

REPORT OF THE VISIT OF THE VICE-CHAIRMAN OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
TO ARMENIA, GEORGIA AND AZERBAIJAN

(25 APRIL – 3 MAY 2000)

14/200

I. INTRODUCTION

In my capacity as Vice-Chairman of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, I undertook a mission to Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan from 25 April to 3 May 2000. I was accompanied throughout the mission by Mrs. Pirkko Kourula, Secretary of the Executive Committee. In each country, I was also accompanied by UNHCR Representatives, whom I wish to thank for their excellent arrangements, cooperation and hospitality.

The mission provided me with a first-hand opportunity to review UNHCR's activities and exchange views with a wide range of interlocutors, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). I also had a chance to explain to Government authorities the functioning of the Executive Committee and extend an invitation to attend its annual session in October of this year.

This report contains my findings in each of the countries visited. The conclusions are offered for consideration by UNHCR and the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee at its meeting on 5 to 7 July 2000.

II. ARMENIA

A. Background

Armenia has over the past decade experienced four major crises: the devastating earthquake in 1988; the independence crisis; the refugee problem; and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The blockade as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has contributed to the prevailing socio-economic hardship and to difficulties in coping with the sudden collapse of the centrally planned economy (Soviet era) and introduction of socio-economic reforms in Armenia. The efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group to find a political solution to the conflict have so far not yielded tangible results.

Some 340,000 ethnic Armenians, who arrived mainly from Azerbaijan between 1988 and 1992, were initially registered as *prima facie* refugees by Armenian authorities. UNHCR has assisted these refugees since 1993 and supported their integration in Armenia. Even though the majority (some 80%) of the refugees had an urban background, most of them (approximately 70%) are currently settled in rural areas and they are faced with a particular challenge of integration. The rest of the refugees live in communal centres in Yerevan and other areas. In many instances, their living conditions are very poor.

Due to the harsh socio-economic conditions, Armenia is also facing a wave of emigration, particularly to the Russian Federation and other CIS countries. It is estimated that some 20% of refugees and at least 700,000 Armenians have left the country so far.

The official figure of refugees remaining in Armenia is 250,000, based on a census in 1997. The number of asylum-seekers in Armenia is very low and only three persons have been granted refugee status.

UNHCR's policy is to support the Government in the areas of nationalization, naturalization and implementation of the 1951 Convention. The role of local implementing partners is very important. UNHCR's assistance activities are – within available financial resources – focused on the provision of shelter, basic medical care and income-generating projects. The target groups for assistance are the most vulnerable among the refugees - the disabled, elderly and single-headed households.

Due to the protracted nature of the refugee problem, UNHCR intends to scale down its programme in the coming years. In order that the needs of the vulnerable populations should not be left unmet, UNHCR is consolidating its activities with other agencies, i.e. WFP, UNDP, UNICEF and IOM. UNHCR, and has joint projects with the World Bank, through the Armenian Social Investment Fund.

B. Mission Schedule

The mission met with the Speaker of the Parliament, the Deputy of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Head of the Department of Migration and Refugees, Representatives of UN agencies, the World Bank and donors. A meeting was also arranged with the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social, Health and Environmental Issues, as well as the Head of the Department of Passports and Visas, Ministry of the Interior. The mission furthermore received a comprehensive briefing on refugee protection issues.

The mission was particularly privileged to have a chance to visit UNHCR project sites in Yerevan, the northern region and Ararat, in the central region of Armenia.

These field visits provided an excellent opportunity to review the work carried out by UNHCR's implementing partners and to hear the concerns of refugees. The mission was accompanied throughout by the UNHCR Representative in Armenia, Mr. Thomas Birath.

C. Specific issues brought up by the Armenian authorities

The Armenian authorities are concerned about the low – even if increasing – level of naturalization among refugees. Irrespective of intensive efforts by the authorities, in cooperation with UNHCR, only 15,000 refugees have been naturalized so far. The authorities are analyzing the reasons for the reluctance of refugees to apply for Armenian citizenship. Some authorities expressed concern about the "two-way tension" that is emerging among refugees and local populations. The unsettled issues of compensation of refugees' lost property was also considered as a factor in the reluctance of refugees to apply to citizenship. Equally decisive are the socio-economic situation and the high unemployment rate in Armenia.

