

**Real-time evaluation of UNHCR's response
to the Afghanistan emergency**

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After years of conflict, instability and false dawns in their country of origin, many Afghan refugees now appear to be on the threshold of returning to their homeland. While international attention has hitherto focused on the repatriation of Afghans from Pakistan, the repatriation of refugees from Iran is also gathering pace. But as this bulletin suggests, it is not yet clear how many refugees will return from Afghanistan's western neighbour, how soon they will choose to repatriate, and to what extent they have the option of remaining in Iran.

The first part of the bulletin analyses the circumstances of exiled Afghans in Iran, identifying the factors that might encourage - or discourage - them from repatriating, as well as UNHCR's role both in that movement and in terms of their continued stay in Iran. The second part examines western Afghanistan and poses a number of questions in relation to the situation awaiting returnees from Iran. What conditions will they encounter in their country of origin, and how is UNHCR responding to their protection and reintegration needs?

The evaluation mission

To examine the questions posed above, a UNHCR evaluation team undertook a 17-day mission to the region, conducting interviews and field visits in Tehran, Mashhad, Zahedan and Dogharoon in Iran, as well as Herat, Islam Qala and Kabul in Afghanistan. Those interviewed included refugees, returnees, internally displaced persons, UNHCR staff, government officials, UN and NGO personnel.

This real-time evaluation bulletin represents the third in a planned series of four bulletins on the Afghan operation. Previous bulletins have focused on Headquarters planning in the immediate aftermath of the 11 September 2001 events, and on emergency preparedness and response in Pakistan.

The focus of this bulletin is the Iran/western Afghanistan situation. It examines issues of immediate relevance to this situation, which has the advantage of highlighting continuities and connections between activities in the two countries. Owing to this focus, however, a number of central-level issues in Afghanistan, such as procurement, funding and Headquarters support, have not been covered in this bulletin. In addition, UNHCR's Afghanistan operation has only been covered partially. It is expected that the fourth bulletin will deal with such issues in greater depth.

In accordance with the real-time and interactive character of the evaluation, the mission engaged in a series of discussions and debriefings with UNHCR staff and other key stakeholders in the field. On returning to Geneva, the mission presented its findings and recommendations in a number of fora: first, at a meeting of UNHCR Representatives from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics, chaired by the Director of the Regional Bureau; second, at a meeting of UNHCR headquarters staff, attended by the Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees; and third, at a meeting of NGOs. A 'highlights' paper was produced for these debriefings and circulated for comments; the current bulletin is an expansion of this paper. It should be noted that the bulletin presents a 'snapshot' of the situation as it was in March 2002.

Summary

The durability of repatriation to Afghanistan hinges upon long-term, sustainable and positive change in Afghanistan's political and economic situation. UNHCR's role is dependent on the nature and pace of such change. If it is positive, UNHCR can serve as a conduit for organized return and a gateway to development; if not, it will at best provide a safety-net for a small number of returnees, and at worst will end up serving as a shuttle service for short term, unsustainable returns.

In accordance with its mandate, UNHCR should concentrate on protection and solutions, both in Iran and Afghanistan. The current and understandable emphasis on repatriation has in some senses overshadowed and prevented the full implementation of these functions.

In Iran, progress on protection issues such as personal documentation and the right to work is slow, although there has been some movement on the deportation issue. Local integration as a durable solution remains a sensitive issue that, while discussed, is difficult to move forward on. In the longer term, however, it is likely to be the solution of necessity or choice for many refugees. The largest impediment to more effective protection is UNHCR's limited access to, and knowledge of, the refugees.

In western Afghanistan, a focus on the logistics of repatriation has led to a neglect of regular and systematic returnee monitoring. Not having a firm grasp of the consequences of return prevents UNHCR from fulfilling its statutory functions vis-à-vis returnees, and in terms of transmitting country of origin information to refugees in Iran. Given the difficulties in discharging these functions, it is not responsible for UNHCR to assert an additional protection role in respect of internally displaced persons (IDPs) without first securing adequate, long-term resources with which to effect this role properly.

Iran: prospects for repatriation

UNHCR has established a target of 400,000 organized voluntary returns of Afghan refugees from Iran in 2002. Some two months after the start of the organized repatriation movement, Afghans were returning from Iran at a rate of some 900 persons per day (increasing to some 1,500 per day a month later). Although the

current climate is more favourable for return than in the past, and although Afghans in general wish to repatriate, relatively positive economic circumstances in Iran and relative instability in Afghanistan suggest that the figure is more a prudent planning scenario than a realistic prediction.

