Real-time evaluation of UNHCR's response to the emergency in Lebanon and Syria, July - September 2006

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Policy Development and Evaluation Service

UNHCR's Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES) is committed to the systematic examination and assessment of UNHCR policies, programmes, projects and practices. PDES also promotes rigorous research on issues related to the work of UNHCR and encourages an active exchange of ideas and information between humanitarian practitioners, policymakers and the research community. All of these activities are undertaken with the purpose of strengthening UNHCR's operational effectiveness, thereby enhancing the organization's capacity to fulfil its mandate on behalf of refugees and other displaced people. The work of the Service is guided by the principles of transparency, independence, consultation, relevance and integrity.

Preface

UNHCR undertakes Real Time Evaluations (RTE) of large emergency operations to independently assess the effectiveness of its operational response. In analyzing the operation as it evolves, the RTE seeks to ensure that its findings are used as an immediate catalyst for operational and organisational change.

This RTE was led by Stefan Sperl, a UNHCR Consultant and Senior Lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. The other members from UNHCR Headquarters were Khassim Diagne, Senior Policy Advisor (Internally Displaced Persons Operations) and David Snider, Liaison Officer (Operational Security).

After two days of meetings in Geneva the team travelled to Lebanon and Syria from 20 to 27 September 2006 where it met with UNHCR staff, members of the UN Country Teams, NGO operational partners, donors and government representatives. Meetings were also held with beneficiaries of the UNHCR programme in Beirut and South Lebanon. Several lessons learnt papers prepared by UNHCR staff and other agencies were also taken into account. Upon return to Geneva the team conducted further interviews and held interactive debriefing sessions with UNHCR senior management and staff.

The report begins with a list of recommendations which arise from the findings and is followed by a general assessment of the main features of the emergency. There follows a discussion of the findings with respect to Lebanon and Syria in two separate sections. The Terms of Reference for the RTE figure in Annex 1.

Recommendations

Emergency management

1. UNHCR should review its in-house procedure for the purpose of emergency declaration to ensure that emergencies are identified as such at the earliest possible moment and appropriate action is taken; this should be combined with the designation of a senior staff member at Headquarters with the responsibility for managing the emergency, and the re-establishment of an emergency reserve with a quick allocation procedure.

2. UNHCR should establish a roster of staff members with the right profile to assume leadership of the protection and shelter clusters in an IDP emergency and provide them with special orientation and training.

3. Emergency task force arrangements in UNHCR Headquarters should include the participation of the UNHCR Office in New York to ensure ongoing coordination and effective representation of UNHCR's concerns at inter-agency level in New York.

4. ERTs should be staffed around a nucleus of experienced senior participants who have worked as a team before and are clear about each others roles and responsibilities; it may be advisable to develop sets of different teams with regional specialisation.

5. In countries where highly trained staff and sufficient material resources are locally available UNHCR emergency management should place maximum emphasis on empowering and recruiting national staff and relying on local procurement rather than import resources from outside; to this effect tenders should be issued in the local language.

6. ERT leaders should aim to forge a coherent team of national and international staff in which responsibility is sensitively delegated and each member is felt valued and respected.

7. ERT members should be familiar with UNHCR equipment and administrative procedures, in particular MSRP.

8. The possibility of establishing geographic stockpiles of relief items appropriate for different climates and regions should be actively considered.

9. Measures should be taken to support offices who have faced large emergencies to deal with the aftermath notably in the areas of administration (compliance with procedures, regularisation of contracts) and finance (clearing of accounts)

Security management

10. From the beginning of an emergency operation UNHCR should ensure that it is strongly represented in the local Security Cell, the SMT as well as UNDSS New York.

11. Two seasoned safety advisers familiar with the area of operations should be detached to the emergencies, one to take care of field operations and the other to represent UNHCR in the Security Cell and to assist the UNHCR Senior Line Manager to actively participate in SMT.

12. UNHCR should initiate and support in-house training efforts to bring security and humanitarian staff together and engender greater mutual awareness of their respective priorities and working methods.

