

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

INITIAL OBJECTIVES

- Facilitate the voluntary repatriation of 100,000 Afghan refugees in accordance with the Joint UNHCR/Government Programme and establish mechanisms to ensure that undocumented Afghans in need of protection are identified through a transparent and fair procedure.
- Help an estimated 30,000 Iraqi refugees repatriate voluntarily to various areas of Iraq.
- Continue to assist Afghan and Iraqi refugees living in camps and further develop measures to assist refugees living outside the camps; introduce integrated small-scale community projects and micro-credit schemes to reduce dependency and foster some degree of self-reliance pending repatriation.
- Develop new partnerships, in agreement with the Government, for refugee care and raise awareness of refugee problems among national and international NGOs, specialised UN agencies and civil society at large.

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS, PROGRESS ACHIEVED AND CONSTRAINTS

Voluntary Repatriation of Afghan Refugees

The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to host (according to Government estimates) some 1.3 million Afghan refugees in the country's eastern provinces and major urban centres. Only a small proportion of the refugees live in camps and the majority have access to a number of government services on an equal basis with nationals. However, economic recession coupled with the protracted nature of the Afghan refugee situation have led to a gradual reduction in government assistance and an increasing need for solutions to their plight.

To avoid that Afghans return involuntarily to their country of origin and to ascertain their

need for continued international protection, UNHCR and the Government formally agreed on 14 February to begin implementing a Joint Programme for voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees. The Programme, which will last for six months, comprises two components and has been running since 8 April. Afghan refugees (both documented and undocumented) are assisted to return voluntarily in organised repatriation convoys and undocumented Afghans who believe they have valid reasons for continued protection in the Islamic Republic of Iran will have their claims examined by joint Government/UNHCR screening teams and be permitted to remain in the country until solutions are found to their situation.

By the end of June, 41,397 Afghans had already repatriated voluntarily under the Joint Programme and it is expected that a weekly average of 4,500 will return before mid-October. Close co-ordination between UNHCR's offices in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Afghanistan ensures that Afghans will not be returning to areas affected by insecurity or drought. Repatriation packages consisting of USD 40 per person (USD 20 paid in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the other half to be paid in Afghanistan) and one plastic sheet per family were distributed to repatriating refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In parallel, seven protection screening centres (which operate under UNHCR's supervision) have been established out of a planned nine. By the end of the first week of July, some 26,000 requests (covering 100,000 persons) for interviews had been registered and a total of 7,061 interviews (covering 27,000 individuals) had been carried out by the 28 joint Government/UNHCR teams then deployed. UNHCR organised a training seminar on international protection for government officials participating in the Joint Programme prior to the implementation of the screening process. The Joint Programme has offered Afghan refugees the possibility of returning safely with humanitarian assistance as well as access to a protection safety net. It has also led to a significant reduction in involuntary re-

turns and provided an opportunity for addressing the situation of undocumented Afghan refugees in the country. It needs to be followed, however, by the establishment of a more permanent mechanism to examine the situation of newly arrived Afghans. The absence of such a mechanism could, upon the completion of the Joint Programme, trigger a return to the situation that existed prior to its establishment and UNHCR has initiated discussions with the authorities on this important issue.

The Joint Programme represents a financial commitment estimated at some USD 7 million. Although part of the costs have been met with unspent funds from 1999, the Programme may require a re-allocation of this year's available resources to the detriment of other planned activities. Failure to obtain full financing of UNHCR's budget could jeopardise gains achieved in refugee protection through the Joint Programme and also require the agency to curtail vital assistance, such as support to individual refugees requiring emergency medical treatment. The planned Grameen Bank-style project to provide refugee women with income-generating opportunities (with UNHCR's financial support) was not approved by the Government.

Voluntary Repatriation of Iraqi Refugees

According to government estimates, more than 500,000 Iraqi refugees (of which 44,000 live in camps) are also hosted by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although some developments have fostered a climate more conducive to their eventual return (the issuance of a general amnesty for refugees originating from Iraq's southern provinces, the return of Iraqi prisoners of war, etc.), there are no indications that Iraqi refugees will begin to return in large numbers in the near future.