Afghans living in Iran generally want to go home, partly because they have a strong cultural and social identification with their country of origin, and partly because they have a sense of exclusion from the mainstream of Iranian life. As one educated Afghan woman put it, 'I have lived in Iran since childhood, and am Iranian in every way. Yet wherever you go, or whatever you do, you are always an Afghan'. Similarly, one Afghan contractor stated, 'Afghanistan is better for us because if we stay in Iran for even 100 more years, we will still be labourers.'

Such statements should not be read as an indication that the many Afghans living in Iran will necessarily or immediately repatriate. Many of those interviewed by the evaluation mission said that they were unlikely to go back until there is evidence of a sustained improvement in relation to security, employment possibilities and the availability of schooling in Afghanistan.

At the moment, such evidence is hard to come by: security remains precarious, jobs are in short supply and education - despite substantial support from the international community - will reach only one in three school-age Afghan children this year.

On the negative side, Iranian government pressure, in the form of direct deportations or a stricter enforcement of existing labour legislation, could also accelerate return to Afghanistan. Incentives to repatriate under the auspices of various political organizations is also a visible feature of return in Herat. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that Iran now sees repatriants as potential bridges between Iran and Afghanistan, and that it recognizes that forcible return is not an effective means of creating such bridges.

In this context, two groups of Afghans in Iran seem likely to repatriate most readily: those with considerable resources, and who consequently enjoy the security required to take a calculated risk (and who do not need UNHCR assistance to return); and those with scarcely any resources (such as day labourers) who have relatively little to lose by going home. Members of both groups have already started to return, sometimes for short-term visits, after which they go back to Iran.

It is important to note that most Afghans in Iran belong to neither of these categories. For while most enjoy a limited degree of economic security in Iran, they are not secure enough to save up for a potentially risky return to their country of origin.

The cautious attitude of many Afghans is reinforced by the fact that they must surrender their refugee card and any benefits associated with it if they choose to go home. In these circumstances, many prefer to adopt a 'wait-and-see' attitude.

Levels of economic and physical security are not the only determinants of a refugee's propensity to return to Afghanistan. Significantly, and somewhat surprisingly, members of the younger generation (both male and female) seem more eager to return to Afghanistan than their parents - an attitude that might be explained by a combination of idealism, unfamiliarity with Afghanistan and the difficulties of being

a foreigner in Iran. And rural Afghans living in Sistan-Baluchistan interviewed by the evaluation team seemed in some respects more reluctant to repatriate than some urbanized refugees in the city of Mashhad.

Gender is also an issue. While often appearing forceful and articulate, returnee women interviewed in Afghanistan indicated that they had little say in the decision to repatriate. This is a significant protection problem for UNHCR to address, given that many of the social restrictions associated with the Taleban remain in place, and that they have now been supplemented by insecurity. The current procedure of interviewing families together does allow, in principle, individual members to express their desire to return, although in practice, and given the familial and often community based manner in which repatriation decisions are taken, this may not be a realistic expectation.

Some groups of Afghans in Iran have particular reason to remain in Iran or to delay their repatriation. These include high-ranking members of the former communist regime, Ismailis and Shiite clergymen. Members of certain clans and extended families also seem unlikely to repatriate in the near future, due to the risk that old vendettas might be reactivated upon their return. And there are reports of Pashtoons facing persecution in some areas where they form the minority.

Barring a dramatic improvement to conditions in Afghanistan, therefore, or significantly increased pressure from the host government, the exiled population in Iran will not repatriate overnight. Indeed, this is likely to emerge as a 'protracted repatriation operation', lasting several years, during which refugees take the decision to return on the basis of their livelihood patterns, including their personal resources, and security thresholds.

In these circumstances, many observers believe that UNHCR's 2002 repatriation planning figure of 400,000 will not be attained. Nevertheless, and given the unpredictability of events in the region, this figure should be maintained. It should, however, be considered as a 'scenario' rather than as a 'goal'. UNHCR should not feel under pressure to meet numerical repatriation targets, nor should it consider a lower level of repatriation to constitute a failure. This point is recognized by the offices on the ground.

