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Update on UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa

A. Situational analysis including new developments

Unrest in the Syrian Arab Republic over the past two years has forced two million refugees to flee to Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Smaller numbers of Syrian refugees have sought protection further afield, mainly in North Africa, the Gulf States and Europe. UNHCR and host governments have registered some 1.3 million Syrian refugees this year alone. Inside the Syrian Arab Republic, the continued unraveling of the security, political, economic and social conditions resulted in an estimated 6.8 million Syrians needing humanitarian assistance, including more than 4.25 million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

As part of the United Nations Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan, UNHCR and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent have mounted a cash and material assistance operation that aims to reach 600,000 internally displaced families (3 million individuals) by the end of 2013. Between the beginning 2012 and August 2013, the number of Iraqi refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic dropped from 64,000 to 43,000.

In Lebanon, some 740,000 refugees and asylum-seekers – the overwhelming majority of whom are Syrians – have been registered or are awaiting registration, although the total figure of Syrians in the country is believed to be much higher. In addition, some 6,500 Iraqi refugees remain in Beirut. Refugees are being hosted by local communities across Lebanon, putting the country's resources and fragile political and social balance under heavy strain.

The Jordanian Government estimates that more than 600,000 refugees have entered the country since the beginning of the Syria crisis. Close to 520,000 have been registered by UNHCR or are awaiting registration. The majority are being hosted in local communities. A new camp is under construction in Azraq to complement the capacity of Zaatari camp, which currently hosts 122,000 refugees – well over capacity. Some 27,000 Iraqi refugees are also being supported by UNHCR in Jordan.

Iraq is hosting over 200,000 Syrian refugees, mainly in the Kurdistan region, as well as 38,000 refugees from other countries. More than one million Iraqis remain internally displaced, many of whom are living in extremely difficult conditions, including occupying space in public buildings and informal settlements. UNHCR is assisting vulnerable IDPs with material assistance and legal advice, while supporting the authorities in the identification of durable solutions for this group.

In line with a memorandum of understanding between the Government of Iraq and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), UNHCR continues to review the protection needs of the residents of Camp Hurriya in Baghdad. As a contribution to international solidarity and burden-sharing, the Government of Albania agreed to accept 210 individuals, and their relocation is expected to be finalized by the end of September 2013. More than 220 people have departed Camp Hurriya on resettlement or through other humanitarian arrangements. The slow response of resettlement countries in offering places for this caseload remains a challenge.

The number of Iraqi refugees registered in the region has decreased from 126,000 at the end of 2012 to 103,000 nine months later. Despite the volatile security situation, some 100,000 refugees have returned to Iraq since July 2012.

Yemen continues to demonstrate hospitality towards refugees, despite the challenges posed by the civil unrest and fragile security, political, economic and social situation in the country. Yemen is affected by a mixed flow of asylum-seekers and migrants and currently hosts 239,000 refugees, mainly from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. Between January and June 2013, the number of new arrivals along the Red Sea and Arabian Sea coastlines reached over 46,400 persons. In November 2013, Yemen is expected to host a regional conference on mixed migration in view of the regional dimension of the population movements. As of July 2013, the number of IDPs in the country was 306,000, a decrease of 21 per cent since the end of 2012, mainly due to the mass return to Abyan in the south of Yemen. The adoption by the Government of the national policy on IDPs marks an important step toward addressing and resolving internal displacement in the country.

UNHCR further strengthened its partnerships in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including resource mobilization efforts that resulted in unprecedented contributions for the Syria emergency and other operations. In close coordination with the GCC Secretariat, the Office organized a regional conference on statelessness in Istanbul in May 2013, with the participation of government officials from the GCC. This conference represents important progress on cooperation for the prevention and reduction of statelessness in the region.

In Israel, there are over 55,000 persons of concern to UNHCR, 90 per cent of whom are from Eritrea and the Sudan. UNHCR continues to advocate for these populations to have access to the Government's refugee status determination (RSD) procedures and basic services. As a result of increased security measures and legislative action, which have restricted asylum space, the number of new arrivals in Israel in 2013 has decreased significantly compared to previous years.

New arrivals in Israel continue to report grave human rights violations at the hands of smugglers and traffickers in the Sinai Peninsula. A complex criminal network engages in human rights smuggling from countries such as Eritrea and Sudan. In response, UNHCR has developed a regional strategy to support the protection of these persons of concern.

In Egypt, the Office remains concerned about the impact of recent unrest upon persons of concern. The number of Syrian refugees now registered with UNHCR stands at 90,000, though the Government estimates that more than 250,000 Syrians are in the country. Syrians have generally been welcome and have access to employment and basic services. UNHCR is working with the Government to ensure that adequate protection and assistance are provided to this population. In addition to Syrians, the number of refugees of other nationalities registered with UNHCR stands at 27,600, while the number of asylum-seekers is on the rise. UNHCR continues to implement accelerated RSD procedures for Sudanese asylum-seekers (the largest category among this group) and submitted 850 persons for resettlement so far in 2013. Of these, more than 600 departed for third countries. As of July, the total camp population in Salloum at the Egyptian-Libyan border stood at 1,350 individuals, mainly Sudanese. From this group, the total number of refugees who have departed for resettlement stands at 930.

