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## **Update on UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa - 2010**

This update presents some examples of challenges, progress and developments in the region since the last strategic overview presented to the 47<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee in March 2010. A more comprehensive report will be provided in the forthcoming Global Appeal 2011 Update.

### **A: Major challenges and new developments**

The overall security situation in **Iraq** has remained precarious. While the outcome of the March elections was expected to bring about a certain degree of stability and better prospects for the future of hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), the country has remained in a political vacuum as a result of continuing differences on the way to form a Government, fuelling more uncertainty and tension.

Inside Iraq, despite severe security and logistical limitations, the Office maintains a strategic presence in order to respond to the protection and humanitarian needs of persons of concern, including preparations for larger scale assisted voluntary repatriation and reintegration, once conditions permit. Some 30 international staff have been deployed inside Iraq (Baghdad, Erbil, Basra, Mosul and Kirkuk), while over 120 national staff are working in almost every governorate in the country. Innovative tools have been introduced to monitor and evaluate activities, including through a GPS-based project tracking database. This is proving very helpful in facilitating UNHCR's enhanced engagement in the IDP and squatter camps as well as in the construction and rehabilitation of shelters.

During his visit to the **Syrian Arab Republic** in June 2010, the High Commissioner signed a cooperation agreement with the Syrian authorities, formalizing UNHCR's presence and activities in the country and providing greater space for interaction with Syrian partners.

Thanks to the active engagement of resettlement countries and the open policy of the Syrian Arab Republic, the vast majority of the 2,500 **Palestinian refugees** formerly stranded in the Iraqi-Syrian border area have either been resettled or relocated to sites inside the Syrian Arab Republic. Following the closure of two camps hosting ex-Iraqi-based Palestinian refugees, UNHCR is now working towards the closure of the desolate and remote Al Waleed camp at the Iraqi border and Al Hol camp in the Syrian Arab Republic, by the end of this year.

The number of Somali arrivals in **Yemen** during the first half of 2010 has dropped by more than half compared to the same period in 2009. This decrease can be attributed to the security developments in Somalia, including tightened control over migration routes to and from Bossasso, a popular point of departure. The rate of arrival from Djibouti of non-Somalis has remained similar to the same period last year.

In recent years, UNHCR has registered more than 170,000 refugees, predominantly Somali, at reception centres along the Yemeni coast, including some 7,000 out of an estimated 12,000 arrivals between January and June 2010. Since the beginning of the joint registration exercise in 2009, the Government has registered 54,900 Somali refugees.

Since the Presidential signature of the Decree on the establishment of a Yemeni Bureau for Refugees last February, UNHCR is supporting the National Committee for Refugee Affairs in the development of a national asylum system and refugee legislation as well as the establishment of an administrative structure. UNHCR has also supported the Yemeni authorities in the development and implementation of an urban refugee policy.

The already volatile security situation inside Yemen is being exacerbated by frequent confrontations between Government and Al-Houthi forces, and between the Government and the secessionist southern movement. In addition, there are mounting threats to security from other armed groups, against a background of declining oil revenues and accelerating depreciation of the Yemeni Rial. These are real challenges to the preservation of protection and humanitarian space for refugees, IDPs and other persons of concern. The Office's advocacy efforts and the February 2010 ceasefire, to which all parties re-committed themselves in August, are expected to facilitate humanitarian access to the affected areas and to displaced populations.

UNHCR provides protection and assistance to around 60 per cent of the 342,000 registered IDPs inside Yemen. IDP registration is now undertaken by the national authorities, with technical support from UNHCR. Despite the ceasefire, by the end of July, only some 20,000 of the 342,000 persons registered as internally displaced had returned to their homes. Lack of Government presence in several areas, sporadic security incidents, the presence of mines and a high degree of destruction, combined with the lack of basic services in most of the Sa'ada Governorate, are the main impediments to return.

Access by UNHCR to non-Somali illegal migrants and asylum-seekers in Yemen has improved but remains precarious due to the absence of adequate local asylum procedures and the reluctance of many persons of concern to register.

**Israel** has shared draft refugee status determination (RSD) regulations with UNHCR for comment. While status determination is to be undertaken by the Government, UNHCR would continue to have a role in the RSD process. Despite recent efforts by the Israeli Government, supported by UNHCR, to enact a national asylum system, significant protection challenges remain for persons of concern in the country. These challenges mainly stem from the absence of asylum legislation, national security concerns and the recent increase in the number of asylum-seekers.

Large numbers of persons originating mainly from African countries are still tempted to cross the highly sensitive **Egyptian border** into Israel. A mission by the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection to the region in mid-March 2010 provided an opportunity to discuss a number of proposals aimed at addressing the humanitarian/protection dimensions of these cross-border movements, and to call upon both Egypt and Israel to negotiate appropriate protection-sensitive and human rights-oriented mechanisms to manage the situation.

