

Brussels, 8 March 2004

Protection of refugees and strengthening of humanitarian staff security – EU support to UNHCR's work

Background

The evolution of the geopolitical and economical context in the last decade has led to an upsurge of mainly internal armed conflicts in developing countries. Most observers would agree that they have become more brutal and deadly as a result of, *inter alia*, the proliferation of small arms and the emergence of badly-trained and undisciplined militias, often consisting of forcibly recruited child-soldiers.

From a humanitarian point of view the most worrying fact is that the targets of the wars have dramatically changed. While classical wars were fought between the armed forces of two sovereign states, the primary focus of the new wars is often the civilian population.

The humanitarian consequences of this evolution are serious: large-scale displacement of populations - worldwide 10 million refugees and approximately 25 million internally displaced persons according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and others. Often these people find no peace in their area of refuge.

Two other serious consequences are lack of access by humanitarian agencies to the people in need, and the increase in the number of security incidents with humanitarian aid workers themselves becoming the target of warring factions, culminating in the bomb attack on the UN headquarters in Baghdad.

EU support to refugees and to humanitarian staff

In this context, the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) is supporting the UNHCR in implementing its international mandate to protect refugees.

In addition to grants regularly provided on a geographical basis to UNHCR activities in specific countries, ECHO contributes to strengthening UNHCR's core mandate of refugee protection through an €11 million thematic funding programme for 2004. This amount complements another € 11 million already granted by ECHO in 2002 to support a UNHCR programme for the protection and registration of refugees and humanitarian staff security.

The objectives of the actions funded are to reinforce the protection instruments for refugees and other populations of concern, as well as the security mechanisms of humanitarian workers.

Areas of ECHO's co-operation with the UNHCR in 2004 include:

Protection

Securing the legal and physical protection of refugees is a central responsibility of States and a major concern for UNHCR. Increasingly, refugees are encountering problems while seeking international protection. Instances of refoulement¹ are on the rise - borders may be closed and there have also been instances of increased tension between refugees and local communities, sometimes translating into violence. In specific settings, refugee camps have been perceived as breeding grounds or hiding places for rebel groups. Well-trained, experienced and principled staff is required to address these tasks in a professional manner. As exemplified in West Africa and elsewhere, women and children are particularly vulnerable and need specific protection measures. The need for greatly enhanced protection activities and better training of protection staff in Africa is most clearly evident when there are lapses in the maintenance of protection standards.

The Agenda for Protection, adopted by the Executive Committee in October 2002, provides a coherent and comprehensive framework for UNHCR and its partners to address current challenges relating to refugees and other populations of concern. The Agenda set six inter-related goals to pursue, for UNHCR, for States and for other protection partners: better implementation of the protection regime; better security for refugees; better protection for refugee women and children; greater burden sharing with refugee hosting States; improved management of the asylum/migration nexus; more reliable and timely durable solutions.

ECHO is supporting the UNHCR in the implementation of the Agenda for Protection.

Activities undertaken with ECHO's funding strive to ensure that (i) refugee needs for protection and assistance are well assessed - especially in terms of security, freedom of movement, family reunification, self-reliance, and vulnerability; (ii) sexual and gender-based violence is combated and that (iii) durable solutions are designed. For those purposes and as needs arise, some 130 UNHCR staff members will be deployed in 17 African countries².

Under the 2004 thematic funding, ECHO's contribution to UNHCR activities in the area of refugee protection amounts to € 6,500,000.

Registration

Over the last years UNHCR has identified the need for a comprehensive improvement of registration and population data management activities. All refugees, men or women, need to be individually registered and to receive individual documentation, so as to improve their security, freedom of movement and access to essential services.

In 2002, UNHCR with ECHO support launched the PROFILE project, with the objective of developing new systems and methods relating to the registration, identification, documentation and profiling of refugees and other persons of concern.

¹ Refoulement: the removal of a person to a territory where the person would be at risk of being persecuted, or of being moved to another territory where the person would face persecution. The principle of non-refoulement is included in refugee law and customary international law.

² Burundi, Chad, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, Republic of Congo and Uganda.

Under recent ECHO funding, activities relating to the implementation of the new systems and methods comprise assessment and registration strategy design for some 20 selected country operations³, deployment of four Profile implementation support teams and establishment of implementation teams at site level.

As a result of these actions, refugee women and men in the selected 20 targeted country operations will be individually registered and documented. Moreover, registration will become a continuous process in these countries. The new registration system will include biometric technology (as one of several options) and increased use of photographs. Experience with iris recognition technology experiments has been quite good, suggesting that wider use of this technology could save UNHCR “substantial resources” because of its deterrent value to fraud and “recyclers”.

Under the 2004 thematic funding, ECHO’s contribution to the UNHCR activities in the area of refugee registration amounts to € 2.000.000.

Security

In the last decade a number of internal armed conflicts, often ethnicity-based, in countries with weak governments, have resulted in large-scale displacement both internally and to surrounding countries. Likewise large-scale, deliberate targeting of civilian populations, and in some cases, humanitarian workers have been registered. Both these tendencies are likely to continue.

UNHCR activities comply with minimum operating security standards and procedures, in order to improve the conditions of the working environment of UNHCR and implementing partner staff. To achieve these objectives, the UNHCR deploy some 25 international and 25 national field safety advisors in high risk areas located mainly in Africa but with two operations in Georgia and Indonesia. It also procures and deploys (e.g. communication) equipment to operations in high risk areas and provides training to UNHCR staff and partner staff as a preparedness measure.

These actions allow humanitarian staff members to be informed of relevant security conditions in the refugee setting and adhere to the relevant protocols, so that they are able, in a safe and secure manner, to provide assistance and protection to needy refugees, as circumstances allow.

Under the 2004 thematic funding, ECHO’s contribution to UNHCR activities in favour of humanitarian staff security amounts to € 2,500,000.

The European Commission is the third⁴ largest donor to the UNHCR, contributing more than €60 million in 2003. ECHO has contributed more than €770 million to UNHCR since 1994.

More information on ECHO activities:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/echo/index_en.htm

³ Ghana and Turkey (piloting), followed by Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Guinea, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, and Yemen.

⁴ After the USA and Japan.