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Update on UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa

A. Situational analysis including new developments

Unrest in the Syrian Arab Republic has forced hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee to neighbouring countries. Smaller numbers of Syrian refugees have sought protection further afield, mainly in the Gulf States, North Africa and Europe. UNHCR and host governments have registered some 246,000 Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. More than 100,000 refugees were registered in the month of August alone. In addition, an estimated 1.2 million Syrians are internally displaced.

As part of the UN's Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria, UNHCR and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent have mounted a programme of cash and material assistance that aims to reach 100,000 internally displaced families by the end of 2012. Although there has not been a shift in the Syrian Government's policy towards the entry and stay of refugees in the country, the number of refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic from Iraq and other countries has decreased. Since the beginning of 2012, the number of Iraqi refugees in the country has dropped from 102,000 to 87,000 as of the end of August.

Lebanon is hosting some 78,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, over 90 per cent of whom are Syrian. Of the 71,000 Syrian refugees in the country, 51,000 have registered with UNHCR, with the remaining number awaiting registration. The majority of Syrian refugees are being hosted by local communities in northern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley. Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers remain a sizeable urban refugee population, with some 8,000 individuals living in Beirut.

The Jordanian Government estimates that more than 200,000 refugees have entered the country since the beginning of the Syrian crisis. Approximately, 91,000 have been registered or assisted by UNHCR. The Jordanian Government's open border policy allowed Syrians to enter the country without restrictions on their movement or location. Most refugees subsequently settled with relatives, host families or in rented accommodations. In early August, the Government established a tented camp in northern Jordan where all new arrivals are being transferred. UNHCR and partners are assisting with shelter, ready-made meals, non-food items and health and education facilities. Some 29,000 Iraqi refugees are also being supported by UNHCR in Jordan.

Iraq is hosting over 28,000 Syrian refugees, mainly in the Kurdistan region, as well as 38,000 refugees from other countries. More than one million Iraqis remain internally displaced, including many families forced to live illegally and

in extremely difficult conditions in public buildings. UNHCR is assisting vulnerable internally displaced persons (IDPs) with material relief and legal advice, while supporting the authorities to identify durable solutions for this destitute group.

The number of Iraqi refugees registered in the region stands at 150,000. Despite the volatile security situation, some 43,950 refugees have returned to Iraq so far this year.

In line with a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Government of Iraq and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), UNHCR is assessing individual protection needs for some 3,021 resettlement applicants transferred from camp New Iraq (formerly camp Ashraf) to the Hurriya transit centre in Baghdad. A further 200 applicants are scheduled to be transferred soon. The slow response of resettlement countries in offering places for this caseload remains a challenge.

Through its regional office in Riyadh, UNHCR is strengthening its partnerships in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. A number of new partnerships with a view to a strategic collaboration as well as resource mobilization are being established.

The office acknowledges efforts by the Government of Kuwait to address statelessness and encourages the positive implementation of their decision to resolve statelessness issues.

More than half a million people in Yemen are internally displaced due to civil conflict and natural disasters. The country also hosts some 226,000 registered refugees, mainly from Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Since the beginning of the year, 64,000 new arrivals were recorded from the Horn of Africa in mixed migratory flows. This represents a 30 per cent increase over last year.

There are over 64,000 persons of concern in Israel, 90 per cent of them from Eritrea and the Sudan. The Government grants them temporary protection and has lifted collective protection for those from Côte d'Ivoire and South Sudan. UNHCR continues to advocate that these populations have access to refugee status determination (RSD) procedures. The number of new arrivals in Israel has recently decreased significantly, dropping from a monthly average of 1,000-1,500 persons, to some 200-300 persons. This can be attributed to increased security measures and legislative action which have restricted asylum space.

Many new arrivals in Israel continue to report grave human rights abuses at the hands of smugglers and traffickers in the Sinai Peninsula. Within this border region, a complex criminal network engages in human smuggling from countries such as Eritrea and the Sudan, into Israel. In response, UNHCR is devising a regional strategy to support the protection needs of persons of concern along migratory routes and throughout affected countries.

Over the past year, an increasing number of asylum-seekers from South Sudan and the Sudan have been registered with the UNHCR office in Egypt. UNHCR has initiated accelerated RSD procedures for Sudanese asylum-seekers from Darfur and has begun individual RSD interviews for Sudanese asylum-seekers from South Kordofan and Blue Nile States, given the growing instability in those areas. An increasing number of Syrian refugees are also approaching the Office in Egypt, and UNHCR has asked the Government to consider providing them with temporary protection.

More than 1,700 refugees and asylum-seekers continue to be supported by UNHCR at the Saloum camp near the Egyptian-Libyan border. Nearly 2,000 refugees have been submitted for resettlement over the past year; of this number,

some 600 have been accepted, including 400 who have already departed. Following authorization from the Egyptian Government earlier this year, UNHCR is constructing a camp in the port area of Saloum, where better shelter and services can be provided.

Despite the increased risk of arrest and detention, especially for sub-Saharan Africans, refugees and asylum-seekers continue to arrive in Libya. Pending establishment of a national asylum system and a MOU between the Libyan Government and UNHCR, a progressive resumption of registration and RSD activities is in process. The Office conducts protection monitoring visits to detention sites where refugees and asylum-seekers are held following interception at sea or for lack of valid documentation. It is estimated that several thousand Syrians have arrived in Libya.

The majority of the more than 550,000 people who were internally displaced in Libya during the uprising have returned to their areas of origin though local conflicts have resulted in new displacements. As of the end of August, there were between 65,000 and 80,000 IDPs in the country, most of whom are minorities unable to return to their areas of origin for fear of reprisals. UNHCR carries out regular protection monitoring visits to IDP sites throughout the country and provides food and other relief items. The Office is also continuing its efforts to prevent and reduce statelessness by monitoring the protection needs of populations potentially at risk of becoming stateless.

