

Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan
Tajikistan
Turkmenistan
Uzbekistan



UNHCR sends its trucks across the pass from Bishkek to its Field Office in Osh, Kyrgyzstan

Central Asia

| OPERATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS |

- The number of new asylum-seekers from Afghanistan in Tajikistan increased by 80 per cent.
- With UNHCR support and advocacy, the Government of Kazakhstan developed draft national refugee legislation and presented it to Parliament at the end of 2008.
- UNHCR advocated for the prevention and reduction of statelessness in the region, and stepped up its technical assistance to government and NGO partners to address the issue.
- In line with its regionalization priorities, UNHCR established a Regional Office for Central Asia in Almaty. Significant progress was made in decentralizing functions, assigning regional staff and developing a regional strategy and work plan.





| Working environment |

The year 2008 saw some positive developments in Central Asia in relation to human rights, refugee protection and statelessness. The Government of Kazakhstan signed and ratified two important international human rights instruments: the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture.

In Turkmenistan, an inter-ministerial working group was established to review the refugee and citizenship laws. The Government also agreed to take over refugee status determination (RSD) from UNHCR in accordance with its international and national obligations.

The Kyrgyz Government provided citizenship to the remaining Tajik refugees in the country. It supported a survey on statelessness and expressed willingness to address this issue.

Despite these positive initiatives, the rule of law was increasingly called into question in some countries, following the introduction of laws and policies that restricted freedom of association and religious expression. Concerns related to cross-border and national security issues and rising religious extremism continued to take prominence over asylum obligations under international and national laws. The situation was compounded by the global economic downturn in late 2008: recurring regional energy problems causing severe food insecurity, high inflation and unemployment; and reduced remittances from nationals working abroad.

| Achievements and Impact |

UNHCR operations in Central Asia focused on improving the quality of asylum in accordance with

international standards, preventing *refoulement*, providing access to appropriate durable solutions, reducing and preventing statelessness, and strengthening emergency preparedness and contingency planning.

Sustained advocacy efforts by UNHCR and its NGO partners led to an improved draft of the refugee law in Kazakhstan. Surveys carried out in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan identified the number of stateless persons and significantly raised awareness on this issue with the authorities. Similar data-gathering surveys have the potential to be carried out in other countries in the region and further a field.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were faced with a possible winter emergency related to food, energy and water supply. UNHCR was actively involved in inter-agency planning to improve emergency preparedness at the regional and country level. Because of Central Asia's close proximity to conflict zones, all offices in the region updated their contingency plans to respond to human displacement. The Office also advocated for refugee reception preparedness to be included in the contingency plans and strategies of the Government and the UN.

UNHCR played an active role in a number of inter-agency mechanisms at the regional and country level, such as the Joint Country Support Strategy and United Nations Development Assistance Framework.

A regional strategy and work plan were developed to harmonize systems and procedures across operations. An age, gender and diversity dimension was central to these efforts. In light of the findings of the participatory assessment, the Office strengthened activities to address women's livelihoods, improve child protection and fortify prevention and response measures to address sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

| Constraints |

While many governments in Central Asia have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, adopted national refugee legislation and established appropriate administrative bodies, implementation fell short of international and sometimes national standards.

In some Central Asian countries, access to asylum procedures was selective and based on political and economic issues and perceived national security concerns. This resulted in a decline in the recognition of certain groups of refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR was obliged to establish or maintain parallel systems to ensure RSD and provide the necessary protection and assistance to people of concern.

The restructuring of government departments responsible for refugee and asylum matters continued in 2008, with a high turnover of staff at the political and technical level. Rather than building on previous capacity-building initiatives and providing more strategic interventions, UNHCR had to put resources into basic training.

| Operations |

In the absence of any national refugee law in **Kazakhstan**, UNHCR focused on addressing this gap by advocating for legislation to be developed with the Office's technical advice and support. UNHCR was also involved in the development of a comprehensive plan for the implementation of the refugee law.

UNHCR conducted RSD for asylum-seekers who had no access to government procedures and provided legal and social assistance to those with specific protection needs. The latter received social and legal assistance from UNHCR's partners.

Resettlement remained an important protection tool for refugees and asylum-seekers, with 128 people resettled in 2008. UNHCR also continued to advocate for the local integration of long-staying refugees, mainly from Afghanistan and Chechnya. However, the lack of government-issued documentation prevented refugees from accessing employment and other livelihood opportunities.

As a follow-up to participatory assessment findings UNHCR identified a new local NGO partner and school enrolment of children increased significantly. The enrolment of Uzbek children increased from 45 to 91 per cent. This was largely attributed to a more comprehensive approach to the problem, including home visits to better understand the family situation, consultations with principals, teachers and parents, and language and bridging courses.