In early June 2010, UNHCR received instructions from the Government of the **Libyan Arab Jamahiriya** to close down its office and cease its activities in the country. Dialogue resumed with a high-level visit by the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection to Tripoli on 24 June 2010, during which it was agreed with the authorities that UNHCR could resume its work for the currently registered caseload under the umbrella of the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Tripoli. Following the visit, UNHCR submitted to the Libyan Government a draft proposal for new working arrangements which is currently being reviewed.

During the 14th meeting of the UNHCR-Senegal-Mauritania Tripartite Commission held in Nouakchott in July 2010, the Government of **Mauritania** communicated its

agreement to resume the voluntary repatriation movement from Senegal, which had been on hold since January 2010. The process will resume after the rainy season (October) for some 2,480 refugees whose return forms have already been cleared.

In **Algeria**, UNHCR is engaged in discussions with the Government to put in place a national asylum law. In March 2010, in consultation with the Sahrawi refugee leadership, a comprehensive protection strategy was developed to address the protection gaps in the Tindouf camps. The main element in this strategy is the establishment of a permanent UNHCR presence, through field protection units in each of the camps.

Further to the High Commissioner's proposal to expand the current Confidence Building Measures (CBM) programme for refugees from Western Sahara, a general evaluation of the existing programme has taken place with all parties concerned and discussions on the family visits programme are ongoing.

In **Morocco**, UNHCR has been able to forge important partnerships and to hold a considerable number of capacity-building sessions with judges, lawyers and police officials. A Letter of Understanding between the Ministry of Justice and UNHCR on the consolidation of capacity-building activities for the judiciary is envisaged.

## B. Progress on strategic priorities

**Protracted displacement** continues to feature as a major challenge in the Middle East region. Some 1.5 million Iraqis (post-2006) remain displaced within the country, while hundreds of thousands have taken refuge in neighbouring countries. Limited employment opportunities, lack of basic services, as well as concerns about the potential security vacuum following the phase-down in the military presence of the United States, continue to inhibit returns. The majority of refugees who return do so without taking advantage of UNHCR's individual repatriation management scheme.

**Resettlement departures** and **spontaneous voluntary returns** to Iraq are the prime reasons for an exponential fall in the numbers of Iraqi refugees actively registered with UNHCR. At the same time, the monthly average of new Iraqi arrivals – mainly from religious minority groups - in the region increased during the summer months. With over 100,000 Iraqis already referred for resettlement, it is expected that resettlement will continue to constitute a significant durable solution for many of the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees.

In the two major Iraqi refugee-hosting countries, the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Jordan**, while the number of beneficiaries of UNHCR's direct assistance programmes has dropped considerably, the presence of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees, in addition to large numbers of Palestinian refugees, remains a **heavy burden** for these countries whose economies struggle from the effects of the global economic crisis. Sustained international support is therefore critical.

UNHCR continues to follow up on and raise awareness of **statelessness** issues throughout the region. In Kuwait, a bill of law on the status of stateless persons, the so-called 'Bidoun', has been drafted and is being debated in Parliament; a statelessness registration campaign is ongoing in the United Arab Emirates and some persons have already been naturalized; and in Iraq, the number of stateless people is decreasing on a monthly basis, with some 4,000 having regained their Iraqi nationality this year alone.

In a move to enhance UNHCR's current capacity to forge **strategic partnerships with governments and private donors** in the Gulf region, the Office is preparing to establish an external relations hub in Abu Dhabi before the end of the year. This hub will focus on increasing awareness and support for UNHCR and generating predictable, flexible and sustainable donations.

One of UNHCR's main objectives in North Africa remains to **bridge protection**

**gaps, including in mixed migratory movements.** The 10-Point Plan of Action is proving a useful framework for such efforts, with a focus on the implementation of innovative self-reliance programmes based on UNHCR's policy on refugees in urban contexts. Egypt has been selected as the region's pilot country for the implementation of this new policy. UNHCR is also taking a more active stance on the return of rejected cases, and is increasing its efforts for the identification, and where possible, the re-admission of secondary movers.

### **C. Financial information**

While relatively well funded, the Iraq Situation risks being compromised by a dependency on one major donor while needs are continuing and the situation inside Iraq is still fragile. In order to substantiate the gains made over the recent years and avoid the risk of the premature return of Iraq's displaced populations owing to protection and assistance gaps, UNHCR is calling for a renewed commitment from donors.

Since March 2010, the funding situation for the Yemen operations has improved to a degree, allowing the Office to address pressing protection and assistance needs of the most vulnerable groups. However, enormous funding gaps remain, in particular for the IDP operation.

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