

ANNUAL CONSULTATIONS WITH NGOS
3 – 5 JULY 2012 - International Conference Center Geneva

BACKGROUND PAPER

MENA Regional Session
The Humanitarian Implications of the Arab Spring

Wednesday 4 July 2012, 09h00 – 13h00 – Room 3

The Middle East and North Africa region has been facing a variety of situations ranging from protracted refugee situations to political unrest and new displacement. The unstable situations of the last year, in particular, have led to an increase in the number and vulnerability of many refugee groups. In addition, mixed migration continues to characterize population movements to, from and through the MENA region.

The majority of refugees in the MENA region are found in urban areas. Most are from Iraq, sub-Saharan countries and, recently, Syria. Despite their limited resources and the absence of well-established national asylum systems, MENA countries generously host around 4.9 million refugees, internally displaced persons, stateless persons and asylum seekers as of the end of 2011. The number is much higher when Palestinian refugees who fall under the mandate of UNRWA are taken into account.

Along with the events of the Arab Spring came a multiplication of new displacement situations in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa. The violence that erupted in Libya in 2011 caused almost a million persons, migrants and refugees, to flee to neighboring countries. Over 225,000 refugees are hosted in Yemen in addition to almost half a million Yemenis internally displaced in the north and the south of the country. Armed clashes in Mali have forced some 73,000 persons to seek refuge in Mauritania, while the continuing conflict in Northern Mali may result into further displacement. Moreover, the unrest that Syria has witnessed in the past 14 months resulted in some 92,000 Syrian refugees crossing the borders into Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey, and had its impact, at least in socio-economic terms, on around 95,000 Iraqi and other refugees inside Syria itself.

Apart from the new displacement that the region witnessed in the last year, MENA is already home to old and protracted refugee and IDP situations. Despite improvements in security, some 1.2 million persons (according to the government estimates) remain displaced throughout Iraq, while around 150,000 Iraqi refugees are registered and assisted by UNHCR in the neighboring countries. Algeria continues to host a sizable population of Saharawi refugees in Tindouf camps.

Moreover, the Middle East and North Africa region remains a central hub for mixed-migration movements. Refugees and economic migrants flow across the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, with the Gulf countries and Europe as main

destinations. In 2011 alone, Yemen received a record number of more than 100,000 new arrivals from the Horn of Africa. At least 130 are known to have drowned during this journey. During the first half of 2012, more than 50,000 persons, mainly Ethiopians and Somalis, have already arrived on Yemen's costs.

Similarly, by the end of 2011, over 55,000 persons dared their lives on a dangerous trip across the Mediterranean in an attempt to reach European shores. More than 1,500 of them tragically drowned or went missing. In addition, flows across the Sinai and into Israel, propelled by a sophisticated human smuggling network reaching deep into East Africa, also intensified in the last year.

This year's consultation sessions with NGOs indeed come at a time of unprecedented volatility and rising displacement but also impressive engagement and extraordinary volunteerism across the MENA region. Against this backdrop, UNHCR looks forward to a productive discussion with the NGOs on how best to partner together with the aim of addressing the serious humanitarian challenges that are sweeping the region.

UNHCR Headquarters
Bureau for Middle East and North Africa