

COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

Country: Armenia

Planning Year: 2002

Part I : Executive Committee Summary

(a) Context and Beneficiary Population

Context

The operating context in Armenia was little changed in 2000 from that of previous years. There was no peace settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno Karabakh enclave and all indicators showed a continuing decline in the social and economic conditions within Armenia. While in 2000 the overall political situation in Armenia was relatively stable, often changes took place within the composition of the Armenian government and the structure of the parliament that were. There were two different Prime Ministers and frequent reshuffles of government ministers and some changes were influenced by the events of 27 October 1999 (when the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the Parliament and eight other prominent politicians were killed in the National Assembly). However, these frequent changes in the government have not had any significant impact on the overall domestic and foreign policies of the country.

There has been an intensification of attention paid to the settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh (N-K) conflict. Since 1999 the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan have held numerous meetings under the aegis of the OSCE Minsk Group to seek a peace agreement with the most recent one held in Key West (Florida) in April 2001. However, no tangible breakthrough has been recorded so far. Seeking a solution to the conflict while not appearing to compromise is the major political challenge faced by the government. The stalemate over N-K has had an adverse effect on the political, social and economic development of Armenia since its independence. In addition, the transition from the Soviet economic and political system to a more democratic, market oriented state has been extremely difficult. It has led to an overall decline in productivity, an increase in poverty, a reliance upon international aid and public scepticism in the ability of the government to solve persistent social and economic problems. The Gross National Product of Armenia is 63% of its 1989 level, over 50 percent of the population, including refugees, live in poverty and perhaps as many as 1 million persons have left Armenia seeking employment and opportunities not available locally. Efforts to reform economic structures, reduce corruption and improve the business and investment environment have been made, but the desired results have not yet been fully realised.

In 2001 Armenia was granted membership in the Council of Europe which is indicative of progress having been made toward meeting specific political, legal and human rights standards and norms. However, in the absence of a domestically acceptable peace settlement for the N-K conflict, little significant change can be expected in political, social and economic context in the near term, negatively affecting the refugees even more than the local population.

Protection issues

The vast majority of refugees in Armenia are ethnic Armenians who fled from urban areas in Azerbaijan between 1988 and 1992. Given the nature of the events, which led to their flight, it is not expected that the ethnic Armenians will opt for return to their country of origin (Azerbaijan) even if a settlement to the N-K conflict is found. Given the shared ethnicity of the refugees from Azerbaijan, the causes of their flight and the sympathy felt for their circumstances, it has been the policy of the Armenian authorities to treat the ethnic Armenian refugees in largely the same manner as it treats its citizens. As such they enjoy the right to freedom of movement, access to judicial procedures, health care, education, work, and social assistance and vote right in local elections. While there are some restrictions on access to these rights due to problems related to the registration (*propiska*) regime, all ethnic Armenian refugees can naturalise and acquire full Armenian citizenship yet some 30, 000 have chosen this durable solution, since 1999 (when the naturalisation programme was launched). The biggest obstacle to the refugees choosing to naturalise is neither procedural or administrative, although these aspects need further improvement. It is rather a sense of social insecurity related to the lack of permanent shelter and pervasive poverty as well as the belief that retaining their refugee status may bring them more benefits than acquiring Armenian citizenship.

In view of this, UNHCR will continue its policy of promoting naturalisation and local integration of ethnic Armenian refugees through information campaigns to counter the refugees' misperceptions about naturalisation. In addition, UNHCR will be pursuing its lobbying for the creation or improvement of required legislation and the inclusion of refugees in all social and economic development plans and programmes in the country.

A possible settlement to the N-K conflict could result in the voluntary repatriation of a limited number of persons actually displaced from the N-K enclave and surrounding areas and attention will need to be paid to this durable solution should there be a peaceful settlement to the conflict. Resettlement has been utilised as a durable solution only for those refugee cases, which have involved security considerations.

