

Oral report of the ExCom Chair's visit to Lebanon and Jordan

8 to 12 June 2014

Introduction

From 8 to 12 June, I visited the UNHCR operations for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, spending two full days in each country.

By my visit, I wanted to express the deep appreciation of the UNHCR Executive Committee to the authorities in Lebanon and Jordan for continuing to host Syrian refugees despite the heavy burden. I also wanted to contribute to the High Commissioner's efforts to place the Syrian refugee crisis at the forefront of the international agenda and to mobilize humanitarian and development resources.

In both countries, I met with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as the Ministries responsible for coordinating the response. I conducted field visits and met with the refugees, the local authorities and host communities. I had an opportunity to visit the Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps and interact with representatives of the key donor countries, UN agencies, national and international non-governmental organizations.

Key observations

Let me start my observations by recounting my conversations with the refugees.

I was deeply touched by the suffering that they have experienced. One elderly woman in Azraq camp had to leave her husband behind and was wondering what she will be doing next. In Amman, I met an elderly couple. The husband had heart problems and lost his eye sight, and the son was no longer able to work due to the beatings he had received while fleeing Syria. Likewise in Lebanon, I visited families living in a tented settlement next to an agricultural farm where they were able to work. At a school, I was touched by the children's commitment to learn and hope for a future. Everyone I met expressed the wish to return to Syria as soon as the situation allows. They all shared their gratitude to their neighbours for hosting them and offering help. Although the

relations still appeared to be supportive between host communities and the refugees, many interlocutors referred to the growing tensions between them as they are competing for the limited resources and social, economic and health services.

I also witnessed the considerable efforts being made to support the local communities hosting Syrian refugees. I was struck by the innovative projects being undertaken through the municipal authorities, NGOs and UNHCR. The introduction of the cash allowance scheme, albeit limited and insufficient, has proven to be cost effective under certain circumstances and has enabled UNHCR to reach out to vulnerable refugees regardless of location.

Likewise, the renovation of empty housing units allows refugees to live rent free for one year or longer. Some local municipalities are receiving generators and water tanks, ensuring a stable water supply, as well as waste disposal management equipment. Education for the refugee children has been identified as a priority by all. However, I was warned that a drop in funding contributions would result in cuts in these community based projects, negatively impacting on their ability to host the refugees.

Let me now turn to the Governmental level. In both countries, the authorities strongly conveyed the message that their capacity to continue hosting Syrian refugees has reached its limit. They indicated their intention to tighten access to their country on grounds of national security and stability. In Lebanon, the Ministers of Social Welfare and Foreign Affairs referred to the Roadmap adopted by the Government to deal with the effects of the Syria crisis and the need to establish formal settlements or camps close to the border with Syria to assist in legalizing entries, limit assistance and services, and ensure social cohesion. In Jordan, the authorities indicated that newly arriving refugees would be directed toward Azraq camp, currently hosting some 8,000 refugees but with a capacity to reach nearly 130,000.

Among the key challenges is the linkage between humanitarian assistance and development aid. In Lebanon, the Multi Donor Trust Fund has attracted little funding. In Jordan, significant progress has been made toward finalizing the national plan and priorities, which will

ensure a coherent approach. At the same time, however, we are witnessing growing donor fatigue, with the Regional Response Plan (RRP) 6 only being funded by 27 per cent. During our visit, discussions were taking place on the mid term review of RPP6 with NGOs and UN agencies indicating the need to scale back activities given the limited funding. Therefore, I would be much interested in learning about the outcome of the recent UNHCR donor mission to the region.

Linked to the above is the need for strong coordination mechanisms. Overall, I was impressed by the effective and positive coordination taking place among all the stakeholders. However, more efforts may be required between the humanitarian and development pillars, under national leadership. I also heard repeated calls from national NGOs to be fully included in coordination and assistance activities given their long standing engagement within the local communities.

Let me now turn to the regional dimension. All key interlocutors lamented the lack of a political process to bring the Syria conflict to an end. Some feared that worse is still to come. During my visit, the swift developments in Iraq following the fall of Mosul shocked the humanitarian community given its potential impact on the Syria conflict as well as cause a renewed outflow of Iraqi refugees, further straining and further aggravating an already untenable situation.

Conclusion

Throughout my visit, I felt a strong sense of frustration because a political solution to the Syria crisis remains elusive. National authorities, with the support of humanitarian agencies, have been able to keep up with the challenges but the underlying issues remain unaddressed.

The need for deeper engagement of development actors implies that the resilience of the local communities will remain severely tested in the immediate future. I would like to appeal for a redoubling of efforts in support of local communities hosting the Syrian refugees as this will help reduce social tensions and enhance resilience. Close coordination among all key actors will be key.

Also, I would like to appeal to the donor community to make the necessary funds available to the hosting countries in a timely manner and commensurate with the needs. After more than three years, donor fatigue seems to become a reality. Therefore, it would be desirable to further develop innovative programmes which will help reduce overall costs.

The Lebanon and Jordan operations are a laboratory for developing new approaches toward meeting the protection and assistance needs of refugees in urban settings as well as camp management. Important lessons can be learned and the Executive Committee will be interested in reviewing these.

Finally, I like to express my deep appreciation to the Government of Lebanon and of Jordan for facilitating my visit and the frank and useful discussions. Likewise, I like to thank the UN and NGO partners who shared their insights with me. Special thanks go to the UNHCR Offices for arranging the visit and the generous hospitality extended. I am impressed by the humanitarian staff. They are committed and hardworking, making invaluable contributions, and providing hope for a better future under difficult circumstances.

Thank you