Some interlocutors felt that the 1951 Convention Travel Document, recently issued with the assistance of UNHCR, may deter refugees from applying for citizenship. An intensive campaign explaining the limitations of the document is therefore underway.

The authorities maintained that UNHCR's continued support to the Government is needed both at the moment and in the face of a political settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh

conflict. The message given was that UNHCR needs to be in the lead in humanitarian efforts in Armenia. UNHCR's assistance in providing housing to refugees was high on the agenda of many Government Representatives.

D. Specific concerns of UN agencies and donors

The deteriorating socio-economic conditions both among the refugees and local populations are of particular concern to UN agencies and donors in Armenia. There are worrisome patterns of pockets of populations falling beneath the poverty line and leading to generalized apathy. Young children and the elderly are the worst affected. With the weakening of the overall infrastructure, UN agencies are shifting support not only to central but also to local levels of governance.

Concern was also expressed for the health situation of the population at large; HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria are spreading. In the face of all these challenges, UN agencies felt that the continued presence of humanitarian agencies in Armenia is needed and justified.

E. Specific concerns of refugees

The housing situation was clearly the uppermost concern of refugees. Many refugees still live in sub-human conditions, including in oil containers. UNHCR-funded shelter construction activities have, however, improved the living conditions of many refugees.

Even if refugees have the same benefits as local populations, such benefits are not adequate to provide for decent living conditions. Refugees voiced constant concerns about the lack of means to purchase clothing, food and medicines. Another concern was the lack of employment opportunities.

One outstanding example of self-help initiatives was the rehabilitation of a school by a community of refugees in the northern part of Armenia. The spirit of achievement and self-esteem were clearly discernible among the community. Another positive experience was a naturalization ceremony in the Ararat region in which the mission participated.

F. Conclusion

UNHCR's approach to the refugee situation in Armenia is correct. The Office should, for the time being, continue to support the Government and local authorities to deal with refugees within the community at large – not as a separate group. Special attention should continue to be paid to the vulnerable groups among the refugee population.

UNHCR has achieved positive results in the issues of housing, naturalization, participation of refugees in rehabilitation of schools to provide education and prevent the need for emigration and arranging water and basic health services. Positive results have also been achieved in the field of protection through the adoption of national legislation and manuals.

Some negative aspects, however, pose particular challenges to UNHCR and other agencies in Armenia. These include: the unclear political situation and the as yet unsettled Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; the socio-economic problems affecting all Armenians; the emigration of Armenians; and the unfulfilled expectations of some of the refugees to receive compensation for lost property.

UNHCR needs to maintain its presence in Armenia. At the same time, there is also a need to continue to encourage the Government and local authorities to commit to changes and improvements of the political and socio-economic problems within their existing resources. The pockets of poverty should not be allowed to spread, nor the humanitarian needs of the population to increase.

II. GEORGIA

A. Background

Since 1990, Georgia has had a civil war and faced two secessionist movements leading to conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. As a result, substantial population movements have taken place. The issue of the return of refugees and IDPs is included in the agenda of the UN-sponsored Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution process and a similar process for the Georgian – South-Ossetian conflict, sponsored by the OSCE. In addition, over 7,000 Chechen refugees have sought asylum in Georgia.

Due to time and security constraints, the mission focussed on the conflict resolution efforts in the Georgian-South Ossetian situation. While the conflict zone was limited to the former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, displacement of ethnic Ossetians from Government-controlled areas of Georgia was widespread. Some 10,000 ethnic Georgians were displaced from the South Ossetian territory. In addition, 54,000 Georgian citizens of Osset ethnicity are estimated to have become refugees in North Ossetia. Currently there are 23,000 registered with the Federal Migration Service. The rest have been integrated in North Ossetia or other areas of the Russian Federation.

The main role of UNHCR in Georgia is to support reconciliation efforts through the conflict resolution processes, and to provide international protection and assistance to IDPs and returnees to South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The UNHCR Mobile Team has assisted in the reintegration of 5,800 refugees from the Russian Federation as well as IDPs from Georgian Government-controlled areas. IDPs from Georgia in the above figure include 700 to rural and 800 to urban areas in South Ossetia. In the same period (three years) refugee returns to government-controlled areas are 33 families of some 100 persons. A further 15 IDP families have been assisted to reintegrate from South Ossetia to government-controlled areas in Georgia.

