

The Middle East

Major Developments

The targeting of terrorist groups after the attacks of 11 September 2001, in countries thought to be harbouring terrorists, led to mounting tensions in the Middle East region. Moreover, the deterioration in the relationship between Israel and the Palestine Authority raised sharper fears of a major conflict in the Middle East. For refugees, these developments led to a significant slow-down in the processing of resettlement cases and refugees scheduled for departure stayed longer in their respective countries of asylum. The contingency plans for the countries in the region were updated and consolidated into a single plan to ensure optimum emergency preparedness in the region as a whole.

In 2001, UNHCR kept track of the bilateral talks between the Governments of Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the voluntary repatriation of their respective refugee populations. The first meeting took place in March 2001, with follow-up meetings in October and December. During 2001, some 1,730 Iraqi refugees returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran. UNHCR monitored the reception

Bahrain
Egypt
Iraq
Israel
Jordan
Kuwait
Lebanon
Oman
Qatar
Saudi Arabia
Syrian Arab Republic
United Arab Emirates
Yemen



of these Iraqi refugees at the border to ensure that their protection needs were being met. Some 6,600 Iraqi refugees have returned voluntarily since the Iraqi Government passed an amnesty law in 1999, granting Iraqis who left the country illegally exemption from prosecution if they returned.

Challenges and Concerns

The situation in Iraq remained a major concern: the living conditions of the population, including refugees, continued to deteriorate as a result of the ongoing sanctions against the country. Iraqi nationals continued to leave, heading for neighbouring countries and other asylum countries outside the region. In the Middle East, UNHCR was faced with the challenge of a large backlog of cases awaiting refugee status determination, as a result of the lack of resources needed to respond to the growing numbers of asylum-seekers from Iraq, Somalia and Sudan. The slow-down in the processing of resettlement cases (in late 2001), was perceived by governments in asylum

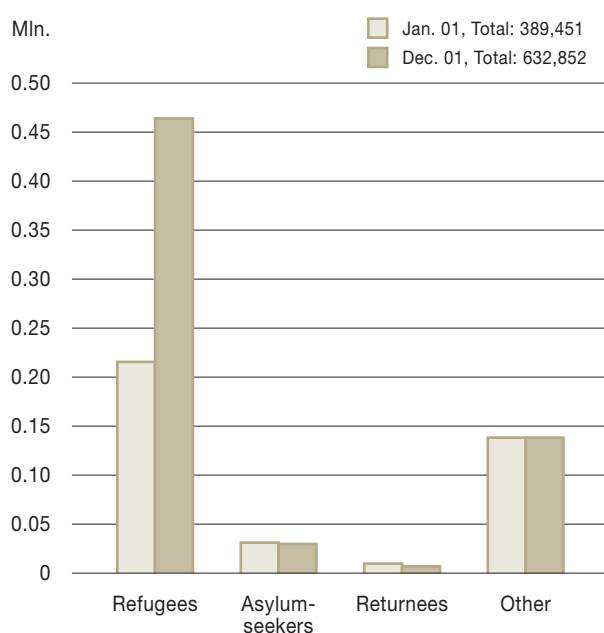
countries as an additional burden, particularly in light of their own difficult political, economic and social situations. It also resulted in a larger number of individuals and families needing material assistance. UNHCR offices had to stretch their limited resources to cope with the increase in demands for assistance throughout the region. UNHCR offices were not able to continue to respond to all the demands for assistance because of constraints in funding and resources. It is anticipated that reduced assistance from UNHCR will eventually lead to an increase in irregular movements of refugees and asylum-seekers to other countries within and beyond the Middle East region.

Progress Toward Solutions

In 2001, UNHCR actively promoted the accession by Governments in the region to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Progress towards the further strengthening of the protection regime in the region was evident in

the growing interest of the Saudi Government to accede to the 1951 Convention, and the positive steps taken towards institutionalising a MOU between UNHCR and the Syrian Government. As an important step towards the eventual hand-over to national authorities and local NGOs of responsibility for refugee status determination (RSD), UNHCR focused on capacity-building through training on RSD procedures. In view of the limited prospects for local integration and voluntary repatriation in the Middle East region, resettlement in a third country continued to represent the most viable solution for many refugees.

Persons of Concern to UNHCR



Operations

In **Egypt**, the number of applicants registered by UNHCR for refugee status determination increased during the year from 11,200 to 15,700. Although Egypt has acceded to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, UNHCR conducted interviews to determine refugee status. To address the growing number of asylum-seekers awaiting interviews for extended periods of time, the Office redoubled its efforts to transfer the responsibility for receiving and registering asylum-seekers to the respective authorities. Furthermore, due to the overwhelming pressure on the Government to resolve crucial national and regional issues, little progress was made in finding durable solutions for the assisted

refugees. During the year, UNHCR provided counselling, medical aid, subsistence allowances and education grants on a needs basis to some 7,230 refugees, mainly of Sudanese, Somali and Yemeni origin, and 137 elderly, stateless persons. With the delays in the processing of resettlement cases and departures, as well as the continuing influx of new arrivals, particularly from Sudan, the total population of recognised refugees at the end of the reporting period was six per cent higher than in the previous year.

