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**Update on UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and
North Africa (MENA)**

A. Situational analysis

Syria situation

With no political solution to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic in sight, Syrians have become the largest refugee population under UNHCR's mandate. Countries neighbouring the Syrian Arab Republic remained at the forefront of the crisis, with some 94 per cent of Syrian refugees (4 million persons) generously hosted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. As at mid-2015, almost one in two Syrian refugees in the region was hosted by Turkey (some 1.8 million refugees), while Lebanon had the highest number of refugees per capita of any country in the world (hosting close to 1.2 million registered refugees). In Jordan, of the 630,000 registered refugees, some 83 per cent lived outside of refugee camps. Iraq hosted over 249,000 Syrian refugees, of whom 97 per cent were in the Kurdistan region. There were concerns about Syrian and other refugees living in Al-Obaidi camp in Anbar governorate, who lacked access to legal assistance and documentation due to inaccessibility of Government services. In Egypt, more than 134,000 Syrian refugees lived in urban neighbourhoods, particularly in shared accommodation.

Despite the assistance provided by host governments and the international community, refugees and host communities are becoming increasingly vulnerable as the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic persists. In Lebanon, 70 per cent of households were living below the Lebanese extreme poverty line. In Jordan, 86 per cent of Syrian refugees living outside of camps were living below the Jordanian poverty line.

With pressures on host countries in the region continuing, it was also increasingly difficult for Syrians to find safety, including by seeking asylum. This resulted in a rise in the number of Syrians seeking refuge beyond the Middle East and North Africa region and a marked decline in the number of newly-arriving registered refugees in the region during the reporting period.

A significant deterioration in the security situation was reported in the Syrian Arab Republic, and conditions remained fluid and unpredictable. A total of 12.2 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance inside the country by mid-2015, including 7.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). UNHCR continued to support the implementation of the 2015 Strategic Response Plan for the Syrian Arab Republic (SRP) within the IDP inter-agency coordination framework, leading the sectors of protection, camp coordination and camp management, and shelter and non-food items. The Office also continued to use all possible means to maximize the delivery of assistance and protection in the country, working across conflict lines and borders, as authorized by United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2139, 2165 and 2191 (2014).

Iraq situation

In 2015, the security situation in Iraq remained highly volatile, with conflict and armed violence largely concentrated in the centre and north of the country. Ongoing hostilities led to significant new internal displacement, with an estimated 1 million civilians displaced

between January and mid-August 2015. This represented an almost 50 per cent increase in Iraq's internally displaced population since the end of 2014, with the total number estimated at 3.2 million as at mid-2015.¹ As of 30 July 2015, close to 300,000 IDPs were reported to have returned to their locations of origin due to perceived improvements in security conditions, but also due to the deterioration of the security situation in their areas of displacement.

Approximately 87 per cent of persons displaced internally in 2014 and 2015 were originally from three governorates only: Anbar, Ninewa and Salah al-Din. In addition, Anbar, Baghdad and Dohuk governorates continue to host the largest IDP population. The Kurdistan region hosts 27 per cent of the total IDPs.

UNHCR continued to lead the protection, shelter and non-food items, and camp coordination and camp management clusters in Iraq, and scaled up its response to address the IDP crisis in 2015. UNHCR and partners continued to monitor checkpoints to assist fleeing civilians and assess the needs of IDPs. UNHCR provided shelter to over 73,700 IDPs in nine camps across Iraq and built two new camps. The Office also completed the rehabilitation of 255 collective centres and almost 8,000 family shelter units, implemented country-wide cash assistance programmes for vulnerable IDPs, conducted protection monitoring, and ran call centres for IDPs seeking information, services and referrals. Technical support was provided to the authorities with regard to the registration and documentation of IDPs.

The situation in Iraq continued to have an impact on neighbouring countries, with over 205,000 Iraqi refugees registered in the region. Half of those refugees were hosted in Turkey (105,900). Other host States included Jordan (49,480), the Syrian Arab Republic (23,520), Lebanon (15,780), Egypt (6,760) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (2,000). UNHCR continued to identify people with specific needs through registration and protection outreach activities, in order to provide protection and support and ensure access to adequate services. UNHCR also continued to promote solutions, including where possible through the strategic use of resettlement.

