



## Crisis in Central Asia

### Lessons learned from UNHCR's response to the 2010 emergency in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

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## **Introduction**

1. This document provides a report of a lessons-learned workshop on the UNHCR emergency operation in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan between June and November 2010.
2. The workshop was held in Istanbul, Turkey, on 6-7 December 2010, and convened by UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific (RBAP) and Regional Office for Central Asia (ROCA). Additional support was provided by the Division of Emergency and Security (DESS) and the Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES). Prior to the Istanbul workshop the UNHCR office in Kyrgyzstan held a retreat to consider the lessons learned from the emergency.
3. The workshop was attended by some 25 staff members from the Central Asia region and from UNHCR Headquarters. It was facilitated by Jeff Crisp, Head of PDES, who prepared this report with the assistance of Hilary Bowman (PDES) and Natalia Prokopchuk (RBAP).
4. At the time of the crisis in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, announced his intention to make effective emergency response one of UNHCR's highest corporate priorities. The purpose of the current report is to strengthen UNHCR's work in this area and to inform the organization's UNHCR's response to future crises, both in Central Asia and in other parts of the world.
5. To serve this purpose most effectively, the report highlights the key findings and recommendations of the workshop, and does not seek to provide a detailed account of the UNHCR operation in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The report was reviewed in draft by workshop participants and other UNHCR personnel who were involved in the emergency operation, and their comments have been taken into account in the finalization of the document.

## **The operational context**

6. The Central Asia emergency began on 10 June 2010, when violence broke out in the city of Osh and subsequently spread to Jalalabad in southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>1</sup> Clashes between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz left hundreds of people dead and up to 400,000 displaced, almost 20 per cent of the population of Osh and Jalalabad. Thousands more were affected but not displaced by the violence.
7. About 75,000 refugees, the vast majority of them women and children, fled to the Andijon area of neighbouring Uzbekistan, where they were accommodated close to the border in schools, warehouses, public buildings and temporary camps. With the exception of a few medical cases, all of the refugees had returned to Kyrgyzstan by 27 June, less than three weeks later, when a referendum was held on the country's constitutional future.

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<sup>1</sup> For a full account of these events see 'The pogroms in Kyrgyzstan', International Crisis Group, August 2010.

8. Responding to this sequence of events, UNHCR launched an emergency operation in both countries, so as to address the humanitarian consequences of the crisis. In addition to large-scale displacement and the destruction of property, southern Kyrgyzstan was affected by high levels of physical and psychological insecurity, as well as arbitrary detention, disappearances, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), intimidation and extortion. In addition to losing their homes, many had lost their businesses and personal assets as well as their identity documents and land titles.

9. In responding to this situation, UNHCR was obliged to work in a difficult operational context, given the unusual speed with which events unfolded and the volatility of the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan. Having been expelled from Uzbekistan five years earlier, moreover, UNHCR was obliged to negotiate and establish a speedy presence in that country and to operate in Andijon, a politically sensitive area which had itself been the scene of serious violence in May 2005.

10. While the emergency turned out to be a very short-lived one in terms of displacement and return, the longer-term challenges of reintegration, reconstruction and reconciliation in Kyrgyzstan remain to be addressed. Although the June 2010 constitutional referendum and October 2010 parliamentary elections were held on schedule and without allegations of fraud or mismanagement, the situation is still fragile, characterized by continued tension violence between different ethnic, political and regional groups. In the words of a report on Kyrgyzstan commissioned by UNHCR's Emergency Preparedness and Response Section (EPRS):

Patterns of behaviour and societal trends that have been evolving over many years have produced a fractured, volatile environment in which savage outbursts, far from being exceptional, are intrinsic. This is not to imply that the situation is beyond redemption, but it does mean that unless determined efforts are made to address major internal problems, the risk of a continuing downward spiral is high.<sup>2</sup>

11. Kyrgyzstan is not the only potential flash point in Central Asia. For although the region's 20-year transition from Soviet domination to national independence has proceeded more smoothly than many commentators had predicted, Central Asia is currently confronted with a range of political, economic, social, ethnic, religious and environmental threats. The region is particularly prone to natural disasters, an issue for which UNHCR has recently assumed some important new responsibilities. It is therefore incumbent upon the organization to retain a high degree of preparedness in this somewhat neglected part of the world.

### **Preparedness and planning**

12. The events of June 2010 in Kyrgyzstan appear to have taken the international community by surprise, even though the country has a history of inter-ethnic violence and had experienced a high level of political uncertainty in the months prior to the crisis. The IASC Early Warning Action Report and Global Preparedness Matrix, for example, did not consider the country to be a particularly high priority.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Kyrgyzstan: a regional analysis', Writenet, August 2010, pp 6-7.

To the extent that emergency preparedness was undertaken in Kyrgyzstan by the UN Country Team, it was focused primarily on the threat of natural disasters.

13. UNHCR's own preparedness measures were stepped up in the months that preceded the crisis. A review of the organization's Contingency Plan for Kyrgyzstan was undertaken at the end of April 2010, and from that point on relevant early warning information was sent from the field to RBAP and EPRS. Arrangements were also made to hold a Situational Emergency Training (SET) in Bishkek in July, which had to be postponed when the crisis erupted.

