



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

Executive Committee Summary

Country : Algeria

Planning Year : 2006

2006 Algeria Country Operations Plan

Part I: Executive Committee Summary

(a) Context and Beneficiary Populations

Political context

During past years Algeria went through a difficult political environment which was not conducive to any reasonable initiative other than the routine assistance programme for Western Sahara refugees. A protracted refugee situation of over 30 years.

UNHCR began its humanitarian activities in North Africa in the late 1950s with the care and maintenance and further the repatriation of the Algerian refugees from the neighbouring countries. In 1975, it started an emergency programme for refugees from Western Sahara in Algeria. Ten years later a UNHCR Branch Office was established in Algiers and a Sub-Office in Tindouf was created in 1996.

Indeed in the mid-1980s the international community was requested by the Algerian Government to provide relief to the refugees. The expectation was that the assistance would be of short duration particularly after cease fire agreed upon by the parties in conflict in 1991 and a United Nations Settlement Plan. The Settlement Plan that began in September 1991 and which stated purpose was to conduct a referendum to enable the people of the Western Sahara to choose freely between integration with Morocco and independence has not taken place despite the renewed efforts of the international community. The prospects of a settlement and eventual voluntary repatriation of the refugees became evanescent in 2001. Thus, the refugees continued to rely entirely on external humanitarian assistance. UNHCR has modified its focus and begun to look at ways to improve both the immediate and long-term needs of these refugees waiting for a political solution.

Western Sahara refugee situation is a protracted one and has now entered its 30th year. However it is a unique case by its political nature with highly organised administrative structures existing within camps and run by refugee representatives. As such, schools, hospitals, dispensaries and transport systems are fully managed by refugees on a voluntary basis. The majority of these volunteers have received secondary and higher level education in many key areas such as health, medicine, law, counselling and pedagogy. In this context, women play a key role within the refugee community and often hold key positions in the Saharawi institutions. Women supervise in all camps the distribution of food and water, on top of traditional responsibilities in terms family care. Each camp is divided into sections and each of these sections is headed by a woman.

Saharawi refugees are recognized on a *prima facie basis* and are housed in refugee camps –namely Alayun, Awserd, Dakhla and Smara, - in the Tindouf governorate (wilaya) in the south-west of Algeria since 1975; and a small number of urban refugees – mostly from Cameroon, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Somalia and Syria. There are also an estimated 4,005 Palestinian refugees, who are well integrated in Algeria. They do not maintain contact with UNHCR. Pending a durable solution to the plight of

Western Saharan refugees, UNHCR continues to carry out assistance and protection activities for their benefit at the site level.

Algeria is signatory to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, its 1967 Protocol and the African Union (AU) 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Problems of African Refugees.

Protection issues

In view of the stalemate in reaching a political settlement for Western Sahara, the planning of the voluntary repatriation and of the care and maintenance activities in the camps are carried out without UNHCR being in a position to factor in unexpected political developments beyond its control. The success of UNHCR's voluntary repatriation operation depends upon the progress made by the UN on the various pending political issues and the agreement of the parties to a political solution. In operational terms, UNHCR teams up with MINURSO as recently shown by the efficient co-operation achieved in respect of the organisation of family visits within the CBMs programme.

Due to insufficient funding, the UNHCR's operation in the camps represents only a limited portion of the total international assistance received by the Western Saharan refugees. WFP, ECHO and other organisations support through their own funds relief activities in the camps. As a result, it is often very difficult to know in advance what type and quantity of assistance will be provided by all these actors. It is hoped that an improved co-ordination mechanism, which began to be strengthened since 2001, will be further enhanced at field and central levels.

Several of the constraints faced are a direct result of the protracted nature of this refugee situation in Tindouf.