Organised repatriation of Iraqi Kurd refugees remains suspended, as UNHCR has been unable to reach an agreement with the two concerned Governments on the modalities of return. Only 132 Iraqi Kurd refugees returned spontaneously to Iraq during the first six

months of the year. Based on the return patterns of last year, repatriation may increase at the end of the school year in July. However, the return of some 18,000 Iraqi refugees of Kurdish origin in 1999 allowed UNHCR to close its office in Kermanshah on 30 June. The protection and assistance needs of the remaining 55,000 Iraqi Kurd refugees in the three western provinces (8,000 of whom live in 11 camps) will now be covered from the office in Orumieh.

A decree issued by the Iraqi Government in 1999, exempting from prosecution nationals who had left the country illegally, prompted the beginning of organised voluntary repatriation movements to southern Iraq. These movements continued in 2000, although at a reduced pace. By 30 June, UNHCR had assisted 858 Iraqi refugees to return voluntarily to southern Iraq. Refugees interested in returning to this part of the country have received information about the circumstances of return (including UNHCR's inability to monitor their situation in southern Iraq) in order to make an informed decision about repatriation.

UNHCR has initiated discussions with the authorities with a view to re-grouping the remaining Iraqi Kurd refugee population into one or two camps and closing the camps which now accommodate only a few hundred refugees. As the discussions are still ongoing, the Office had to postpone some related infrastructure development.

Assistance to Afghan and Iraqi Refugees

As the vast majority (95 per cent) of refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran do not reside in camps, UNHCR has been working to re-direct a larger part of its resources towards projects intended for Afghan and Iraqi refugees living in local Iranian communities.

Activities initiated in previous years continued and nearly 7,500 refugees received financial support for urgent medical or surgical care at six Medical Referral Units located within the premises of UNHCR's eight offices. More than 190,000 Afghan and Iraqi refugee children at

tended national schools under an agreement with the Government through which, on a per-capita basis, a portion of the costs related to their attendance is covered by UNHCR. Only limited upgrading and expansion of the existing facilities for Iraqi Arab refugees living in Khuzistan was carried out, due to delays in the signing of an agreement with the government counterpart.

The Office was not successful in developing other new initiatives for refugees living outside the camps, including income-generating projects for women. This was due to the reallocation of resources to cover increased requirements under the Joint Programme as well as difficulties with the development of operational partnerships between UNHCR and international or national NGOs.

UNHCR intensified its dialogue with the authorities with a view to developing an agreed formula under which international and national NGOs could be associated with the implementation of UNHCR's programmes. The issue was raised with the Government by various visiting staff as well as by the Chairman of UNHCR's Executive Committee in February. However, in response to a proposal for a joint mechanism to assess and approve projects presented by NGOs for UNHCR financing, the Ministry of Interior notified the Office at the end of June that it did not approve of UNHCR funding for international NGOs and that it required national NGOs to contribute to part of the project costs, thereby limiting their ability to co-operate with UNHCR.

REVISED OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITY ACTIVITIES FOR JULY - DECEMBER

The Joint Programme for Afghan refugees will officially run over a period of six months. However, the work of the screening teams will not be completed by 7 October and UNHCR has already proposed that teams should continue examining all claims filed prior to that date. The Office will also pursue a number of equally important priorities, including:

- Establishment by October of a more permanent mechanism to examine the claims of possible newcomers;
- Provision of logistics support for the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees, including those who make an informed decision to return after the conclusion of the Joint Programme;
- Construction of additional infrastructure in settlements hosting Iraqi refugees;
- Provision of information and repatriation grants for up to 10,000 Iraqi refugees (instead of 30,000 as initially foreseen) who may wish to return to Iraq;
- Advocacy for the reversal of a negative decision from the authorities regarding UNHCR's wish to establish closer links with international and national NGOs (including formal co-operation agreements) and review its objectives and priorities for refugees in the country in light of that decision.

FINANCIAL DATA (USD)

	Initial Budget	Revised Budget	Total Funds Available*	Total Funds Obligated
AB and TF	18'307'734	18'354'781	7'279'280	5'692'600

*Includes income from unrestricted contributions, income from contributions restricted to the region/country, opening balance and adjustments.