The most important aspect of the repatriation from Iran is durability rather than quantity. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that a good number of the people who have returned in past spontaneous repatriation movements (overwhelmingly single males) have not remained in Afghanistan. If conditions in Afghanistan fail to improve in a sustained manner, there is a risk that the organized repatriation programme initiated by UNHCR will be simply a shuttle service.

UNHCR's role in the return

UNHCR is correctly facilitating rather than actively promoting repatriation from Iran to Afghanistan. However, the distinction can be a fine one, and UNHCR should be sure that refugees are aware of it.

Under the current arrangement, in which the host government administers the repatriation registration centres and transports refugees to the border, there is a danger that the message being given to refugees may be more robust than that which UNHCR would wish to transmit. UNHCR's goal is to ensure voluntary, safe, dignified and durable repatriation. As such, it must be frank in informing refugees about adverse conditions in areas of return (drought and insecurity, for example), leaving the repatriation decision to the Afghans themselves.

UNHCR has been criticized in some quarters for becoming so heavily involved with a return movement to a country which is so devastated by war and drought, and which has such an uncertain future. But such criticisms overstate UNHCR's ability to influence the refugees' decision. Afghans who decide to return will do so with or without UNHCR. Indeed, in the first three months of 2002, some 40,000 did so spontaneously.

It would be amiss for UNHCR to deny assistance to those Afghans in Iran who wish to repatriate. To do so would be to make the journey more burdensome for them, expose the returnees to unscrupulous 'travel agents', and make them more likely to return under the auspices of such groups as the Hizb-e-Wahdat and the Sipah-e-Mohamed. In this context, UNHCR has an important role to play - one accounted for in the tripartite agreement -- in providing refugees with unbiased information, and in monitoring the messages conveyed to them by other actors.

Modalities of return

The repatriation from Iran to Afghanistan is implemented under the framework of a tripartite agreement, which, after considerable efforts on the part of UNHCR, was signed in Geneva on 3 April 2002. In Iran, UNHCR has chosen to work with the central authorities (Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs, or BAFIA) which registers and transports refugees to the border. As per its mandate and the terms of the tripartite agreement, UNHCR is supposed to ensure the voluntary nature of return through interviews and by overseeing the registration and transportation processes.

Given the government's keen interest in seeing large-scale repatriation to Afghanistan, BAFIA is likely to prove effective in transporting those who wish to return. UNHCR's main concern in this context must be to ensure that the repatriation takes place in a manner which is consistent with refugee protection principles, including the need for refugees to have access to impartial country of origin information and the right of women to make their own repatriation decisions. The adoption of a community development approach would help in this regard.

In terms of practical and logistical considerations, UNHCR and BAFIA are confronted with at least two potential difficulties. One concerns the desire of refugees to transport bulky and unconventional assets that they have accumulated in Iran, such as farming equipment, machinery for small-scale industries and housing materials.

The other concerns the desire of some groups of refugees to repatriate only if they can return and settle together, despite the fact they come from different places of origin. A diverse group of refugees in Torbat-e-Jam camp, for example, told the evaluation mission that they had become a large family in exile, and only wished to repatriate if they could remain together in Afghanistan. Such concerns evidently have a bearing on the sustainability of return, and should therefore be dealt with in a sympathetic manner.

Another looming issue concerns the decision to accept single men for repatriation. As mentioned, in the past, many 'returnees' have in fact been seasonal workers, using the transport on offer to go home for a few months before returning to Iran.

While there is clearly still room for abuse, there is also a possibility that more and more single men will decide to remain in Afghanistan, and that their continued presence in the country will encourage other Afghans to repatriate. The most appropriate response to this situation is for UNHCR to maintain existing arrangements for the time being, but to review their effectiveness before the end of the year, and be prepared to modify them if necessary.

A final observation on repatriation is the role that Afghans can play in their home country as agents for development. Afghans in Iran have benefited from a solid education in their own language, and have in many cases gone on to become skilled professionals. Iran, a middle-income country, does not necessarily need Afghans for development (it needs their labour instead), but Afghanistan does, desperately so. The millions of Afghans forced to flee, then secured and nurtured over the decades in exile, represent a great resource for the country that will be of great help should stability return to Afghanistan.

Remaining in Iran

Even if a high level of return is experienced in 2002, the majority of Afghan refugees seem likely to stay in Iran, at least for the medium term. UNHCR planning cannot therefore focus on repatriation alone, but must also address the protection and solutions needs of those Afghans who remain in exile.