- A protracted refugee situation often results in unclear responsibilities among organisations within the operation. Thus, the establishment of a co-ordination mechanism is paramount.
- A protracted refugee situation often gives rise to a donors' fatigue, thus, sensitisation campaigns are needed on a continued basis.
- A protracted refugee situation tends to suffer from low visibility, thereby becoming more protracted, which in turn weakens the financial and political support from the international community.

In the area of asylum, new contacts have been initiated with the BAPRA, the eligibility body in Algeria, attached to the MFA. The BAPRA has expressed its willingness to take over the RSD activities that so far have been conducted almost exclusively by RO Algiers. To this end the officials concerned are prepared to closely co-operate with UNHCR in order to strengthen the ability of the eligibility organ to examine asylum claims. For this purpose training seminars will be organized in the areas of the country where asylum seekers should have access to the asylum procedure. In view of the embryonic state of the asylum system in Algeria, capacity-building efforts in the field of protection will be a priority for the office.

A first important step towards achieving the strengthening of asylum in Algeria would be the enactment, by the relevant legislative bodies, of an organic asylum law. That should be followed by a large scale capacity building process, jointly undertaken by the Algerian government and UNHCR. Such a process would help the authorities to put in place a system that would be up to meeting the asylum requirements of a vast country, resulting from composite migration flows.

Algeria, in the medium-long term, is most likely destined to become a major asylum country in the Mediterranean basin, as a result of the restrictive asylum policies of the EU countries and a strong economic growth. Developing a capacity to deal efficiently with this phenomenon, by strengthening the asylum system and acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between asylum and migration in the North-African region, is one of the main challenges ahead of the Algerian Government.

UNHCR's role

In 2006, UNHCR will continue to provide protection and assistance to Western Sahara refugees pending a lasting solution through a close co-operation with the Government of Algeria, the Frente POLISARIO, the refugee community and its UN partners, MINURSO, UNICEF and WFP.

UNHCR will seek the continuation of the Confidence Building Measures to facilitate contacts between the refugees and their relatives in the Territory. In 2004, UNHCR started the telephone lines between the refugee camps and the Territory. UNHCR started the family visits on 5 March 2004 for the benefit of refugees and their relatives in the Territory who travel back and forth on a weekly shuttle. In 2006, UNHCR will continue with these activities and will try to implement other CBMs activities namely the postal service and public information campaign. Although the CBMs operation is carried out independently from the activities under the purview of UNHCR in Algeria, the RO Algiers and the Sub-Office in Tindouf will continue to extend logistical and administrative support as deemed necessary.

Overview of beneficiary populations

Western Saharan refugees

UNHCR has undertaken several demarches towards the comprehensive registration of Saharawi refugees in the Tindouf camps in Algeria. The host government has indicated that while registration does not pose a problem in principle, its implementation depends on the global resolution of the conflict. Meanwhile, in order to ensure a more effective use of resources allocated for humanitarian assistance in Tindouf and in close consultation with the World Food Programme (WFP), it has been decided to limit the assistance programme as of September 2005 to the most vulnerable among the Saharawi refugees, estimated at 90,000 persons¹.

¹ According to date provided by the Government of Algeria, there are 155,430 Saharawi refugees in Tindouf camps.

Refugees are housed in refugee camps – namely Alayun, Awserd, Dakhla, Smara and 27 February school - in the Tindouf governorate (wilaya) in the south-west of Algeria since 1975. The camps consist of UNHCR provided tents and concrete houses built with locally produced bricks. In view of the difficulties faced by UNHCR in conducting a registration for Sahraoui refugees, the office has decided to limit the assistance to only 90,000 persons considered to be the most vulnerable.

Western Saharan women play a prominent role in their society. Women supervise the food and non-food items distribution at the camp level and are also responsible for the use of the water wells and taps.

Urban refugees

There are currently some 4,033 urban refugees including 4005 Palestinians who are well integrated and maintain no contact with the office. Out of the remaining 28 remaining refugees, 26 are vulnerable people and receive assistance from UNHCR.

