

COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN - IRAN

PART - I : EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(a) Context and Beneficiary Population(s)

According to official statistics updated in September 2000, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran estimates the number of "documented" refugees to be around 1,482,000 Afghans and 386,000 Iraqis holding various forms of documents issued by the authorities. The number of undocumented aliens, mainly Afghans, considered as staying illegally in the country is estimated at 1.5 million.

The majority of the Afghans and the Iraqis reside in provinces bordering their country of origin and in major urban centers. Less than five percent or 77,000 of the refugees live in thirty designated camps partially assisted by UNHCR. Most of the Afghan refugees now in Iran took refuge during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s and, after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, up to the end of the Najibullah regime in 1992. At the peak of the Afghan crisis, Iran hosted nearly three million Afghan refugees. Several thousands were repatriated in 1993 and 1994 and again during 2000 some 180,000 Afghans were repatriated under a Joint Programme with the Iranian government. The programme also included a refugee status determination procedure allowing some 80,000 individuals to be recognized as refugees.

Iraqi refugees consist of three categories: (i) Iraqi Kurds from the three northern provinces who came during 1970s; (ii) Feilli Kurds (Shiites) who were denied Iraqi citizenship on the grounds of their Iranian origin although they had been in Iraq for several generations; and (iii) Arab Shiites from government-controlled areas in the central and southern provinces of Iraq. The last two groups entered Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-'88) and following the chemical bombardments of Halabjah and other areas in 1988.

Political Context: The Government of Iran (GOI) has been relatively generous in accepting these refugees, allowing most of them to live all over the country - mainly in and around the cities - and to work in areas not attractive to Iranians. Over the last few years, the refugees have contributed towards the rapid development of the country, in more than one way. Donors have continued to support, albeit with signs of fatigue, UNHCR's protection and assistance work towards the refugees in Iran. Unfortunately, there is a corresponding sign of fatigue on the part of the GOI towards this large number of refugees. A key underlying factor and constraint in the possibilities to address the current situation is also the public debate concerning refugees. The debate now is on serious unemployment and increasing insecurity, drug trafficking and human smuggling associated with the presence of foreigners as a major reason for the problems. The Government is under strong pressure to find means of dealing expeditiously with the situation. An important aspect here is that the debate and negative attitude spread across the political spectrum of conservatives and reformists.

Under this public and political pressure and with the increasing number of unemployed young Iranians in the country the GOI introduced a new legislation (Article 48) in the context of its review of the third five-year Development Plan. The new legislation which was adopted by the Majlis in April 2000, requires all foreign nationals currently residing in Iran and not benefiting from a work permit to leave the country unless they would face "physical threats", when returning. The legislation of this act has resulted in increased numbers of spontaneous return. The number of returnees per week has exceeded 3,000 mainly Afghans, at the time this report is updated. There has been a sharp increase in the number of refugees turning up at UNHCR offices seeking assistance, protection and resettlement. In response to concerns expressed by UNHCR, the GOI has assured the

office that this new legislation will be implemented in full respect of the country's commitment to relevant international instruments.

The GOI has on several occasions clearly and unequivocally expressed its dissatisfaction with the assistance provided by UNHCR. They have pointed out the disproportionate low allocation provided to Iran, and that UNHCR and the international communities are not sensitive to the burden the country is shouldering in terms of refugee caseload,

Security Situation: The GOI is responsible for the security of the refugees, and by and large, this has been well provided for. However, since the legislation and implementation of Article 48, there have been incidents of clashes between local Iranians and refugees over loss of jobs, problems related to renting and vacating of houses, and access to facilities. Fortunately these incidents were few and have been well contained. Overall, security situation in the country has been relatively good with isolated cases of crime. Arrests of Afghans related to drug smuggling have been reported.

Protection Issues: In February 2001, the Government provided UNHCR with access to detention centers accommodating Afghans in Khorasan and Sistan-Baluchistan provinces. This may be one of the most significant achievements by UNHCR for many years and may be a turning point in the wish by the Government to see UNHCR very closely associated with the identification of solutions to the deteriorating situation that includes the forcible return to Afghanistan of individuals who could be of concern to UNHCR. However, The Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA/MOI) which has agreed in principle on a new programme for Afghans that will include both screening and repatriation components, has retracted on this. With regards to screening and issuance of registration documents, options are being explored for adopting new operation modalities for protection of refugees/new arrivals.

According to the authorities, the data collected through the recent registration exercise will be the basis for finalizing plans for implementing Article 48 over the remaining years of the Third Five-Year Development Plan (2000-2005). Subsequent steps may involve the introduction of a refugee status determination procedure for all Afghans wishing to remain in Iran including those already documented but without recognition of their status as refugee. This exercise needs to be coordinated with other UN Agencies in view of its migration aspects. It will also need significant support and financial assistance from the international community and other International Organizations like IOM.