In South Ossetia, UNHCR assists returnees – now amounting to some 20% of those displaced – to reintegrate through self-reliance projects, in repairing accommodation (so far some 1,200 individual dwellings), distributing wood stoves and facilities to survive in the winter conditions, improve educational facilities and health clinics as well as to improve food security and income generation. UNHCR's activities are, since late 1996, aimed at supporting the Government's reconciliation efforts in the areas of former conflict in South Ossetia.

B. Mission schedule

Meetings were arranged with the Special Advisor to the President for Conflict Resolution and the Minister of Refugees and Accommodation as well as the local authorities in South Ossetia. During the visit to South Ossetia, UNHCR's local implementing partners presented their programmes along with the Head of UNHCR's Mobile Team, Mr. John Andrew. The mission was accompanied by the UNHCR Representative in Tbilisi, Mr. Ekber Menemencioglu.

C. Specific issues brought up by the authorities

The Special Advisor to the President described the process of reconciliation in South Ossetia through the Joint Control Commission (JCC), established in 1992. The Commission maintains its original tri-partite structure of participation by Georgia, the Russian Federation and North Ossetia. However, it also has participants of South Ossetia and OSCE since 1993, and UNHCR (since 1996) as well as the European Commission (since 1999). Even if the process has been intensive, a comprehensive political settlement has not yet been reached. The last meeting with the North Ossetians was in the summer of 1999 and interaction with UNHCR last year has also been less frequent than in the past. In addition, the Special Advisor to the President maintained that there are some 160,000 ethnic Ossetians in Georgia. Those from South Ossetia found refuge from human rights violations by Georgian authorities prior to the tenure of the current President since 1992.

The Minister for Refugees and Accommodation underlined the good relations that UNHCR enjoys with the Government. In South Ossetia, the situation is improving because of UNHCR's programmes. Apart from such improvements, political actions to arrive at a comprehensive settlement need to be strengthened. The Minister alluded to a statement made earlier in Geneva according to which the Government is willing to accept its citizens from abroad to areas under its control.

As to the situation in the Pankisi Valley, where some 6,300 Chechen refugees are located, the Minister stated that he had advised the mission not to travel to that area due to security reasons.

D. Specific issues brought up by the local authorities in South Ossetia

The local authorities described the results of the conflict; 117 villages were affected, 3,400 houses were damaged and tens of thousands of persons fled South Ossetia. Since the establishment of the conflict resolution process, some 300 families have returned. UNHCR was the "pioneer" in providing necessary assistance to the returnees. UNHCR's continued presence is extremely important in the fact of the conflict resolution, which was proceeding well.

The local authorities proposed that UNHCR facilitate the construction of a small electrical station. The importance of such a station for encouraging returns was underscored. Furthermore, the local authorities stressed the need to tackle the issue of housing in order to have returns to Georgia proper. So far, only some 30 families have returned.

E. Conclusions

The mission had a chance to observe the work of the UNHCR mobile team in South Ossetia. There is no doubt that the team's presence contributes to the atmosphere of normalcy and eventual further returns of populations. Protection monitoring is an essential part of the creation of an enabling environment. The visibility of such monitoring is likely to enhance the conflict resolution process and should, therefore, be maintained at least at its current level until a UNHCR exit strategy is implemented. Simultaneously there is the need to ensure that the local implementing partners can gain necessary visibility to carry out monitoring and other essential tasks after UNHCR's departure from South Ossetia.

III. AZERBAIJAN

A. Background

According to a registration carried out by the Government of Azerbaijan in October 1998, there are some 576,000 IDPs in the country. In addition, Azerbaijan has provided refuge to 185,000 ethnic Azeris who left Armenia, mainly in 1989, and approximately 48,000 Meskhetian Turks who fled social unrest in Uzbekistan in the late 1980s. All these persons are automatically considered citizens of Azerbaijan. The country also hosts about 10,000 stateless persons and individual asylum seekers.

