



The Middle East

Recent developments

UNHCR's programmes in the Middle East have been heavily influenced by events in Iraq and by the continued tension over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2004, developments in Sudan have also had an impact – most notably on the refugee situation in Egypt, where the vast majority of refugees are Sudanese.

Given the fluidity of the situation in Sudan, individual refugee status determination (RSD) has been temporarily suspended for Sudanese asylum-seekers. New arrivals from Sudan have been registered and provided with identity documents entitling them to reside legally in the country.

Following the voluntary and spontaneous return of almost 5,000 refugees from Rafha Camp, UNHCR's Regional Office in **Saudi Arabia** has been able to give more attention to building relations with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in the Gulf region.

Most refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic are Iraqi. They are currently protected under the temporary protection regime advocated by UNHCR in early 2003 immediately after the beginning of hostilities in Iraq. Although

Bahrain

Egypt

Iraq

Israel

Jordan

Kuwait

Lebanon

Oman

Qatar

Saudi Arabia

Syrian Arab Republic

United Arab Emirates

Yemen



some refugees returned to Iraq in 2004 (UNHCR facilitated the return of a small number of groups of persons who applied for assistance), many more still remain in countries of asylum. The largest return movements to Iraq assisted by UNHCR were from the Islamic Republic of Iran and from Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, refugees who fled Iraq before and during the conflict in 2003 (mostly Palestinians and Iranians of Kurdish ethnicity) remain stranded in the Ruwayshed camp in Jordan or in the No Man's Land between Jordan and Iraq. UNHCR has been pursuing a variety of options for this group, primarily resettlement, but further cooperation from Governments will be required if durable solutions are to be found.

In many Middle Eastern countries, UNHCR has been forced to review its approach to assisting refugees and asylum-seekers as a consequence of the ever growing number of asylum-seekers and the decrease in budgetary allocations with which to attend to their needs. The organization must therefore as a matter of urgency seek out ways to reduce refugees' and asylum-seekers' dependence on

external assistance. The absence of practicable and effective domestic asylum legislation and structures in most of these countries constitutes a major challenge.

A series of consultations with the host governments and confidence-building exercises with local authorities are enabling UNHCR gradually to elicit greater respect for basic protection principles, mainly the principle of *non-refoulement*. The Office will build on existing achievements with a view to extending access to asylum-seekers in the urban context and then carrying out the necessary refugee status determination. The still embryonic international protection regime will have to be strengthened. UNHCR will also continue to address the problems faced by stateless people in the region.

Strategic objectives

The overall aim is to improve the asylum climate in the region, by encouraging States to accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, and to develop and implement domestic

asylum procedures, thereby reducing dependence on UNHCR.

While voluntary repatriation is an option for some refugees, and it is hoped that developments in Iraq and Sudan will enhance repatriation prospects in 2005, resettlement to third countries is likely to remain an important solution for many refugees currently living in the Middle East. It is however proving increasingly difficult to find resettlement options outside the region for many refugees from the Middle East. UNHCR will therefore continue to advocate resettlement in countries within the region whenever appropriate.

In the meantime, the Office will conduct RSD and identify durable solutions, whilst providing some

assistance to vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers. To discourage people from trying to use asylum procedures as a way to move to other countries for economic reasons, UNHCR will try to improve and harmonize regional policies on assistance criteria and resettlement submissions. Staff will maintain contacts with colleagues in neighbouring countries to enable them to cross-reference asylum applications where necessary. UNHCR will continue to seek unhindered access to refugees and asylum-seekers in detention. Care will be taken to ensure that gender concerns are addressed. The Office will also build on the work of the recently-formed network of community services officers addressing gender and child-related issues throughout the Middle East.



Children in a refugee settlement receiving lessons in a classroom sponsored by UNHCR. *UNHCR / A. Van Genderen Stort*

Operations

UNHCR's Iraq Operation will be covered by a Supplementary Programme, for which a separate appeal will be launched in late 2004.