14. The June 2010 emergency both revealed and reinforced the volatile nature of the Kyrgyz state and the divided nature of its society. UNHCR should now work on the assumption that a recurrence of violence and displacement may recur in the short or medium term future and plan accordingly. The planning process should include political scenario analysis, using external expertise if necessary. In view of the geopolitics of the Kyrgyzstan situation, both RBAP and the Regional Bureau for Europe should contribute to such analysis.

15. In view of the various threats to human security that are to be seen throughout Central Asia, UNHCR's planning and preparedness strategy should be formulated on a regional basis and thus involve ROCA, which is located in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The strategy should examine the potential for both internal and cross-border displacement, resulting from political, social and ethnic conflict as well as natural disasters. It should give particular attention to:

- the establishment of a Central Asia web portal where relevant information and analysis can be posted in a timely manner;
- improved inter-agency information sharing throughout the Central Asia region, including the establishment of regularly updated national databases that identify the organizations and resources available in the event of an emergency;
- the pre-identification of local and regional suppliers for non-food items and shelter materials and the establishment of frame agreements with those suppliers, with a particular focus on the procurement needs for winter emergencies;
- the creation of a regional emergency stockpile, sourced to the extent possible from Central Asian and other nearby countries;
- the establishment of pre-emergency contacts (and ideally agreements) with customs and telecom authorities with respect to issues such as the transit of goods, as well as the radio licences, frequencies and equipment required by UNHCR in the event of a crisis;
- a strengthened programme of local capacity building with governmental and non-governmental institutions that have the potential to contribute to conflict resolution, emergency response and rehabilitation;

- the identification of Russian-speaking staff members for inclusion in future emergency management training workshops; and,
- the provision of leadership and coordination training for UNHCR staff members who have the potential to become Cluster Coordinators, as well as the elaboration of Terms of Reference for those Clusters that UNHCR will be expected to coordinate.

### **Protection and solutions**

16. In the course of the Kyrgyzstan crisis, UNHCR was confronted with a variety of challenges relating to the organization's mandate for protection and solutions. These included:

- the ethnically-targeted violence that provoked such large-scale population displacements and which also involved human rights concerns such as discrimination, arbitrary detention and disappearances;
- constraints related to securing access and asylum space in a country where UNHCR did not have presence.
- the restrictive conditions under which refugees were accommodated in Uzbekistan, with very limited freedom of movement, access to UNHCR and to information about conditions in their country of origin;
- the repatriation movement to Kyrgyzstan, which, as a result of the restrictions referred to above, did not meet acceptable standards of voluntariness; and,
- the need to address both the immediate and longer-term plight of people who were physically or psychologically affected by the violence, including those whose property, assets and documents were destroyed during the crisis.

17. A number of lessons can be learned from UNHCR's efforts to respond to these challenges.

18. First, while sometimes referred to as a 'humanitarian emergency', the Central Asian crisis was in fact a deeply political one, characterized by the failure of established security mechanisms at the local, national, regional and global levels. Within and beyond Kyrgyzstan, a variety of different actors failed to assume the responsibility that they could have exercised for protecting citizens, upholding the rule of law and promoting the process of reintegration and reconciliation. However effective they are, UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response arrangements evidently cannot act as a substitute for such political failures.

19. At the same time, and while maintaining its status as a strictly humanitarian organization, the Kyrgyzstan crisis underlines the need for UNHCR to maintain a constant dialogue with political, security and law-enforcement actors (including those who are not represented in government) at all levels of society. Such dialogue serves three important purposes: (a) supporting conflict prevention and resolution efforts, as well as respect for international refugee and human rights law; (b) facilitating UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response activities; and (c)



consolidating the process of reintegration, reconciliation and reconstruction in the post-conflict phase of an emergency.

20. A second lesson to be learned from the Central Asia crisis is that UNHCR may be required to make difficult choices and compromises when states are eager to exert their sovereignty and pursue their political interests. Following the organization's expulsion from Uzbekistan, for example, UNHCR regarded the Kyrgyz refugee crisis as an important opportunity to establish a more productive working relationship with the government in Tashkent and possibly to establish a logistics facility in the country.

21. These strategic priorities appeared to have played some role in UNHCR's decision not to raise its concerns with respect to Uzbekistan's treatment of the Kyrgyz refugees and the less than voluntary nature of their return. Furthermore, the active involvement of Kyrgyz government officials in the Uzbek refugee camps in persuading refugees to return prior to the referendum added to the complexity of the situation.

22. At the same time, the speed of the repatriation movement and the firmness of the government's position on this issue made any demarche appear futile. According to workshop participants, "UNHCR was limited in what it could say publicly and even privately for fear of losing its toe-hold in Uzbekistan." "It is quite evident that any strong criticism would not have made any difference but led, most probably, to the end of any protection monitoring."