In Tunisia, the Government remains committed to developing an asylum law and system. UNHCR and partners are working to enhance the capacity of border officials to ensure a protection-sensitive approach to border management. Since the launch of the Global Resettlement Solidarity Initiative last year, more than 3,600 refugees living in the Shousha transit camp have been submitted for resettlement; of this number, more than 2,100 have been accepted, including some 1,500 who have already departed. The camp still hosts more than 2,400 recognized refugees and asylum-seekers, including some 300 persons with rejected claims. This latter group poses the greatest challenge for the planned closure of the transit camp next year. UNHCR is working with its partners and the Government to find solutions for this group and for recognized refugees who are not likely to be resettled.

According to the Algerian Government, a significant number of Malians have sought safety in the country and are being hosted by families along the border. There are also reports that thousands of Syrians have arrived in Algeria by air. Both the Malians and the Syrians are being assisted by the Algerian Red Crescent. Although UNHCR offered its assistance, the Algerian Red Crescent confirmed that it has the means to address both refugee situations.

With support from donors, a “Saving Lives Together” initiative has been launched to enhance security coordination with international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) working in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf. Under this initiative, a Joint Security Coordination Mechanism will be established.

At a meeting in January to discuss the confidence building measures (CBM) with the parties, Morocco and the Frente POLISARIO, and Algeria and Mauritania as neighbouring countries, and UNHCR, it was agreed to expand the family visits programme through the use of larger aircraft. The first of these took place in April, with a total of 15 visits planned for 2012. The visits are expected to benefit 4,500 people this year. As of the end of June, some 14,300 Sahrawis, out of a total of more than 43,200 persons who registered to participate, had benefited from the programme since its inception in 2004. Another CBM meeting will be held in Geneva in late September with the same participants.

In Morocco, there has been an increase in the number of asylum-seekers from Côte d'Ivoire and the Syrian Arab Republic approaching UNHCR. Discussions continue with the Government on the development and establishment of a national asylum system. UNHCR continues to provide training to prosecutors, police officials and *gendarmérie*, as well as briefings to civil society.

More than 107,000 Malian refugees sought refuge in Mauritania since January. The influx continues at a rate of several hundred per day. In coordination with the Mauritanian Government, UNHCR set up a refugee camp in Mbera, 60 kilometres from the border, and established a presence in the village of Bassikounou. A new verification of the number of refugees registered so far has been launched.

B. Progress made and challenges encountered in achieving strategic priorities

UNHCR continues to provide the predominantly urban refugee populations in the region with tailored protection and assistance support. It also assists governments, as appropriate, to develop fair and efficient legislative and administrative frameworks for asylum. The Office's priorities are delivering life-saving assistance; ensuring protection for all persons of concern using resettlement as a protection tool; and preparing for new emergencies. Continuing insecurity has affected humanitarian operations and access throughout the region.

Assistance to refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic - both financial aid to help them relocate to safer areas and material assistance - continues despite the current insecurity. Following the killing of a national staff member, UNHCR closed its registration centre on the outskirts of Damascus and conducted registration services from its branch office. Services to refugees in Aleppo and Hassakeh were also affected by the ongoing violence.

In Lebanon, the network of host families accommodating Syrian refugees is at capacity, and identifying alternative shelters for those refugees living in public buildings is thus a priority.

While the national dialogue in Yemen, as part of the Agreement on the Implementation Mechanism for the Transitional Process and in Accordance with the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative, presents an opportunity for a political solution in the country, continued international support and a commitment to humanitarian access are vital. The civil unrest and fragile security environment continues to pose serious challenges to the humanitarian space and to durable solutions. However, UNHCR was able to maintain its activities through national implementing partners to meet the needs of its beneficiaries.

A UNHCR global Arabic web site was launched in April from the external relations hub in Abu Dhabi. The Office also supported the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Secretariat for the first OIC-UNHCR meeting on Refugees in the Muslim World, which was held in May in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

Capacity building activities were held throughout the GCC region. The Qatar Emergency Management Training was held in Doha, the first of its kind to be held in the MENA region.

The volatile security situation in Libya continues to pose significant challenges for UNHCR's operations. Repeated attacks in Benghazi targeting the international community led UNHCR and other agencies to reduce their presence in the east of the country.

In March, the voluntary repatriation of Mauritanian refugees in Senegal was completed, with more than 24,536 people having returned home since the beginning of 2008. The returnees will benefit from UNHCR's reintegration activities until the end of the year. Following the Algerian Government's request for support in developing and establishing a national asylum structure, UNHCR identified an expert who is assisting the Government in updating the draft asylum law in conformity with international standards. In Mauritania, a national asylum law was finalized in 2011 and submitted for adoption to Parliament.

C. Financial information

The current 2012 budget for MENA stands at US\$ 745 million, compared to an initial ExCom approved budget of US\$ 565.5 million. Given the drastic increase in Syrian refugee numbers and their humanitarian needs, UNHCR and partners plan to launch a second revision of the Syria Regional Response Plan at the end of September. Requirements for the Yemen operation were increased to US\$ 72.6 million. In Mauritania, requirements have been increased to US\$ 38.1 million, of which US\$ 30.3 million is for the Malian refugee situation. Since the launch of the UNAMI-UNHCR Joint Appeal for US\$ 43 million for the Ashraf Special Operation, which includes US\$ 13 million for UNHCR, the Office has received just US\$ 6.9 million to date.