Libya

Libya continued to navigate a tumultuous transition period characterized by political divisions, armed clashes in various regions, insecurity and criminality. The regional contingency plan was in the process of being updated to reflect the evolving context. According to local authorities and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), there were some 418,800 IDPs in Libya as at mid-2015, many of whom were displaced again when new fighting started. They were in need of assistance, including non-food items, medicine and alternative shelter for those accommodated in schools and other public facilities. Many schools, particularly in Benghazi, have been closed since October 2014, and over 70 schools continued to be used to host IDPs in Benghazi.

Within the United Nations humanitarian country team, UNHCR lead all protection-related activities and coordinated the Libya protection working group. This was established by United Nations agencies and NGOs working temporarily from Tunis to support national colleagues working inside Libya, coordinate protection activities and respond to humanitarian needs. In 2015, UNHCR and partners provided humanitarian assistance to nearly 60,000 persons of concern, including at different community development centres, despite limited freedom of movement in most parts of the country. UNHCR carried out protection monitoring inside immigration detention centres and over 8,000 individuals in detention received assistance, mainly medical care and relief items. UNHCR ran nine emergency hotlines, providing information and counselling to persons of concern on protection services, including on the limitations of registration and community services. The hotlines were also used to respond to requests for assistance from persons of concern who had been arrested due to lack of documentation.

¹ This figure did not include the nearly 1 million persons that remained displaced, mainly in central Iraq, as a result of sectarian violence in 2006.

More than 37,000 refugees and asylum-seekers were registered with UNHCR in Libya. More than half of them were from the Syrian Arab Republic, and the rest were from over 30 other countries. As a result of the instability in the country, Libya continued to be the main transit and departure point for mixed movements by sea from North Africa to Europe (see “Mixed movements and protection at sea”, below).

Yemen

The complex humanitarian situation in Yemen further deteriorated during the reporting period, aggravated by airstrikes, armed clashes and shelling throughout the country. Since the beginning of the current conflict in late March 2015, over 1.4 million people have been displaced internally and nearly 100,000 people have fled the country. An estimated 80 per cent of the population of Yemen (totalling 25 million persons) was in need of humanitarian assistance. The lack of security has hampered the delivery of basic services, such as food, medical supplies, shelter, water and fuel. Despite these difficulties, UNHCR has continued to provide life-saving assistance and to register new arrivals, as well as to provide protection and legal aid support, and to undertake refugee status determination (RSD), detention monitoring and resettlement processing. In July 2015, in parallel with the activation of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) system wide level-3 emergency response in Yemen for six months, a Regional Refugee Coordinator for the Yemen situation was appointed, based in Djibouti, to ensure UNHCR’s coordination of the refugee response and to liaise closely with other humanitarian agencies and the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Yemen crisis.

Over 25 per cent of those who have fled Yemen since end of March 2015 are Somali nationals who had been recognized as refugees on a prima facie basis in Yemen. Many have returned to Somalia, but some have moved to other countries in the region, notably Djibouti and Ethiopia, where they are hosted as refugees. Nonetheless, despite the unstable security situation, Yemen continued to host some 250,000 refugees as at mid-2015. Mixed movements to Yemen also continued, with some 41,300 new arrivals recorded between January and July 2015, mostly originating from Ethiopia and Somalia.

Mixed movements and protection at sea

The Middle East and North Africa continued to be a region of origin, first asylum, transit and destination for persons travelling as part of mixed movements. The number of deaths at sea, the use of detention following interception or rescue at sea, as well as trafficking and smuggling, were of growing concern. North Africa was particularly affected by movements of refugees and migrants, by both land and sea. In addition to movements across the Gulf of Aden, from January to August 2015, over 115,500 persons arrived by sea in Italy, the majority of whom were reported to have departed from Libya. During the same period, some 2,750 persons lost their lives or were reported missing in the Mediterranean Sea.

