

FINAL REPORT ON UNHCR EMERGENCY OPERATIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN

CONTEXT

Following the onset of violence in southern Kyrgyzstan on 10-11 June 2010, some 90,000 Kyrgyz nationals/ ethnic Uzbeks fled into Andijan, Fergana and Namangan provinces of the neighbouring Republic of Uzbekistan. The vast majority of the refugees were hosted in the Andijan region, which is the most densely populated area of Uzbekistan. Prior to the emergency operation, UNHCR did not have a presence in Uzbekistan and a UN presence in Andijan had only been limited to one UNDP-funded community development project.

The dynamic, complex and politically sensitive nature of the events on the ground caused the emergency relief operation to suddenly switch from an initially anticipated prolonged refugee operation to one characterised by mass returns and early recovery. According to official sources of the Uzbek Government, the last registered refugees left the country on 25 June 2010 and only a few (some 500 refugees) remained mainly wounded in hospitals.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE

The initial emergency response was based on the formal acceptance by the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan of UNHCR's offer to assist in this humanitarian crisis, received through the Permanent Mission of Uzbekistan in Geneva on 14 June 2010. The initial programme design was based on the rapid assessment conducted by a joint United Nations team mission (including UNHCR) to the region on 17-18 June.

As part of the Emergency Response Team (ERT), a total of 11 international UNHCR staff were deployed to Uzbekistan (Tashkent and Andijan) and two national staff were recruited, one in Andijan and one in Tashkent to provide required logistical support and assistance.

At the initial stage of the emergency, a shortage of shelter and food; the quantity and quality of water available; the need for clothes, hygiene and basic household items; and the supply of medicines to the district health facilities were all identified as key priorities. Many refugees suffered from severe psychological trauma, which also required urgent attention.

The immediate response by the Government of Uzbekistan to the crisis in southern Kyrgyzstan was exemplary through the opening of its border and facilitation of border-crossings, transportation of refugees, registration and the establishment of refugee sites in public facilities such as schools and youth camps, which hosted the majority of the refugees. The Government also funded and organised the provision of food and medical services to refugees located in these locations.

Within 72 hours of the Government's appeal to the international community, UNHCR was the first agency to respond by delivering emergency humanitarian assistance through six airlifts during three consecutive days, starting on 16 June 2010. Over 200 tons of tents and non-food items (NFIs) were distributed in the refugee sites in close cooperation with the local authorities. The Uzbek Government assumed the leading role in this emergency response and assistance to the refugees.



Photo: UNHCR / M. Niyazov / June 2010

Andijan airport, Uzbekistan on 16 June 2010: The first planes arrived at the airport in Andijan on 16 June 2010. The 240 tones of aid brought by 6 airplanes included tents, plastic sheets, jerry cans, kitchen sets and blankets.

UNHCR planning and emergency response was kept flexible in order to adapt to the rapidly changing operational environment. The initial response to the crisis focused on the supply and delivery of the tents and NFIs (for more than 45,000 refugees) to the local authorities for distribution in Andijan. The storage, transportation and distribution activities of the NFIs and tents were conducted by the Government, namely by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry for the Emergency Situations, and monitored by UNHCR.

In addition to shelter and NFI assistance, UNHCR planned to assist the Government with registration and the provision of medical supplies, the coordination of the water and sanitation sector and psycho-social support to the adults. Advocacy and the promotion of access to protection, freedom of movement and respect for refugee rights were an integral component of the programming along with protection monitoring and particular support to persons with specific needs.

The preparation of the Flash Appeal for Uzbekistan, which included nine¹ UN agencies sought a total of USD 37.9 million and was prepared through joint UN planning and programming under the leadership of UNHCR. Of this total value, the requirement for UNHCR was USD 15.6 million. However, with increased repatriation to Kyrgyzstan encouraged by the Kyrgyz Government, the operational environment changed rapidly over the following days and the Flash Appeal was eventually withdrawn as the population moved back to Kyrgyzstan.

¹ These nine agencies included OCHA, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WFP, and WHO.

The large scale repatriation necessitated the shifting of humanitarian assistance to return areas in Kyrgyzstan (Osh and Jalalabad). As such, the final phase of the operation included two joint UN cross-border convoys that transported the remaining humanitarian aid from Andijan to Osh on 30 June and 2 July. In total, 47 trucks (19 carrying UNHCR goods) were involved in the transfers. With the approval of UNHCR, a small quantity of NFI supplies (759 tents) was retained by the authorities in Uzbekistan as a contingency stock.

Of a total of 45,000 blankets received in Andijan in June, 19,750 were distributed in Andijan and 25,350 were released to Osh, Kyrgyzstan. Of a total of 2,400 tents received, 1,641 were released to Osh, and 759 were retained in stock with the Uzbekistan Government. Of a total of 9,000 plastic sheeting received, 8,802 were distributed in Andijan and 198 were released to Osh. Of a total of 9,000 kitchen sets received, 7,055 were distributed in Andijan and 1,945 were released to Osh. Finally, of a total of 18,000 jerry-cans received, 6,481 were distributed in Andijan and 11,519 were released to Osh.

