



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

Executive Committee Summary

Country : Syrian Arab Republic

Planning Year : 2006

2006 Syria Country Operations Plan

Part I: Executive Committee Summary

(a) Context and Beneficiary Populations

Political context

Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) is not a party to the 1951 Convention or 1967 Protocol and has not adopted any national legislative or administrative provisions on issues related to asylum. UNHCR made several demarches on finalization of the Memorandum of Understanding between UNHCR and SAR, which it considers as an important step towards institutionalization of relations between UNHCR and Syria. Similarly, discussions were initiated with the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on accession to the 1951 Convention and in encouraging the authorities to adopt an institutional framework in dealing with the issues relating to asylum.

In the wake of the war in Iraq in March 2003, Temporary Protection Regime (TPR) has been applied for all Iraqi nationals in Syria upon the Syrian authorities' consent.

The political and historical context of the Middle East influences UNHCR's refugee work in all aspects be it political or practical. This influence stems from the Palestinian refugee question and the unresolved conflict.

Protection issues

The Syrian Government continues to respect generally the recognition Letter and asylum Seekers Attestation Letter issued to those registered with UNHCR office in Damascus. The Syrian Government also respects this arrangement for the Palestinians who entered Syria after the military operations in Iraq and who were registered by UNHCR.

Efforts towards encouraging Syria to accede to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees remained an important objective. Consistent discussions are undertaken with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Syrian Government. The Government has expressed in principle its consent to accede to the 1951 Geneva Convention and UNHCR Damascus embarked on a series of activities involving advocacy and dissemination of information concerning the 1951 Geneva Convention among various Syrian Government departments, the Faculty of Law of the Damascus University as inclusion of Refugee law studies as part of the curriculum for the post graduation student.

New immigration legislation/regulations, which entered into force in 2004-2005, stipulates that if an alien is expelled from SAR territory, he/she may not be allowed to return except with the permission of the Minister of Interior. In the case of Arab nationals, they may stay in SAR for three months, beyond which a request for residence permit should be submitted to the Immigration and Passports Department. There are no specific legal or administrative provisions for asylum seekers and refugees. They are treated in accordance to the relevant provisions of the immigration laws.

UNHCR is closely monitoring the issues related to detention and deportation of asylum seekers /refugees. Through discussions with high officials of the Ministry of Interior and the Immigration Department access to asylum seekers has been insured. The attitude of the Syrian authorities with asylum-seekers staying illegally in the country continued to be more restrictive. The tightening of resettlement criteria by resettlement countries is expected to call for more interventions of UNHCR on behalf of individual cases so as to prevent deportation and ensure the access of the concerned to the status determination process.

UNHCR's role

The overall objective for UNHCR in the country is to provide protection and assistance to persons in need, to seek durable solutions for them, to advocate the protection concepts and to gradually build the capacity of the local partners in dealing with asylum issues. In this context, UNHCR strives to determine the status of asylum applicants, to exercise its mandate for those found to be in need of international protection, to assist the most needy among them and to identify and implement the appropriate durable solutions for them. In parallel, the Office works towards disseminating the asylum concepts among selected audiences and strengthening its relationship with the government and other local partners.

The office would continue concerted and systematic activities towards promotion of accession to the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol. UNHCR Damascus will work on establishing viable and sustained capacity and institutions of asylum in Syria and encourage Syria in burden and responsibility sharing towards asylum seekers and refugees. The Syrian authorities will be encouraged to adopt an institutional framework for asylum without prejudice to the issue of the Palestinian refugees.

Overview of beneficiary populations

Asylum-seekers from various countries continue to enter Syria claiming the need for international protection. The average number of new cases approaching the office is about 600 per month. This number has increased substantially especially since the beginning of 2004. Most of them originate from Iraq, but the office has also been approached by asylum seekers from Sudan, Somalia, Iran and some North African countries.

At the end of the year 2004, there were 15,604 individuals refugees with 13,036 Iraqi individuals recognised under the temporary protection regime and 2,568 individuals recognised under UNHCR's mandate. The breakdown of the recognized refugees shows 14391 Iraqi individuals, 476 Somalis, 166 Sudanese, 360 Afghans and 220 from other nationalities. In 2004, Iraqis represented 82.50% of the asylum-seekers followed by Sudanese (1,89 %) and Somalis 4.36 %).

The majority of the Iraqi asylum-seekers enters Syria alone and is mostly of Arab ethnicity, Shi'a Muslims originating from the Southern and central parts of Iraq. Most of the asylum applicants from Somalia and Sudan enter Syria through the Damascus airport, with a small number of asylum seekers arriving in Lattakia port. It should be noted that over 90 % of asylum-seekers enter Syria in a legal manner. While most of

the asylum seekers are dispersed in various governorates in Syria, the majority of them live in urban set-ups in Damascus or in the towns and cities around Damascus.

At present, asylum seeker certificates are issued in an A4 format certificate of recognition. UNHCR will pursue discussions with the local authorities to agree on issuance of new and more secure documents. They will also be encouraged to co-sign these documents. UNHCR is planning by 2006 to start the issuance of these certificates with a secured and solid format.

The assistance component of UNHCR's refugee work is crucial for the level of livelihood that the refugee will be able to sustain in Syria. Refugees in Syria do not enjoy the right to work, and albeit some refugees indeed manage to attend informal employment, this legal constraint is a serious obstacle in UNHCR's search for implementing sustainable self-reliance activities that would relieve them from dependency on the office's assistance. Although Palestinian refugees do have the right to work, it is assumed that the lack of providing the legal right to work to other refugees will continue to be a constraint.

