



North Africa

Major developments

The five countries of the Union of the Arab Maghreb have seen a dramatic increase in the mixed flows of asylum-seekers and economic migrants originating from Sub-Saharan Africa who transit through their territories in an attempt to enter Europe illegally. This has prompted the countries of transit and the countries of destination to undertake initiatives to stem this migratory flow.

The year 2004 saw a breakthrough for the refugees from Western Sahara living in camps in south-western Algeria, with the implementation of a series of Confidence Building Measures aimed at facilitating person-to-person contact – for the first time in almost three decades – between the refugees and their communities of origin in Western Sahara.

Algeria

Libyan Arab Jamahiriya

Mauritania

Morocco

Tunisia

Western Sahara

Challenges and concerns

UNHCR's primary focus in the region remained the protracted plight of the Saharawi refugees in the camps in Tindouf, Algeria. While a political solution remained elusive, UNHCR continued to implement its basic humanitarian assistance activities with



regard to this population. Moreover, there has been a growing concern regarding the precise number of refugees in the camps and calls for a comprehensive re-registration of these persons. Demarches towards this end will be pursued in 2005.

An emerging concern for UNHCR in the North Africa region was the growing importance of these countries as a major transit hub for third-country nationals wishing to enter Europe. Possibly as many as 120,000 people are estimated to have tried to cross the Mediterranean in the past twelve months, including some 35,000 persons of Sub-Saharan origin. The crossing is generally attempted in unseaworthy vessels and the number of would-be migrants who have drowned is not known.

UNHCR is currently developing a strategy to gradually strengthen the institution of asylum in North Africa, by increasing the capacity of the region to identify genuine asylum-seekers and refugees amongst the populations who transit through North Africa en route to Europe.

While four of the five countries in North Africa have acceded to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, all five have signed the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention.

However, the refugee protection framework in most of these countries remained fragile, with the exception of Mauritania, where the Government has adopted national refugee regulations and is collaborating with UNHCR in the establishment of national refugee status determination procedures.



Progress towards solutions

Ever since 1999, UNHCR and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Western Sahara have been promoting a series of confidence building measures involving the parties to the Western Sahara conflict. These measures were not intended to be linked to any political option that could resolve the Western Saharan conflict; rather, they were designed to meet the humanitarian needs of two populations who had already suffered the effects of prolonged separation. The first phase of these measures – which was finally implemented between March and December 2004 – included exchanges of family visits and a telephone service between the refugees in the camps in Tindouf and their communities of origin in Western Sahara. All concerned parties have indicated their willingness to continue with this programme in 2005.

In Mauritania, the Government adopted a decree to implement its obligations under the international and regional refugee conventions. The decree includes provisions to establish a national refugee status determination procedure. UNHCR continued, together with the Mauritanian authorities, to actively promote the identification of durable solutions for refugees. As a result, several self-reliance schemes were implemented to facilitate local integration. The voluntary repatriation of refugees from Sierra Leone was also carried out during 2004.

Similarly, in Libya, UNHCR continued to re-orient its humanitarian assistance activities to refugees, putting the emphasis on self-reliance, including by facilitating the local integration of the few hundred Somali refugees still remaining in the so-called Somali Compound. Thus, UNHCR was able to bring to a close a protracted assistance programme dating back to 1991.

In view of the growing importance of the transit migration phenomenon in the north African region, the Office obtained funds from the European Union in order to implement a number of exploratory activities in the region. These aim to create a space for the international protection of refugees in the five States, as well as to establish a collaborative regional approach to the protection of refugees and migrants rescued or intercepted on the Mediterranean Sea.



Operations

In **Algeria**, UNHCR continued to focus on the Saharawi refugees in the camps in Tindouf. Along with the implementation of the confidence building measures, the Office has also endeavoured to strengthen its protection role by gaining more



Western Sahara: Confidence building measures and UNHCR-sponsored home visits allow refugees living in exile some for almost 30 years, the opportunity to visit family members in the Territory. *UNHCR/S. Hopper*

effective and comprehensive access to these persons and working with them to improve the administration of justice in the camps. In addition to the usual assistance activities, the Office continued to design specific programmes for the most vulnerable amongst the refugee populations, particularly the women, children and adolescents. Vocational training for women was expanded and legal and social

counselling services for women were reinforced. Recreational youth centres were established in Dakhla and Smara camps, similar to those set up in Layoune and Aswerd camps in 2003.

UNHCR continued to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to urban refugees of different nationalities in Algiers, many originating from

sub-Saharan Africa. This included medical, financial and social assistance to the most vulnerable amongst them, as well as efforts to identify durable solutions to their situation.

In the **Libyan Arab Jamahiriya**, the Office continued to strengthen its self-reliance activities for refugees by gradually phasing down its protracted assistance to these populations, with the support of local operational partners. These self-reliance activities included job placement, vocational training, apprenticeships and micro-credit agricultural schemes. Refugee committees were involved in the design and establishment of the activities, ensuring that the needs of refugee women were adequately addressed, and that initiatives and proposals from the refugees were given due consideration. In Libya, UNHCR continues to seek a clearer and more formal status for itself, in order to provide a firmer underpinning for its activities there.

Encouraged by the adoption of the decree on refugees by **Mauritania** in 2004, UNHCR has been working with the Government on building the capacity of state structures to deal with refugee issues, including the establishment of a national refugee status determination procedure. Meanwhile, the Office continued to examine the refugee claims of all asylum-seekers who approached UNHCR, in partnership with an international NGO. In parallel, the Office also provided basic humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable amongst the refugee population, particularly women and children.

In **Morocco**, UNHCR moved its office from Casablanca to Rabat, as most of the refugees were located in

that city, and in light of the need to liaise with relevant Government counterparts and UN agencies, all based in the capital. The Office continued to determine the status of asylum-seekers, and provided financial, medical and education assistance to the most vulnerable refugees. The Office has also noted an increase in the numbers of asylum-seekers, which is attributed to the phenomenon of transit migration described above.

In **Tunisia**, UNHCR continued to advocate the enactment of a national refugee law and the establishment of a national asylum procedure. It also sought to facilitate the issuance of residence permits to recognized refugees. No substantive change to government policy on refugees was noted during this period. In the absence of national structures to deal with refugees, UNHCR carried out its usual functions of examining asylum claims, assisting the most vulnerable refugees, and identifying durable solutions, whenever feasible.

Funding

During 2004, UNHCR continued to prioritize its activities within the allocated programme budget. Of particular concern was the funding of the confidence building measures for the refugees in Tindouf, which had not been foreseen in the 2004 budget and had to be financed through funds from UNHCR's Operational Reserve.

Restricted voluntary contributions (USD)		
Earmarking ¹	Donor	Annual programme budget
Algeria		
	European Commission	1,444,043
	Japan	500,000
	Norway	327,869
	Spain	428,679
	United States of America	191,432
Sub-total		2,892,023
Morocco		
	<i>Association française de soutien à l'UNHCR</i>	55
Sub-total		55
North Africa		
	Sweden	412,088
	United States of America	954,299
Sub-total		1,366,387
Western Sahara		
	France	132,626
	Ireland	254,453
Sub-total		387,079
Total		4,645,544

¹ For more information on earmarking, please refer to the donor profiles.

Budget and expenditure (USD)		
Country	Revised budget	Expenditure
	Annual programme budget	
Algeria	5,248,756	5,236,291
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	867,566	753,837
Mauritania	381,536	380,370
Morocco	271,351	255,791
Tunisia	204,495	190,959
Western Sahara	699,728	699,728
Total	7,673,432	7,516,976

North Africa