who originate from Iraq’s five central Governorates of Baghdad, Diyala, Ninewa, Salah-al-Din and Kirkuk, should not be returned and should continue to benefit from international protection.

Yemen

In Yemen, the influx of Somali refugees crossing the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea in 2010 dropped by 50 per cent compared to the previous year. This is mainly due to increased road checks and arrests of smugglers in Somalia. Two out of three of the 53,400 new arrivals on Yemen’s shores were Ethiopian migrants escaping poverty and lack of opportunities in their own country.

In January 2011, a joint high-level mission to Yemen by UNHCR and the European Union highlighted the plight of nearly 300,000 internally displaced Yemeni civilians. Instability and slow implementation of the 2010 peace agreement is prolonging their displacement with only 20,000 Yemenis having returned to Sa’ada Governorate. In the meantime, obtaining safer and broader humanitarian access in all areas affected by the conflict remains the main challenge.
B. Analysis of challenges and response strategies

Confidence Building Measures programme

Since the CBM programme began in 2004, 13,000 out of over 40,000 people have benefited from the opportunity to see their families after more than three decades of separation. During the CBM meeting in February 2011, as referred to in section A, the parties agreed to: find ways to maximize the links between the families divided by the conflict; cooperate fully with UNHCR in implementing the 2004 Plan of Action; and preserve the humanitarian character of the CBM operation. Several steps were agreed to, including the deployment of a technical assessment mission to consider road travel as an option for family visits, and the organization of a seminar with the participation of Sahrawi communities living in refugee camps and those in the Territory.

As part of the comprehensive protection strategy in the Tindouf camps and in cooperation with the Sahrawi leadership, UNHCR is in the process of establishing a permanent presence in each of the camps. Pending the construction of the field units, UNHCR staff are travelling more frequently to the camps and family visits are being increased.

Situation at the Egyptian-Israeli border

The Office has enhanced its efforts with the Israeli and Egyptian Governments to put in place protection-sensitive mechanisms to deal with the continuing irregular movements of migrants and asylum-seekers from sub-Saharan countries who transit through Egypt and cross the Sinai border in search of protection and better economic opportunities. These efforts include the implementation of UNHCR’s 10-Point Plan of Action. The influx of asylum-seekers in Israel now numbers about 1,000 a month and an estimated 30,000 asylum-seekers are now residing in Israel.

Iraq situation

Iraq continues to host some 38,000 Iranian, Palestinian, Syrian and Turkish refugees, whom UNHCR will continue to protect and assist. In addition, some 1.3 million IDPs have been registered, including 500,000 Iraqis living in dire conditions in 360 settlements across Iraq, more than a third of whom are in Baghdad. In 2011, one of UNHCR’s main priorities will be to target these very vulnerable IDPs through relief assistance and help ensure they receive Government support for land allocation or voluntary return.

While over 89,000 Iraqi refugees have returned home in the past three years, the rate of return has slowed recently and new asylum-seekers continue to register with UNHCR in neighbouring countries. At the end of 2010, a total of 193,000 Iraqi refugees were registered in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as in other countries of the region. This represents a considerable decrease from the 230,000 registered a year earlier.

At the same time, the proportion of Iraqi refugees at risk has increased. Some 34 per cent of the registered caseload are currently considered to be vulnerable, including thousands of people with critical health conditions and a significant number of female-headed households.

Lebanon

In order to enhance protection and assistance for refugees and IDPs in Lebanon, UNHCR has embarked on a programme to strengthen the capacity of 20 Social Development Centres throughout the country. This is being closely coordinated with the Ministry of Social Affairs and will be an integral part of a reinforced contingency plan for the country. Lebanon continues to receive significant numbers of Iraqis and serves as the resettlement hub for the region.

Yemen

The Yemeni Government maintains its policy of granting prima facie refugee status to Somalis, while asylum space for non-Somali refugees is still restricted. There are more than 170,000 registered Somali refugees in Yemen, of which some 16,000 arrived in 2010 alone. UNHCR is working to enlarge the protection space for Somali and non-Somali refugees and asylum-seekers, including by providing support for the administrative and
legal set-up of the new Bureau for Refugees, endorsed in February 2010. The Office is also looking at further ways to implement the urban refugee policy.

With regard to the IDPs in northern Yemen, UNHCR continues to advocate for humanitarian access despite difficult political and security circumstances. Pending the signature of an overall peace agreement, the United Nations in Yemen has initiated a declaration of intention related to humanitarian access in Sa’ada and adjacent areas, which is to be signed by the Government, the Al-Houthi movement, and the UN Country Team.

Due to tightened border security controls between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, hundreds of migrants have been abandoned and remain on the Yemeni side of the border. Since September 2010, UNHCR has been able to offer limited assistance from across the border and, is collaborating with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to help stranded migrants repatriate voluntarily to Ethiopia.

UNHCR is further strengthening its partnership with the League of Arab States, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and civil society institutions in the region. The Office is also working with prominent figures in the region to promote refugee rights. Fundraising activities are being expanded through the strengthening of an external relations hub in the United Arab Emirates, and the establishment of a liaison office in Qatar is envisaged.

C. Financial information

The 2011 Global Needs Assessment budget of the Middle East and North Africa region amounts to US$ 498.3 million. Operations budgeted under Pillars 3 and 4 which are in need of contributions include Iraq and Yemen. Funding needs for UNHCR’s operation in Yemen are included in the 2011 Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) and the Iraqi refugee needs form part of the 2011 Regional Response Plan for Iraqi Refugees.