

**ANNUAL CONSULTATIONS WITH NGOs
28 – 30 JUNE 2011, International Conference Center Geneva**

**Background Paper
MENA Regional Session**

Wednesday 29 June 2011, 11:15 - 13:00, Room 2

Unprecedented volatility in the region: Responding to humanitarian and protection concerns

In early 2011, extensive anti-government protests spread rapidly throughout the Middle East and North Africa triggering not only regime changes in Egypt and Tunisia, but causing also unprecedented turmoil particularly in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. In Libya, the crisis widened to an open conflict between the Government and opposition forces. As of end of May, some 890,000 persons had left Libya, mainly to Egypt and Tunisia, but also to a lesser extent to other neighboring countries, as well as to southern Europe, mainly to Italy and Malta. Since end of February, UNHCR jointly with IOM engaged in a massive humanitarian evacuation programme of Egyptians and third country nationals, repatriating over 130,000 persons to their home countries. In addition, UNHCR with its partners has provided protection and assistance to thousands of people of concern to UNHCR who are stranded at the Egyptian and Tunisian borders with Libya.

As seen in Tunisia, Egypt and now in Libya as well as in Yemen, urban refugees in times of crisis are particularly vulnerable and can encounter problems including disruption of assistance and protection services, further displacement and uprooting as well as becoming a potential target of discrimination, xenophobia and attacks. In the rapidly changing dynamics in the region, it is vital that the spirit of solidarity and burden sharing for refugees are maintained, if not increased. The aftermath of the current crisis will require increased UNHCR attention to protect and assist persons of concern in the region and it might delay and disrupt the ongoing implementation and promotion of existing refugee protection agendas with the governments.

Elsewhere in the region, the MENA region continues to deal with the displacement of millions of Iraqis, including 1,343,468 IDPs inside Iraq and 199,179 registered refugees in neighbouring countries. The main countries of asylum, Syrian Arab Republic, Jordan and Lebanon, have been generous hosts despite stretched resources. Resettlement as a protection tool as well as a burden-sharing mechanism remained an important tool in responding to the Iraqi refugee situation. Inside Iraq itself, UNHCR continues to support the Government of Iraq in preparing the grounds for a safe and dignified return, particular attention will be paid to the most vulnerable among IDPs living in settlements inside the country.

The protection climate, particularly in Yemen and the North African countries, is affected by mixed-migration flows, limiting the protection space available for refugees and asylum-seekers. The North African countries are transit routes for mixed-migration movements, primarily from sub-Saharan African countries towards Europe. The management of mixed migration in North Africa is constrained by the absence of regional and national migration-management systems and administrative structures.

In addition to mixed migration movements compounding further the Yemen operation with Somalis fleeing violence in their country and others seeking better economic opportunities continuing to arrive on Yemen's shores, nearly 300,000 Yemeni civilians remain internally displaced, uprooted by sectarian conflict in the northern part of Yemen, often living in dire circumstances. Humanitarian access to IDPs remains problematic.

Within the framework of strategic and comprehensive partnerships, the MENA Bureau will support States, civil society institutions and other relevant actors to ensure the protection of persons of concern to the Office to bridge the existing protection and assistance gaps, maintain an improved emergency response capacity as well as identify and implement comprehensive solutions to refugee situations in the region.

The current political unrest, combined with the increased level of poverty, social inequality, and fragile or lack of governance may potentially lead the region to a sustained period of regional instability and uncertainty. Furthermore, continued insecurity and extremist activities especially in Iraq and Yemen, the long-standing Palestinian problems, the ongoing irregular and mixed flows of migrants and asylum-seekers, the protracted refugee situations particularly in the urban context, and the weak or non-existent responsive asylum system add to the aforementioned challenges and the Office's efforts to safeguard the protection space and standard.

Nevertheless, the emerging political and socio-economic transformations may bring opening and reforms that could offer opportunities to improve the protection situation in the region. In this context, UNHCR regards it essential in forging closer collaboration with NGOs – both national and international ones – at a time the entire region is experiencing profound changes.