As part of UNHCR’s Special Mediterranean Initiative, the response of the Office to refugee protection and mixed movement situations in North Africa is centred on four objectives: preventing refoulement; improving access to territory and to asylum; empowering refugees to make informed decisions; and enhancing protection space including the quality of stay arrangements. UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) held a two-day technical consultation with the Libyan Coast Guard and the Department for Combatting Illegal Migration in July 2015 in Tunis on the topic of “Saving lives at sea”, with a view to enhancing collective responses to rescue and disembarkation.

In Tunisia, UNHCR worked with the authorities on the development of a predictable mechanism to respond to distress-at-sea incidents, including the provision of protection and assistance to persons rescued. In July 2015, standard operating procedures on rescue at sea were reviewed and updated following a study visit by Tunisian officials to Italy, organized by UNHCR and the Italian Council for Refugees. In Egypt, a key priority remained the release from detention of asylum-seekers and refugees who had attempted to depart from Egypt by land or sea and had been rescued or intercepted by the authorities.

B. Progress in achieving the global strategic priorities

While there was significant progress in responding to the protection and assistance needs of large numbers of refugees and IDPs in the Middle East and North Africa region, increasing insecurity and the protracted nature of the conflicts causing displacement continued to pose complex protection and operational challenges.

Favourable protection environment

UNHCR continued to conduct individual registration using biometrics for persons in need of international protection throughout the region. Nearly 48,900 Syrians have been registered in the Middle East and North Africa region since the beginning of 2015. The Office embarked upon verification exercises to keep registration records up to date. In Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, UNHCR rolled out a new version of the Refugee Assistance Information System, software to facilitate the management of refugee assistance by UNHCR and its partners.

UNHCR implemented more efficient and harmonized RSD procedures for Syrian and Iraqi applicants, including the strategic use of RSD for resettlement or other protection purposes. In Egypt, RSD was used to determine the protection situation of 85 persons remaining in Salloum camp. They were subsequently relocated to Cairo and the camp was officially closed.

Morocco was in the process of adopting legislation on asylum, and UNHCR has worked with the authorities on the registration and regularization of refugees since June 2014. Tunisia was also progressing towards the adoption of a legal framework for asylum, and UNHCR supported the establishment of a national protection system by providing training on international refugee law for judges and other authorities. In Mauritania, UNHCR organized workshops for the authorities involved in revision of the asylum legislation.

In Israel, UNHCR continued to promote access to the legal status and rights associated with asylum, and to advocate measures to enhance protection. The population of concern was approximately 45,000 by mid-2015. In Saudi Arabia, the General Department of Passports granted six month residency permits to Yemeni nationals, based on a Royal Decree issued in May 2015. As of early August 2015, over 400,000 Yemeni nationals had regularized their status. The permits are renewable after six months until the conflict in Yemen abates.

UNHCR continued to enhance community-based protection initiatives. Community-based mechanisms are essential for the delivery of basic protection and assistance services, particularly in situations where access is limited due to security. For example, under the “community outreach system”, over 900 community outreach members have facilitated access to protection and assistance for vulnerable displaced persons in Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic. In Iraq and Jordan, “community-based committees”, comprised of members of displaced and hosting communities, have helped prevent and address multiple protection challenges. There were 60 community centres operating in Egypt, Lebanon, Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic, offering services such as recreational activities, psychosocial support, access to information, skills development opportunities and counselling for both displaced people and host communities.

Two-way communication was also enhanced as part of community-based approaches. The refugee helpline system in Jordan, multifunctional team meetings with community structures in Egypt, telephone hotline systems in Libya, and the “communication tree” and WhatsApp group in Lebanon, all have allowed refugees to access accurate information, while also giving them the opportunity to provide feedback and bring concerns to the attention of UNHCR and its partners.

The implementation of UNHCR’s “Global action plan to end statelessness” was supported through a number of initiatives in the region. In particular, UNHCR focused on addressing new risks of statelessness arising in the region from unprecedented levels of forced displacement, family separation, and the loss or destruction of identity documents. The Office worked with governments to increase birth registration rates for refugees and IDPs, and provided advice on addressing gaps in nationality laws. UNHCR supported research to

improve data on statelessness and provided technical assistance to States on preventing and reducing statelessness. For example, with respect to the Syria situation, where over 142,000 Syrian refugee children have been born in exile since the start of the crisis, UNHCR has partnered with civil society organizations to establish legal aid programmes that assist families in registering new births and to launch public information campaigns on refugee birth registration in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. In Jordan, these measures, coupled with strong Government support, saw an eight-fold increase in the issuance of birth certificates to children born in refugee camps.