23. Third, while external commentators have sometimes criticized UNHCR for its involvement in large-scale relief operations, arguing that the organization should instead confine its efforts to protection, the Kyrgyzstan crisis strongly suggests otherwise. Indeed, workshop participants were unanimous in their conviction that the gains that UNHCR was able to make in expanding the protection space in both countries were directly related to its role in the delivery of tangible assistance such as non-food items and shelter materials.

24. Similarly, it was pointed out that an important constraint on the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is the organization's limited operational role and hence its inability to 'buy' the goodwill of affected governments and populations by providing them with urgently-needed resources.

25. Fourth, and to immediately qualify the conclusion reached in the preceding paragraph, UNHCR and its partners must prioritize protection in a fast-moving emergency and avoid any scenario in which the organization's efforts are focused solely on the procurement, delivery and distribution of relief items. UNHCR was able to negotiate the transfer to Kyrgyzstan of all emergency humanitarian assistance that remained unused in Uzbekistan after the return of the refugees. This was a significant achievement in that it underscored the principle that assistance should be linked to the needs of the beneficiaries.

26. In Kyrgyzstan, the benefits of this approach were underlined by the Rapid Protection Assessment (RPA) that was undertaken by the Protection Cluster and led by UNHCR at an early stage of the operation. Using focus group methodology, the RPA involved more than 1,600 Kyrgyz citizens in Osh and Jalalabad, selected in

accordance with the principles of Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM).

27. As well as bringing together all of the relevant agencies and establishing a baseline understanding of protection problems in areas affected by the conflict, this “light and quick” exercise facilitated the prioritization, design and implementation of protection projects. At the same time, it averted the need for different organizations to carry out separate but duplicative protection assessments. In view of its effectiveness, documentation related to the methodology and findings of the RPA could usefully be incorporated in future emergency training initiatives.

28. A fifth issue to arise in the Kyrgyzstan context, and one that is likely to recur in future emergencies in view of UNHCR’s evolving mandate and involvement in the Cluster Approach, concerns the very fundamental question, ‘who exactly is UNHCR trying to protect?’ In the words of one staff member:

We were working in a context where it was extremely difficult to differentiate between persons of concern (i.e. displaced persons and returnees) and the host population. Some people had left home for a few days and returned to their intact houses. Were they returnees? They might live next door to someone who was never displaced but faced ethnic discrimination. If a teenage son from each of these families was detained, should the ‘returnee’ be of concern to UNHCR while the non-displaced person is not?

29. UNHCR’s response to this situation was to refer all cases of detention and torture to OHCHR and ICRC, thereby avoiding the question as to the extent of UNHCR’s mandate. This approach also resolved an issue concerning UNHCR’s relationship with the authorities: “We didn’t want to get overly involved in controversial human rights issues when we were simultaneously trying to push forward the shelter project with the government.”

30. A sixth lesson to be learned from the Central Asia crisis is that UNHCR’s own protection capacity will almost inevitably be limited in a major emergency, due to the modest number of international protection personnel that the organization can deploy as well as the access and security restrictions that may be imposed on international organizations.

31. In Kyrgyzstan, the organization’s response to this challenge was to maximize the use of national staff as well as local partners and networks, particularly in the early phase of the emergency when border monitoring and updated information on the number and location of displaced people was of particular importance, but when the UN’s security system did not allow the deployment of UNHCR staff.

32. Similarly, UNHCR established and equipped joint mobile registration teams involving the authorities and NGOs, who re-issued identity documents on a cost-free basis to people who were in need of them. This initiative helped to address a key protection concern, as people without personal documentation were at risk of being detained, were obliged to limit their movements and could not access social services.

33. Seventh, the Kyrgyzstan emergency underlined the central role that housing, land and property (HLP) issues can play in the effort to find an early solution to a

refugee or displacement emergency, especially in situations where the destruction or seizure of such assets is deliberately used as a means of displacing and intimidating the victims.

34. It is recommended that increased attention be given to HLP issues in all of UNHCR's emergency training activities, given the limited knowledge of them within the organization. In the words of one experienced staff member who was deployed to Kyrgyzstan as a member of the emergency team:

Thanks for the quick deployment of an HLP expert from Serbia! I admit that I didn't even know what this acronym stood for and hardly understood its importance. But this was crucial in a context where property destruction and confiscation were being used as a means of ethnic cleansing. You absolutely need a good technical expert who knows the right questions to ask and has the patience for legal research.

35. Eighth, the Central Asia emergency underlined the important role that information and communications can play in the task of protection. In Uzbekistan, refugees were essentially deprived of information regarding conditions in their country of origin, and were simultaneously informed that they were expected to repatriate as quickly as possible. In Kyrgyzstan, however, a UNHCR implementing partner was able to establish a helpline and to distribute flyers advertising the helpline, in addition to other useful telephone numbers (the ICRC for family tracing, and MSF for healthcare, for example).

36. Many former refugees and displaced people took advantage of this facility, the most common calls being reports on protection problems and requests for information on compensation, the replacement of lost documents and opportunities to leave the country. As recommended in an evaluation of UNHCR's response to the Iraqi refugee crisis in the Middle East, such initiatives should form part a comprehensive community communications strategy in any large-scale emergency.