As part of its strategy to enhance refugee protection through partnerships and capacity-building initiatives, UNHCR continued to work with relevant partner agencies on the Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) project. In this regard, it contributed to the training of border guards throughout Kazakhstan. Similar capacity-building activities were also developed and carried out for government officials in the Migration Services, Prosecutor General's Office and the Supreme Court. In collaboration with relevant government bodies, UNHCR developed

standard operating procedures on issues specifically related to extradition requests. As a result, no extradition or *refoulement* took place in 2008.

UNHCR's activities in **Kyrgyzstan** continued to focus on safeguarding the asylum and protection environment and promoting solutions for asylum-seekers, refugees and stateless people. With the Government taking a selective approach and registering only certain groups of asylum-seekers and refugees, UNHCR and its partners became more involved in directly implementing protection and assistance activities. At the same time, the need for resettlement as a protection tool greatly increased.

UNHCR facilitated voluntary repatriation for 13 people. In collaboration with implementing and other partners, including refugee groups and NGOs, UNHCR provided access to basic medical and social services, language courses and vocational training. For people with specific protection concerns, mainly Uzbeks and Uighurs, resettlement remained the only durable solution. In 2008, UNHCR facilitated the resettlement of 183 individuals.

The Office was instrumental in ensuring that the few remaining former refugees from Tajikistan received Kyrgyz citizenship, bringing a durable solution for this group of refugees. Since the opening of the office in 1995, UNHCR has repatriated some 10,000 Tajik refugees. Another 10,000 Tajik refugees are being locally integrated by the Government with the help of UNHCR.

A UNHCR-funded survey conducted in the southern provinces in 2008 identified some 10,000 stateless people, leading to an overall count of close to 20,000 stateless persons in Kyrgyzstan, mainly individuals who hold expired USSR or foreign passports or no documents at all. Based on the results of the survey, UNHCR and the authorities plan to work together to support stateless persons' access to Kyrgyz citizenship.

As the overall socio-economic and energy situation deteriorated in late 2008, the UN responded with a humanitarian flash appeal. UNHCR received funds from CERF to implement life-saving winterization support for some 1,000 refugees and asylum-seekers during the 2008/2009 winter.

In addition to its representation in Bishkek, UNHCR maintained a small Field Office in Osh to support activities in the south of the country, manage a warehouse of emergency stocks and maintain preparedness for contingencies in the Ferghana valley in the centre of Central Asia. In early October, these facilities allowed for a quick UN response to the earthquake that hit the border region between Tajikistan and China.

The protection environment in **Tajikistan** was affected by an 80 per cent rise in the number of new arrivals from Afghanistan. With 1,351 new arrivals, it was one of the largest registered new asylum-seeker populations in the region. All new arrivals, with UNHCR's support, were registered. However the recognition rate fell significantly in 2008. The majority of the new arrivals were in great need of care, straining UNHCR's and the Government's assistance programmes.

Using a community-based approach, the Office revised its social assistance policy and programme to target refugees with specific protection needs. Nonetheless, many asylum-seekers and refugees do not receive UNHCR support and find it difficult to cope and have to compete with

locals who, due to the effects of the financial crisis, are also in need of assistance.

As part of its efforts to improve the asylum regime, UNHCR focused on building the capacity of relevant government departments by organizing training workshops for government officials and participating in government working groups to reform the Law on Refugees. UNHCR also advocated for refugee and asylum issues to be included in training activities for Border Security and Ministry of the Interior officials.

For the majority of the estimated 1,000 long-staying Afghan refugees, local integration remained the most viable solution. Following the visit of the High Commissioner in April and the signing of a joint communiqué with the Government, the Office pursued the local integration strategy with relevant government authorities. Although efforts have stalled at the national level, UNHCR implemented some local integration activities in areas where the majority of refugees live.

Among these initiatives were vocational skills training, the provision of micro-credit loans to open small businesses and the formation of two Afghan refugee community groups. Legal assistance was given to refugees to apply for permanent residency and citizenship, refugee-hosting schools were refurbished and approximately 355 long-staying refugee children were enrolled in local schools.

In response to the emergency in early 2008 created by the severe winter conditions, UNHCR and its partners provided urgent assistance to some 1,300 refugees and asylum-seekers in the form of food and non-food items. The Office also played a role in the REACT UN-Government mechanism. UNHCR and UNDP established a UN Emergency Stockpile from an initial donation of USD 500,000 worth of non-food items (NFIs) and three transport vehicles. This NFI stockpile will be used as the basis for emergency relief operations in the future.

In 2008, the Government of **Turkmenistan** agreed, in accordance with its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and in line with the national Law on Refugees, to take over responsibility for RSD. To ensure a smooth handover, UNHCR trained State Migration Service officials, including border guards. Furthermore, the Government established an inter-ministerial working group in June 2008 to revise refugee and citizenship legislation. UNHCR gave technical assistance to the working group and organized a study visit to Lithuania.

