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## YEMEN: DURABLE SOLUTIONS NEEDED

Yemen is one of the least developed countries in the world, ranking 153rd in the Human Development Index. In the north of the country, a localized conflict has displaced tens of thousands of civilians since 2004. In the past few years the arrival of large numbers of Ethiopian and Somali migrants and asylum seekers has further jeopardized the economy and stability of the country. A country of geo-strategic importance, linking the Middle East with the Horn of Africa, Yemen shoulders a heavy burden which the international community and UN agencies should do more to alleviate, for both humanitarian and security reasons. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in particular must gear up its operations and identify and support durable solutions.

### A Growing, Invisible Problem: Somalis and Other Refugees in Yemen

UNHCR expanded its presence in Yemen after the collapse of the central Somali government in 1991. It estimates that there are now between 200,000 and 250,000 Somalis in Yemen, although the government of Yemen believes the figure to be much higher. In October 2007 alone, UNHCR recorded 7,000 arrivals at its reception center located near the coast. Because of long-standing ties between Somalia and Yemen, the Yemeni government grants *prima facie* recognition to all Somalis who seek asylum. Despite this legal protection, most Somalis do not approach UNHCR for registration. During the agency's registration exercise, which ended in January 2007, only 48,000 Somalis came forward, most of whom had been in Yemen at least since 2004.

While UNHCR tries to provide incentives for registration – such as access to services, temporary protection letters, and documentation – most Somalis are either unaware of their options or are worried of being identified by the government and possibly repatriated should Yemen change its policy in the future.

Other refugee populations are equally difficult to identify and reach. Ethiopians, including ethnic Somalis living in Ethiopia, are considered economic migrants by the Yemeni authorities. To be granted asylum, they have to undergo individual Refugee Status Determination (RSD). As a result, most evade authorities once they reach the coast of Yemen.

### Policy Recommendations

1. UNHCR must improve its outreach to refugee populations.
2. UNHCR should make its services available to unregistered refugees and vulnerable Yemenis.
3. UNHCR should increase its protection staff, and have a protection officer permanently based in Kharaz camp.
4. UNHCR and its partners should address the needs of urban refugees and favor local integration over camp settlement.
5. Donors should fully fund UNHCR appeals.

As for Iraqis, about 70,000 lived in Yemen before the start of the war in 2003. Only 2,500 are now registered with UNHCR, and of those who arrived after 2003, most came from Lebanon and Syria. As Yemen has recently changed its visa requirements for Iraqis, they tend to be reluctant to come forward as well. There is a lack of information as to how many now live in Yemen, or how the visa requirement has affected Iraqis' ability to live in the country.

The vast majority of refugees in Yemen live in towns and cities, and is therefore harder to identify and assist. UNHCR must engage in a much larger public outreach campaign and be more inclusive in the provision of services. Refugees International met with UNHCR's implementing partners in Sana'a and they expressed the desire to provide assistance to non-UNHCR card holders, an initiative UNHCR has yet to approve.

## Addressing Protection Issues at All Levels

Protection for all refugees and the right to seek asylum are major concerns in Yemen. Non-Somali migrants in Yemen are not automatically considered refugees. Ethiopians in particular are at risk of detention and deportation, especially upon arrival. International organizations are particularly worried about the conditions of detention, and there have been several cases of detained Ethiopians dying due to harsh treatment and lack of access to medicine or food. Iraqis too have been subjected to deportations. UNHCR knows of three cases of Shiites deported because of alleged links with rebels in the north of Yemen.

Abuses are also perpetrated at other levels by local authorities. Since UNHCR doesn't have continuous presence on the Red Sea coast yet, refugees who come this way are usually escorted to the Kharaz refugee camp by the local military. Many are beaten and robbed. Refugees International interviewed a group who had just arrived; all had had their meager possessions confiscated by the military. Similar abuses are taking place at Kharaz camp itself, home to 9,300 refugees, with the direct complicity of the head of security. UNHCR has taken some measures, including ensuring that policemen rotate out of the camp every six months, but doesn't have protection officers permanently based in the camp, located more than two hours away from Aden.

Finally, in a country as poor as Yemen, where there is a 49% unemployment rate, tensions are bound to arise between refugees and the local population. Heads of villages surrounding Kharaz camp regularly complain of the lack of initiatives benefiting the local population. Similarly, the fact that UNHCR assistance in Sana'a is restricted to refugees, even though they live amongst poor Yemenis, is bound to create problems.

To monitor protection issues, UNHCR only has two international protection staff (up from zero in 2004). The agency needs to make protection a priority, and increase both its staff and their presence in key areas. Programs that address host communities' needs are also essential to ensure tensions are minimized.

## Local Integration Over Warehousing

Upon arrival, refugees in Yemen are given a stark choice: either be taken to the Kharaz refugee camp in the middle of the desert or make it on their own in Yemeni cities. Most opt not to go to the camp, as living conditions are extremely difficult and the possibilities for local integration are absent. Many choose to work in Yemen or in other Arab Gulf countries, often falling prey to smuggling networks. Others swell the ranks of the urban poor in the Safia neighborhood of Sana'a or in Basatin, a neighborhood slum in Aden.

Last year, UNHCR resettled fewer than 50 refugees from Yemen. Given the state of the country, return to Somalia is not a viable proposition. The only available durable solution for Somali refugees in Yemen is local integration, especially since they are allowed to work in the country. Yet until now, UNHCR's policies have put the emphasis on camp settlement rather than creative urban livelihood projects. It is essential that UNHCR and other UN agencies reconsider their approach and address assistance needs in urban environments.

Local and international NGOs, UNHCR's implementing partners, are already providing assistance in Safia and Basatin and deliver an array of services on a shoestring budget. By expanding their programs and implementing new ones, UNHCR would be able to encourage local integration and provide durable solutions for many.

## Funding UN Efforts in Yemen

Migration to Yemen is not a new phenomenon, and UNHCR's slow and inadequate response is difficult to understand. UNHCR has recently been gearing up, however, and international donors should support its efforts. From a budget of less than \$2 million for 2007, UNHCR hopes to raise \$17 million for 2008. This would allow for increased assistance. Donors should fund UNHCR's appeal and engage the agency in discussions about the possibility of addressing urban refugees' needs and including vulnerable Yemenis in its programs. Donors should also fund other UN appeals to allow agencies like WFP to continue and expand their assistance programs for refugees in Yemen.

*Kristele Younes and Patrick Duplat assessed the situation for refugees in Yemen in late February.*