37. Finally, the Central Asian crisis of June 2010 suggests that the protection issues associated with emergency operations are likely to assume an increasingly regional and even global dimension as a result of the growing mobility of the world's population. Thus in addition to the 75,000 Kyrgyz citizens who fled across the border to Uzbekistan during the emergency crisis, large numbers also sought safety in places such as Russia, Turkey, Ukraine and Eastern Europe, where many enjoyed entry and residency rights.

38. An innovative response to this phenomenon was launched by the UNHCR emergency team in Osh, which established an airport and bus terminal monitoring system, in an attempt to track the scale, composition and direction of the movement to other countries. In future emergencies, UNHCR should endeavour to map such longer-distance movements, especially in situations where the people concerned have protection needs in their countries of destination.

### **Operations management**

39. The notion of operations management is used in this section of the report to denote the way in which responsibilities, authorities and accountabilities are defined

within the UNHCR organizational structure, with particular reference to the respective roles of entities such as the Executive Office, RBAP, ROCA, the Branch Office for Kyrgyzstan, DESS, EPRS and the Division of Human Resource Management (DHRM).

40. UNHCR's response to the Central Asia crisis was characterized by some personal and organizational tensions, a common feature of emergency operations, when individuals and offices are working under tremendous pressure. Even so, the workshop identified numerous examples of effective teamwork and coordination, involving UNHCR entities in diverse locations such as Almaty, Bishkek, Brussels, Budapest, Dubai, Geneva and Tashkent. Particular reference was made to the effective communications established in the very early phase of the operation between the emergency teams in the country of origin (Kyrgyzstan), the country of asylum (Uzbekistan), UNHCR's Regional Office in Kazakhstan and the Headquarters Task Force.

41. The workshop reached a broad consensus with respect to the central role that the Executive Office has to play in an emergency, both in signalling the importance which the organization attaches to the operation to relevant internal and external stakeholders, and in making the high-level demarches which are often necessary to remove actual or potential obstacles to an effective operational response.

42. In the Central Asian context, a particularly important role was played by the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations who called for and chaired an Emergency Task Force (whose composition is outlined below), directed negotiations for UNHCR's re-entry to Uzbekistan, appointed a team leader for that country, maintained contact with key donors and embassies and defined the role of the Regional Office.

43. Another significant feature of UNHCR's response to the emergency was the High Commissioner's mission to Kyrgyzstan, where he was the first high-ranking international visitor to meet affected communities in Osh and Jalalabad and to engage in direct discussions with the interim government, including the President and Foreign Minister. The High Commissioner also took part in media briefings that attracted local, regional and international attention to the plight of people displaced by the conflict and UNHCR's role in providing them with protection and assistance.

44. Despite these achievements, participants in the emergency operation felt that further consideration should be given to a longstanding but hitherto unimplemented proposal, whereby the High Commissioner is able to formally declare the launch of a new emergency operation, automatically triggering a set of expedited processes in relation to issues such as procurement, supply chain management and staff deployment. Given that such proposals can be traced back to the time of the Persian Gulf crisis of 1991, it is now time for UNHCR to make a clear decision with respect to the viability, design and implementation of this proposal.

45. An important component of such a corporate response mechanism would be the establishment of a consistently designed Headquarters Task Force for each new emergency operation.

46. The Task Force established for the Central Asia emergency is generally recognized to be one of the most effective examples of its type, in the sense that it

was (a) chaired at the Bureau Director/Deputy Director level; (b) benefited from strong EPRS support; (c) ensured the involvement of key HQ divisions and involved all of the key stakeholders (including ROCA and other personnel based in the region); (d) met on a regular basis; (e) took and recorded clear decisions and was used as a means of verifying that agreed actions had been taken, and (f) revised reporting lines in order to ensure the devolution of accountability and to foster real-time coordination and follow up.

47. Drawing on this experience, it is recommended that a set of Emergency Task Force Standard Operating Procedures be established, focusing on the leadership, composition, frequency, functions, working methods and lifespan of such entities.

48. Positive lessons can also be learned from other aspects of the way in which the emergency response was organized at Headquarters. These include (a) the opening of a full-time Operations Room, staffed throughout the day by EPRS; (b) the regular sharing of information by means of group e-mails and the establishment of a dedicated intranet page; and (c) the secondment of DESS staff to RBAP to strengthen the Bureau's capacity in the initial stage of the emergency operation.

49. An important issue to arise in the Central Asian context (and which has also emerged in the more recent Cote d'Ivoire crisis) concerns the extent to which normal reporting lines should be revised or relaxed in an emergency operation, especially when that operation is taking place in a country or countries that are covered by a Regional UNHCR Office with limited capacity.

50. A delicate balance has to be reached in relation to this issue. On one hand, it is essential for Regional Offices to be fully involved and informed in any emergency operation from the outset, given their knowledge of the local context and the longer-term tasks that such offices will have to undertake in the post-emergency period.

