

Islamic Republic of Iran in short

Main Objectives

- Facilitate the voluntary repatriation of an estimated 100,000 Afghan and 5,000 Iraqi refugees.
- Ensure a transparent and fair procedure to identify persons in need of protection.
- Devote a larger share of programme resources to address the needs of the majority of refugees living outside camps.
- Improve programme delivery and impact, particularly through the increased involvement of NGOs.



WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Recent Developments

On 14 February 2000, the Government and UNHCR signed a Joint Programme designed to facilitate voluntary repatriation as well as to protect undocumented Afghans. By mid-October, more than 116,000 Afghans had repatriated voluntarily under the Joint Programme, and it is expected that some 160,000 will have returned by the end of the year. Since this Programme began, joint UNHCR/Government screening teams have accepted 10,800 cases (55,000 individuals) after reviewing the claims of 35,000 cases (175,000 persons) of previously undocumented Afghans who believed they had valid reasons for continued protection in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

PLANNING FIGURES

Population	Jan. 2001	Dec. 2001
Afghans	1,482,000 ¹	1,382,000
Iraqi Kurds/Iraqi Arabs	386,000 ¹	381,000
Total	1,868,000	1,763,000

¹Based on Government estimates (September 2000).

TOTAL REQUIREMENTS • USD 17,619,929

The Joint Programme has helped to improve the quality of repatriation and asylum. Organised repatriation directs returnees away from the unsafe and drought-affected areas of Afghanistan as well as conflict areas. Returnees benefit from cash grants (half in Afghanistan), non-food items and food (provided by WFP on arrival in Afghanistan). In co-operation with IOM, UNHCR transports Afghans to their home regions under safe

conditions. A further benefit is that many thousands of asylum-seekers obliged to remain in the Islamic Republic of Iran are now able to do so legally and receive proper documentation. In view of the Joint Programme's success, the High Commissioner personally requested its extension (during her September 2000 mission to the country). The Government readily agreed to extend it to the end of 2000.

Following insistent requests for repatriation from Iraqi Arabs after a 1999 Iraqi Government decree exempting from prosecution Iraqi nationals who had left the country illegally, UNHCR began to facilitate the return of a limited number of refugees to southern Iraq. These return movements continued at a reduced pace in 2000, with 1,204 returning during the first nine months of the year. Meanwhile, over 18,000 Iraqi Kurdish refugees have returned spontaneously to northern Iraq. This reduction of the Iraqi Kurdish population enabled UNHCR to close its office in Kermanshah in June 2000. As there are now only about 9,000 Iraqi Kurds in 12 camps, UNHCR has raised with the authorities the possibility of consolidating this population into fewer camps.

In a worsening economic environment, the refugees are increasingly seen as an unbearable burden on national resources and are often portrayed as being responsible for a number of social problems, including crime and drug smuggling. It is in this climate of public opinion that the Iranian Parliament adopted legislation in April 2000 calling on the Government to repatriate all foreigners without a work permit, exempting, however, people whose safety would thereby be jeopardised upon returning home.

The High Commissioner was personally assured in September 2000 that such legislation would be implemented in a manner demonstrating unwavering adherence to the 1951 Convention (to which the Islamic Republic of Iran is a party). UNHCR has also been informed that it would continue to be associated with the screening mechanism to be set up to identify refugees.

Constraints

The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to host the world's largest refugee population. The Government has informed UNHCR that, in addition to the 1.8 million documented refugees, there are 500,000 undocumented Afghans and Iraqis (referred to by the Government as illegal immigrants). Only a small proportion (five per cent) of the total refugee population lives in 29 camps: 32,000 Afghans in the country's eastern and central provinces, and 48,000 Iraqi Kurds and Arabs in the western and south-western regions. The majority of the refugees have been living alongside the Iranian population in cities and local communities. They have settled spontaneously, benefiting from various public services and amenities for two decades, and have achieved a certain degree of self-reliance. The Government does not, however, consider local integration to be a desirable solution.

The presence of international and national NGOs is still limited by the absence of a legal framework to define the conditions under which they can operate. In February 2000, UNHCR proposed an *ad hoc* formula for NGO participation in UNHCR-funded activities, but only limited progress has as yet been achieved. The High Commissioner and the Chairman of UNHCR's Executive Committee both raised the issue of NGO implementation during their visits to the country. Although it welcomes the self-financed activities of



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NGOs, UNHCR's main governmental implementing partner, the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs (BAFIA) of the Ministry of Interior, has raised strong objections to UNHCR channelling part of its funding through NGOs.

In the absence of an effective eligibility procedure for the past eight years, a large group of undocumented Afghan and Iraqi nationals has grown, lacking defined rights or status. Many are believed to have come to the Islamic Republic of Iran for a variety of reasons, and it has become increasingly difficult to identify the genuine refugees and those in need of protection.

STRATEGY

Protection and Solutions

In the 1980s large numbers of Afghans fled the Soviet invasion. During the 1990s, factional fighting created a complex and unpredictable situation, with some refugees returning and others fleeing or remaining in exile. At the beginning of the third decade of Afghan displacement, a change in the nature and composition of the Afghan population in asylum countries is clearly visible. In what increasingly resembles the complex

refugee movements in other countries (except on a much larger scale), refugees are mixed with migrant workers and other persons not considered in need of international protection.