In addition to ethnic Armenian refugees, there is a small number of asylum seekers and refugees in Armenia from non-CIS countries, such as Iran, Iraq, Somalia and Sudan. The 1999 Armenia Refugee Law defines their applications for asylum and determination of refugee status (RSD). The State Department of Migration and Refugees (DMR) is the governmental agency responsible for RSD with UNHCR's advice, support and assistance.

UNHCR's role

The Republic of Armenia acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol in 1993. In March 1999 Armenia adopted its own refugee law, establishing a legal and administrative framework for RSD, protection assistance and durable solutions. UNHCR's primary role is to strengthen national capacity of the state to undertake its responsibilities for asylum seekers and refugees. In this regard, UNHCR will take a supportive role in enhancing national capacities, including governmental structures and local NGOs in order to increase their skill, knowledge and efficiency in the management of refugee-related matters.

UNHCR will also continue to support the government's policy of local integration/naturalisation of the ethnic Armenian refugees, with particular emphasis on the improvement of the social and legal environment for integration through further development of proper legislation and the inclusion of refugees in country's various social and development programmes.

UNHCR-funded material assistance for refugees will be targeted to meet the basic needs of the most vulnerable groups within the refugee population, especially those, which are not being met effectively by other actors. At the same time, particular emphasis will be placed on enabling relevant governmental agencies, local organisations and other partners to assume greater responsibility in resolving the problems of this category of refugees. In this regard, UNHCR in Armenia has adopted a long-term strategy of transferring greater responsibility to national actors and strengthening their capacity in the effective management of the integration and naturalisation process as well as protection and other legal matters.

UNHCR will limit its activities to a basic monitoring function and will ensure prevention of potential statelessness and further displacement, once structures and conditions are conducive including; practical legal instruments for efficient and fair access to asylum and the provision of protection to asylum-seekers/refugees are in place, government structures for granting citizenship become efficiently operational, the large-scale naturalisation of refugees materialises, minimal favourable economic conditions for the most vulnerable refugees and naturalised persons are secured and the worst consequences of displacement as a result of the N-K conflict are mitigated.

Overview of beneficiary populations

Recent surveys have shown that the refugee population is even more affected by the prevailing difficult socio-economic conditions in Armenia than the local population. Intensive and sustained migration has affected the demographic balance of the refugee population leading to a comparatively high number of women headed households and older refugees (44% of the refugee population are elderly). According to Government sources, 12,000 refugee families still live in temporary shelters like hotels, student dormitories and former resorts. The living conditions in communal centres are generally poor and sub-standard. Some 80% of the ethnic Armenian refugees come from Baku, out of which 70% are settled in rural areas in Armenia, a fact which further complicates their local integration.

Name of Beneficiary Population:		Refugees from Azerbaijan of ethnic Armenian origin (who arrived to Armenia in 1988-1992) and from non CIS countries.					
Age Group	Male (in absolute numbers)	(in %)	Female (in absolute numbers)	(in %)	Total (in absolute numbers)	(in %)	
0-4	3,964	1%	3,719	1%	7,683	2%	
5-17	10,194	4%	10,836	4%	21,030	8%	
18-59	58,048	21%	66,588	24%	124,736	45%	
60 and >	54,428	20%	68,197	25%	122,625	45%	
Total:	126,634	46%	149,440	54%	276,074	100%	
Major locations:		Most of the refugees are located in Yerevan (65,463); and in the regions of Ararat (55,447), Kotayk (34,741), Gegharkunik (29,999) and Armavir (25,849)					

	Non-CIS recognised refugees (Sudan, Somalia, Iraq)			
18-59 age group	5	0	5	
Overall Total	126, 639	149, 440	276, 079	

Naturalised Refugees

29,300 refugees of ethnic Armenian origin have acquired the citizenship of the Republic of Armenia since the launch of naturalisation programme in 1999.

Source: State Department of Refugees & Migration (DMR). Data are based on UNHCR-DMR sponsored survey in 1997.

