

## **Update on UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa**

### **A. Situational context including new developments**

#### **Syria situation**

As the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic entered its ninth year, over 5.9 million Syrians remained internally displaced and over 5.6 million Syrians were registered as refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey as at August 2019. Their generosity notwithstanding, these host countries experienced increasing demographic, economic, political, social and security challenges, leading to stricter border management measures. This had a significant impact on the ability of thousands of vulnerable people to seek, and continue to access, safety and assistance.

From January to July 2019, some 52,000 Syrian refugees spontaneously returned to the Syrian Arab Republic. Around 135,530 internally displaced persons (IDPs) also returned to their places of origin in the first four months of this year, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In 2018, over 55,000 Syrian refugees and some 1.4 million IDPs returned to their areas of origin.

UNHCR is the lead agency for the shelter and non-food items (NFI) cluster, as well as the protection cluster in the Syrian Arab Republic. As of end-June 2019, UNHCR had provided more than 752,000 IDPs, returnees and host community members with community-based protection services. In addition, around 825,200 people received at least one core-relief item; almost 78,000 benefited from UNHCR's shelter activities; and some 220,000 individuals were supported through UNHCR's community-based health interventions.

Since violence escalated at the end of April, UNHCR has recorded around 500,000 individual displacements (including secondary displacements) in north-west Syria. A response plan for up to 700,000 people has been prepared by the United Nations.

UNHCR continued to lead, with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) in response to the Syria crisis, coordinating the work of over 270 partners in the five main countries hosting Syrian refugees.

#### **Iraq situation**

The number of IDPs in Iraq has gradually declined since 2014, with some 1.6 million people still internally displaced, according to the Displacement Tracking Matrix of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as at 30 June 2019. Many of the 4.3 million returnees face difficulty in accessing basic services, while at the same time contending with ongoing insecurity, the lack of shelter and livelihood opportunities,

as well as explosive hazards. This has led to instances of protracted and secondary displacement and re-admittance to camps where return was not possible or sustainable.

Instances of displacement, eviction, denied return, confiscation of documents and limitations on freedom of movement have been recorded due to perceived affiliation to insurgent groups. UNHCR continued to advocate and assist authorities with access to civil documentation for IDPs. Ensuring the protection of the displaced, including through safe and sustainable returns, also continued to be a critical component of the broader recovery and stabilization efforts in Iraq.

The first round of returnee grants from the Ministry of Displacement and Migration were provided to 12,000 Iraqi IDP returnee families at the end of July. Each returnee family received 1.5 million Iraqi Dinar (roughly US\$1,250) to help them re-establish themselves in their areas of origin.

UNHCR is co-leading, together with the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), the working group on sustainable solutions for IDPs in the context of the recovery and resilience programme for Iraq.

Over 257,000 Iraqi refugees are registered with UNHCR in neighbouring countries, with an additional almost 32,000 individuals living in camps without any form of registration in the Al- Hassakeh Governorate in the Syrian Arab Republic.

## **Yemen**

The humanitarian situation in Yemen continued to decline in 2019, with more than 24.1 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, amounting to more than three-quarters of the entire population. A further deterioration to the political, economic and security situation compromised humanitarian access and delivery of goods, thereby aggravating the existing threat of famine.

Now in its fifth year, the conflict continued to exact a brutal toll on civilians. Despite the welcomed Hudaydah ceasefire in December 2018, violence persisted, including in the governorates of Hajjah, Al Dhale'e and Hudaydah, where 65 per cent of all displaced families (around 54,540) were located. The number of people internally displaced since 2015 reached an estimated 4 million. The absorption capacity for communities hosting IDPs was becoming critical, resulting in evictions, spontaneous settlements and discrimination, with a negative impact on social cohesion.

As of August 2019, despite partial blockades and import restrictions that had an impact on UNHCR's operational capacity, more than 420,000 IDPs, IDP returnees and host community members were assisted with basic household items. Nearly 100,000 IDPs were also provided with emergency shelter. Protection assessments were carried out for over 85,000 individuals and some seven million IDPs received cash assistance for rental support, protection or winter needs. Despite these achievements, funding shortfalls threatened the continuation of protection and shelter programmes, including cash assistance and camp coordination and management.