51. On the other hand, if emergency operations are to be treated as a corporate priority, as the High Commissioner has indicated they should be, then UNHCR Headquarters (especially the Regional Bureau concerned and the Executive Office) should normally be in the driving seat for the duration of the crisis. For it is only in Geneva that the Task Force can meet, that the Executive Office can be directly engaged in the operation, and that the respective contributions of functions such as donor relations, media relations, protection (including the Global Protection Cluster), supply chain management and security can all be harnessed. It is recommended that the Terms of Reference of all UNHCR Regional Offices be reviewed in accordance with this principle.

### **Human resource management**

52. It has long been recognized that one of the keys to effective emergency response is to deploy the right people in the right place at the right time. In the Central Asian crisis this objective was met to a large extent.

53. When the emergency began on 10 June, UNHCR had no presence at all in Uzbekistan, while in southern Kyrgyzstan, the Osh office was staffed by just one international officer, one local employee and a driver. Emergency deployees began to arrive in Bishkek on 20 June, when there was still no security permission to access the

south of the country. Three members of the emergency team had arrived in Jalalabad by 24 June, the first UN personnel to arrive in the area.

54. By the end of July, the Osh and Jalalabad offices had a combined complement of 24 international staff members, 35 national employees and 20 additional personnel on service contracts. Altogether, 33 international staff members were deployed in Kyrgyzstan, while 11 were sent to Uzbekistan. By the last week of June, most of the key functions were represented in the Kyrgyzstan emergency team: protection, community services, administration, programme, logistics, security and external relations.

55. A number of additional observations can be made with respect to the issue of human resource management in the Central Asia crisis. First, and to underline an issue raised in the previous section of this report, the provision of personnel for the emergency in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was addressed as a corporate priority, rather than the sole responsibility of the Regional Bureau concerned, even if there was no formal declaration of emergency from HQs.

56. UNHCR was, for example, successful in deploying a critical mass of Russian-speaking staff members to the region, despite the fact that they are few in number and that most had to be drawn from other parts of the organization, most notably the Regional Bureau for Europe.

57. In this respect, the operation benefited from the significant degree of flexibility demonstrated by managers and staff members alike, the agreed time limits that were established for such emergency deployments, and the fact that the relatively short duration of the emergency allowed those time limits to be respected. The close working relationship established between EPRS, RBAP and DHRM in identifying staff members with appropriate profiles was also cited as an example of effective human resource management.

58. A second strength of the human resource component of the operation was the deployment of senior administrative staff with relevant emergency experience from the beginning of the crisis. Once appropriate administrative structures and procedures had been put in place, less senior staff were able to maintain them as the pace and scale of the emergency diminished.

59. Third, an important precedent was set in the establishment of a dedicated Human Resources Cell at an early stage of the emergency. Involving the Department of Human Resource Management (DHRM) the Asia Bureau and the Emergency Section, and involving staff members both at Headquarters and in Budapest, the establishment of the cell enabled UNHCR to launch and complete a fast-track posting process in record time.

60. Fourth, and again in contrast to some previous operations, relations between existing staff in the region and those deployed on an emergency basis were generally effective and harmonious. While this outcome may have been in part because the existing staff component was so small and was therefore heavily dependent on the emergency deployments, regular and transparent communication between the two groups played an important part in this respect.

61. At the same time, some workshop participants pointed to the tensions that almost inevitably arise when contingents of old and new staff members are obliged to work together in the context of a fast-moving emergency, and called for greater clarity in the respective roles and responsibilities of the two.

62. A fifth lesson learned from the Central Asia crisis concerns the kind of training received by UNHCR's emergency team members. The need for staff to have a better understanding of HLP issues has already been mentioned. Another and perhaps even more important recommendation is for UNHCR staff members to have a firm grasp of the humanitarian reform process, including the Cluster Approach, pooled funding and the Humanitarian Coordinator system. Given the limited number of conventional refugee emergencies that are now taking place, compared to the much larger number involving internal displacement and natural disasters, this should be a corporate priority.

63. A sixth lesson learned is from a human resource management perspective is the need to ensure operational continuity and transition management of staff. In the context of the Central Asia emergency the Asia Bureau in close coordination with EPRS and DHRM instituted a roster for transition and immediately identified key staff positions that would be required beyond the initial emergency period (after 60 days). Moreover, the early establishment of a Fast Track appointment system and speedy staff deployment enabled operational continuity with no critical staff gaps.

64. Finally, and despite the relative success of UNHCR's human resource management arrangements during the Central Asia crisis, workshop participants felt that UNHCR could improve its performance in relation to the efficient retrieval of personnel data. More specifically, they suggested, it should be easier to identify current staff members, retired staff members, stand-by staff and consultants that have the particular profile (e.g. experience, professional and language skills, national origin and regional knowledge) required for each new emergency operation.

### **Procurement, supply chain and logistics**

65. A notable feature of UNHCR's response to the Central Asia crisis was the absence of any serious blockages the procurement, supply chain and logistics pipeline, another difficulty that has historically characterized many of the organization's emergency operations.

