



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

OVERVIEW

Country: Azerbaijan

Planning Year: 2006

2006 COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN FOR AZERBAIJAN

OVERVIEW

1. Protection and socio-economic operational environment

Since early 1990 Azerbaijan has had to grapple with the problems of almost half a million internally displaced persons resulting from the still unresolved conflict with Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh. In recent years the country also became a refugee destination and transit country. With the opening of the oil/gas pipeline Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan in June 2005, there are expectations that the anticipated increase of revenues will transform the financial situation of the country. UNHCR hopes that this will allow the Government of Azerbaijan to allocate more funds to the benefit of IDPs and refugees in the country.

Working in a complex political environment, UNHCR is playing a crucial role in helping the national authorities to develop its newly-established asylum system, protect and assist some 5,000 asylum seekers and refugees, reduce statelessness, improve conditions for vulnerable urban IDPs, and, along with others (IOM, OSCE, the Council of Europe, the EU, NGOs) help building a humane migration management system.

UNHCR remains committed to paying due attention to the plight of one of the largest IDP populations in the world even though its own budgetary resources are diminishing. In virtue of its core mandate, the Agency assumes its core role to protect and support refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons.

Consequently, UNHCR in Azerbaijan strives to:

- Continue a modest assistance programme for IDPs, strengthening their capacity and self-reliance;
- Undertake an energetic advocacy role with governmental and non-governmental partners to bring more qualitative assistance to the IDPs and advocate for measures to compensate for the unavoidable negative side effects of the massive population displacement (such as deforestation);
- Participate in an inclusive preparation process for returns and be ready to assist the authorities if and when the voluntary return of IDPs becomes possible;
- Continue to enhance RSD procedures through budgetary support, training and coaching of relevant national authorities;
- Continue to give a neutral and humanitarian dimension to the de facto policy of asylum granted by the authorities to the Russian refugees (Chechens).

The implementation of Azerbaijan's 1992 accession to the Convention on the Status of Refugees (the 1951 Convention) began to materialise in 2004 with the establishment of the Refugee Status Determination Department. In 2004, 459 individuals lodged applications for refugee status with the Department, of whom eighteen were recognised, whilst 76 had their claims rejected. However, ethnic Chechens from the Russian Federation - the largest group of asylum-seekers in the country - have not been granted access to these procedures. Some 2 to 3 million Azerbaijanis

live and work in Russia. Most of the asylum seekers in Azerbaijan are located in and around the capital, Baku.

The possibility of voluntary returns of IDPs to occupied territories and Nagorno-Karabakh, which is of paramount importance to the Government, will depend on political progress uncertain to date. While much remains to be done to improve the living conditions of IDPs in the country, there is also the need to begin a joint planning process for returns in order to be prepared once this possibility materialises.

For Chechen refugees, the low level of returns to The Russian Federation and attempts to move onward to Western Europe are likely to continue. The main reason for this trend is difficult living conditions for many refugees, both Chechens and others. The number of Chechens leaving Russia is expected to remain low, partially due to the introduction of the passport regime between the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan which requires all Russian citizens crossing the border to hold valid external passports. Afghan and Iraqi refugees will continue to repatriate in small numbers. Unless political links generating population displacement will affect Iran or neighbouring countries, the number of persons asking for asylum in the Republic of Azerbaijan will slightly decrease. The importance of migratory movements into Azerbaijan on the other hand will increase as and if the country becomes economically more attractive.

With a national asylum system in its infancy and the lack of Government integration assistance for the few recognized refugees through the national procedure for most refugees, local integration is not a realistic option. Larger-scale resettlement to third countries is even less likely. Under these circumstances, UNHCR Baku has the challenging task to continue providing protection and assistance to a large group of urban asylum-seekers and refugees, many of whom are caught in a protracted situation with no durable solution in sight. At the same time, the office continues to encourage the Government to adhere to its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the relevant domestic legislation according to international standards.

2. Operational goals and potential for durable solutions

The 2006 UNHCR program in Azerbaijan closely follows UNHCR's global strategic objectives and the Europe Bureau's strategy, and can be broadly summarised as follows:

- Continue to collaborate with national counterparts to ensure the further development of the newly-created national asylum system;
- Ensure that Azerbaijan continues to host Chechen asylum seekers by allowing their stay in the country, and refrains from deporting or refouling them;
- Actively seek to raise funds for UNHCR in Azerbaijan through regular meetings, both formal and informal, with representatives of the donor community, corporate organizations and government/oil funds.

- Lobby and advocate towards the adoption of a temporary asylum regime, in conformity with international standards, targeting government officials from ministries and parliamentarians involved with migration and refugee affairs. This will potentially benefit the Office's two major caseloads, Chechens from the Russian Federation and Afghans;
- Promote durable solutions, including citizenship, local integration, resettlement for the most vulnerable refugees, and voluntary repatriation as appropriate;
- Review viable alternatives to determine the number of statelessness persons, and assist the government to start implementing existing legislation related to the 1954 and 1961 Conventions;
- Disseminate information on refugee matters and sensitize the Azerbaijani public opinion through media campaigns and targeted activities covering refugee issues and human rights in general;
- Continue to support and further expand the national network of lawyers to further enhance national capacities to protect refugees' and asylum seekers' rights;
- Whenever and wherever feasible, identify durable solutions for the most vulnerable of those displaced persons still wishing to exercise their rights to return through the enhancement of the capacity of local authorities to perform their responsibilities in terms of return and reconstruction initiatives;
- Take an active role in developing an inclusive IDP return plan with the Government following the IASC model;
- Where appropriate advocate for increased assistance for IDPs;
- Fill the gaps in the Government's lack of provision of basic material, social and legal assistance to asylum-seekers and refugees;
- Further minimize the occurrence of sexual and gender based violence among the refugee and asylum seeker population by expanding awareness programs -including trafficking of women at risk-, and promoting effective reporting mechanisms;
- Strengthen linkages within the United Nations Country Team and advocate for the inclusion of persons of concern (IDPs and refugees) to UNHCR in Millennium Development Goals programmes and State Programmes on Poverty Reduction and Economic Development;