What are the variables that will affect the longer-term presence - and possibly the integration - of Afghans in Iran, and what role might UNHCR have to play in this process? On one hand, there is the evolving situation in Afghanistan itself, a factor over which UNHCR has little control. On the other hand are host government policies, and the extent to which they allow members of the Afghan community to enjoy continued asylum in Iran.

In accordance with its protection mandate, and in view of the insecurity and instability that continues to afflict Afghanistan, UNHCR must advocate for the right of Afghans to remain safely in Iran, while simultaneously working towards the durable solutions of voluntary repatriation and, for those who require or would benefit from it, local integration.

As discussed later in this bulletin, such a policy must be underpinned by a detailed knowledge of the Afghan population. It should also (a) address the legal status of

those Afghans who remain in Iran, either as refugees or migrant workers; (b) entail more visible international burden-sharing, and (c) involve a limited number of projects that will serve refugees in both the country of asylum and origin.

Raising the issue of continued asylum in Iran, let alone local integration, is regarded as a non-starter by some observers, given Iran's frequently expressed and strong desire to see the Afghans repatriate. While it is true that the current climate in Iran is not conducive to the refugees' continued presence, it has not always been thus. Iran initially welcomed them in a spirit of compassion and solidarity, and the country's attitude towards those who remain may change again, especially if a large-scale repatriation takes place in 2002, thereby reducing the size of the 'residual caseload'.

A number of steps might be taken by UNHCR to facilitate continued asylum and local integration in Iran.

Documentation: While some progress has been made in improving the situation of Afghans not in possession of official refugee cards, continued advocacy is required on this issue. For unlike refugees in some countries, the possession of a legal document does make a difference to the status and situation of Afghans in Iran. Without one, he or she is subject to fees at internal checkpoints, and is liable to be deported.

Refugees or seasonal workers? The refugee situation in Iran is complicated by the fact that Afghans have traditionally filled gaps in Iran's labour market. At present, there appears to be no legal mechanism for foreign workers to seek employment in Iran; as such, large number of Afghans who should probably be classified as workers are subsumed under the category of 'refugee'. UNHCR is well aware of this issue, its long-term nature and the need to lay the groundwork for its eventual resolution. In this respect, the organization's efforts to explore appropriate options with the ILO are particularly welcome.

Scope of UNHCR activities. Compared to other countries, and given the large size of the refugee population, UNHCR activities in Iran are limited. This is not necessarily a bad thing; the government has assumed primary responsibility for the Afghans, most of whom appear to have become substantially self-reliant. Now that UNHCR has been granted better access to the population, and given the host government's desire for UNHCR to assume a greater role, the organization should indeed expand its activities.

Such activities must not, however, lapse into the administration of long-term care and maintenance programmes. Rather, they should be designed in a way that will support the organization's protection efforts, capacitate refugees for a future and productive life in either Iran or Afghanistan and, to the extent possible, reflect a commitment to international burden-sharing.

Some of the programmes currently being implemented by UNHCR, such as a revolving fund scheme in Zahedan and skills training classes in Mashhad, are examples of good practice in this regard. Such initiatives build skills that are of value to refugees and their community, whether in exile in Iran or upon return in Afghanistan.

Moreover, by facilitating a process of income-generation and capital accumulation, programmes of this nature may also prove critical in enabling a refugee to decide to whether or not repatriate. For it is estimated that a refugee family needs some \$1,000 if it is to take the decision to go home.

Deportations

An issue that complicates the question of continued asylum in Iran is that of deportations to Afghanistan, undertaken by the Iranian authorities. This is understandably a vexed issue, which has significant bearing both on the protection situation of Afghans in the country, and on international perceptions of UNHCR's effectiveness in exercising its protection mandate.

The evidence suggests that Iran is not generally deporting refugees, but is exercising its right to curb illegal immigration. However, the fact that UNHCR has a limited knowledge of the Afghan population and is unable to access deportees freely currently makes such suppositions unverifiable, and weakens UNHCR's ability to ensure that international protection standards are being met.

That ability may improve, given the improved access which UNHCR has gained with respect to the Afghan population, as well as the government's willingness, even prior to the signing of the tripartite agreement, to take note of UNHCR's protection concerns. Moreover, with the expansion of the UNHCR programme and presence in western Afghanistan, the organization's capacity to monitor the scale and nature of the deportations taking place should be enhanced.