UNHCR's presence in Azerbaijan dates back to December 1992. Its current multi-sectoral programme has some 150,000 beneficiaries among the most vulnerable IDP and refugee populations. The programme is implemented by ten partners and consists of seven sectoral activities. These are: shelter/water/sanitation; health; education; income generation, livestock or animal husbandry and crop production; community services; forestry; and transport and logistics support.

UNHCR's goals in Azerbaijan are three-fold. First, to create opportunities for self-reliance among IDPs and facilitate access to services. Second, to create and further develop partnerships with concerned stake-holders and the Government to facilitate safe and voluntary return of IDPs. The third goal is to establish asylum procedures and to develop a network of national NGOs. The goals are based on UNHCR's intent to assist the Government in fulfilling its responsibilities towards the populations of concern to UNHCR is partnerships with other actors and through well-informed choices of these populations.

In February 1999, UNHCR, UNDP, the World Bank and the Government signed an Aide Memoire under which activities funded by UNHCR aim at promoting self-reliance and temporary local settlement among IDPs and refugees. Priority is given to communities who have access to land or are accommodated in durable dwellings in rural and urban areas. A responsibility -sharing framework has been agreed upon with NGOs, ICRC, IFRC, ECHO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, USAID, WFP and the World Bank.

A functioning responsibility-sharing framework would allow UNHCR to hand over to UNFPA and UNICEF, in 2000, most of the UNHCR-funded health activities. Similarly, a World Bank initiated Social Investment Fund, with the collaboration of UNDP and USAID, would provide for quick impact projects at the local level, with full participation of IDP communities, local authorities and NGOs. Such a framework, if fully operationalized, would allow UNHCR's gradual phase-down of its assistance activities in Azerbaijan.

Continued international assistance is required to assist the IDPs, and alleviate the poverty of vulnerable populations and refugees and stateless persons. The need to address the problems faced by these populations remains while negotiations continue within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group in search of a comprehensive peace settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

B. Mission schedule

The mission in Azerbaijan started at the Georgian border from where we drove, with the Representative, Mr. Didier Laye, to the UNHCR Antenna Office in Barda. A meeting was arranged with the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Barda Region, UNHCR's implementing partners and IDPs in camps and railway carriages in Barda and the region. A visit to a UNHCR-funded limestone settlement also took place.

In Baku, the mission was received by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister, Head of the State Commission for Refugees and IDPs. Substantive discussions were further held with the Representatives of UN agencies, the World Bank, IOM, IFRC and ICRC as well as with the donors and international NGOs based in Baku.

C. Specific issues in the Barda region

According to the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Barda region, this region, close to Nagorno-Karabakh, is carrying a heavy burden in hosting IDPs. The local population is 124,000 and the official figure of registered IDPs is 54,000 persons (13,000 families). As all IDPs are not registered, their total figure may be in the range of 80,000 – 100,000. Some 2,000 IDPs live in pitiful conditions in over 200 railway carriages in Barda town. The living conditions of some 7,000 IDPs in tent-like camps is also particularly worrying, especially in harsh winter conditions. The situation of no war-no peace, that has prevailed for over ten years, exacerbates the suffering of the IDPs, the growing resentment of the local population and the possibilities of international organizations to fund assistance activities. The improvement of the IDPs' socio-economic situation is hampered by their resistance, in many cases, to move away from the temporary dwellings. The hopes of returning to their regions of origin are still high, irrespective of the protracted nature of their exile.

UNHCR-funded programmes within sectoral activities in Azerbaijan in the Barda region aim to bring about the IDP community development and self-reliance as well as increase of self-esteem of the IDPs. The main concerns of the NGOs, implementing such programmes, are reductions in funding by some donors, for instance, in the shelter sector. There was a general feeling that the needs of the IDP communities have to be addressed through continued international assistance. The NGOs, however, also recognized that the conditions of the local population in many areas resembles that of IDPs. The situation of both populations – in a general no war-no peace context – is very particular. It represents a grey area between a need for humanitarian and development assistance. While the donor community is finding it difficult to provide long-term funding, diversification of the funding base through contributions from the private sector has commenced and should be intensified.

D. Specific issues brought up by the authorities in Baku

The Government Representatives in Baku pointed to the magnitude of the IDP problem in Azerbaijan; where every eighth person is an IDP. They maintained that the Government is doing its best to improve the situation of IDPs but cannot manage alone. UNHCR's continued support to the Government was described as crucial.

