

**47th MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE
(2-4 March 2010)**

REGIONAL STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa

Part A: Introduction - critical challenges

- The situation in **Iraq** continues to require considerable attention as the prevailing conditions in the country affect the ability of many Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to their homes. Despite a relative decrease in violence in the previous period, attacks are still common and the security situation has deteriorated again ahead of the 7 March elections. On 18 January, under UNHCR's leadership, an inter-agency Regional Response Plan (RRP) for Iraqi Refugees amounting to USD 364 million was launched in Damascus, seeking the ongoing support of the international community until such time when the situation in Iraq allows for safe and sustainable returns. In addition, UNHCR's activities inside Iraq formed part of the inter-agency Iraq Humanitarian Action Plan (IHAP).
- As of 31 January 2010, and following a deactivation of the files of all Iraqis registered with UNHCR who had not been in contact with the Office for some time, the total active registered Iraqi population has been reduced to some 230,000 individuals. Thanks to the significant support of the international community and the generous hospitality of neighbouring asylum countries, particularly the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Jordan**, in 2009 UNHCR was able to provide food assistance to some 150,000 Iraqis; support 500,000 medical interventions; and provide financial cash assistance to some 15,000 families through an innovative scheme utilizing ATM (automated teller machine) bank cards.
- The deepening humanitarian crisis in **Yemen** remains of serious concern. It is now estimated that 250,000 civilians have been displaced by the ongoing conflict in the northern part of the country, mainly as a result of the escalation which erupted in August 2009. Meanwhile, large numbers of people from the Horn of Africa continue to cross the Gulf of Aden and, more recently, the Red Sea, and arrive on Yemen's shores. In 2009 Yemen received more than 77,000 new arrivals (a marked increase compared to 50,000 in 2008), of whom the majority (some 43,000) were from Ethiopia. In the current climate, the arrival of Somalis and Ethiopians is being perceived as an additional security threat as well as an increasing strain on Yemen's already limited resources. As a result, arrests of illegal migrants have intensified throughout the country. Moreover, the Government's increasing security concerns have led to a reconsideration of the "*prima facie*" policy for all new Somali arrivals. Meanwhile, violent demonstrations in a number of the southern governorates have imposed some restrictions on UNHCR's movements and operations.
- From 2006 until 2009, Iraqis constituted the largest group of persons approaching UNHCR in **Egypt** to seek protection. The trend has however changed. Throughout 2009, Sudanese continued to arrive in the country, albeit not in large numbers, and now constitute the largest group of new arrivals, approaching UNHCR for registration. Interest in assisted voluntary repatriation to Sudan among Southern Sudanese residing in Cairo, declined and was exceeded by the numbers of new arrivals approaching UNHCR.
- In 2009, UNHCR began the handover of asylum-seeker registration and refugee status determination (RSD) to the Government of **Israel**, with the Ministry of Interior now conducting RSD for asylum-seekers, excluding Eritreans and Sudanese (who comprise approximately 80 per cent of the caseload and enjoy a form of temporary protection). While UNHCR is phasing out of direct RSD implementation, it is concerned about instances of the deportation of asylum-seekers

before their claims had been adequately reviewed. Specifically, UNHCR is aware of 13 asylum-seekers claiming to be Eritrean, but whom the authorities determined to be Ethiopian and subsequently deported.