By the end of 2004, it is envisaged that the number of registered refugees and asylum-seekers in **Egypt** will have increased to 25,000.

Although the country is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, it has no domestic asylum legislation. UNHCR currently registers newly arriving asylum-seekers and carries out individual refugee status determination as required.



To address the lack of domestic asylum legislation, UNHCR will redouble its institutional capacity-building efforts, to enable the Egyptian authorities to play a greater role in the asylum process and protection. Activities will include training in refugee law as well as increasing public awareness of refugees and asylum. UNHCR will also focus on deepening its operational partnership with the League of Arab States as a means to expand the asylum constituency. A plan of action, comprising a series of joint activities, has been elaborated by UNHCR and the League of Arab States and is expected to enter into effect shortly.

In parallel, the Office will build upon its community-based approach and promote the participation of refugee groups, implementing partners and host communities in planning and delivering assistance as well as in promoting self-reliance among refugees.

During 2004, nearly 1,000 refugee status determination interviews were conducted in **Israel** and about 250 people were granted refugee status. This entitles them to work and gives them access to basic health and education services. Most of these refugees originate from Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sierra Leone. In July 2004, nearly 300 asylum-seekers were awaiting a decision on their status, while another 40 refugees qualified for resettlement. The claim for asylum by some 100 Eritrean nationals is now scheduled to be heard by the national authorities. The UNHCR Office in Israel will continue to ensure that every qualifying asylum-seeker is interviewed and his/her case duly considered by the Government. In addition, UNHCR will continue to seek durable solutions for the refugees while providing medical and financial assistance to vulnerable cases. Asylum-seekers and refugees will continue to be protected against *refoulement* and possible deportation. Voluntary repatriation and resettlement will be promoted and facilitated for urban refugees as required.

Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and UNHCR's role and status is based on an MOU signed in 1998, which generally provides time-limited asylum. Since early 2003, however, Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers have been covered by a temporary protection regime.

Most of the over 1,000 refugees who had arrived prior to 2003 (Iraqis and others) and roughly 10,000 Iraqi asylum-seekers who arrived in or after 2003 have now been registered and are living in urban environments. Meanwhile, UNHCR continues to support the Palestinian and Iranian Kurdish refugees in the Ruwayshed and No Man's Land camps.

UNHCR will continue to pursue resettlement opportunities and provide assistance on the basis of individually assessed needs. As part of its efforts to encourage the Government of Jordan to accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and adopt domestic refugee legislation, the Office will enhance public awareness of refugee issues and support local institutions – the authorities, indigenous non-governmental partners and community groups – in the process of gaining experience in dealing with asylum issues.

Lebanon is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol. The country is host to almost 400,000 Palestinian refugees and some 2,000 refugees from other countries. Local authorities insist that Lebanon should not be regarded as a country of asylum. In the absence of readily accessible national asylum legislation and institutions to carry out RSD, UNHCR itself processes applications for asylum. The Office's operations in Lebanon are defined by an MOU signed with the Lebanese authorities in September 2003.

In 2005, the organization will continue to focus on providing protection and durable solutions for the refugees falling within its mandate. Local integration prospects are nearly non-existent and the most viable solution is often resettlement. In view of the current security condition in Iraq, UNHCR is not promoting voluntary repatriation. It will, however, continue to facilitate the voluntary return of those who apply for assistance. The Office also seeks resettlement opportunities for Iraqis when that is the most viable durable solution. While they wait, refugees depend on UNHCR for protection and assistance.

In 2005, the Office will conduct training and public awareness-raising activities to promote understanding of refugee law and draw attention to international standards.

To help refugees become more self-reliant, UNHCR has been cooperating with a local NGO to establish a community development centre. Refugees take part in skills training and capacity-building programmes while waiting for durable solutions. Gender- and age-mainstreaming will be a key focus in 2005 following the sensitization campaign and training sessions organized during 2004.