Algerian asylum authorities afforded a fair treatment to the urban refugees registered with UNHCR in Algiers. No incident of ill treatment was reported to our office. Urban refugees often went through identity checks carried out by the Police and the certificates delivered to persons of concern to UNHCR were accepted as valid ID papers. However urban refugees encounter problems to ensure their self-reliance. That situation is due to the administrative and social environment which restrains access to the labour market. As a result of a lack of adequate documents but also due to very high unemployment rate in Algeria, the implementation of income generating activities becomes extremely difficult for them.

Recently composite flows of irregular migrants have been on the rise as, increasingly, migrants use Algeria as a transit country for their journey to Southern Europe. Thus, travelling exclusively through Algeria, with Oran as a departure point, is becoming an alternative to the traditional smuggling routes via Morocco, Tunisia and Libya, as a result of the very stringent interception measures adopted by these states due to strong political pressure exerted on them by EU countries. Therefore the numbers of asylum seekers might be on the rise in 2006.

Migration Asylum Nexus

The interplay between asylum and migration has become very relevant in the North African context and is a source of concern for the states of the Mediterranean basin. These developments call for a more active UNHCR involvement in this field and innovative approaches. Parallel to the enlargement of the European Union, a new concept of New Neighbourhood Policy is in the process of developing in countries bordering the EU. This process will promote peace, democracy and security in the Mediterranean basin. Current initiatives such as the EU Barcelona Process' Euro-Mediterranean Committee are now being revitalised and make reference to asylum, refugee, and migration issues as part of the overall policy vis-à-vis the countries in the region. In the same sense, major fora, such as the 5+5 Forum, keep migration issues high on their agenda.

UNHCR will have to redouble its efforts in Algeria, in order to promote, within the context of the MDG and the government's Human Rights policies, fundamental principles of humanitarian law and a notion of asylum in line with international

standards. In terms of capacity building, the main focus will be on the creation of an asylum system up to the legal and operational requirements of a country which has become a major hub for composite migration flows and is in the process of becoming an asylum country for sub-Saharan refugees.

Adequate capacity to deal with asylum issues will have to be built within the government and the Human rights NGOs. UNHCR has to identify and formulate proper responses to the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees, in particular access to international protection within the broader context of migration management. This will allow UNHCR to play a catalytic role in the North-South debate on the issue of migration control versus protection safeguards.

Policy issues

The possibility of a political settlement between the parties concerned over the disputed Western Sahara Territory is not likely to occur in the foreseeable future. The repatriation of the Saharawi caseload remains a remote possibility. Therefore UNHCR and the other actors concerned will have to devise specific strategies to deal with humanitarian problems arising from a protracted humanitarian crisis by adapting its policies to the renewed needs of a static situation characterized by harsh living conditions and very limited infrastructural facilities available to the refugees. Such strategies will have to take on a long term dimension that may well depart from the traditional assistance policies of UNHCR.

In this respect the decision of the Spanish Co-operation to create a secondary education system within refugee camps is a positive step as it responds to the needs of those Saharawis who otherwise would not have the possibility of pursuing their studies on the basis of a curricula designed for them.

Capacity and presence of partners

As mentioned earlier, considerable efforts will be devoted to the co-ordination of activities with UN sister organizations and bilateral donors.. The current ground breaking operational arrangement with UNICEF will be pursued in 2006, in order to improve the quality assistance provided in the area of health and education.

European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) has pledged its support in terms of food and non-food items.

A close collaboration will be achieved with the Spanish Co-operation Unit in Tindouf, where the latter should complement the efforts of UNHCR in the education sector, by putting in place a secondary education system, entirely funded by the Spanish government, within refugee sites. In the same sense the Spanish authorities will fund the purchase of means of transport for food commodities that, combined with the UNHCR fleet, will strengthen the logistics of the relief operation in Tindouf, thereby addressing the current food distribution problems.