To capitalize upon this situation, it is recommended that the UNHCR Iran continues to strengthen its linkage with the UNHCR office in Herat, and that it make appropriate *démarches* if there is evidence that Afghans who are in continued need of international protection are being subjected to *refoulement*.

Getting to know the population

Although the Afghans in Iran constitute one of the world's largest refugee populations, UNHCR's knowledge of this population is limited. This lack of knowledge derives from a combination of factors: the leading role played by the government in managing the refugee issue; the dispersed and urban nature of the Afghan population; and the limited access granted to UNHCR by the authorities.

This situation places important constraints on the UNHCR programme in Iran. Not knowing the population, or having good access to it, means that the organization is unable to gauge with any certainty the protection problems and needs of Afghan refugees.

UNHCR is similarly handicapped in its efforts to assess the refugees' potential to find durable solutions to their plight, whether in their country of origin, or in their country of asylum. In such circumstances, UNHCR actions will be reactive to unforeseen situations rather than proactive in respect of predictable occurrences.

In spite of these historically rooted difficulties, some new opportunities appear to be opening up. Even prior to the events of 11 September 2001, UNHCR had been granted improved access to the Afghan population.

With the subsequent fall of the Taliban regime the country became more open to international agencies. As UNHCR was one of the largest UN agencies on the ground, it was able to play a leading role in the humanitarian sector, offering considerable assistance to other organizations less familiar with the Iranian context.

UNHCR's office in Tehran has contracted a private firm to develop a profile of the Afghan refugee population in Iran. The results of this survey are imminent, and should help the organization to plan its future programmes more precisely.

At local level, new approaches are also being tried. In Zahedan, for example, the UNHCR office has managed to develop a solid working relationship with BAFIA, and as a result has been able to gain access to - and establish small-scale projects for - a number of groups of Afghan refugees.

The office is also planning to expand its access to refugees (and the access of refugees to UNHCR) through the use of mobile medical referral units that will cover several provinces. In Mashhad, moreover, the UNHCR office has been compiling a series of durable solutions surveys, which promise to shed new light on the way in the refugees perceive their own future.

Western Afghanistan

The situations in western Afghanistan and Iran are deeply linked because the refugees in Iran either hail from and/or intend to return to western Afghanistan. The west also has its own dynamic vis-à-vis the rest of Afghanistan, a fact that needs to be accounted for in planning.

Having withdrawn its international staff from the region soon after the events of 11 September 2001, UNHCR was quick to recognize the importance of re-establishing a presence in western Afghanistan.

A November 2001 e-mail from one senior staff member put it this way: 'It may sound ambitious and perhaps premature (especially at a time when many of you, particularly in Pakistan and Iran, are working flat out on refugee preparedness) but this is not a situation in which you wait for things to happen. Afghanistan is the political and operational focus of this crisis, much more than ever before.' By the time of the evaluation mission, UNHCR had re-established a presence in Herat, Badghis, Farah, and on the border. It was not yet operational in Ghor, the fourth western region province.

This is a considerable achievement in view of the very difficult operational environment that exists in the region. In order to undertake a simple visit to the field (i.e. outside of Herat city), missions are obliged to obtain security clearance, to send two vehicles, two international staff and three national staff. Combined with poor roads and restrictions on overnight stays in the field, this can make it extremely

difficult to undertake the type of activities that are essential to UNHCR's work.

While UNHCR may have established a presence in the western region, the same cannot be said for all other international actors. WFP and IOM have a large presence, but many NGOs maintain only small offices in Herat, and have no offices deeper in the field. It is little surprise that Afghans are given to wonder where the large international aid pledges have gone.

Repatriation and protection

In western Afghanistan, many of the logistical arrangements required for repatriation are being prepared and are largely under control. There are some difficulties – such as the capacity of the transit centre at Islam Qala – but these are of a technical nature, and UNHCR has been working to resolve them.

Conceptually, it is appealing to think of repatriation as a fast moving process, in which returnees spend very little time in transit centres before going home. Although there had been concerns that climatic and security conditions might oblige people to stay in the centres for longer than expected, thus far this has not been the case.

IOM had been assigned the task of arranging onward returnee transportation from the transit centres. But it has struggled to develop the capacity for this task. Significantly, following the departure of the evaluation mission, steps were taken to explore alternative transport arrangements, including the provision of a cash grant to returnees, as is done on the Pakistan side.

