



# **COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN**

**Executive Committee Summary**

**Country: Yemen**

**Planning Year: 2005**

# 2005 Yemen Country Operation Plan

## Part I: Executive Committee Summary

### (a) Context and Beneficiary Populations

#### Political context

Yemen is moving forward with the progressive introduction of multi-party democratic political system. The April 2003 parliamentary elections were an important milestone in this process. The establishment of the Ministry for Human Rights in May 2003 gave concrete expression to the Government's goal of enhancing human rights protections for Yemeni citizens. The new Ministry was also assigned responsibility for refugee affairs. Democratisation is proceeding in tandem with efforts to modernise and reform state institutions and management of the economy. Yemen has also intensively pursued stronger international ties, notably with its regional neighbours. Gaining full membership in the Gulf Cooperation Council is an important foreign policy goal. More than seven million Yemenis reportedly live and work abroad, making an important contribution to the national economy through remittances.

The prevailing economic and social conditions in Yemen are nevertheless a serious constraint on the Government's capacity to protect and care for refugees. Yemen is among the world's least developed countries, ranking 148 of 175 countries on the 2003 UNDP Human Development Index. According to the World Bank, an estimated 42 percent of Yemenis live below the poverty line, and the unemployment (40 percent) and population growth (3.8 percent) rates remain stubbornly high. Less than half of the population has access to health care and over half of the population is illiterate, including more than three-quarters of all women. Faced with these domestic challenges, the Government looks to UNHCR as a partner for protecting refugees and meeting their humanitarian needs.

#### Protection issues

Yemen lies along a historical migration route from East Africa to the Middle East. Somalis fleeing the seemingly endless cycle of violent conflict, social upheaval and economic deprivation in their country make up the largest component of the contemporary migratory flow, with Ethiopians constituting the next largest group. They rely upon smugglers in the Somali port of Bossasso to facilitate their perilous crossing of the Arabian Sea in small, unsafe vessels for a relatively small fee. Many lose their lives when the small, unsafe vessels sink or when the smugglers force passengers overboard before reaching the coast. Most do not plan to stay in Yemen. Some 80 percent of the Somalis interviewed by UNHCR upon arrival indicate that they plan to move on to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries in search of employment. A significant number, particularly the most vulnerable, remains behind in Yemen and turns to UNHCR for protection and support.

New arrivals have surged in early 2004. During each of the past three years, UNHCR registered roughly 12,500 Somalis at the Mayfa'a reception centre near the village of Bir Ali, which lies opposite the Somali port of Bossasso. Bir Ali, however, is only the most important of fifteen main entry points along the 2,400 kilometre Yemeni coast. In the first three months of 2004, however, more than 7,000 Somalis arrived through

Bir Ali – a nearly 30 percent increase over the same period in the previous year. More than 1,600 Ethiopians have entered through Bir Ali since September 2003, representing a dramatic increase over previous years.

Recent developments in the region provide some possible explanations for the rising influx to Yemen. Apart from the generalised insecurity in many parts of Somalia, another factor may be the recent edict of the Somaliland authorities ordering all “foreigners” (including Somali IDPs) to leave the territory. Djibouti’s decision to expel some 82,000 mainly Somali and Ethiopian migrants in August 2003 has also impacted on Yemen, as have the reported famine conditions in Ethiopia.

### **UNHCR’s role**

UNHCR supports the Government of Yemen in meeting its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. The inter-ministerial National Committee for Refugee Affairs (NCRA) and its operational sub-committee facilitate cooperation with UNHCR. Yemen extends *prima facie* recognition to Somalis who register with the Government, issuing refugee cards co-signed by UNHCR that legalise their stay, permit freedom of movement and facilitate access to employment and education. A joint registration project resulted in the documentation of 46,976 Somali refugees through end-February 2004. Plans for the establishment of six Government-run regional registration centres are awaiting final official approval. UNHCR conducts RSD under its Mandate for asylum-seekers of other nationalities and advocates for their registration and documentation by the Government.

UNHCR works with the Government to strengthen the legal framework and institutional capacities for refugee protection in Yemen. UNHCR provides technical advice and drafting support for the development of new national refugee legislation and carries out an intensive programme of training seminars for officials involved in policy development and day-to-day refugee matters. UNHCR also offers protection training for NGO personnel and collaborates with Sana’a University on a semester-long course for law students.