There are also several non-governmental organisations that provide bilateral assistance. In addition individual donors like Austria, Belgium, France, Italy and Spain implement small projects in Tindouf. Regular meetings will be organised

locally by the UNHCR Sub-Office to better co-ordinate humanitarian activities in order to avoid overlaps for a better use of scarce funds.

(b) Selected Programme Goals and Objectives

As regards the urban caseload, UNHCR will continue working closely with the Algerian authorities to foster the implementation of the provisions of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol in Algeria. In line with the strategic directions of the NAME region, with regard to refugee law training activities in Algeria, RO Algiers will focus its efforts on capacity-building, at the level of academic institutions and provincial authorities responsible for border and migration control measures. Cooperation between the Algerian authorities and UNHCR on establishing good asylum practices within a broader migratory framework will be enhanced with special focus on building a capacity at peripheral level. Towards that end, in close cooperation with the relevant units in Geneva HQ as well as in RR Brussels, UNHCR Algeria will conduct seminars in three cities (Algiers, Oran and Tamanrasset), the target group of which will be represented by high ranking officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Gendarmerie, and Human Rights NGOs. In the course of training events the rights of refugees and the obligations of the relevant authorities in the field of asylum will be addressed within the overall framework of illegal and transit migration.

Concerning the Saharawi refugees, the Algerian government provides since 1975 in kind support to the population in order to contribute to meeting their humanitarian needs.

Western Saharan women play a prominent role in their society. Women supervise the food and non-food items distribution at the camp level and are also responsible for the use of the water wells and taps. UNHCR will continue to support women's prominent role, and will try to find ways to facilitate the carrying out of all these responsibilities, especially with regard to food distribution (due to the erratic distribution of basis food items, women often have to make several trips to the warehouse every month). More efficient ways of transporting such items will be considered by UNHCR and the refugee women's committees.

UNHCR will continue to ensure that its implementing partners consult with the women's committees in each daira before starting their project, especially in areas such as water, education and health.

UNHCR's projects will continue to build women's capacity in respect of skills which will assist them not only while they are in the camps, but also upon return to their country of origin (agriculture, computers, sewing, solar energy).

Children's needs will be looked at especially in the context of Health and Nutrition activities. UNHCR will continue to provide the most vulnerable refugee children with therapeutic, supplementary feeding and supplementary micro-nutrients through a supplementary feeding programme. UNHCR will also continue to provide basic school materials for school-aged children.

Due to the psychological hardships associated with extended periods in exile, many young people in the camps suffer from lack of motivation and feel disillusioned for the future. One of UNHCR's priorities will be to continue to work with adolescents

with the aim of providing them with educational and recreational activities through youth centres which will enable them to devote time to useful activities. A Youth Centre will be established in one of the camps in close cooperation with the Saharawi Youth Organisation. UNHCR will also continue to ensure the rehabilitation and maintenance of youth centres in the four camps.

In the water and sanitation sector, UNHCR will continue its information campaign on proper sanitation practices, so as to promote the proper storage of water, disposal of human waste, maintenance of latrines, raising livestock away from domestic food stores and children's playgrounds, so as to prevent the spread of disease. The aim of this project is to increase the cleanliness and hygiene of the camps, which will bring about a healthier environment and an improvement in the quality of the soil.

Water will remain UNHCR's key priority sector for 2006. UNHCR will continue to make efforts to ensure the maintenance of the water supply system in the five camps to maintain the standards achieved during the previous years.

UNHCR will continue to support and strengthen the Handicap Centres in each camp. Although mainly aimed at assisting children, these centres also provide assistance to adults and elderly persons, as needed. The main goal will be that of enhancing the management and technical capacity of the refugees working in the Centres and to hand-over the management of these Centres to the refugees themselves.

UNHCR will also need to carefully monitor the psychological situation of the refugees who are in exile in a very difficult environment. The long-pending political situation and the constant reduction in the assistance has had a very negative impact on the most vulnerable, especially the elderly, women and children.