During the first few months of 2001 the number of Afghans entering Iran has again increased significantly with an estimated number of arrivals into Eastern Iran between 700 to 1,000 persons per day. The reasons for these new increases are linked to the consequences of the drought, ethnic affiliation as well as continuing hostilities.

The GOI announced that over 80,000 economic refugees have been repatriated – an operation in which UNHCR is not involved. Currently, the weekly figure of spontaneous return is between 3,000 to 4,000. UNHCR has requested the screening of these Afghans before they are returned to enable UNHCR to determine if they are safe to return.

UNHCR's Role: UNHCR started its operations in the Islamic Republic of Iran in the early 1980s, assisting initially the Afghans and later on expanding its programmes to benefit Iraqi refugees. Continued instability in both Afghanistan and Iraq has reduced the possibilities of massive repatriation movements and has often resulted in repeated influxes of refugees into Iran over the years. Except for the implementation of Article 48 indicated above, Iran has shown hospitality and understanding towards the refugees, but has shown no interest in local settlement as a durable solution.

Over the year 2000, two major developments took place, which substantially influenced the focus of the operations, not only by the government but also clearly, for UNHCR. First, following intensive discussions that lasted for more than a year, the Government and UNHCR implemented the “Joint Programme for the Voluntary Repatriation of Afghan Refugees” between April and December 2000. The programme had two linked key objectives. First, to facilitate the voluntary return of Afghans, documented or undocumented. Second, to provide protection to undocumented Afghans who had valid reasons not to return. By the end of December 2000, a total of 182,000 Afghans had returned to their country while some 80,000 had been accepted for continued protection in the Islamic Republic of Iran after being interviewed by joint GOI and UNHCR screening teams. Despite its many implementation difficulties, the Joint Programme marked a significant breakthrough in developing joint approaches between the Government and UNHCR in dealing with both protection and solutions. The joint experience forms the main basis for the current discussions on a longer-term framework based on legal terms regarding the implementation of Art. 48 of the Third Five-Year Development Plan (2000-2005).

Overview of beneficiary population: The Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA) started the first phase of the Aliens Identification Plan (AIP) on 19 February 2001 in 28 provinces of Iran, to identify and register the documented aliens in Iran. According to the authorities, the data collected through this exercise will form the basis for finalizing the plans for implementation of Article 48 over the remaining years of the Third Five-Year Development Plan. The second phase of this exercise, (11 April – 17 May), was for registration of undocumented aliens. Government statistics indicated that a total number of 2,563,827 persons were registered during the two phases, of which 2,355,427 were Afghans, 202,878 were Iraqis and 5,522 had other nationalities. Reportedly, some 8-10% of the aliens in Iran did not show up for registration. BAFIA has categorized the Afghans presently in Iran, into six groups, and specified the action to be taken, as follows:

CATEGORY DESCRIPTION	ACTION
Holders of Joint Programme certificates (some 15,811 persons)	Certificates to be extended. Continued access to medical, social services.
Cases/persons screened out under the Joint Programme (some 30,529 persons)	Return to their country of origin.
Persons who did not participate in the recent registration exercise (except for those documented Afghans with valid reasons for not having registered).	Will be expelled by Ministerial order and have to return to their country.
Registered cases who wish to repatriate.	Repatriate voluntarily (either spontaneously or with UNHCR assistance)
Undocumented singles (99% identified as economic migrants). Claims for threats upon return will be examined prior to return.	Return to their country, unless identified as “in need of protection”.
Families residing in Iran for several years (some 1 million persons)	Screened for determining need for protection. If screened-in will be given temporary protection for one year, renewable. If screened-out, they will have to return to their country.

The majority of the refugees is undocumented and scattered throughout the country, largely in provinces bordering Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as major urban centers. Less than five percent of the refugees live in twenty-nine designated camps.

Policy Issues: UNHCR has shifted its emphasis from camp to non-camp refugees. This is appropriate in view of the legislation of Article 48, which had resulted in the lay off of thousands of Afghans from work. In this process, UNHCR is doing as much outreach protection and assistance work as possible. Emphasis is given to the most needy – in this case to those who have lost their jobs and have children and elderly to look after, to the sick who need medical treatment, to women in general and elderly women and men, and to children in general.

UNHCR also supports and promotes environment projects such as tree planting, improvement of sanitation and drainage and water supply in camps and in communities where there are large concentrations of refugees. Several small community based projects for women have been proposed and are awaiting the agreement of the Government for the relevant NGOs to carry them out.

