

SOUTH-WEST ASIA REGIONAL OVERVIEW

SOUTH-WEST ASIA REGIONAL OVERVIEW



Recent Developments

By August 1999, the majority of the population in the Shomali valley in Afghanistan had been displaced because of fighting which erupted between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. Some 60,000 people had arrived in Kabul and been accommodated in the compound of the ex-Soviet Embassy or with relatives; and another 80,000 found themselves in the Panjshir valley. Displacement had also taken place in the northern provinces of Kunduz, Takhar and Pul-i-Khumri.

UN agencies and NGOs have been very active in the distribution of relief items and in the implementation of a programme to provide the displaced persons with adequate shelter before the onset of winter. The UN has continued to receive reliable reports about organised destruction of the agricultural infrastructure in the Shomali valley and systematic violations of the human rights of the displaced population. Although military activ-

ity has not caused any new departures to neighbouring countries, UNHCR's offices in Central Asia, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan are ready to respond in the case of potential new flows of refugees.

Despite conditions in Afghanistan, more than 80,000 Afghans returned home from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan during the first nine months of 1999. In addition to individual assistance and transport, UNHCR has facilitated the reintegration of the returnees through rehabilitation projects in their areas of return. UNHCR has braved dangerous conditions to conduct interviews with returnees to assess their safety, welfare, rights and general ability to reintegrate. This monitoring has allowed UNHCR to intervene with the local authorities on behalf of the returnees and to design assistance measures which address their most urgent needs.

Strategic Objectives

UNHCR's primary objective in the region is continued respect for the rights of refugees, returnees and asylum-seekers. This includes guaranteeing the safe entry of new arrivals, their immediate assistance and the determination of their status in coordination with host countries. During the refugees' stay in the countries of asylum, they must be protected from forced return to their country of origin.

UNHCR also provides assistance to cover their basic needs (mainly health, education and social services) and facilitates their self-reliance through income-generating projects or credit schemes. The majority of the refugee population in the asylum countries is self-sufficient in terms of food and accommodation and has managed to achieve a degree of economic integration. However, the host governments have indicated that they do not consider long-term local settlement of Afghan refugees a feasible option: voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan is therefore the preferred solution.

Although the current situation in Afghanistan does not allow UNHCR to actively promote voluntary repatriation, those refugees who make an informed decision to return will be helped with transport and repatriation grants. UNHCR estimates that up to 200,000 Afghan refugees will return in 2000. In Afghanistan, rehabilitation activities will focus on water, shelter and basic services.

Iraqi refugees currently in the Islamic Republic of Iran will also be helped to return home as long as their decision to repatriate is a voluntary one informed by knowledge of conditions in their areas of return. About 30,000 Iraqi refugees are expected to choose to repatriate in 2000. Arrangements for their repatriation are currently under discussion with the host government and the refugees themselves.

UNHCR will liaise with European Union members to implement those elements of the EU Action Plan for Afghanistan (adopted by the EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs in October 1999) that relate to the mandate and activities of UNHCR.

Operations

UNHCR's country programmes in **Afghanistan**, the **Islamic Republic of Iran** and **Pakistan** are described in separate chapters hereafter.

SOUTH-WEST ASIA	
BUDGET (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Afghanistan	7,813,802
Islamic Republic of Iran	18,307,734
Pakistan	16,030,080
Sub-total	42,151,616
Bureau at Headquarters	1,475,400
Total	43,627,016

The Afghan Refugee Situation

Afghan refugees have unfortunately broken world records: in the years following the Soviet invasion, more than 6 million Afghans took refuge in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran; since 1992, more than 4 million of them have repatriated. At present, the Afghan refugees are the single largest and longest-staying refugee population in the world, with 1.4 million still in the Islamic Republic of Iran and 1.2 million in Pakistan.

Many Afghan refugees, having weighed up the military and political insecurity in Afghanistan, the lack of economic opportunities and basic services, and reports of serious human rights violations, still hesitate to return. Nevertheless, every year about 100,000 Afghan refugees have continued to repatriate to more stable areas of the country, and 200,000 refugees are expected to return in 2000.

The socio-economic situation in asylum countries, which have been tremendously generous towards the Afghan refugees, is worsening. Host governments are becoming increasingly impatient to find solutions for these large refugee groups, and UNHCR is concerned about certain practices that have failed to meet internationally recognised standards of protection.

International interest in the Afghan cause, and hence financial assistance, has been diminishing over the years. Now at risk are programmes for health, education and social services in the countries of asylum as well as projects to support the reintegration of the returnees in Afghanistan. Voluntary repatriation also requires solid support to pay for transport and repatriation packages. In 2000, UNHCR will require **USD 36,997,146** to manage this situation.