- In the course of his visit to **Algeria, Morocco, and Western Sahara** in September 2009, the High Commissioner secured, in principle, the agreement of the parties to the expansion of the **Confidence Building Measures (CBM)** programme, which entails the use of road transport for family visits, using the most direct route via Mahbas to destination cities in Western Sahara. This expansion would more than double the number of persons able to benefit from family visits, from 2,000 to 4,400 per year.
- In **Morocco**, the Ministry of Justice, in cooperation with the judiciary, law enforcement agencies and UNHCR, conducted a successful programme for the promotion of refugee law, which will be further expanded upon following the signature of a letter of understanding between the Ministry and UNHCR in February 2010.
- The organized repatriation of **Mauritanian** refugees from Senegal came to an end on 31 December 2009. Since the beginning of the operation in early 2008, a total of 79 return convoys have been organized, bringing home over 19,000 persons.
- UNHCR's efforts in the **Gulf** started to yield positive results, as governments, civil society institutions and prominent individuals in the region showed increased interest in refugee matters. The Governments of Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates made generous contributions towards UNHCR's operations in Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen. In addition, with the assistance of the Saudi authorities, UNHCR was able to carry out three cross-border operations to deliver urgent humanitarian assistance to the displaced population in northern Yemen.
- As part of its efforts to address **statelessness** in the region, UNHCR convened jointly with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), a regional expert meeting on 18-19 February in Amman, Jordan on, "The Human Rights of Stateless Persons in the Middle East and North Africa Region."

Part B: Analysis - challenges and response strategies

- While noting the precarious security situation in **Iraq**, UNHCR remains committed to supporting the Iraqi Government in establishing the conditions which would facilitate the return of refugees and IDPs. To this end, UNHCR has significantly reinforced its presence as well as its linkages with national actors inside Iraq. The Office currently has over 150 national staff working in 18 different locations within the country, supported by 14 international "in-country staff". It has also enlisted the help of over 125 national NGOs. Together with its partners, UNHCR has been able to complete the establishment of 10,000 housing units, particularly in Diyala Governorate, which has undergone massive destruction in recent years. The protection and assistance centres, combined with the returnee centres, continue to provide practical legal and administrative support to thousands of returnees and IDPs. The UNHCR office in Iraq, in conjunction with the relevant authorities, estimates that in 2009 more than 37,000 Iraqi refugees and some 168,000 IDPs returned home.
- In 2010, UNHCR will further increase its activities inside Iraq with the overall objectives of making return a viable and sustainable option for displaced Iraqis and providing urgently needed support to refugees in Iraq and the internally displaced. To improve the conditions for return, UNHCR will strengthen border monitoring, information sharing, and registration and reception capacity, while increasingly focusing its efforts on supporting and coordinating reintegration activities. Until such time that conditions permit the return of the displaced, UNHCR will continue to provide protection and assistance to Iraqi refugees in the region. The Office will also continue to refer for resettlement vulnerable Iraqis for whom return is not an option in the foreseeable future. Since 2007, close to 100,000 Iraqi refugees have been referred for

resettlement, with some 45,000 having already departed. The generous response by some resettlement countries also allowed UNHCR to close the Al Tanf camp for Palestinian refugees in early 2010. While solutions for most of the 40,000 refugees inside Iraq will not happen rapidly, UNHCR has been able to accelerate the resettlement of the Palestinian refugees from Al-Waleed camp and hopes to complete this process by mid-2010.