66. Uzbekistan, for example, received six UNHCR airlifts carrying 200 tons of tents and non-food items (NFIs) on 16-18 June, the first of them arriving in Andijon within 72 hours of the government's appeal for assistance. Some of these goods were subsequently moved across the border to Kyrgyzstan in response to the mass repatriation movement. An additional four flights carrying NFIs arrived in Osh by the end of June. No complaints were received from the field with respect to the quality or specifications of the items they received. A similar success was recorded in the timely provision of computers and telecommunications equipment.

67. The workshop identified a number of variables that contributed to this outcome, including:

- the advance preparation of an operations plan and the availability of appropriate pre-positioned items and equipment in UNHCR's Dubai stockpile;
- the effective use of local procurement and delivery, backed up by an international procurement contingency plan;
- good cooperation between RBAP, the Supply Management Service (SMS) and supply staff in the field;
- the administrative and logistical support provided by the UNHCR office in Bishkek, which enabled the clearance of ICT equipment from the airport soon after its arrival;
- the deployment of a Supply Officer in Osh, and the rapid establishment of the Osh Supply Unit, which established a goods release and tracking system and liaised closely with the government's Emergency Ministry and Customs Department.
- an agreement with the Kyrgyzstan Logistics Cluster, which gave UNHCR free use of a prefabricated warehouse in Osh;
- the employment of Uzbek airlines for relief flights destined for Andijon, as well as effective cooperation with the Uzbekistan government and UNDP;
- the early involvement of DIST in the emergency operation, as well as the swift deployment of ICT staff in the field and the rapid provision of ICT equipment from the EPRS stockpile; and,
- the rapid financing of the operation by means of a loan from DESS to RBAP that enabled the early airlifts to take place, as well as the prompt establishment of a budget that allowed the reimbursement of that loan.

68. In addition to these achievements, the workshop identified two lapses in the area of procurement, supply chain and logistics. The first occurred at an early stage of the operation, when as a result of UN security restrictions and the consequent absence of a UNHCR presence in Osh, two UNHCR consignments of NFIs, flown in at considerable expense by air, had to be transferred to ICRC for distribution.

69. While this arrangement allowed the items to reach their intended beneficiaries, it also reduced UNHCR's visibility in the operation and highlighted the tension that exists between the organization's operational effectiveness and its obligation to respect the UN's somewhat risk-averse security arrangements. This issue is addressed in a later section of the report, dealing with security management.

70. A second logistical difficulty to arise in the Central Asia emergency derived from a decision to transfer a number of UNHCR vehicles from Afghanistan to Kyrgyzstan, which were found on arrival to be in need of serious repairs and which could not be deployed to the field. While the transfer of such assets from one operation to another has a useful contribution to make to UNHCR's cost-saving



efforts, they must evidently be preceded by a rigorous technical inspection and an assessment with regard to their suitability for the intended destination.

## **Shelter**

71. The issue of shelter was central to the Kyrgyzstan emergency, given the widespread destruction of property that took place during the violence of June 2010. An important element of the international response to this issue was a Rapid Joint Shelter Assessment, carried out by the Shelter Cluster in July 2010. It revealed that almost 2,000 private houses had been damaged, most of them so severely that complete reconstruction was required. While this was significant, it evidently bears no comparison to the shelter needs generated by a major emergency such as the earthquake in Haiti.

72. As coordinator of that Cluster, UNHCR, its partners and the government developed a three-part emergency strategy, involving emergency assistance (tents and NFIs), emergency shelter construction and support to displaced people living with host families. UNHCR also decided to fund much of the shelter construction programme was implemented by ACTED, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and Save the Children, strongly supported by the State Directorate for Reconstruction and Rehabilitation. Smaller numbers of shelters were provided by ICRC and CRS, the latter with USAID/OFDA funds). Workshop participants observed that the technical support provided by UNHCR's Operational Solutions and Transition Section was crucial for the formulation of this strategy.

73. UNHCR took a considerable risk in accepting such a high level of operational involvement and responsibility for the shelter programme. It was rewarded, however, by its ability to provide victims of the violence with accommodation before the outbreak of winter, by its enhanced ability to undertake protection activities and the visibility that it enjoyed.

74. The shelter programme was confronted with a variety of constraints. First, it had to be undertaken quickly, given that temperatures in Kyrgyzstan fall to well below freezing during the winter. Second, there was a lack of agreement among donors as to how to proceed with the shelter programme in terms of design, funding and the role of the Shelter Cluster.

75. Third, while the authorities placed mounting pressure on UNHCR and its partners for the completion of the programme, final authorization to start the programme was not given until the end of August. At an early stage of the emergency, moreover, the government had expressed a preference for homeless people to be accommodated in new high-rise apartments, which were culturally unacceptable to the people concerned. Costs and procurement were a third consideration. Both bricks and timber were in high demand and short supply. As a result, the price of both items went up, leading to a situation where a two or three room shelter cost between \$5,000 and \$7,000 to construct.

76. Despite these constraints the winterized shelter programme proceeded according to plan and was completed by the end of November. As indicated by workshop participants, the programme was of considerable importance, not only because it put a roof over the head of former refugees and displaced people, but also

because it helped to restore a sense of community to neighbourhoods that had been destroyed, gave people some help for the future and demonstrated that their plight had been recognized by the international community.