As the office witnessed an increase in single women approaching the office from especially Iraq, Somalia and Sudan, particular focus was paid to attend to their needs especially with regard to shelter. Material support will be provided to convents in Damascus that housed a group of single females of concern to UNHCR. This support will continue in a more formalized manner, and other similar residences will be approached as an encouragement to shelter vulnerable persons of concern to UNHCR.

Policy issues

In view of the declared intention of the Syrian Government to accede to the 1951 Geneva Convention, UNHCR Syria would also develop a multi-year strategy to operationalise the asylum procedures through a legal framework. This would be achieved through investment in capacity and institutional building. Meanwhile, UNHCR Syria would continue to sensitise the Syrian Government of its responsibilities towards protection of refugees and asylum seekers and get involved in burden and responsibility sharing.

Within the context of Syria's accession to the 1951 Geneva Convention, UNHCR will continue to engage the authorities in institutionalising the asylum procedures and capacity building. The initiatives will consist of a range of activities including training and briefing sessions and high-level meetings and cooperation. The training sessions will include topics on UNHCR's mandate, refugee and human rights issues, and the different forms of international protection e.g. temporary protection and complementary protection.

Depending on the eventual accession of SAR to the 1951 Geneva Convention UNHCR will begin to prepare for the establishment of a joint refugee status determination committee with the participation of selected Syrian authorities and UNHCR. The work of this committee is indeed a long term activity, and while it will constitute a concrete output of UNHCR's engagement strategy with the Syrian authorities, it will ultimately also form part of UNHCR's phase out strategy;

UNHCR will continue its discussions with the local and national-level authorities on issues such as respect to the principle of non-refoulement and detention of refugees on basis of illegal presence or entry on the SAR territory. Reference will be made to the already internalized understanding of these principles vis-à-vis Palestinian refugees. An agreement with the authorities is essential and would ensure a structured and formalized approach, which will improve the now more uncertain informal verbal agreement.

Capacity and presence of partners

With regard to policy and protection related issues, UNHCR Damascus works in close coordination with the government stakeholders such as the Department of International Organizations (MFA), the Department of Immigration and Passports (MOI) and relevant security branches. With regard to the design and implementation of the assistance program, the main partners of UNHCR are the Syrian Red Crescent (SARC), the Syrian Women Union (SWU) for urban refugees and, for the rural refugees staying in Hassake, the Office of the Governor of the province.

Assistance to urban refugees will continue to be provided through the Syrian Red Crescent (SARC) and the Syrian Women Union (SWU). Joint coordination meetings and monitoring visits will continue to be held. The existing Needs Assessment Committee (NAC) comprising UNHCR and the SRCO will be extended to include the SWU as well. Counseling activities will be carried out by a different set of actors. The main responsibility for counseling will be with the focal point for legal counseling and the Community Services Officer. In addition, SRCO through its needs assessments and home visits will complement further UNHCR's counseling system;

In close cooperation with its implementing partners SARC and SWU, UNHCR will continue to individually assess the needs of refugees and provide the required assistance. The needs of the already assisted refugee families will regularly be reviewed and their assistance package will be adjusted accordingly;

Presence and roles of other UN and international organisations

UNHCR Syria continues to actively participate in the UN Country Team and the UN Security Coordination arrangements. UNHCR has also been designated the Chair of the UN Coordination for drafting and updating the UN Contingency Plan for Emergency Preparedness and Response. UNHCR would maintain close working relations with the UN agencies to develop on the complementarities of various UN programmes for enhancing the protection of women and children and prevention of gender based violence and combat HIV/AIDS pandemic among persons of concern to UNHCR. UNHCR would build in particular close cooperation with UN agencies such as UNICEF, WFP, WHO, UNRWA, UNFPA and other agencies to improve the programme delivery system and exchange of information.

(b) Selected Programme Goals and Objectives

UNHCR in Syria will continue to perform its mandate activities related to protection of asylum seekers and refugees. It will update its Guidelines on Standard Operating Procedure and consistent to UNHCR policies and practices all asylum-seekers and refugees continue to receive appropriate individual documentation that are generally respected by the host government.

Participatory planning and Gender and Age perspective would be fully incorporated all levels of the protection and programme design, assessment, monitoring and evaluation.

Focus will be particularly on policy priorities for Iraqis under Temporary Protection and in addressing minimum standards of humanitarian assistance in various sectors as nutrition, health, schools and community services for all refugees. In view of the large number of Iraqis, support would be provided to the host country and refugee hosting countries when required.

In case the repatriation activities are resuming for either Iraqi or Sudanese refugees, the office will actively promote the voluntary, safe and dignified repatriation of refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR. In view of any such development, UNHCR Syria will update its Voluntary Repatriation Plan.

Due to lack of any prospect for local integration, UNHCR Syria will vigorously pursue all feasible initiatives and opportunities for durable solutions for refugees. In this process, the key objective would continue to be identifying and addressing all the legitimate and deserving resettlement needs and enhance the quality and credibility of the resettlement submissions. Efforts would be made to increase the predictability aspect within the resettlement process.

UNHCR Syria will continue to engage and encourage the Syrian Government to access the 1951 Geneva Convention. UNHCR Damascus will continue its activities to enlarge the protection space in the country through promotion of the asylum concepts, training and close contacts with the local partners. Furthermore, in order to provide a sustainable protection framework in Syria, UNHCR continues to engage the Syrian government to adopt an institutional frame for asylum.

UNHCR will consolidate and expand the partnership with various UN agencies and civil society to foster complementarities between UNHCR's protection mandate and to involve more partners in protecting and assisting refugees.