Linkage to Other Countries: Programmes and activities in Iran are designed in coordination with the situation and activities carried out in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. For Afghan refugees, goals are set within the context of the prevailing situation in Afghanistan. Similarly, the UNHCR Office in Tehran sets its objectives on Iraqi refugees in light of the situation in Iraq and in consultation with OCM Baghdad. The Common Country Assessment and appeal, in which Iran is included, is another facet of the linkage and regionalisation of our activities.

Capacity and Presence of Implementing Partners: Over 90% of UNHCR's activities in Iran are either implemented by the relevant departments or ministries of the Government of Iran or directly implemented by UNHCR. This is because of the reluctance of the GOI to accept the involvement of NGOs. The situation has improved over the last two years, but very slowly indeed. UNHCR implements the Medical Referral Unit (MRU) and the One Time Assistance (OTA) at OCM Tehran and the Sub-Offices using a total budget of 1.4 million US Dollars for the year 2001. Nevertheless, UNHCR continues to urge the Government to accept NGOs.

Presence and role of other UN agencies and International Organizations : WFP complements UNHCR's work by supplying food to over 64,000 camp-based refugees and 5,000 non-camp refugees and incentives for 5,500 refugees. UNHCR is the largest UN agency in Iran, employing 40% of both local and international staff of all UN agencies. UNHCR is an active partner in the Common Country Assessment team (CCA). Discussions are held with UNICEF on activities for children especially education activities. UNHCR supports the effort of UNDP in the formation of a security team to deal with security matters and earthquake disaster.

Name of Beneficiary Population/Theme: Afghan refugees in Iran	
Main Goal(s): To facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees; To ensure the effective protection of Afghan refugees/asylum-seekers; To address the essential needs of Afghan refugees in the country, both in and outside the camps, while seeking to improve programme delivery and impact, in particular through increased involvement of NGOs.	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support, facilitate and implement voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transportation/logistical support, repatriation grant, food and non-food items provided for the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees. Training provided to newly recruited staff and implementing partners on voluntary repatriation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify refugees and persons in need of protection among foreign nationals currently in Iran or arriving in the country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint screening mechanism established Re-registration system overhauled and working New documentation issued
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the work of the Legal Committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extension of the mandate of the Legal Committee and Legal Adviser Legal assistance and representation provided to the refugees Involvement of Legal Adviser under the supervision of the Office of the Chief of Mission
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide resettlement for eligible cases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A Resettlement Unit, and related posts, established Liaison established with the embassies of resettlement countries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide material support to the most needy among the refugees recognized through the screening mechanism as well as complementary community services, to address, in a non-discriminatory fashion, the needs of both of refugees and affected local populations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Material assistance provided in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shelter - Support to education - Medical support/insurance - Micro-credit schemes Establishment of rural health centers and school libraries for primary schools Training for refugee women, including literacy, health, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that all camp-based beneficiaries have access to food/potable water, appropriate level of primary health care, in particular mother and child care, as well as ensuring access to primary education to school age children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic care and maintenance assistance provided in terms of: delivery/distribution of food Maintenance of water systems Equipping and staffing of health posts as well as carrying out of immunization campaigns for children Provision of school supplies and equipment to primary schools in the camp

COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN – IRAN

Name of Beneficiary Population/Theme: Iraqi refugees	
Main Goal(s): To facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Iraqi refugees To ensure the effective protection of Iraqi refugees/asylum-seekers To address the essential needs of Iraqi refugees in the country, both in and outside the camps, while seeking to improve programme delivery and impact, in particular through increased involvement of NGOs	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Iraqi refugees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring the situation and ensure that: Iraqis return spontaneously and on a voluntary basis • Assistance provided comparable to that for the Afghan repatriations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the work of the Legal Committee. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension of the mandate of the Legal Committee and Legal Adviser • Legal assistance and representation provided to the refugees • Involvement of Legal Adviser under the supervision of the Office of the Chief of Mission
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resettlement for eligible cases. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Resettlement Unit, and related posts, established • Liaison established with the embassies of resettlement countries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide complementary community services to address, in a non-discriminatory fashion, the needs of both non-camp refugees and affected local populations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material assistance provided in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support to education - Medical support/insurance - Micro-credit schemes • Establishment of rural health centers, school libraries for primary schools • Training for refugee women, including literacy, health, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that all camp-based beneficiaries have access to food/potable water, appropriate level of primary health care, in particular mother and child, as well as ensuring access to primary education to school age children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic care and maintenance assistance provided in terms of: delivery/distribution of food • Maintenance of water systems • Equipping and staffing of health posts as well as carrying out of immunization campaigns for children • Provision of school supplies and equipment to primary schools in the camp