77. A number of other lessons have been learned from this experience. First, the procurement arrangements established for the shelter programme proved to be very effective. While the original plan was for SMS to issue local and international tenders for construction materials, this approach was abandoned in view of the very tight timeline for completing construction work.

78. Instead, it was agreed that DRC would act as UNHCR's procurement agency in Osh and Jalalabad, as DRC already had an appropriate procurement and logistical infrastructure in place on the ground and was able to source appropriate items with greater speed than UNHCR. According to one report, "DRC managed over 150 contracts with vendors, supplying the operation with 34 types of construction material. On average, DRC had to revise 70 per cent of the signed contracts, for reasons related to the steadily increasing price of these items and limited supply capacity."

79. Second, UNHCR should develop a roster of UNHCR staff and consultants who have both the leadership skills and technical knowledge to lead the Shelter Cluster. In Kyrgyzstan, the Emergency Team Leader was obliged to become the *de facto* Shelter Cluster Coordinator, a task which, in that person's own words, "required an enormous amount of time in an operation where protection was the priority concern."

80. Third, the provision of shelter should not be regarded in exclusively technical terms. While construction design and standards evidently require specialized skills, there is a need to establish a balance in the attention given to such 'hardware' issues and the broader issues of protection, legal rights, community reconstruction and cultural identity. To achieve this objective, there should be close coordination between shelter specialists, community services officers and those protection staff responsible for HLP issues.

81. Fourth, a compilation of basic shelter models would be of assistance to the decision-making process in future emergencies, drawing on UNHCR's experience in different geographic, cultural and climatic contexts.

82. Fifth, UNHCR should be aware of the expectations that it might raise when it is involved in a successful shelter programme of the type undertaken in Kyrgyzstan. Thus in Bishkek, a senior government official observed that shelter construction had been undertaken almost exclusively for ethnic Uzbeks but not for the ethnic Kyrgyz. Because this had created some additional tension between the two groups, the official asked UNHCR to consider broadening its assistance to the ethnic Kyrgyz population. At the same time, the official drew attention to some 8,000 ethnic Kyrgyz families who had been affected by earthquakes, floods and landslides, but who had not received any support.

83. While UNHCR should not go beyond its mandate by acceding to such requests, it should take up such issues with development agencies and bilateral donors so as to avert any impression of being uncooperative or discriminatory in its approach.

84. A final challenge concerned the type of shelter assistance that was offered. While UNHCR is the cluster lead for Emergency Shelter, in a cold climate such as that which prevails in Kyrgyzstan, the classical form of emergency shelter assistance, namely tents and plastic sheets, is evidently not suitable. As a result, there is a need for more durable but non-permanent forms of shelter that are often characterized as 'transitional shelter'. In this respect, there is a need to better define the limits of UNHCR's responsibility for emergency shelter.

### **Inter-agency coordination**

85. In the early days of the emergency in Uzbekistan, it was strongly suggested that the operation should be coordinated by means of the Cluster Approach. In accordance with its refugee protection mandate, UNHCR resisted this approach and assumed the leading role in what was to become a very short-lived emergency. In Kyrgyzstan, however, the Cluster Approach was activated, with UNHCR assuming responsibility for the coordination of the Protection and Shelter Clusters.

86. At a more general level, the workshop reached a number of conclusions with respect to the Cluster Approach and the issue of inter-agency coordination:

- the cluster system should build on existing inter-agency coordination mechanisms so as to avoid the establishment of parallel structures and should be outlined in contingency plans for both conflict-related and natural disaster emergencies;
- UNHCR should strive to ensure that its Cluster Coordinators are senior and experienced UNHCR staff members rather than secondees or surge deployments;
- UNHCR should identify potential Cluster Coordinators and provide them with appropriate training before their deployment in emergencies;
- while there are advantages for a UNHCR emergency team member to simultaneously act as Cluster Coordinator, such arrangements should generally be avoided in view of the workload associated with both functions;
- Clusters should be located as close to the field as possible, and focus to the extent possible on issues of implementation and delivery rather than process;
- Protection Cluster representation at the capital level must be simultaneously maintained so as to facilitate communication and coordination with donors,
- Cluster meetings should remain focussed on immediate operational responses and be kept to a minimum;
- regular teleconference communication should be maintained with the global Clusters to facilitate the speedy identification of critical gaps;
- UNHCR should mainstream protection in the activities of all Clusters, and ensure that cross-cutting issues (AGDM, HIV/AIDS, mental health and

psycho-social support, the environment and early recovery) are integrated in the work of the Clusters that it coordinates;

- UNHCR's in-house Cluster coordination capacity should be strengthened by means of Tri-Cluster training;
- UNHCR should make use of inter-cluster meetings to highlight its protection concerns and to ensure that the Humanitarian Coordinator and UN Country team are prepared to make any necessary interventions with senior levels of government;
- UNHCR should continue with its efforts to secure a separation of the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator functions, and should similarly pursue the goal of proposing appropriate UNHCR staff members as Humanitarian Coordinators;
- UNHCR should ensure the inclusion of national actors, including NGOs and civil society, in the Cluster Approach and other coordination activities;
- UNHCR should help to inform and educate those donor state entities that are not familiar with the Cluster Approach, especially OFDA/USAID.