Linkages to other countries

The Branch Office (BO) in Armenia has defined its strategy and policies in the framework of UNHCR's sub-regional and regional strategies. Contacts with and co-ordination among UNHCR offices in the Caucasus, in particular, and CIS, in general, are well established and will be maintained and further strengthened. Bilateral contacts and collaboration with the BO Azerbaijan will be continued in order to share experiences and develop a co-ordinated operational approach in anticipation of eventual settlement to the N-K conflict.

Capacity and presence of implementing partners

UNHCR Armenia will continue assisting its local interlocutors (NGOs and government) in building their capacity for effective management of refugee/asylum issues. Given the fact that UNHCR's material resources are becoming more targeted, UNHCR will continue to encourage and enable national actors to obtain needed funding from other sources through facilitating contacts between them and potential funding organisations. Priority in providing support will be given to NGOs involved in legal protection of refugees/asylum-seekers and implementation of naturalisation programme, as well as those providing basic social aid to the most vulnerable groups within the refugee community. UNHCR will also closely collaborate with international NGOs, particularly OXFAM, Norwegian Refugee Council, United Methodist Committee On Refugees and Catholic Relief Services, to ensure the inclusion of refugee needs in their respective programmes.

Co-ordination and co-operation with other UN agencies and international organisations

UNHCR will continue to seek an increased support and participation of UN sister-agencies and other international organisations in addressing the outstanding legal, economic and social needs of the refugees. The BO will continue to actively participate in UN inter-agency theme groups and task forces as well as in regular inter-agency co-ordination and donor meetings. UNHCR will also continue to lobby with other UN agencies and international organisations for their increased coverage of and support to refugees through their regular on-going programmes.

(b) Selected Programme Goals and Objectives

In view of the linkages between improvements in the quality of the national asylum regime, the reduction of statelessness through naturalisation and local integration of refugees, these goals will be pursued simultaneously. Particular emphasis shall be made on social and legal integration (naturalisation) of refugees as the most viable durable solution for the majority of refugees in Armenia through implementation of the International Conventions on Statelessness acceded to by Armenia, the national citizenship law, the national refugee law and related sub-legislation. The quality of asylum shall be further improved to allow unrestricted access of asylum-seekers/refugees to legal protection/assistance through strengthening the capacities of relevant national structures and the efficient implementation of refugee-related international and national legal instruments.

Beneficiary Population / Theme	
Strengthening of Asylum, Reduction of Statelessness and Local Integration of Refugees in Armenia	
First Goal : Continued development of asylum system in accordance with international standards and norms	
Objectives	Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All asylum seekers have direct and unhindered access to the national RSD procedure Establishment of RSD Appeal Procedure in accordance with international standards and norms Improved management in the administration of RSD provided by DMR and other relevant agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical and legal assistance in drafting new national legislation and amending existing laws related to RSD procedures Asylum applications processed according to existing International and Domestic legislation. Legislation on RSD Appeal Procedures established Government and national NGO officials trained on the implementation of the RSD procedures

Second Goal: Reduction of statelessness of ethnic Armenian refugees through naturalisation and acquisition of citizenship	
Objectives	Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Citizenship is acquired in line with international norms and practices Continued development of effective legal and administrative mechanisms for acquisition of citizenship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved and amended legislation related to the acquisition of citizenship Legal and technical assistance in drafting or amending of national legislation.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refugees are fully informed about naturalisation procedures as well as their rights and obligations as citizens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information campaign on naturalisation carried out by the Department of Migration and Refugees and UNHCR lead to increasing number of refugees opting for naturalisation
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Third Goal: Legal and local Integration of the ethnic Armenian refugees in Armenia	
Objectives	Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refugees benefit from national social protection measures and services which foster local integration Improved co-operation among Government Ministries, UN Agencies, NGOs and development actors for local integration Increased public support for the local integration of ethnic Armenian refugees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased assistance to refugees under national welfare system Basic needs of the most vulnerable refugees are met Increased NGO capacity to meet basic needs of the most vulnerable refugees TV/radio/media dissemination of stories/programmes on successful local integration