The strategic objective of UNHCR's regional office in Riyadh, **Saudi Arabia**, is to continue to encourage Gulf countries to adhere to refugee law principles and improve international protection, accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and introduce effective domestic refugee laws. The Office will enhance existing efforts to bring Governments and civil society into closer partnership with UNHCR through greater political and financial support for its programmes.

Following the return of almost all the refugees from Rafha, UNHCR is looking at new ways to manage the camp in the light of the Government's desire to hand over management of the camp to Border Police.

As the Government does not legally acknowledge UNHCR-recognized refugees living in the country, the Office is obliged to obtain government clearance for their temporary stay in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia whilst it looks for durable solutions outside the region.

The **Syrian Arab Republic** is not a party to either the 1951 Refugee Convention or 1967 Protocol, nor has it adopted any national legislative or administrative provisions on issues related to asylum for non-Palestinians. During this period, UNHCR took steps to finalize the Memorandum of Understanding between UNHCR and the Government. Similarly, discussions were initiated with the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention and to encourage the authorities to adopt an institutional framework to deal with the issues relating to asylum.

By July 2004, some 5,700 Iraqis had registered to repatriate. UNHCR has not, however, taken part in organized repatriation from Syria since the withdrawal of UNHCR and other UN international staff from Iraq in 2003.

Capacity building and enhancement of the asylum climate are UNHCR's main priorities in Syria. In 2005, UNHCR will continue its efforts to promote accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. It will work to establish viable asylum institutions and mechanisms to encourage the Government to share responsibility for asylum-seekers and refugees. The Office will encourage the authorities to adopt an institutional framework for asylum without prejudice to the issue of the Palestinian refugees.

UNHCR and its partners in **Yemen** will continue to provide essential humanitarian assistance and services to some 10,500 refugees settled at the Kharaz camp, with a focus on meeting the special needs of vulnerable individuals. WFP will supply basic food rations for all refugees living in the camp. Residents will also have access to adequate water, sanitation, shelter, household items and medical care, vocational training and language courses, as well as education, counselling and services related to HIV/AIDS and harmful traditional practices (i.e. female genital mutilation). Refugees will be allocated garden plots and receive seeds and tools. It is noteworthy that women and children comprise more than 83 per cent of the total camp population, with nearly half the refugee households headed by women. It would appear that the camps are fulfilling some basic welfare needs that refugee women cannot access elsewhere.

UNHCR will provide protection and assistance to some 26,100 urban refugees settled mostly in Sana'a and Aden (Basateen) and new arrivals at the Mayfa'a Reception Centre. Direct financial assistance will target the most vulnerable. Refugee health clinics will offer preventive and curative treatment and refer more serious cases to local hospitals. Reproductive health and HIV/AIDS related services will also be available in Sana'a and Aden. UNHCR-funded community centres will offer a safe environment for refugees and social and legal counselling, language training, day care for children, and recreational, social and cultural activities. Refugee children will continue to attend local primary schools with assistance from UNHCR. Vocational training programmes will prepare adult refugees to acquire marketable skills.

Yemen extends *prima facie* recognition to Somalis, issuing refugee cards co-signed by UNHCR that legalize their stay, permit freedom of movement and facilitate access to employment and education. On average, some 1,000 Somalis arrive in Yemen each month, and all are accepted as refugees on a *prima facie* basis. Nearly 90 per cent of the refugees in the country hail from Somalia. In addition, UNHCR counts amongst its beneficiaries nearly 2,700 non-Somali refugees. Yemen also hosts 9,000 Palestinian refugees. As they live outside the operational area of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), those who need support qualify for UNHCR's protection and assistance.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Egypt	4,106,753
Iraq	2,461,766
Israel	93,200
Jordan	1,639,023
Lebanon	2,945,081
Saudi Arabia	1,797,507
Syrian Arab Republic	1,817,050
Yemen	4,043,406
Total	18,903,786

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