COORDINATION

Prior to the arrival of the UNHCR emergency teams in Uzbekistan, the overall coordination of the emergency response was carried out by the UN Resident Coordinator (UN RC) with the support of OCHA. As of 17 June, UNHCR assumed the lead role, in close coordination with UN RC and other sister UN agencies, and a sector approach was adopted.

UNHCR led the protection, education, shelter/NFI and WASH sectors in the operation. With few activities on the ground, however, coordination was limited to inter-agency collaboration, information-sharing and the design of a joint communication strategy vis-à-vis the Government and donors.

CHALLENGES

The speed at which UNHCR was able to respond to the initial emergency was challenged by the lack of a permanent presence in the country prior to the events.

Communication channels between UN agencies (including UNHCR) and the Government, which had rapidly assumed the lead role in coordinating the response, also needed to be streamlined. Information from the Government was shared on a need-to-know basis causing significant challenges to the humanitarian response of international agencies. Furthermore, the massive return and the facilitating role of the Government in the return caused significant confusion on the ground among camp management officials, authorities, and UN and international humanitarian agencies.

PROTECTION

Access to the territory for people seeking asylum:

There are approximately 12 border crossing points in the Andijan region, six on the border with Osh region and six bordering the Jalal Abad region of Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan authorities were quick to open informal crossing points in order to facilitate the entry of thousands of refugees. The border was also opened to those who did not have identification documents. There was little evidence that people were systematically refused access to the territory, however there were reports that men decided to stay behind or were strongly encouraged not to leave in order to guard their family property. This may also explain why they only constituted 3 per cent of the refugee population.

Registration and individual documentation:

Government estimates of refugee numbers in the Andijan, Fergana and Namangan regions ranged from 90,000 to 100,000. Some 80,000 refugees were registered by the Government in Andijan province, 8,500 in Fergana and 3,500 in Namangan. According to statistics provided by the authorities, 54 per cent of the refugee population were children, 47 per cent were women and 3 per cent were men (mainly elderly and wounded men). UN and international NGOs relied fully upon the Government statistics, as it carried out the registration of new arrivals and returnees. There were also a considerable number of pregnant women who gave birth in Uzbekistan. However, birth certificates were not issued (only medical certificates).

Camp situation and freedom of movement:

There were approximately 46 refugee sites/camps in Andijan province, all in close proximity of the border with Kyrgyzstan. Schools, college buildings, summer camps, industrial collective centres, warehouses and garages were used for sheltering refugees. The camp sizes varied from 700 to 6,000 refugees. According to an initial assessment conducted by UNHCR, concerns existed with regard to the layout and site planning at these locations, i.e., distance between the tents and overcrowding in tents. An assessment of latrines and water points was not possible due to the restricted access given to international actors in the camps.



Photo: UNHCR / N. Prokopchuk / June 2010

Refugee camp in Kara-Su, Andijan province of Uzbekistan, hosted some 2,700 refugees, mainly from the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan.

Refugees were restricted to the camps and did not enjoy freedom of movement. It was reported that an estimated number of 60 to 500 refugees stayed with host families. It was Government policy, however, that assistance would not be provided to those staying outside the camps.

Refugees traumatized by the violence and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence:

UNHCR received reports that there were more victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) among the refugee caseload who fled Osh compared to those from Jalal Abad. The UNHCR team attempted to provide counselling to refugee women and girls as well as to collect more information on the matter, however as the issue remains sensitive in local culture, many victims were unwilling to identify themselves and discuss their situation. Some victims, including minors, reportedly received medical

treatment in hospitals in Andijan; however UNHCR did not have access to the hospitals or the victims being treated there.

Return:

Small scale return movements were reported as early as 19 June and were mainly to areas which had been less affected by the violence. These early returns seemed voluntary in nature.



Photo: UNHCR / S. Schulman / 23 June 2010

Balti Kazyk, Kyrgyzstan, border with Uzbekistan: Refugees return home to Kyrgyzstan. The returnees said they decided to return home after a visit from the governor of Jalalabad, who promised them safety and to rebuild their destroyed homes. Nonetheless, returnees spoke of concerns over security and returning to destroyed homes.

Documenting the voluntary nature of return proved difficult as access to refugee sites was strictly controlled by the authorities and communication with refugees was limited. As of 21 June, after a delegation of Kyrgyz officials (including the Kyrgyz Ambassador and embassy staff from Tashkent as well as representatives of local authorities from Osh and Jalal Abad) visited refugee camps and actively promoted repatriation, massive return movements began to take place. While force was not used, there was evidence of pressure put on the refugees to return before the Constitutional Referendum in Kyrgyzstan. It was also reported that most refugees had limited information on the conditions prevailing at home, thus limiting their ability to make an informed decision concerning their return.

LOOKING FORWARD

UNHCR will continue to work closely with the UN country team in Uzbekistan and the Government on contingency planning and will support and capacitate the Government in this regard.