Some 276,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in Yemen, the majority from Somalia and Ethiopia, continued to have pressing needs in 2019. Protection space for refugees and asylum-seekers was impacted by anti-migrant rhetoric leading to a rise in arrests, detentions and restricted movements. UNHCR offered protection services for refugees, including legal counselling, education, psychosocial care and health services, as well as refugee status determination and registration support. In response to Somali refugees expressing their intention to return home, UNHCR maintained the

assisted spontaneous returns programme, with some 4,550 Somali refugees having returned since April 2017.

### **North Africa**

The volatile security situation in Libya was marked by violent clashes, which started again in April 2019 and created new displacement of 120,000 persons from areas in and around Tripoli. In response, UNHCR provided over 26,400 IDPs and returnees with NFIs and shelter kits, as well as over 5,000 IDPs with cash grants.

As at September 2019, an estimated 5,200 refugees and migrants are detained in Libya, of whom 3,800 are of persons of concern to UNHCR. In pursuit of viable alternatives to detention, UNHCR is strengthening its urban response programme and accelerated durable solutions to third countries through the Gathering and Departure Facility. There are a total of 48,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers in Libya, and so far this year, over 1,100 refugees have departed Libya through evacuation programmes and over 370 under resettlement programmes. UNHCR has continued to register refugees and asylum-seekers, with over 7,000 individuals newly-registered in 2019, including 2,450 registered while in detention.

As of mid-September 2019, more than 6,650 refugees and migrants have been rescued or intercepted at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard, a decrease of over 50 per cent compared to the same period in 2018. UNHCR intervened at disembarkation points with the primary objective to save lives through the provision of emergency humanitarian assistance.

In Tunisia, the number of new arrivals (some 1,250) as of end August 2019 surpassed the number (around 1,190) for 2018, which reflects the deteriorating situation in Libya. Moreover, some 390 individuals have been disembarked in Tunisia, which is an increase since 2018, when 290 people were disembarked during the entire year. Overall, there were more than 1,200 new registrations by UNHCR in Tunisia – more than double what it was in 2018. With greater movements along the Western Mediterranean route, asylum-seeker registrations in Morocco also increased by 53 per cent during the first half of 2019, compared to the same period in 2018.

In Egypt, some 250,000 refugees and asylum-seekers of 57 nationalities were registered with UNHCR, with over half originating from the Syrian Arab Republic. In Algeria, UNHCR continued to provide protection and basic assistance and services to Sahrawi refugees in the five camps near Tindouf, despite serious funding shortfalls, which made achieving international standards of assistance challenging.

In Mauritania, UNHCR registered over 3,700 new Malian refugees in the first half of 2019. Malian refugees were also registered in urban centres, thereby widening the available protection space. In April, the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR introduced the first phase of targeted food assistance to Malian refugees registered at Mbera camp, as part of the joint strategy to help refugees achieve self-reliance.

UNHCR continued to work with national authorities in the region, to develop and implement national asylum systems, expand access to public services, and promote livelihood opportunities for refugees.

### **Mixed and onward movements**

In 2019, refugees and migrants continued to face high levels of risk when travelling from the Middle East or Africa towards Europe via the Mediterranean routes. UNHCR worked with governments and other partners to provide access to safety and

protect persons of concern from refoulement. Solutions in the context of migration management frameworks were also sought.

More than 800 people had reportedly died or gone missing in the Mediterranean as of August 2019. An unknown number of individuals died along routes at crossing points in North Africa, including in the Sahara Desert. An increase in incidents and human rights violations was observed amidst the tightening of border control in the region.

The Central Mediterranean situation rapidly changed with reductions in the search and rescue undertaken by European Union member States and the increasing role that Libyan authorities are playing at sea. Refugees and migrants crossing through Libya faced notable protection risks, particularly when arrested and detained by the Libyan authorities or exposed to criminal networks. In July, an airstrike on the Tajoura detention centre in Libya resulted in the deaths of more than 50 refugees and migrants. UNHCR sought to evacuate refugees from detention centres for their safety and with a view to providing durable solutions for vulnerable persons of concern. The Office promoted alternatives to detention and advocated for the release of refugees and asylum-seekers.

## **B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities**

### **Creating a favourable protection environment**

UNHCR invested in community-based approaches to empower people as agents of their own protection. In 2019, some 4,000 community volunteers facilitated access to information and some 380 community centres provided services. UNHCR launched the rollout of its updated age, gender and diversity policy, with an aim to improve inclusivity in programming, strengthen accountability and promote gender equality. Despite having access to education, displaced young people continued to face language barriers and economic hardship which UNHCR, partners and communities sought to mitigate through various programmes. In response to the Iraq and Syria crises, an increasing number of scholarship programmes at the higher educational level were made available to refugees in their countries of asylum, as well as in third countries. These initiatives complemented the protection and education strategies of UNHCR and partners to preserve the protection space available for refugees in MENA region.