UNHCR’s operational protection activities focus on preventing *refoulement* and ensuring that refugees and asylum-seekers in Yemen enjoy basic human rights. UNHCR also pursues durable solutions, where possible, through voluntary repatriation, limited resettlement and by working to establish the necessary legal framework for local integration in Yemen. Lawyers under contract with UNHCR provide counselling, advice and, on a selective basis, representation in connection with criminal and civil legal proceedings, including women who have survived sexual or gender-based violence and those escaping situations of abuse or exploitation.

UNHCR and its NGO partners provide support in meeting the basic humanitarian needs of refugees and asylum-seekers in Yemen. New arrivals at the Mayfa’a reception centre are issued temporary registration cards, undergo medical screening and receive necessary treatment and care. They also receive basic assistance (*i.e.*, prepared meals, water and shelter) and information about the Kharaz refugee camp operated by UNHCR. Only three to five percent of the new arrivals ask to be transported to the Kharaz camp, with most preferring to proceed to Sana’a, Aden and other cities or to continue their onward journey from Yemen immediately. The vast

majority of refugees transferred to the camp later move on to urban centres, because the location is so remote and inhospitable, particularly during the hot summer months.

UNHCR and its partners provide essential humanitarian assistance and services at the Kharaz refugee camp, with a focus on meeting the special needs of vulnerable individuals. WFP supplies a basic food ration for all refugees living in the camp, in line with the established standards. Residents also have access to adequate water, sanitation, shelter, household items and medical care, as well as awareness education, counselling and services related to HIV/AIDS and harmful traditional practices (*i.e.*, female genital mutilation (FGM)). Programmes offered at the camp community centre include social counselling, language courses, vocational training and recreational opportunities. Primary education is available in both Arabic and Somali language, and needy children receive uniforms, books and supplies. To supplement their diet and achieve greater self-reliance, refugees are allocated garden plots and receive seeds and tools.

UNHCR seeks to empower the camp community, particularly refugee women, as partners in planning and managing programmes for their benefit through training and community development activities. Refugee women participate through the Women's Committee, and they make up half the Block Leaders and half the members of the Security Committee. UNHCR's training efforts also aim at building the capacity of NGO partners and the relevant line ministries and directorates in Lahj and Aden governorates, where the reception centre and camp are located. Funding permitting, UNHCR also allows poorer Yemenis in nearby villages to access some assistance and services, which reinforces local support for the presence of the camp.

UNHCR's programmes outside the camp are focused Sana'a and Aden (Basatine), where most urban refugees live. Direct financial assistance is very limited and targets the most vulnerable on the basis of strict criteria. Refugee health clinics offer preventive and curative treatment and refer more serious cases to local hospitals. Reproductive health and HIV/AIDS related services also available in Sana'a and Aden. UNHCR-funded community centres offer a safe environment for refugees and social and legal counselling, language training, day care for children, opportunities for recreation and social and cultural activities. Refugee children attend local primary schools with assistance from UNHCR. Vocational training programmes give adult refugees with marketable skills, increasing their employability and prospects for achieving a self-reliance and economic integration in Yemen.

### **Overview of beneficiary populations**

UNHCR and the Government of Yemen, as noted above, have officially registered nearly 46,976 Somali refugees. This figure, however, includes only a small portion of the roughly 19,500 Somalis who entered through Bir Ali during 2003 and the first months of 2004. Many of these people, it should be noted, are likely to have already left Yemen for Saudi Arabia and other destinations, leaving behind the most vulnerable and destitute.

Most Somali refugees in Yemen – some 80 percent – originate from the central and southern regions of the country, within only a fifth coming from Somaliland and Puntland in the north. The Darod, Hawiye and Banadiri clans account for roughly two-thirds of the refugee population. Just over half of the refugees were nomadic

herders or rural farmers in Somalia, while the other half come from urban areas, mainly Mogadishu. Most are unskilled and have a limited potential to earn their livelihood in Yemen.

Roughly three-quarters of the new arrivals passing through the Mayfa'a facility are young, single men. At the Kharaz camp, however, women and children comprise more than 83 percent of the 10,521 registered refugees. Moreover, nearly half of the refugee households in the camp are headed by women. These statistics suggest that staying at the camp is a "survival strategy" for the most vulnerable refugees.

