

Update on UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa
Executive Committee 2008
(Revised version)

Part A: Major developments

- The displacement of **Iraqis** continues to dominate the situation in the Middle East region. The approximate number of Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries stands at some 2 million, while over 2.2 million others are internally displaced. A decrease in the level of violence in Iraq has been observed during the last few months, which has resulted in a significant reduction in departures from the country and a limited number of returns, particularly among the IDPs.
- The humanitarian situation of Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries remains of serious concern to UNHCR. The authorities of the major host countries, namely **Jordan** and the **Syrian Arab Republic**, have been showing a commendable degree of hospitality towards Iraqis. However, a sense of “asylum fatigue” has started to surface, with the presence of refugees becoming an increasing burden on the economies and social structures of these two countries. The increasing costs of staple food and consumer goods worldwide have also had an impact on refugees, particularly in urban areas where refugees are struggling to survive with their savings rapidly running out.
- Although the security situation and other conditions inside Iraq are not conducive to large-scale voluntary repatriation, an increasing number of Iraqi refugee families are opting to return spontaneously. In an attempt to respond to their needs as well as to those of internally displaced persons, and with a view to preparing the ground for a possible large scale voluntary repatriation, UNHCR reinstated a strong international presence in Baghdad in March 2008. The Baghdad office currently comprises five international staff members, including the Representative. Their number will increase to nine by the end of 2008. UNHCR has also expanded its shelter project in Sadr City and other conflict-affected areas in Iraq and adopted an individual case management policy to help individuals and families wishing to repatriate to Iraq.
- In May 2008, UNHCR signed a statement of principles with the Government of **Sudan** and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in respect of the relocation of Palestinian refugees from the Iraqi-Syrian border areas to Sudan.
- In the **Middle East** region, as part of its efforts to strengthen partnerships with regional organizations as well as civil society and religious institutions, UNHCR has established a Liaison Office in Abu Dhabi. Preparations are underway for a partnership agreement with the **United Arab Emirates** government-sponsored Khalifa Bin Hamad Foundation. A workshop on asylum was organized in Doha, Qatar, for interior ministry officials from several States in July 2008, and a joint UNHCR-League of Arab States (LAS) conference on asylum will be organized in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, for Arab parliamentarians in October 2008. A comparative study on asylum in Islam and international law, sponsored by UNHCR in cooperation with LAS, will be launched soon.
- The protection climate in **Egypt** has been adversely affected by the increase in the number of asylum-seekers and refugees. A significant number of Eritrean asylum-seekers were *refouled* from Egypt to their country of origin in June 2008. UNHCR is in dialogue with the authorities to jointly enhance protection-sensitive responses to deal with Eritrean and other asylum-seekers who enter Egypt illegally. Meanwhile, UNHCR has strengthened its presence in **Israel** to assist the authorities with registration and

status determination of some eight thousand asylum-seekers, as well as the establishment of responsive national asylum systems.

- In **North Africa**, to better address the challenges posed by mixed migration movements, UNHCR recently signed a quadripartite agreement with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), the International Organization for Peace, Care and Relief (IOPCR) - a major Libyan non-governmental organization - and the Italian Refugee Council (IRC).
- With no immediate durable solution in sight for refugees from **Western Sahara**, UNHCR continues to provide them with basic humanitarian assistance. The Office collaborates with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the parties involved in order to expand the Confidence Building Measures (CBM), facilitate personal contacts between the Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf refugee camps in **Algeria** and their family members in the Territory, and assist with the necessary arrangements for the exchange of family visits.
- The voluntary repatriation of Mauritanian refugees from **Senegal** is underway and a significant number have already returned. It is expected that by mid-2009 most of these refugees will have either returned home or found an alternative durable solution, including local integration.
- In **Yemen**, UNHCR strives to ease the burden shouldered by this major host country to ensure that its generosity and open-door policy towards refugees do not change. The High Commissioner's visit to Yemen and meetings with the country's leadership have helped to draw more international attention to the refugees' humanitarian needs as well as to the impact of their presence on this country. Meanwhile, in the absence of national asylum institutions and effective national and/or regional migration strategies, the sizeable mixed migration movements from the **Horn of Africa** are making the protection situation increasingly complicated. To discuss the need for international and regional partnerships and cooperation to tackle the challenges posed by mixed migration to and through Yemen, UNHCR organized an international conference in Sanaá in May 2008. Participants came from countries of origin and destination, as well as from international organizations and the donor community. The principal objective of the conference was to contribute to the establishment of a regional medium and longer term plan of action on refugee protection and mixed migration in the Gulf of Aden region. Representatives from both sides of the Gulf of Aden made recommendations on how best to meet these challenges and improve cross-regional cooperation.

Part B: Progress on strategic objectives

Ensuring protection for all people of concern to UNHCR and strengthening the protection of refugees within broader migration movements (GSO 1)

- UNHCR strives to foster collaborative partnerships in the region and to support national capacity for the management of migratory movements, so as to reconcile the imperatives of refugee protection with States' national security and migration management interests. The piloting of the 10-Point Plan of Action (designed to ensure the protection of refugees in mixed migration movements) in North Africa, the conclusion of a quadripartite agreement by UNHCR, ICMP, IOPCR and IRC, and the organization of the Gulf of Aden Conference on mixed migration are important steps in that direction.

Affirming and developing an international protection regime (GSO 2)

- The Office has embarked on the implementation of an asylum capacity and institution-building strategy targeting governmental structures and civil society institutions to promote engagement with refugees and asylum-seekers. A series of refugee law/protection training activities are being undertaken in the region in 2008. Moreover, UNHCR offices in some countries have been strengthened significantly, primarily with the aim of assisting the concerned Governments with the registration and status determination of asylum-seekers, as well as with the establishment of effective asylum systems consistent with international standards.

Realizing the social and economic well-being of persons of concern and attaining durable solutions (GSO 3, 4)

- Instability in Iraq has prompted the Office to focus its strategic interventions on the provision of protection and humanitarian assistance outside the country. Focus is also being placed on finding durable solutions abroad for the most vulnerable among Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries as well as Palestinian refugees in Iraq. An important element of this strategy is the active promotion of the burden-sharing principle. UNHCR is therefore soliciting significant support from the international community for Governments hosting Iraqi refugees, particularly Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic. The visits by the High Commissioner and the Chairman of the Executive Committee in the course of 2008 contributed to drawing renewed international attention to the plight of Iraqi refugees.

Strengthen external relations (GSO 8)

- The placement of a Senior External Relations Officer in Abu Dhabi, the commissioning of a comparative study on asylum in Islam and international law, as well as the start of negotiations on a strategic partnership agreement with the Khalifa Foundation in the United Arab Emirates are important steps towards establishing comprehensive partnerships with the Gulf States and civil society institutions. These partnerships are aimed at securing political and humanitarian support as well as financial contributions to UNHCR's programmes. Moreover, through partnerships with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council, civil society institutions are being empowered to promote refugee rights in the region.

*UNHCR
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