



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

Executive Committee Summary

Country: Islamic Republic of Iran

Planning Year: 2005

Note : This planning document was written in March 2004.

Islamic Republic of Iran 2005 Country Operations Plan

Part I: Executive Committee Summary

(a) Context and Beneficiary Populations

Iran continues to host one of the world's largest refugee populations. In a re-registration exercise (Amayesh) carried out in autumn 2003, the number of Afghans registered with the Iranian authorities was approximately 1.5 million while the number of Iraqis was estimated at approximately 125,000, the large majority of whom have settled amidst Iranian communities in cities, towns and villages across Iran. UNHCR considers all Iraqis in Iran to be persons of concern to the Office. There has been a pattern of economic migration between Afghanistan and Iran that predates the first refugee outflows. The number of undocumented Afghan migrants in Iran is unknown, but some estimate it at 500-700,000 persons the large majority of whom would be single men between 15 to 35 years of age.

Since the end of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, UNHCR's operation in Iran has focused on facilitating the voluntary repatriation of Afghans in close consultation with Iranian authorities (BAFIA), NGO partners and UNHCR offices in Afghanistan. A Tripartite Agreement between Iran, Afghanistan and UNHCR was signed in April 2002 and was renewed in 2003 for two years (expiring on 20 March 2005). From April 2002 to December 2003, a total of 645,000 Afghans have returned to Afghanistan.

When the conflict in Iraq ended in May 2003, UNHCR began planning a repatriation operation for Iraqi refugees. Unfortunately, the vacuum of power left by the overthrow of the Iraqi authorities quickly resulted in a breakdown of law and order with looting and violence occurring in many areas. A campaign of terrorist attacks also followed which caused general insecurity and the tragic bombing of the UN Headquarters in Bagdad. While many Iraqi refugees in Iran were eager to return quickly, the situation in Iraq was not conducive for UNHCR to engage in facilitating repatriation movements. In spite of this, it is estimated that over the period April to December 2003 approximately 50,000 Iraqi refugees decided to return to Iraq spontaneously using their own means. UNHCR initiated a series of proxy consultations between the Iranian authorities and the Coalition Provisional Authority on a tripartite framework outlining the modalities for the voluntary repatriation of Iraqis from Iran and agreement was reached in October 2003. The first organised repatriation movement started in mid-November 2003. As of 17/3/2004 UNHCR has facilitated the voluntary repatriation of 5,187 Iraqi refugees.

In spite of the size of the refugee population in Iran, the Government and people of Iran has maintained a very generous asylum policy throughout the past 25 years. Afghans and Iraqis have had access to education and health facilities and have also been able to benefit from a subsidised economy and opportunities to find employment, which although not permitted, has been tolerated.

The Iranian authorities had hoped that much larger number of Afghans would by now have opted to repatriate to Afghanistan and assist in the reconstruction of their country. The Government is convinced that the slow pace of return is due to the fact that the socio-

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economic conditions for Afghans in Iran are much more favourable than compared with Afghanistan at its present level of development.

At the end of 2003, the Iranian authorities have therefore announced a series of measures, which are clearly intended to *induce* a more substantial level of repatriation of Afghans in 2004. They aim at raising the cost of living for Afghans in Iran to make it *less attractive* for Afghans to continue to extend their stay in Iran. The measures include introduction of fees for extension of ID-cards as well as school fees for Afghan children at all levels of the education system for the school year starting in October 2004. The cost of health insurance would also increase significantly and a nominal taxation would be introduced. Access to the labour market would require obtaining a work permit and employers engaging Afghans without permits would be sanctioned. A campaign would be undertaken to deport Afghans who reside and work in Iran illegally.

The authorities have also announced some steps aimed at “*enticing*” return to Afghanistan. The current policy whereby all members of a family must repatriate together would be changed so that opportunity is given for a head of household to continue to remain in Iran for a further period, while his family members would return. The Government would also seek to direct its program of development assistance for Afghanistan towards communities receiving high number of returnees from Iran.