UNHCR's role in refugees' countries of origin is premised on the organization's 'legitimate concern for the consequences of return.' UNHCR's ability to monitor such consequences are currently insufficient. While security constraints and official regulations make missions difficult to organize, and while the logistical imperatives of repatriation tend to have first call of UNHCR's human and other resources, occupying staff and resources, it is nevertheless essential that a wide-ranging programme of returnee monitoring be instituted.

Such a programme will enable UNHCR to respond to immediate problems and needs in western Afghanistan, and will also provide UNHCR with useful information that can be relayed to prospective returnees in Iran. As recognized by UNHCR Afghanistan, monitoring should incorporate community services and field staff.

Comprehensive coverage may not be immediately possible, given the security and other constraints confronting UNHCR. However, it should be possible to identify areas that are sufficiently safe for staff members to visit on a regular basis. Such visits should involve both direct protection interventions, as well as an effort to develop local protection networks. As a means of providing an entry point to local society, protection monitoring visits could usefully be combined with more assistance-oriented missions, in sectors such as shelter and income-generation.

The roving officer function has proved useful in disseminating guidance and filling gaps. In the longer term, however, additional international and national protection officers are required to provide more consistent coverage. The use of the SURGE stand-by facility can help, but it is a short-term palliative, that does not compensate for adequate and stable protection staffing.

Reintegration and urbanization

Although the long-term reintegration of Afghan refugees is largely out of UNHCR's hands, the organization has a key role to play in providing a 'cushion' for returnees, and a subsequent stepping stone in the direction of self-reliance. Reintegration projects also provide UNHCR with visibility, an asset which may help to boost the confidence and protection of returnees.

In designing its reintegration assistance programme, UNHCR should not adhere to past operational models. As another e-mail from UNHCR's Kabul office put it: 'Afghanistan is simply not a "business as usual" situation, and we cannot simply say that "we will do Quick Impact Projects". We are getting ready to fund and implement reintegration projects in many traditional areas (shelter, water, health, education, income-generation, agriculture) but it is imperative that we do so within a framework endorsed and supported by our development partners (particularly UNDP and the World Bank) and even more so by the Afghan Interim Administration (AIA).'

As is the case in many other countries, Afghanistan's cities are expanding, through a combination of natural growth, rural-urban migration (including IDP movements) and refugee repatriation. Returnees from Pakistan are already swelling Kabul and other cities. If major repatriation begins from Iran, where a large majority of the caseload has already been urbanized, this will become an even bigger issue.

UNHCR cannot, and should not, attempt to stop urbanization; rather, the question is how UNHCR can account for urbanization in its repatriation planning, and at the same time avoid exacerbating conditions in the cities. At present, and in line with many other aid agencies in Afghanistan, UNHCR tends to look at Afghans through a rural prism, and plans assistance on the basis of a rural paradigm.

To the extent that returnees desire rurally based assistance, this should be provided, especially if the delivery of such assistance could make the difference between a returnee becoming a self-reliant farmer rather than an urban slum-dweller. For the medium-term, though, UNHCR should develop community-based urban assistance programmes.

Some argue that it is irresponsible for UNHCR to repatriate people to a country that is devastated by drought and war, and where many provinces lack the absorption capacity to support large new populations. Such observations exaggerate UNHCR's ability to influence repatriation decisions. The organization should not attempt to stop people returning from Iran. Rather, it should make use of data on provincial capacities and infrastructure, coupled with data on forecasted areas of return, as a means of designing reintegration projects that increase absorption capacity.

This process will be aided by the fact that the UNHCR office in Afghanistan, in collaboration with the Geneva-based Reintegration and Local Settlement Section, has made modest progress in integrating returnee concerns into the strategic planning processes and plans of the World Bank and the AIA, although progress on the ground in the western region is not yet visible.

The internally displaced

The issue of internal displacement in Afghanistan will be covered in greater detail in a subsequent evaluation bulletin. However, given that Maslakh - the world's largest camp for the internally displaced - is located in Herat, it is an unavoidable issue.

Hitherto, IOM has been in charge of Maslakh camp. UNHCR has staked a claim to handling protection issues there, and, with a new agreement apparently designating UNHCR as the 'programme secretariat' for displacement in Afghanistan, this role has been recognized.