As to prospects for a peace-agreement in respect of Nagorno-Karabakh and the occupied territories, the Minister of Foreign Affairs informed that the Minsk Group of OSCE is preparing a fourth proposal. The Group will arrange a meeting in Geneva in the latter part of May. Azerbaijan is willing to continue talks for a fair peace respecting the rights of victims, the return of IDPs and the restoration of Nagorno-Karabakh for both Armenians and Azeris. A durable peace is needed in the region. While having discussed the funding for IDP programmes with the World Bank and UNDP, the Minister expressed the wish that UNHCR's funding be restored to the original levels.

The funding situation was also the concern of the Deputy Prime Minister. He underlined the crucial role of UNHCR since 1992 in the country. He cautioned about optimism for the immediate return of IDPs in the face of a peace agreement due to the destruction of the infrastructure and mines in the territories concerned. He further pointed to the fact that the Government would be in receipt of oil revenues only in 2005. In the meantime, reduction of international assistance can lead into great socio-economic tensions in Azerbaijan. In view of the reduction of activities by IFRC and WFP, the Government is likely to face the challenge of such tensions already this year.

E. Specific concerns of UN agencies and other organizations, NGOs and donors

The UN agencies and other organizations in Baku expressed grave concern for the situation of IDPs in the following areas: lack of employment opportunities (IDPs ending up in the streets of Baku); lack of teaching aids and tools to provide proper primary education; deteriorating health conditions (spread of HIV/AIDs, tuberculosis and malaria); corruptive practices by local authorities; and lack of commitment by some central authorities to improve the situation of IDPs and local populations.

In a meeting with UN agencies and other organizations, mutual collaboration and coordination were described as excellent. A rotating coordination mechanism is functioning well. Constant contact and information-sharing avoids any duplication in activities and ensures that international support to the Government is provided in a complementary manner. The UN agencies and other organizations were also united in stating that UNHCR's presence will be needed more than ever if and when a peace agreement is in sight.

The donors in Baku felt that the continued provision of funding is tied to the efforts to reach a political solution. For the type of situation prevailing in Azerbaijan, neither humanitarian nor development funds are readily available. Nevertheless, some donors fear that the humanitarian situation is worsening. In the eventuality of a peace settlement, some donors may wish to provide aid on a bilateral basis. This would mean that there would be even less money than at present to support multilateral programmes.

As for UNHCR's continued presence in Azerbaijan, some donor countries felt that scaling down of the Office's activities would be unwise; UNHCR's name as such is important. In the face of a peace settlement, UNHCR may also need to review its activities from a regional perspective. At the same time, however, there should continue to be sustained efforts to encourage the Government to maintain and strengthen the political will to improve the situation of IDPs and local populations.

The need for UNHCR's continued presence was also underscored by the international NGOs represented in Baku. NGOs felt strongly that UNHCR's activities in the field of international protection, both in its social and legal aspects, need to be continued. UNHCR was seen as an important bridge between expectations and the reality in the future, whether or not a peace settlement is agreed upon as a result of the current initiatives.

F. Conclusions

All interlocutors in Azerbaijan were of the opinion that UNHCR's presence in the country should be maintained. Such a presence should continue both in Baku and outside in the regions concerned. The assessment of the level of UNHCR's presence requires close monitoring of developments in efforts to attain a peace settlement.

The current handing over of some operational activities to UNHCR's partners should continue, especially in view of the funding situation. Nevertheless, UNHCR should be actively involved in the implementation of the objectives of the Social Fund in collaboration with the World Bank, UNDP and USAID. UNHCR should also act as a bridge in private-sector funding efforts as already in the case of AGIP contributions.

The situation of IDPs in Azerbaijan provides an important test for UNHCR in terms of implementing its policy on IDPs as well as drawing lessons from the continuing efforts to bridge the gap between relief and development in a no war-no peace context. With a view to an eventual peace settlement, UNHCR furthermore needs to assess its role from a regional perspective. In weighing UNHCR's future role, parallel efforts to maintain and strengthen the commitment of the authorities of Azerbaijan to improve the situation of their population, including IDPs, is of primary importance.