UNHCR has also registered 2,635 non-Somali refugees in Yemen, including 1,795 Ethiopians, 410 Palestinians, 225 Iraqis, 86 Eritreans and 63 Sudanese. The Ethiopian refugees include 720 former naval personnel and their dependants and 663 ethnic Oromo refugees who live in the Kharaz camp. Yemen also hosts an estimated 100,000 Iraqi nationals, many of whom are in a refugee like situation. Since the conflict in Iraq began in March 2003, Iraqis have approached UNHCR and received temporary protection documents that are respected by the Government. Most of the Iraqis are well integrated, although some 7,000 reportedly have repatriated spontaneously via Jordan since July 2003. Yemen also hosts 9,000 Palestinian refugees, who are outside the operational area of the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) and, thus, may seek UNHCR's protection and assistance.

### **Policy issues**

The major policy challenge facing UNHCR in Yemen arises from the new security dynamic in the region. Confronted with intensifying international pressure to control Yemen's borders and increasing arrivals from the Horn of Africa, the Government is concerned about the strain that greater numbers of refugees and migrants may place on state institutions and the country's poorly resourced social infrastructure. UNHCR, with support from its donors, will need to demonstrate a commitment to sharing this burden, in order to ensure continued access to asylum in Yemen, ease the growing strain on public services and consolidate the progress achieved in strengthening the national legal and institutional arrangements for refugee protection.

The mixed economic and refugee-related motivations of the Somalis (and increasingly Ethiopians) arriving in Yemen and the mainly transitory nature of their presence also poses complex policy dilemmas. UNHCR must ensure that its limited assistance reaches refugees and other persons of concern and targets the most vulnerable, while avoiding that its humanitarian programmes attract non-refugees and become overburdened by them. UNHCR's assessment is that the need for resettlement from Yemen well exceeds the current levels, and the Government has expressed interest in expanded resettlement as a tangible sign of burden sharing by the international community. Any increase in resettlement processing, however, would have to be carefully planned, based upon strict criteria and take into account the need for significant additional staffing. Moreover, expanding resettlement in a country where the great majority of new arrivals receive *prima facie* refugee status entails obvious risks, as UNHCR's programme could be overwhelmed and the choices of people who remain in their country of origin might be influenced.

### **Linkages to other country operations**

UNHCR in Yemen has strong interest in the success of the planned Comprehensive Plan of Action for Somali refugees. Unless a measure of stability and economic vitality returns to Somalia, however, outward migration through Yemen will continue and voluntary repatriation will not be an attractive option for those already settled in this country. Yemen represents the first step in a much longer journey for refugees and other migrants from the Horn of Africa to the Middle East, Europe and beyond. Until the root causes of these movements are addressed, UNHCR's Yemen operation will be increasingly linked to country programmes the other countries along the route.

### **Capacity and presence of partners**

UNHCR enjoys the support of four international and three national NGOs in providing humanitarian assistance and services to urban refugees in Sana'a and Aden and at the Mayfa'a reception centre and Kharaz camp. UNHCR collaborates with these partners on training activities and efforts to strengthen their operational capacity.

### **Presence and roles of other UN and international organisations**

WFP procures and delivers basic food rations for all refugees living in the Kharaz camp, and also supplies food for meals served to clinic in-patients, children attending camp primary schools and people in transit at the Mayfa'a reception centre. UNHCR works with UNAIDS and UNFPA to address the problem of HIV/AIDS through the Ministry of Health, within the framework of the national AIDS strategy plan. Well-established partnerships with UNICEF help to ensure the quality of education for refugees, particularly at the Kharaz camp.

UNHCR participates actively in the UN Country Team (UNCT) and inter-agency Security Management Team. UNDP has led UNCT efforts to formulate the Common Country Assessment (CCA) and UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), which set out the priorities of the UN development agencies in Yemen for the five year period beginning in 2001. The UN development agencies recognise the need to promote national development and address the needs of urban refugees in an integrated manner. UNHCR is also working to bring urban refugees within the scope of the poverty alleviation strategy being advanced by the World Bank and international donors through the Social Fund for Development.