If UNHCR is to assume a protection role in respect of Herat's IDPs (estimated to be over 100,000), however, it must do so correctly. Asserting such a role without a proper plan and with limited staff is a disingenuous stance that will leave the internally displaced unprotected, and UNHCR open to charges of opportunism.

Currently, the UNHCR sub-office in Herat has three protection officers (two international, one national). But they are fully occupied with the repatriation, and struggle even to undertake proper returnee monitoring. It is simply unreasonable to expect UNHCR Herat to assume responsibility for up to 400,000 returnees plus 170,000 IDPs with such a low staffing component.

If it is to request additional resources to handle the problem of internal displacement in Herat, then it must do so on the basis of a firm policy and long-term commitment. Two years from now, when Afghanistan is off the television screens and UNHCR is finds itself in another financial squeeze, IDP programmes will be the first in line for reductions. If the organization is to assert a role with IDPs in Herat today, only to abandon them tomorrow, then it will have done no one a favour, least of all the displaced people themselves.

Partnerships

UNHCR has established a privileged working relationship with the AIA, not least because of the organization's decision to relocate from Islamabad to Kabul at the earliest possible moment.

To the extent that this boosts official and public confidence in UNHCR and furthers the organization's repatriation and reintegration objectives, this is to be welcomed. Nonetheless, there are obvious risks in being too closely associated with a particular and interim regime.

While UNHCR has found a governmental counterpart in the Ministry of Repatriation, the MOR appears to be largely bereft of the capacity required to

discharge its duties. The UNHCR office in Kabul is right to envisage increased support for the central and provincial MORs. It is correctly avoiding paying recurrent and administrative costs, and thus preventing the creation of a bloated and UNHCR-dependent refugee ministry, of the type that has emerged - and proved so difficult to dismantle - in other parts of the world.

UNHCR coordination

UNHCR's Afghan operation is structurally an unusual one, with the country office in Kabul simultaneously assuming responsibility for repatriation coordination between Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian Republics. The evaluation mission concluded that these arrangements have been problematic. A somewhat inevitable tension exists between the need for a centralized and region-wide approach to a rapidly evolving refugee situation, and the desire of individual offices to exercise the flexibility they need to respond to local circumstances.

It is clear that, although there is a need for coordinated regional policies regarding repatriation, the designation of the Afghanistan Chargé de Mission as a Repatriation Coordinator is not viable. UNHCR staff do not readily accept what is perceived as management by a peer. How should this be resolved?

There is no easy answer to this situation, and the idea of creating an additional management layer on top of the current structure is not one that is espoused by anyone in the field. Rather, it seems that an intensification of current coordination arrangements is required, with offices throughout the region spending more time discussing and resolving issues of common concern. Cross-border visits would be facilitated if UNHCR staff involved in the operation were to acquire multiple-entry visas for the different countries in the region. Improved telecommunications would also facilitate this task.

Within Iran, UNHCR has tended to pursue a relatively centralized approach to the operation, with key decisions being taken in Tehran. Such centralization mirrors the Iranian government set-up, where BAFIA Tehran enjoys a similar relationship with provincial BAFIA branches. While this approach may simplify matters by enabling country-wide agreements to be signed with the authorities, it has in some cases hindered the efforts of sub-offices to forge effective working relationships with their provincial BAFIA counterparts.

UNHCR Afghanistan has attempted to resolve centralization issues through the use of roving officers (field and protection), whose job is to provide operational support and policy guidance. Alternating with this would be periodic meetings in Kabul. Although not fully implemented in all sectors, this arrangement appeared to be both desired and viable.

Conclusion

UNHCR has responded rapidly and proactively to the changing situation in Afghanistan, and the organization is well placed to play a substantive role in the repatriation and reintegration of the refugee population in Iran.

But the fragility of this situation must be acknowledged. If Afghanistan offers hope today, then it is a hope that depends to a significant extent on international support. And it is a hope that could quite readily be undermined by drought, natural disaster, warlord politics and continued armed conflict.

Even in the most positive of scenarios, voluntary repatriation will not be an immediate option for all - or perhaps even the majority - of Afghans in Iran. While UNHCR is right to facilitate the return of those who choose this option, the organization must ensure that the attention given to the logistics of repatriation does not detract attention from activities in favour of alternative solutions, protection monitoring and reintegration.

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