Significant efforts were made to prevent and resolve cases of statelessness among refugee children. In July 2019, UNHCR convened a regional preparatory meeting, hosted by the Kingdom of Morocco, to explore country-level achievements and pledges against the ten action points of the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness. UNHCR strengthened its engagement on Palestinian issues with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), including through the yearly high-level meeting.

UNHCR supported the “No Lost Generation” initiative to reinforce protection and learning priorities for Syrian children and youth. A UNHCR study conducted in three 3RP operations showed that cash assistance in combination with other sustained services is more efficient than cash assistance alone in reducing vulnerabilities and positively impacting children’s development.

UNHCR enhanced its assistance delivery through digital identification in Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq, including through mobile phone services. Six operations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have already upgraded their registration, case and identity management system to PRIMES.

As a result of the immense needs identified among populations of concern in the region, UNHCR increased the response provided in the area of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). The response was carried out through ad-hoc technical support and direct trainings on MHPSS interventions, such as psychological first aid. Five operations (Egypt, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen) are currently upgrading their MHPSS strategy to ensure that psychosocial support is integrated into protection response

### **Ensuring protection from violence and exploitation**

To strengthen its response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in all areas of work, UNHCR organized a series of workshops for multi-functional country teams from Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Turkey and Yemen. The Yemen operation subsequently received funding through the “Safe from the Start” initiative to implement a multisectoral project to mainstream SGBV prevention, mitigation and response activities in refugee and IDP contexts. Additionally, 3RP operations used the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s gender marker tool to support the integration of gender equality measures in 2019-2020 programming.

Initiatives to reinforce awareness of, and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse among UNHCR staff were also implemented. A regional workshop for focal points was organized and UNHCR conducted a compliance review of several 3RP operations. Key findings and recommendations were subsequently shared across the region and with Headquarters, to bolster implementation of UNHCR’s zero tolerance policy in this area.

### **Achieving durable solutions**

UNHCR continued to seek durable solutions, including through resettlement and complementary pathways, for the most vulnerable across the region. By mid-2019, operations in the MENA region and Turkey had submitted over 22,500 people for resettlement, which represented an increase of around 14 per cent compared to the same period in 2018.

By mid-August 2019, over 3,900 people, including unaccompanied children, had been evacuated from Libya since the start of the evacuation operation in late 2017. The majority, around three-quarters, were evacuated to Niger with the remainder evacuated to Italy or to the emergency transit centre in Romania.

UNHCR continued to monitor the situation of returning Syrian refugees. In 2019, a limited number returned, and UNHCR aimed to ensure that refugees were able to make informed decisions, and that obstacles to sustainable return were minimized. UNHCR also advocated for maintaining the international protection status of Syrians in need and monitored the intentions and perceptions of return among Syrian refugees through surveys conducted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.

### **Mobilizing support through strategic partnerships**

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, a strong “whole of society” approach to addressing regional refugee crises continued to be a priority for UNHCR’s strategic partnerships in MENA. In 2019, UNHCR held its first annual regional consultations with non-governmental organizations and civil society in Amman on World Refugee Day (20 June). The consultations were instrumental in pioneering implementation of corporate strategic directions on decentralization and regionalization and bringing the dialogue closer to the points of delivery with key stakeholders. Particular thematic issues of relevance were conflict prevention and addressing root causes of

displacement, as well as the sustainable development goals, which are expected to contribute to regional discussions at the upcoming Global Refugee Forum.

There was renewed focus on engagement with the private sector, including faith-based philanthropy and social entrepreneurship, in support of refugees and host communities in the region. UNHCR also worked with academic institutions and research centres to build a strong knowledge base, and to engage cultural influencers in shaping the narrative on displacement in MENA.

### **C. Financial Information**

In October 2018, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme (ExCom) approved the 2019 budget of \$2,758 million for the Middle East and North Africa region. As of end of August 2019, the region’s budget remained stable at \$2.751 billion.

The needs for Middle East and North Africa of \$2.75 billion were 35 per cent funded as of 10 September 2019, after considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions. This left an indicative funding gap of \$1.79 billion.

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