Safety from violence and exploitation

Implementation of UNHCR's strategies on the protection of children and the prevention of and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) continued in the region, including through efforts to strengthen national protection mechanisms by reinforcing two-way communication with communities, and to provide specialized assistance to refugees with specific needs.

SGBV was a key concern in the region. Refugees – and boys and girls in particular – faced increasing risks of violence, abuse and exploitation as their displacement became more protracted, including due to prolonged family separation, breakdown of community structures, loss of financial and social assets, and overcrowded housing. UNHCR has placed particular emphasis on strengthening national systems and capacities to prevent and respond to SGBV, including by providing training on case management, referrals, and working closely with national partners across the region. Similarly, protection training was provided to government officials and partners, including on child protection and SGBV, in order to allow the authorities to facilitate the identification of refugees with specific needs and to develop systematic responses.

Durable solutions

Significant progress was made towards obtaining 130,000 places for resettlement and other forms of admission for Syrian refugees by the end of 2016. By mid-2015, an estimated 104,000 places had been or were projected to be made available. There was scope to further explore forms of admission such as humanitarian visas, community-based private sponsorship, scholarships, enhanced family reunification and labour mobility to fill the remaining gap. As of July 2015, UNHCR had submitted almost 21,500 refugees for resettlement from countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, as well as from Turkey (Syrian and Iraqi refugees only). This constituted 51 per cent of the 2015 resettlement submission target (41,980 places), and included over 13,600 Syrian submissions (Syrian target: 26,500) and over 6,000 Iraqi submissions (Iraqi target: 10,080). Between 2013 and mid-2015, over 11,000 Syrian refugees departed from the region through resettlement and other forms of admission. Safeguards were embedded to ensure the integrity of the resettlement programme, including biometric registration, document verification, personal interviews and reviews of findings.

Mobilizing public, political, financial and operational support through strategic partnerships

UNHCR co-led, together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the development and launch of the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) in response to the Syria crisis in December 2014. This is an innovative planning and implementation framework, aimed at ensuring protection and humanitarian assistance for refugees, while strengthening host communities and national services and systems. At the third international pledging conference for the Syrian Arab Republic (Kuwait III) in March 2015, more than US\$ 3.6 billion was pledged for the 3RP and SRP for 2015 and 2016. A 3RP progress report was released in June 2015 to highlight the achievements and progress made in each response sector and the consequences of underfunding, and to call upon the international community to do more to respond to the crisis.

UNHCR strengthened strategic partnerships, including with the League of Arab States, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Islamic Development Bank, and the Economic

and Social Commission for Western Asia. Public and private entities from countries in the region continued to make generous contributions to support UNHCR's operations and to address displacement challenges in the Middle East and North Africa. A regional conference on protecting refugee children was held in 2014 in partnership with UNHCR Eminent Advocate, Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher Bint Mohammed Al Qasimi, providing a platform for engagement with key actors in the region to further the Office's regional refugee child protection strategy.

A region-wide network of local and regional civil society actors was being established to strengthen advocacy on displacement issues, build national capacities and share lessons learned on emergency response and protection. UNHCR also continued to strengthen engagement with local and regional stakeholders from academia, think-tanks and policy research institutes in order to develop better links between research and displacement-related policy formulation and advocacy in the region.

Training and capacity building activities continued for various actors responding to displacement challenges in the region, including government authorities and civil society. In the United Arab Emirates, a workshop on emergency management was held in the International Humanitarian City in Dubai in January 2015. The training targeted national partners.

C. Financial information

The initial 2015 budget approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (ExCom) at its sixty-fifth session in October 2014 for the Middle East and North Africa region was US\$ 1.9 billion. As at 31 August 2015, the overall financial requirements for the region had reached US\$ 2.1 billion.

As of early September 2015, contributions for the region amounted to over US\$ 875.1 million. Despite this generous donor support, needs continued to outpace the means available to address them.