Following the country-wide registration of undocumented people in 2007, the Office continued to advocate for the acceptance of the citizenship applications of some 8,500 people, including 29 mandate refugees from Azerbaijan and Armenia. After more surveys were conducted in 2008, the total number of stateless adults was estimated at 12,000. UNHCR will continue to work with the authorities to facilitate citizenship and to support the Government's accession to the 1954 and 1961 Statelessness Conventions.

The Office continued to implement local integration activities under a joint project with UNFPA. The project significantly improved the lives of new citizens, refugees and host communities in two key provinces through the provision of better health services, access to clean water, more educational and sports facilities and vocational training opportunities.

UNHCR worked with other relevant stakeholders to raise awareness on SGBV and strengthen mechanisms to address it. Through its implementing partners, the Office conducted 24 training workshops targeting some 150 people from among refugees, the Government and local communities.

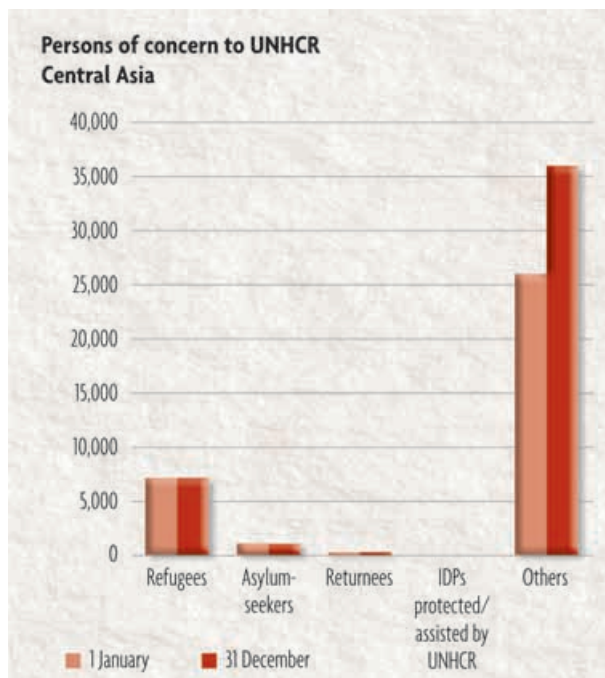
Since the 2005 closing of UNHCR's office in **Uzbekistan**, the protection of refugees, mostly from Afghanistan, has been carried out in cooperation with UNDP in Tashkent. The Refugee Support Unit, under UNDP, facilitates resettlement departures, while local NGOs provided some assistance to the remaining mandate refugees.

While the Government formerly tolerated the presence of mandate refugees, it now requires them to hold migratory visas for legal stay. Uzbekistan is not a signatory to either the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol, nor has it adopted refugee legislation. Under these circumstances, resettlement remained the most viable solution for refugees, and in 2008 UNHCR resettled 238 people to third countries. The Office is committed to finding solutions for the approximately 750 refugees remaining in the country, primarily through resettlement.

Financial Information

The initial 2008 budget for operations in Central Asia was lower than in previous years. However, in the last quarter of the year additional funds were provided to address protection needs and gaps, including assistance for the new arrivals in Tajikistan and remaining refugees in Uzbekistan, support for an education project in Kazakhstan, a statelessness survey in Kyrgyzstan and additional assistance for refugees with specific protection needs.

As part of the UN's humanitarian flash appeal for 2008-2009 for Kyrgyzstan, UNHCR received additional funding at the end of 2008 from the Central Emergency Response Fund. This allowed giving life-saving support to refugees and asylum-seekers during the 2008/2009 winter.



Budget and expenditure in Central Asia(USD)		
Central Asia	Annual Programme Budget	
	Final budget	Expenditure
Kazakhstan	2,060,005	2,030,445
Kyrgyzstan	1,716,157	1,715,598
Tajikistan	945,484	904,776
Turkmenistan	973,875	899,108
Uzbekistan	163,000	135,818
Total	5,858,522	5,685,745

Note: Excludes indirect support costs that are recovered from contributions against supplementary programmes and the "New or additional activities – mandate-related" (NAM) reserve.

Voluntary contributions to Central Asia (USD)			
Earmarking	Donor	Annual Budget	Total
Turkmenistan	UN Trust Fund for Human Security	252,020	252,020
	Turkmenistan Subtotal	252,020	252,020
Central Asia Subregion	Sweden	1,386,749	1,386,749
	United States of America	749,841	749,841
	Central Asia Subtotal	2,136,590	2,136,590
Total		2,388,610	2,388,610

Note: Contributions shown exclude indirect support costs that are recovered from contributions against supplementary programmes and the "New or additional activities – mandate related" (NAM) Reserve.