In **Iraq**, UNHCR and Iraqi government representatives undertook joint missions to all the Iranian refugee camps and settlements to explain the repatriation process and to distribute voluntary repatriation forms, as a follow-up to the Islamic Republic of Iran-Iraq talks. As a result of these visits, 1,062 Iranian families have applied for voluntary repatriation, of whom some 1,000 persons received clearance from the Iranian Government to return home by the end of 2002. UNHCR assisted almost 39,000 refugees, out of more than 128,100 living in the country, including 23,700 Iranian refugees in Al-Tash camp and the five refugee settlements in southern and central Iraq, and about 13,100 Turkish refugees in Makhmour camp and five refugee settlements in the Dohuk Governorate in northern Iraq. The Iraqi Government continued to provide basic food and medicine under UN Security Council Resolution 968 for the population in Al-Tash camp, while UNHCR provided medicines and supplies for primary school classrooms. In the north, the Government continued to provide basic assistance for the camp, while UNHCR provided complementary aid. Although prospects for the voluntary repatriation of Turkish refugees (Kurds) remained bleak, 38 Turkish refugees returned in 2001 with the approval of the Governments of Iraq and Turkey and the assistance of UNHCR.

During the year, a total of 750 refugees, including 650 Iranian refugees from Al-Tash Camp and 100 Iranian refugees from the three northern governorates, were resettled from Iraq to 10 different resettlement countries. The resettlement of the latter group was exceptional, since it was approved by the Iraqi Government despite the official ban on exit visas for refugees staying in the non-government controlled part of northern Iraq. By the end of the year, 419 persons qualified for resettlement,

and were waiting to leave, while 1,317 persons were still awaiting decisions on resettlement.

In March, the Government of Iraq approved UNHCR's proposal to help the University of Baghdad's Faculty of Law raise awareness of refugee issues. The Government's participation in the Global Consultations meeting in Cairo (Egypt) in July 2001 showed the country's increasing interest in regional discussions related to further strengthening refugee protection. A workshop on refugee law was organised in November for students at the Diplomatic Institute of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and officials involved in refugee matters.

Israel hosted some 4,200 refugees, and provided assistance to 170 of them. Throughout the year, the Office supported the refugee status determination (RSD) procedure in the country. UNHCR also gave several training sessions on refugee law to relevant officials, in order to facilitate the hand-over of RSD to the Government of Israel at the beginning of 2002.

In **Jordan**, UNHCR's activities focused on the protection of refugee women and children. To obviate problems with gender sensitive issues, female protection officers were hired to interview female asylum-seekers. Refugee women received computer, language and vocational training from local humanitarian organisations. The Office organised bi-monthly meetings with refugee women to provide a forum for them to freely express their needs and concerns.

UNHCR registered a total of 4,600 asylum-seekers, some 4,000 of whom were Iraqis. The Office also recognised 1,900 individuals, mostly Iraqis, as refugees. Throughout the year, some 1,900 refugees were resettled and 12 voluntarily repatriated to their country of origin, with the result that 5,300 asylum-seekers and 1,100 refugees remained at the end of 2001.

Through UNHCR's participation in the opening ceremony for the ratification of the Amman Declaration on Children in Armed Conflict, the Office was able to promote accession to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as include other references to refugee children in the final declaration supported by the Government of Jordan. UNHCR used the media to raise its profile. The Yarmouk University Refugee Study Centre hosted several workshops on refugee issues, and the



Saudi Arabia: Refugee children playing in Rafha camp.
UNHCR / P. Mourtzis

Office continued to co-operate with the Royal Commission on Human Rights on human rights topics. Throughout the year training on the rights of the child (in association with UNICEF) and on human rights/refugee law (with UNDP/UNESCO) was undertaken.

At the end of 2001, **Lebanon** provided protection and assistance to some 2,800 recognised refugees, mainly Iraqis, Somalis and Sudanese. UNHCR's assistance mainly targeted women and children. There were delays in departures for resettlement at the beginning of the year, due to the temporary suspension of travel documents by the Lebanese authorities. After 11 September 2001, opportunities for resettlement were affected, since previously planned missions by the USA and Canada to select and process potential candidates for resettlement did not take place.

An ongoing economic crisis contributed to stricter application of the legislation on aliens by the Lebanese authorities. Many refugees and asylum-seekers were arbitrarily arrested and detained in 2001, following searches for people staying illegally in Lebanon. The Lebanese authorities continued to

deport illegal aliens (sometimes including refugees and asylum-seekers), mostly to Syria.

In **Saudi Arabia**, UNHCR's efforts to promote the Government of Saudi Arabia's accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention yielded results. The newly created Saudi Committee on Accession to the 1951 Convention held several meetings throughout the year and a high profile delegation was sent by the Government to participate in the Ministerial Meetings of State Parties to the 1951 Convention, as part of the Global Consultations process held in Geneva.