The authorities have not introduced similar measures for Iraqi refugees as they appreciate that the situation in Iraq is not conducive to a mass return of Iraqi refugees at this stage.

UNHCR’s strategy for 2004 and 2005

In October 2003 UNHCR launched a policy initiative known as the “2005 process” and a document entitled “Towards a Comprehensive Solution for Displacement from Afghanistan” was shared with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran as well as with key donor countries. A first discussion took place during the meeting of EXCOM in October 2003. The thrust of the paper focuses on the fact that the causes of displacement of Afghans in the region can not be explained in refugee terms alone, but are the result of a complex mix of issues. Economic factors have been playing an increasingly influential role in cross border movements over recent years, as well as in sustaining the Afghan presence abroad. UNHCR is therefore advocating for a new approach to the situation involving a more differentiated set of solutions than what has been pursued up to now. With the gradual improvement in the situation in Afghanistan, which is expected to further consolidate over the coming years, UNHCR is proposing that the post 2005 situation should also be approached as a migration and development challenge. Naturally, this approach should incorporate a refugee dimension with a focus on ensuring timely identification and protection of those who may still be in need of international protection.

In further consultations during February 2004, both internal as well as with representatives from the donor community - including development institutions - it was agreed to pursue the following strategy for UNHCR activities in 2004 and 2005.

Voluntary Repatriation: In 2004, UNHCR Iran will engage in a *dynamic facilitation* of the voluntary repatriation of Afghans. This will involve more focus on identifying and removing existing obstacles to the repatriation of Afghans. UNHCR will also redouble its efforts to

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reach out to the Afghan community and provide them with targeted information about the situation in their home areas. Special development programs in Afghanistan will target areas with high number of returnees. In the course of 2004, UNHCR will also shift its approach from facilitation of repatriation to active promotion of repatriation to selective areas in Afghanistan. It is hoped that up to 500,000 Afghans will opt for voluntary repatriation in 2004. UNHCR plans that 2005 will be the last year of organised mass-repatriation of Afghans from Iran. On the assumption that a sizeable repatriation is achieved in 2004, the planning figure for 2005 is an assisted repatriation of 200,000 Afghans. The set up of Voluntary Repatriation Centres in 11 provinces will have to be maintained through 2005.

With regard to Iraqi refugees, it is assumed that by the end of 2004, the large majority of Iraqis will have repatriated to Iraq, either spontaneously or with the assistance of UNHCR. It is expected that up to 30,000 Iraqi may delay their return to Iraq for various reasons, but will eventually request UNHCR's assistance with their voluntary repatriation in 2005.

Protection: The main focus will be to ensure the timely identification and protection of Afghans and Iraqis who may still be in need of international protection. The screening mechanisms in Dogharoun, which has been established in a co-operation between UNHCR and BAFIA will be maintained, and if necessary, reinforced, while the screening mechanism in Milak should be established in the course of 2004. The screening provides an essential safeguard to identify refugees amongst Afghans who are in the process of deportation for illegal entry/residence in Iran. In addition, UNHCR will work with the Iranian authorities to initiate the establishment of proper Refugee Status Determination procedures in Iran. The introduction of RSD procedures will be essential to determine claims from Afghans and Iraqis who fear that a return to Afghanistan / Iraq would expose their lives to danger. It will also be an essential component in the future framework to be established for better management of migration to Iran. The Dispute Settlement Committees and system of free Legal Advice for Afghan refugees which has been started in 2004 will be maintained at the same level as in 2004. UNHCR will also advocate for the safe and dignified return of Afghans or Iraqis who have entered and remain illegally in Iran. Special return arrangements will be arranged for the return of children and single women. Resettlement will continue to be used as a toll of protection and burden sharing. Priorities in the selection criteria will be reviewed with other countries in the region during 2004. In 2005, resettlement will primarily be oriented towards the smaller group of Afghans and Iraqis who have been accepted as refugees in a RSD procedure and for whom resettlement may be the most suitable durable solution.