Consequently, UNHCR has begun a comprehensive review of the entire Afghan refugee situation in order to obtain broader perspectives on the seemingly intractable search for lasting solutions. With support from a donor, UNHCR has contracted the services



of a consultant to help develop a new policy framework as well as a strategy for a comprehensive regional approach. The strategy will concentrate mainly on the issue of identification of refugees and on improving the quality of asylum. This will be in the context of continuing influxes and the presence in the Islamic Republic of Iran of large numbers of Afghans who are not in need of international protection. UNHCR will work with the Iranian authorities to find an appropriate solution while at the same time maintaining international standards for asylum and the treatment of refugees.

It is expected that some Iraqi refugees of Kurdish origin will repatriate to northern Iraq. Those Iraqi Kurds who do not wish to repatriate and who have valid grounds for not returning will receive assistance from UNHCR. The Office will continue its efforts to negotiate an agreement with the Government to upgrade and expand existing facilities in Khuzistan for the Iraqi Arab refugees. UNHCR will also continue to help Iraqi Arabs repatriate if their return is voluntary and based on an informed decision (taken in the knowledge that UNHCR cannot at present monitor their situation inside Iraq). Resettlement will remain a solution for a limited number of vulnerable refugees, especially women and children and adolescents at risk, refugees seeking family reunion and refugees with severe protection problems.

UNHCR will pursue its work with the Government to establish a legal framework within which NGOs could operate in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Assistance

The initial plan to focus resources in 2000 on assistance to non-camp refugees had to be revised to accommodate the vastly increased requirements for voluntary repatriation support and protection screening under the Joint Programme. The

overall funding shortfall compounded these problems and seriously hampered implementation of planned activities. Consequently, in 2001, a number of deferred activities will be undertaken (as well as new ones) to benefit in particular refugees accepted under the Joint Programme's screening mechanism. It is estimated that by the end of the Joint Programme as many as 100,000 Afghans could be accepted and in receipt of documentation. In consultation with the Government, UNHCR will develop specific strategies for assistance in the fields of education, health and income-generating activities (micro-credits). As far as possible, such measures will be implemented with NGO participation and the involvement of refugee communities.

In the western region, the consolidation of Iraqi Kurdish refugee camps may require limited investment in infrastructure and services during the course of 2001.

Desired Impact

UNHCR aims to ensure that refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran are protected and secure, and that their living conditions are adequate. UNHCR and the Government have for the first time in two decades agreed to look into the situation of undocumented Afghans. It is expected that status determination and provision of documentation to genuine refugees will continue in 2001 leading to improved conditions of asylum. An important medium-term objective is to alleviate some of the burden on the Government while the search for lasting solutions continues. Income-generating schemes, especially for the vulnerable and for families headed by women, will help them become more self-reliant and prepare them for reintegration.

ORGANISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Management

The country operation is co-ordinated by the Chief of Mission who is based in Teheran. In 2001, a total of 95 UNHCR staff will be working in the country. This comprises 16 international staff including one Junior Professional Officer, and 79 national staff.

OFFICES

Teheran	Ahwaz
Dogharun	Mashad
Milak	Orumiyeh
Zahedan	

Co-ordination

The Ministries of the Interior (primarily BAFIA, which reports directly to the Minister), Foreign Affairs, Health and Education are UNHCR's main government counterparts and implementing partners. The Office will maintain its long-term partnerships with other UN agencies such as WFP, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA and UNDCP. WFP provides food rations to the refugees in camps, and has also developed a successful 'oil for girls' education' project in the camps. All girls going to school receive five litres of cooking oil for each month of their attendance as an encouragement to both the students and their families. UNFPA will continue implementing reproductive health and family planning projects for refugee women and adolescents in the areas where they are concentrated. UNHCR will also co-operate with UNDCP to implement drugs awareness campaigns among refugees. The Office will continue to participate in the on-going inter-agency programme for poverty alleviation led by UNDP. This will target deprived regions of the country which are also severely affected by the presence of refugees. In addition, UNHCR maintains working relations with the Iranian Red Crescent Society and with a number of NGOs. IOM will continue to provide transport, funded by UNHCR, for the voluntary repatriation programme. Subject to confirmation of adequate funding by its partners (chiefly IOM and the Government itself) UNHCR will participate in the establishment in Teheran of a Regional Centre for Migration and Refugee Studies (proposed by the Government). UNOCHA provides mine- awareness courses to repatriating refugees.

BUDGET (USD)

Activities and Services	Annual Programme
Protection, Monitoring and Co-ordination	2,713,738
Community Services	427,496
Domestic Needs/Household Support	400,204
Education	2,307,528
Forestry	2,216
Health/Nutrition	2,084,800
Income Generation	1,026,750
Legal Assistance	359,360
Operational Support (to Agencies)	480,000
Sanitation	195,630
Shelter/Other Infrastructure	758,898
Transport/Logistics	5,000,000
Water (non-agricultural)	256,018
Total Operations	16,012,638
Programme Support	1,607,291
Total	17,619,929

PARTNERS

Government Agencies

Ministry of Education and Training (BISC)
Ministry for Foreign Affairs
Ministry of Health
Ministry of Interior (BAFIA)

Other

International Consortium for Refugees in Iran
International Organisation for Migration
Iraqi Refugee Aid Council
United Nations Population Fund
World Food Programme