UNHCR faced difficulties in finding durable solutions for over 5,000 Iraqi refugees in Rafha camp. Therefore, the Office proposed a two-pronged exit strategy: to resettle those individuals who opted for resettlement; and to temporarily locally integrate those persons who wished to stay in Saudi Arabia, pending voluntary repatriation. Major progress was achieved towards the end of the year, when the Saudi authorities agreed to allow refugees from Rafha Camp to find work in the country as soon as the resettlement process was completed.

UNHCR's office in Riyadh continued to supervise UNHCR operations in **Kuwait** and the **United Arab Emirates**. The Office co-ordinated activities in the countries of the Arab Gulf Co-operation Council, namely **Bahrain**, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, **Oman** and **Qatar**.

UNHCR's Office in the **Syrian Arab Republic** ensured that protection and assistance were provided to some 3,350 refugees, from Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan and Afghanistan, including 960 individual asylum-seekers spontaneously arriving in the country. UNHCR paid special attention to the needs of female heads of household, children, and individuals with health problems. During 2001, some 700 persons were resettled, mainly to Canada and the USA. Two planned missions by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) to process potential candidates for resettlement were cancelled after the terrorists' attacks of 11 September. Nevertheless, the Office continued to submit candidates for resettlement to the Governments of Canada and Australia for their consideration.

UNHCR strengthened co-operation with the central and local authorities in the Syrian Arab Republic through a Memorandum of Understanding. UNHCR continued to meet with the relevant Syrian authorities to discuss a range of issues concerning refugees including solving issues related to the detention of asylum-seekers and refugees, the *refoulement* of refugees without proper residence permits, and exit visas for resettlement cases. However, the Ministry of Interior issued a decree on 6 November 2001 requiring Arab nationals staying in the country longer than three months to register and obtain residence permits from the Department of Immigration and Passports: this increased the vulnerability of refugees who lacked proper documentation. Government authorities, including the military and police officials were trained.

In **Yemen**, UNHCR ensured that protection and assistance was provided to some 69,500 refugees, from Somalia and countries in the Horn of Africa. During the year, UNHCR worked in close consultation with the Government and implementing partners to relocate Somali refugees living in the Al-Gahin camp to Kharaz, a new site to the west of Aden. Their relocation went fairly smoothly and their refugee registration cards were revalidated upon arrival at the new camp. UNHCR strengthened the refugee status determination procedure in the country by employing and training national UNVs and protection assistants.

The instability prevailing in Somalia led to an influx of Somalis into Yemen during 2001. More than 11,000 spontaneous arrivals were registered by the Office. During this period, UNHCR facilitated the voluntary repatriation of refugees, mainly Somalis, wishing to return to their places of origin. Over 550 refugees were assisted to repatriate from Yemen to Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2001. Limited material assistance was provided to the most vulnerable urban refugees residing in the major cities. UNHCR strengthened the capacity of national constituencies to progressively hand over responsibility for refugee protection and local integration.

A positive development was the request by the Government for UNHCR's assistance in drafting

its national legislation. The law will facilitate the implementation of the provisions of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. UNHCR also conducted a number of training sessions, workshops and seminars on refugee law for government officials, UNHCR's implementing partners and human rights organisations.

Funding

The funding shortfall had a negative impact on programmes covering basic humanitarian assistance in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Refugee families were evicted from their homes, unable to pay their rent, and some refugee children were unable to continue attending school. If further budget cuts take their toll on programmes in the region, there could be an erosion of tolerance shown by host governments towards the continuing presence of refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR would then have difficulties to carry out its protection mandate.

Voluntary Contributions – Restricted (USD)			
Donor	Earmarking ¹	Annual Programme Budget	
		Income	Contribution
Italy	Yemen Republic	110,638	110,638
Japan	Iraq	700,000	700,000
Japan Association for UNHCR (JPN)	Middle East	2,745	2,745
Netherlands	Jordan	4,944	4,944
Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia	100,306	100,306
Sweden	Middle East	4,583,334	4,583,334
United States of America	Middle East	3,700,000	3,700,000
TOTAL²		9,201,967	9,201,967

¹ For more information on the various earmarkings, please refer to the Donor Profiles.

² Total funds available for obligation in the region also included unrestricted voluntary contributions, lightly restricted contributions, opening balances and adjustments.

Budget and Expenditure (USD)		
Country	Revised Budget	Expenditure
	Annual Programme Budget and Trust Funds	
Egypt	2,757,846	2,608,600
Iraq	3,271,943	3,136,498
Israel	10,000	9,181
Jordan	1,505,805	1,254,452
Kuwait	556,472	482,700
Lebanon	2,185,065	2,060,953
Saudi Arabia	1,661,797	1,537,684
Syrian Arab Republic	1,946,264	1,818,424
United Arab Emirates	87,000	87,000
Yemen	3,551,297	3,372,889
Regional Projects ¹	12,663	12,663
TOTAL	17,546,152	6,334,068

¹ Includes scholarships for refugee students.