- **Yemen** is currently experiencing enormous political, economic and social turmoil, affecting the country's ability to meet its protection obligations towards asylum-seekers and refugees on its territory. With the security situation in Somalia expected to remain volatile and the general economic situation in the Horn of Africa not likely to improve, mixed migration movements will also continue to affect Yemen. UNHCR will maintain its support of the Government in developing national refugee legislation and establishing an administrative framework to manage the migration flow. Meanwhile, intense fighting in Sa'ada has resulted in continuous movements of IDPs into neighbouring governorates, increasing pressure in these already dire locations. Overcrowded IDP settlements, lack of shelter for new arrivals, limited access to health care, and scarce livelihood opportunities are of particular concern. As the lead agency for protection, shelter and non-food items (NFIs), and camp coordination/management, UNHCR is working on expanding the existing camps and building new ones, distributing shelter materials, and providing basic relief items to IDPs inside the camp, as well as to those outside the camp who constitute the majority. Meanwhile, UNHCR is supporting the Government in its efforts to centralize and standardize the registration data systems, which will help to improve the protection and assistance response to the IDP population.
- In **Israel**, there are at present three challenges to ensuring a continued favourable asylum environment: the High Court's current consideration of the Government's proposed "hot return" policy; the draft Anti-Infiltration Law; and the absence of a procedural framework to guide the work of the Government's newly established Refugee Status Determination Unit. UNHCR has provided its views to the parties regarding the High Court case on the Government's proposed "hot return" policy, which contemplates the immediate return of persons, including potential asylum-seekers, illegally entering Israel within 24 hours of arrival at the border. The draft Anti-Infiltration Law, which foresees harsh penalties for illegal entry and does not adequately ensure that a potential asylum-seeker can establish a claim, is approaching its final readings in the Knesset. UNHCR is actively advocating for the exclusion of the law's applicability to refugees and asylum-seekers.
- Although migration movements in the Mediterranean seem to have shifted in intensity from the Libyan-Italian route further east to the Turkish-Greek route, mixed population flows continue to be a major feature in **North Africa**. In this respect, UNHCR will continue to work on expanding its partnerships, particularly with other UN agencies, local NGOs, and civil society. The Office will concentrate on improving the assessment and profiling of persons caught in mixed migration flows and operationalizing the recently-issued policy on urban refugees.
- In the **Libyan Arab Jamahiriya**, through its partnership with the International Organization for Peace Care and Relief (IOPCR), UNHCR has been able to access several migrant detention centres. Together with its partners, UNHCR is working to improve the living conditions in these centres and to screen and profile the mixed migrants through focused interviews. At the same time, the number of persons approaching the UNHCR office in Tripoli, particularly Eritreans, has increased significantly. Nevertheless, in the continued absence of a formal agreement with the Libyan Government, UNHCR's engagement on protection issues remains fragile. In December 2009, the High Commissioner extended an open invitation to the authorities to engage in a constructive dialogue that would clarify the status of UNHCR and its activities in the country. In the meantime, offering resettlement opportunities to the most vulnerable among refugees in the country would offer protection and a solution to those of immediate concern.
- During his mission to **Algeria** in September 2009, the High Commissioner emphasized the need to reorient the protection monitoring and assistance programme for the Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps. Accordingly, the level of assistance has been increased in 2010, with the

programme focusing more on the long-term welfare of the refugees, particularly in the areas of nutrition, health and education.

- UNHCR is working on plans to expand its cooperation with the relevant institutions in **Morocco**, with a view to developing a future legislative and institutional framework on asylum and refugee matters. The Office is also reinforcing its capacity-building activities with its partners and working on finding solutions for refugees recognized by UNHCR under its mandate.
- In the framework of the Protection Plan of Action, UNHCR is organizing joint evaluation sessions to take place in April 2010, with the parties involved in the **Confidence Building Measures** programme.
- With the completion of the voluntary repatriation operation, UNHCR is focusing its efforts on bolstering the reintegration of the returnee population in **Mauritania**. Significant challenges persist on that front, particularly the inadequate economic and social conditions in the areas of return, including shortages of potable water, a lack of social infrastructure and the grim potential to resume agricultural activities. At the same time, UNHCR will continue to provide limited return assistance to refugees wishing to repatriate within the first six months of 2010. It is estimated that around 5,000 refugees may take advantage of this last opportunity to receive assistance upon repatriation.
- To enhance the capacities of governments and expand asylum space in the Arab world, UNHCR will continue to conduct **refugee law training** activities. This year, for the second time since 2006, an international refugee law course targeting government officials from the region will be held in Arabic at the International Institute of Humanitarian Law, in Sanremo, Italy.

Part C: Financial information

The Comprehensive Needs Assessment budget of the Middle East and North Africa region for 2010 amounts to USD 611 million. Operations budgeted under Pillars 3 and 4 in need of earmarked contributions include Iraq and Yemen. UNHCR's operation in Yemen, which is part of the 2010 Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP), is currently facing a dramatic funding shortfall. UNHCR has therefore decided to issue a separate appeal for Yemen amounting to over USD 38 million.

UNHCR
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