Migration Framework: UNHCR will engage in active consultations with the Iranian authorities in order to promote the development of a proper migration framework that can assist the Governments of Iran and Afghanistan in regularising the large seasonal migration of Afghan workers to Iran at the bilateral level. UNHCR will seek the involvement of experts from ILO and IOM to analyse the present situation and participate in the formulation of proposals and discussions with the authorities. Throughout 2005, UNHCR will work closely with UN agencies, other international organisations, NGO partners and Government counterparts in order to implement its strategies.

Assistance: Since 2003, the assistance programme has gradually been reoriented towards repatriation activities. Support for education and running costs for long-standing settlements is being phased out as of mid-2004. The individual assistance programme to support subsistence or defray high health costs is also being reduced. From 2004, the strategy for assistance will gradually be directed towards assisting only those Afghans and Iraqis who

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have been positively determined to be in continued need of international protection in Iran. In negotiations with the Iranian authorities, UNHCR will insist that recognised refugees are granted freedom of movement and given opportunity to access the work market. Areas of assistance will include support to cover health and education costs. Support will also be given to vocational training of refugees as well as support to start up income-generating activities. UNHCR will play a catalytic role to encourage international support for the integration of Afghans and Iraqis who request continued permission to remain in Iran based on their long stay, inter-marriage or invoke other compelling humanitarian reasons.

(b) Selected Programme Goals and Objectives

Name of Beneficiary Population/Theme: Afghan refugees	
Main Goal(s):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve a voluntary and sustainable repatriation in safety and dignity of 200,000 Afghan refugees. • Afghans in need of international protection are identified and assisted to regularise their stay in Iran. • Afghans whose refugee status has been established and with special needs for their continued stay in Iran are identified and assisted through their families and the community to access services, assistance and protection. 	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afghan refugees who express a will to return with UNHCR support are assisted and well informed to decide on their repatriation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free of charge and safe transportation to the border, processing services in VRCs/BESs, including medical, mine awareness, food for overnight stay & non-food items. • An enhanced and proactive mass information campaign targeting the majority of the Afghans residing in Iran.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals at risk of deportation have a chance to present an asylum claim or other reasons why they should not be deported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The screening programme will strive to access all deportees, including court ordered cases. The deportation of separated children is expected to further decrease.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afghans of concern to UNHCR have access to assistance and support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of a reinforced Community and Social Service set up with UNHCR staff and specialist staff in order to identify individuals with special needs and propose solutions and assistance in the fields of counselling, medical, social and financial.

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Name of Beneficiary Population/Theme: Iraqi refugees	
Main Goal(s):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve the voluntary repatriation of 30,000 Iraqi refugees to Iraq in a safe and dignified manner. • Iraqis whose refugees with special needs for their continued stay in Iran are identified and assisted through their families and the community to access services, assistance and protection. 	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraqi refugees who express a will to return with UNHCR support are assisted and well informed to decide on their repatriation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free of charge and safe transportation to the border or into Iraq, processing services in VRCs/BESs, including medical, mine awareness, food for overnight stay & non-food items. Mass information activities will target the remaining Iraqis residing in Iran.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraqis of concern to UNHCR have access to assistance and support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of a reinforced Community and Social Service set up with UNHCR staff and specialist staff in order to identify individuals with special needs and propose solutions and assistance in the fields of counselling, medical, social and financial.

Name of Beneficiary Population/Theme: Development of asylum and migration system	
Main Goal(s):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of an efficient and fair national asylum system. • Establishment of a bilateral arrangement regularising seasonal work-related migration between Iran and Afghanistan. 	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of national asylum legislation in conformity with international refugee law and standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of model laws and related references, meetings with Government counterparts and elaboration of draft legislation.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengthen capacity of the responsible national authorities in the field of refugee protection.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provision of training to Government officials, including attendance to international conferences.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Elaboration of a bilateral arrangement on seasonal migration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on studies on migration trends, propose suitable arrangements for both Iran and Afghanistan, and support the creation of a special department for migration by Iranian authorities.