In Libya, close to 13,000 Syrians have been registered, and UNHCR has launched a cash assistance programme targeting vulnerable families. Pending establishment of a national asylum system and a memorandum of understanding between the Libyan Government and UNHCR, a progressive resumption of registration and RSD activities is underway. The Office has also organized medical assistance for persons of concern intercepted at sea. In July alone, 21 boats, with approximately 3,320 persons, are known to have departed from Libya in an irregular manner. Of these, two boats reached Malta, while the rest landed in Italy. The situation in detention centres in Libya remains a concern as the detainees include persons in need of international protection.

In Tunisia, Shousha Camp was closed at the end of June 2013. UNHCR is working with partners and the Government to find solutions for some 300 rejected asylum-seekers and 400 recognized refugees who are unlikely to be immediately resettled. The total number of refugees resettled since the beginning of the Libya crisis has now reached 3,250. As of 30 June, there are 330 asylum-seekers and 90 refugees in Tunis.

In Algeria, significant numbers of Malians have sought safety along the border inside the country and are being hosted by families. The number of Syrians arriving continues to grow. Both populations are being assisted by the Algerian Red Crescent.

Major donors have announced significant cuts (up to 70 per cent) in bilateral aid for 2013 for Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps. Sectors affected include water, health, sanitation, agriculture, education and youth activities. This adds to the demands being placed on UNHCR to fill major assistance gaps.

At the Geneva meeting in July to discuss the confidence-building measures (CBM) with the parties, Morocco and the Frente POLISARIO, and Algeria and Mauritania as neighbouring countries, and UNHCR, it was agreed to conduct a final registration of beneficiaries of the family visits programme and to conduct a cultural seminar in the Azores, Portugal. The flight schedule of family visits for 2014 was also agreed. Since the beginning of the CBM operation in March 2004, more than 4,200 families (19,700 individuals) have benefited from the family visits programme.

In Morocco, the number of asylum-seekers from sub-Saharan Africa and the Syrian Arab Republic approaching UNHCR continues to rise. Efforts are being made with the Government to establish a national asylum system. UNHCR continues to provide training to prosecutors, police officials and *gendarmerie*, as well as briefings to civil society.

The number of Malian refugees in Mauritania stood at some 72,200 at the end of July. Of the 8,470 eligible voters from Mbera Camp on the electoral lists, over 800 voted in the first round of the Mali elections. In the second round, 3,120 voted, representing 36.8 per cent voter turnout. Separate biometric verifications by UNHCR and the Government of the number of Malian refugees in Mauritania are underway. Once completed, the results will be shared with partners to facilitate protection and assistance activities for this group.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving strategic priorities

UNHCR continues to provide the predominantly urban refugee populations in the region with protection and assistance adapted to their needs. It also assists governments, as appropriate, to develop fair and efficient legislative and administrative frameworks for asylum. The Office's priorities are delivering life-saving assistance; ensuring protection for all persons of concern, using resettlement as a protection tool; and preparing for new emergencies. Continuing insecurity has affected humanitarian operations and access throughout the region.

Mixed migration movements continue from the sub-Saharan/Horn of Africa regions, across the Gulf of Aden, the Mediterranean, Yemen and the Sinai in Egypt. The Government of Yemen, in collaboration with UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration, is convening a regional conference with the objective of developing a regional plan of action to address mixed migration and refugee flows from the Horn of Africa.

In Iraq, UNHCR, in cooperation with the Permanent Committee for Refugees of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, delivered identification cards to 1,580 refugees. This allows them to have freedom of movement and full access to basic services and the labour market.

Assistance to refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic – both financial aid to help them relocate to safer areas and material assistance – continues despite the ongoing insecurity. The cooperation framework between UNHCR and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour allows refugees with special needs to access government-provided social services. UNHCR's refugee programme in the Syrian Arab Republic has been successful in terms of meeting basic assistance objectives and the main global strategic priorities.

C. Financial information

During the first semester of 2013, the Executive Committee approved budget for the Middle East and North Africa region was revised from US\$ 593.0 million to US\$ 1.6 billion. The main increase is related to the Syria situation, for activities targeting nearly 2 million Syrian refugees and more than 4 million IDPs. In response to rising needs, the fifth Regional Response Plan for Syrian refugees (RRP5) was launched in July 2013, with a total budget of US\$ 1.1 billion for country programmes outside the Syrian Arab Republic. Meanwhile, the Syrian Humanitarian Assistance and Response Plan for inside the country included US\$ 248.7 million for UNHCR's activities.

While the Mauritania and Yemen situations have increased by US\$ 2.1 million and US\$ 13.0 million respectively, needs in the North Africa sub-region also are increasing due to political unrest in several countries. Resource limitations are affecting the delivery of assistance to refugees and will have a negative impact on protection space in the North Africa sub-region.
