



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

Executive Committee Summary

Country : Israel

Planning Year : 2006

2006 Israel Country Operations Plan

Part I: Executive Committee Summary

(a) Context and Beneficiary Populations

Political context

The refugee and asylum seekers' situation in Israel throughout these last years has been enmeshed within the efforts made by the local authorities to reduce the number of "illegal workers" in the country. This policy has increased dramatically the number of asylum requests received by UNHCR in Jerusalem from about 60 - 100 a month to up to 40 - 60 a day, thus the need to intervene constantly to assure protection for people who are in any of the stages of their refugee status determination. Since 2002, refugee status is being granted by the Israeli National Status Granting board (NSGB), a special body created within the Minister of the Interior upon the recommendation of the Inter-ministerial Committee (Justice, Foreign Affairs and Interior). The UNHCR office, at the request of the government, receives and sorts asylum seeker requests, interviews individual cases, gathers information, assesses the cases and makes recommendations to the NSGB.

UNHCR's role

UNHCR intervenes with authorities to prevent "refoulment," supporting asylum seeker claims and ensuring that the government grants temporary asylum for special cases.

The office in Israel will continue throughout 2006 to ensure that qualifying asylum seekers are interviewed and their claims duly considered by the government. In addition, UNHCR will continue seeking durable solutions for the refugees while providing medical and financial assistance to vulnerable cases. Asylum-seekers and urban refugees will continue to be protected against refoulment and possible deportation. Voluntary repatriation and resettlement will be promoted and facilitated for the urban caseload whenever required.

In addition to its standard protection role vis-à-vis refugees and asylum seekers, UNHCR intends also to normalize, formalize and "perpetuate" the progress already made in Israel and move these activities from the domain of "goodwill and good contacts" into a formal system. Training for government officials will be conducted for the directors of the regional offices of the Ministry of Interior and other local and national government agencies, including police officers and field officers of the Ministry of Interior. As well, UNHCR will enlarge its cooperation with the Tel Aviv University and expand the "legal clinic" created at the University to assist asylum seekers. UNHCR will continue monitoring the observance of the convention, assisting the asylum seekers and refugees to ensure their rights, and intervening on their behalf when deemed necessary. UNHCR will continue issuing temporary documents, which besides protecting the asylum seekers from deportation while their claims are being processed, serves them as a de-facto working visa in the country. UNHCR will continue activating the "short procedure" used for manifestly unfounded cases, which greatly alleviates the burden on the committee. Under the necessary precautions and

safeguards, over 400 cases were dealt with using these procedures in 2004. Finally, UNHCR will continue supporting the resettlement to third countries of so called "citizens originating from enemy countries," and other meriting cases on protection grounds.

Overview of beneficiary populations

During 2004, nearly 1,000 refugee status determination interviews were conducted in Israel and about 250 people received refugee status, which entitles them to basic health and education services, along with access to work possibilities. Most of these refugees originate from the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Congo, Sierra Leone, Eritrea and Burma. In July 2004, close to 300 asylum seekers were awaiting a decision on their status, while another 40 refugees qualified for resettlement. At the request of UNHCR, the authorities have agreed to consider the claim for asylum of some 100 Eritrean nationals.

The total number of refugees recognised in Israel is limited to about one hundred, of which only a few are assisted by UNHCR, while the rest are able to make a living through gainful employment.

Policy issues

Israel is signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. However, it is yet to develop a functioning procedure for refugee status determination, currently carried out by UNHCR under its mandate.

Capacity and presence of partners

UNHCR in Israel has established a close working relationship with the following NGO and government bodies:

- Physicians for Human Rights (treating patients at very low or no cost)
- "Latet" ("To give"- sending food parcels and babies' needs to people in need).
- "Rape center" (providing free counseling when necessary)
- The Public Defense (providing free legal advice to refugees and asylum seekers)
- ACRI – Israeli Association for Civil Rights (joint protection activities)
- Amnesty International, Israel branch (joint protection activities)
- The American Joint Distribution Committee (funding the HCR premises, a staff member and other administrative support for the office)
- The ministry of Interior, granting funds for the functioning of the N.S.G.B.
- Various municipalities (social departments and hospitals).

(b) Selected Programme Goals and Objectives

In addition to UNHCR effort to increase the process of asylum requests and shorten the NSGB procedure time frame to obtain a better response by the various governmental agencies to the basic asylum seekers needs. The main objectives for 2006 will be:

- The transformation of the UNHCR "Honorary correspondent " status to a full fledged UNHCR office in Israel. This will entail both physical needs (new office in Tel Aviv in addition to the existing office in Jerusalem, additional personnel with specified qualifications, and a new administrative set up, etc.

- Initiating a proper "refugee legislation" in Israel to obtain special asylum seekers visas, border stations procedures, social security amendments, etc .
- Exploring the possibilities, through training, lecturing and administrative changes, of involving increasingly the authorities in the part of the asylum seekers procedure at present dealt with by UNHCR.
- Enhanced collaboration with UNHCR in neighbouring countries, especially those that serve as passageway to asylum seekers from third countries .