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**U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey
2002 – Syria**

June 2002

At the end of 2001, Syria hosted more than 397,600 refugees and asylum seekers in need of protection. These included 391,651 Palestinian refugees registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 3,271 non-Palestinian refugees registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and about 2,700 asylum seekers pending a UNHCR status determination at year's end.

In addition to Palestinians registered with UNRWA, the Syrian government reported another 75,000 unregistered Palestinians living in refugee-like conditions in the country. As many as 40,000 Iraqi nationals not registered with UNHCR also lived in Syria during 2001, many of whom may be refugees. An estimated half-million long-term internally displaced persons and 200,000 stateless Kurds also lived in the country. Some 4,300 Syrian nationals sought asylum in European countries during 2001.

Palestinian Refugees

Although Palestinian refugees in Syria are not eligible for citizenship, they are permitted to work and have access to government services. Of the Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA, 109,466, about 28 percent, were living in camps. Palestinian refugees in Syria represented 10.1 percent of all UNRWA-registered refugees.

Successive budgetary shortfalls have forced UNRWA, the UN agency that assists Palestinians refugees, to implement austerity measures that continued to strain severely its ability to assist Palestinian refugees in Syria during the year. Nevertheless, UNRWA continued to provide essential services in the fields of health care, education, infrastructure development, and emergency relief in 2001.

During the year, UNRWA operated 23 medical clinics, including mother-and-child health care and family-planning services. Funding shortages forced UNRWA to limit hospital referrals and the duration of hospital care.

UNRWA's funding shortage manifested itself in other ways during the year. Although the number of people registered with UNRWA's special hardship program had increased by 7.2 percent to 28,513 by June 2001, delays in funding prevented the agency from providing emergency cash assistance in a timely manner to needy families. Serious overcrowding in UNRWA schools continued in 2001, with 93.6 percent operating on double shifts, the highest percentage in any of agency's fields of operation.

Non-Palestinian Refugees

Syria is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol. Therefore, non-Palestinian asylum seekers and refugees continued to register with UNHCR for assistance and protection during 2001.

In June, Syria amended its admission and residence procedures for citizens of Arab countries generally, and for Iraqis specifically. Whereas Syria previously had allowed nationals of Arab countries (except Iraqis) to reside indefinitely in the country without applying for a residence permit, the new regulation requires Arab-country nationals to apply for, and renew, a residence permit every three months. Citizens of Arab countries still may enter Syria without a visa. The regulation also rescinded the prior requirement that had obliged Iraqis to obtain a security clearance from the Syrian authorities to enter and remain in the country. During a U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) site visit to Syria in January 2002, UNHCR reported that it was too early to gauge the impact on asylum seekers of the new residence permit requirement.

UNHCR registered 3,271 refugees in Syria in December 2001, mostly from Iraq (1,597 persons). Significant numbers also came from Yemen (662), Somalia (397), Afghanistan (407), and Sudan (109).

Some 2,935 asylum seekers applied for refugee status with UNHCR during the year, mostly from Iraq. Although UNHCR was unable to provide detailed statistics on its status determinations for 2001, it reported to USCR that its recognition rate was somewhere between 10 and 13 percent, a significant drop from the 29 percent approval rate the agency reported for 2000.

During USCR's January 2002 site visit, UNHCR reported that about 700 Iraqi long-term residents of Iran had applied for refugee status with UNHCR in Syria since the beginning of 2000, most in 2001. UNHCR treats such applicants as "irregular movers," granting them refugee status if they meet the refugee definition, but denying them assistance and resettlement opportunities because it deems them to have already found protection in Iran.

Syria does not allow non-Palestinian refugees the right to employment, although it reportedly tolerates the illegal employment of foreign Arabs. Most UNHCR-recognized refugees received limited financial assistance from the agency, provided through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society and the Women's Association.

The Syrian authorities generally cooperated with UNHCR to ensure that refugees received protection, and facilitated the agency's visits to asylum seekers and refugees in detention. During 2001, however, Syrian authorities reportedly deported to northern Iraq seven Iraqi asylum seekers registered with UNHCR in Damascus. There were also reports that Syria *refouled* between 180 and 300 Iraqis, originally deported from Lebanon, to northern Iraq in December. Illegal border crossing reportedly constitutes a deportable offence in Syria.

On December 7, Syrian authorities arrested more than 100 rejected southern Sudanese asylum seekers for demonstrating outside the UNHCR office in Damascus. The demonstrators were protesting what they called an unfair bias against southern Sudanese in UNHCR's refugee status determinations, and demanding that the agency issue them protection letters to prevent their deportation to Sudan. Syrian police made the arrests after UNHCR refused to meet the protesters' demands and the demonstrators in turn refused to leave the UNHCR office. Although Syrian authorities promptly released the women, children, and married men they had arrested, about 90 single male demonstrators remained in detention at year's end.

Syria generally tolerates the presence of non-Palestinian refugees, but does not offer them the possibility for permanent asylum. Thus, UNHCR pursues resettlement for those the agency recognizes as refugees in Syria.

Internal Displacement

Except for some Druze villagers who stayed behind, most of the Syrian population of the Golan Heights fled in 1967. Estimates of their original numbers vary. While Israel says that about 70,000 left, Syria puts the original number at 153,000 and asserts that the number has grown to almost 500,000, 34 years later.

After the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Israel agreed to return a slice of territory along the eastern edge of the Golan Heights, extending to Kuneitra, the one-time capital of Golan Province, in return for the repatriation of Israeli POWs. Before leaving, however, the Israelis leveled the city with bulldozers and dynamite. Although its 53,000 displaced residents had been expected to return, the late President Assad said that the city was uninhabitable, and it remained empty.

The Syrian government rebuilt ten villages in territory adjacent to the Golan returned to Syria in 1973 where it resettled about 60,000 displaced Golan residents. The remaining Syrian displaced and their descendants, as many as 400,000 people in 2001, lived in government housing projects in the suburbs of Damascus, Dara, and Homs.

Stateless Kurds

Another little-known group outside Syria are 200,000 stateless Kurds in northeastern Syria. Although the Syrian government has registered the Kurds, it denies them citizenship despite their strong claims. Consequently, they are denied the rights and benefits of Syrian nationals, including the right to hold a Syrian passport and travel outside the country. The Syrian government disputes that the Kurds suffer discrimination, claiming that stateless Kurds in Syria who wish to travel abroad receive temporary travel documents.

The Syrian government asserts that the stateless Kurds are Turkish nationals and classifies them either as "foreigners" or as *maktoumeen*, meaning "unregistered." The former are issued red identity documents, which prevent them from owning land, practicing certain professions, receiving food subsidies, being admitted to public hospitals, or having legally recognized marriages to Syrian citizens. The latter are issued no documents at all. *Maktoumeen* are the children (or grandchildren) of "foreigners," including foreigners who marry women who are Syrian citizens.

In a December 7, 2001 letter to USCR, the Syrian government defended its treatment of this group, claiming that it provides shelter and other assistance to needy stateless Kurds and allows their children to attend school. Nevertheless, diplomatic sources disputed the government's assertion, reporting to USCR that the situation of stateless Kurds remained very difficult in 2001.