### **Security management**

87. As indicated earlier in this report, the Central Asia emergency operation was characterized by a tension between UNHCR's operational objectives and the security arrangements presided over by the UN security cell, UN-DSS and the Designated Officer (DO). While UNHCR's (as well as UNICEF's and WFP's) primary objective was to deploy its personnel, vehicles, relief items and other assets at the earliest possible opportunity, the DO placed considerably greater emphasis on minimizing any risks that might be encountered by agencies and staff members. In the words of one UNHCR staff member, "Understandably, after critical incidents in Atambua, Baghdad and Algiers, DOs are rewarded for being cautious rather than looking for ways to identify security risk mitigation strategies."

88. At the beginning of the crisis, the UN was unable to clarify the security phase in Osh, and during the third week of June, the UN concluded that its staff could work in Osh, but only with security hardware such as armoured vehicles. While UNHCR was able to airlift such vehicles to Kyrgyzstan in an expeditious manner, workshop participants were of the general opinion that an expensive, time-consuming and overly cautious approach had been imposed upon them, especially in relation to the limited level of violence taking place in Osh at this time. Due to these restrictions, they pointed out, the launch of UNHCR activities was delayed, with negative consequences for the speed and effectiveness of the operation, the well-being of beneficiaries and the image of the organization.

89. Given the way that the UN's security system is structured, UNHCR is limited in its ability to change this situation, other than to propose that Designated Officers receive more comprehensive training and are guided more closely by other members of the UN Country Team. UNHCR can carry out its own security assessments and

liaise with non-UN agencies such as the ICRC, but cannot in the final analysis overrule or disregard the UN's security arrangements.

### **External relations**

90. Unlike some of the emergency operations that UNHCR has launched in recent years, the Central Asia crisis attracted a very high level of donor support. By 22 September, over 92 per cent of the organization's \$27.5 million appeal had been funded, the largest contributions coming from the USA and Japan. Four issues were raised with respect to the issue of donor relations in the course of the workshop.

91. First, while the high level of interest in the Central Asia emergency was of evident benefit to UNHCR, it also required the Representative in Bishkek to spend considerable time reporting to donor states. While this function cannot be wholly delegated to more junior staff, the establishment of a dedicated donor relations and reporting capacity should be considered in high-profile emergencies. Donor relations should also form part of the training provided to all UNHCR personnel deployed in emergencies.

92. Second, UNHCR should strive to improve its access to funding from the CERF and the Peacebuilding Fund. Donor relations staff should be deployed during the preparation of Flash Appeals so that the organization's needs are clearly articulated from the start of an emergency. UNHCR should also play a more active role in relation to the CERF and Peacebuilding Fund in New York.

93. Third, the crisis in Kyrgyzstan demonstrated the growing importance of 'non-traditional donors', including Turkey, Russia, certain Middle East countries and USAID (in distinction to PRM, UNHCR's usual partner in the US administration). UNHCR should explore the potential for increased partnership with such donors, both in the Central Asian context and globally.

94. Finally, donor states should be encouraged to coordinate more effectively in formulating and communicating messages to the governments of crisis-affected countries such as Kyrgyzstan. As a humanitarian organization, UNHCR is limited in the extent to which it can persuade governments to take the political decisions that are often required for refugees and displaced people to find durable solutions to their plight.

95. That is particularly the case in a country such as Kyrgyzstan, which has some endemic political problems but which is also eager to become more closely integrated in the global economy. Donor states have a role to play in averting further crises of the type witnessed in June 2010, although it must also be recognized that the interests of such states do not always coincide with UNHCR's specific concerns.

96. With respect to external relations more generally, the UNHCR operation in Central Asia received considerable media coverage, but was limited in a number of ways. In Uzbekistan, such coverage was limited by the government's sensitivity to the presence of the international media, especially in Andijon. Even so, the UNHCR emergency team was the only reliable source of information about the situation in the camps for the international media. In Kyrgyzstan, the UN's security restrictions prevented the UNHCR emergency team from establishing an immediate presence in

Osh and Jalalabad and required the organization's initial relief consignments to be transferred to ICRC for distribution.

97. The workshop agreed that the High Commissioner's mission to Kyrgyzstan, shortly after the 27 June referendum, had a very positive effect in terms of UNHCR's relationship with the government and the donor community. The visit also raised staff morale in the field and attracted a high level of attention from all stakeholders. For maximum media impact, however, the mission would ideally have taken place at an earlier date, and have been accompanied by a smaller official entourage.

98. An additional lesson learned from the Central Asia operation is that UNHCR needs dedicated capacity for both the public information and programme reporting functions in high-visibility emergencies. Because of the volume of work involved and the different skills required to undertake these functions, the two tasks cannot be carried out by the same person. In this respect, UNHCR should develop an appropriate profile and training for Emergency Reporting Officers, responsible for collecting, compiling and analyzing information, preparing situation reports and alerting Public Information to any developments that might have a broader media and public interest.