13. UNHCR (in collaboration with other humanitarian partners, e.g. OCHA, WFP, etc.) should promote the full understanding of its mandate and modus operandi with the security management community.

14. In order to give sufficient weight to humanitarian priorities UNHCR should, as a rule, advocate for the Humanitarian Coordinator to be appointed as Designated Official for security in emergency situations.

15. UNHCR should prepare itself better to operate in a phase IV security environment by having adequate stocks of armoured vehicles and other required equipment readily available.

Cluster management

16. UNHCR should promote the adoption of mutually compatible IT systems by UN agencies to improve information flow within and between clusters.

17. UNHCR should promote the adoption of joint inter-agency approaches to monitoring and assessment, including participatory assessment techniques.

18. From the beginning of an IDP operation UNHCR should appoint leaders for the protection and shelter clusters with the necessary seniority and interpersonal skills to conduct meetings effectively and make them into a forum for prioritisation and decision making; to ensure continuity they should remain in place for the decisive early stages of the emergency.

19. Cluster leaders should place the interests of cluster members and the UN as a whole above the interests of their respective agency.

20. Whenever possible government representatives from designated focal points should be invited to jointly chair cluster meetings.

21. Protection cluster leaders should aim to identify and prioritise key protection concerns relevant to the operation and to develop a concrete and realistic plan of action in consultation with cluster members.

22. Credible protection cluster leadership requires UNHCR to be directly involved in managing and implementing protection related projects.

23. From the beginning UNHCR should devise a strategy to inject a protection component into all relevant clusters.

24. Clusters located in the capital and in the field should to the extent possible be led by the same person to ensure information sharing and operational coherence; failing that, other means should be devised to maintain maximum coherence between the two.

25. UNHCR and WFP should undertake a joint review of the Lebanon emergency to determine what lessons can be learnt from the experience and how the workings of the logistics cluster can be improved in future operations.

26. UNHCR should aim to develop and maintain its own logistics capacity in future emergency operations and make it available to the logistics cluster as needed.

Regional issues

27. During the coming winter period UNHCR should continue to provide protection and assistance for the remaining displaced persons in Lebanon by engaging in protection related community development programmes addressed at the most vulnerable groups.

28. Headquarters may wish to consider sending an EPRS mission to Syria to further UNHCR's input in the contingency planning process currently under discussion by the government and the UNCT.

29. UNHCR should build on the experience of the Lebanese emergency by developing a comprehensive strategy to enhance its effectiveness and reputation and in the region; this should comprise:

a) public information activities such as:

- recruitment and/or deployment of more PI staff proficient in Arabic;
- empowerment of national staff in the PI domain;
- establishment of an Arabic PI network;
- consolidation of relationships with Arab print and media outlets;
- design of an Arabic logo and brand image for UNHCR;
- preparation of Arabic PI materials.

b) emergency preparedness measures such as:

- contingency planning with regional governments and UNCTs;
- cooperation agreements with relevant relief agencies, in particular Red Crescent Societies;
- developing ERTs with specialised expertise for the wider Middle East.

c) regional seminars on protection, assistance, emergency management and refugee issues of regional concern;

d) recruitment of an Arabic speaking donor relations officer;

e) approaches to donors to seek funding for the strategy and for UNHCR's programmes in the region.

The design of this strategy should be combined with a comprehensive review of refugee/IDP caseloads in the region and the identification of key longer term objectives.

General assessment and key features of the operation

1.   Perhaps no refugee emergency in recent years has taken the world more by surprise than the mass flight brought about by the Israeli bombing campaign in Lebanon following the abduction of two IDF soldiers by Hizbollah on July 12, 2006. By the time the war ended 33 days later, nearly one million people had left their homes in Southern Lebanon, South Beirut and the Bekaa Valley in order to seek sanctuary in other parts of the country while some 180,000 of them had fled across the border into Syria. After the cease fire resolution was adopted on August 14 another sudden population movement took place as the majority of the displaced returned to their areas of origin within a matter of days.

2.   Catering for the needs of the IDPs and refugees represented a huge challenge for the governments of Lebanon and Syria and the humanitarian agencies on the ground which were not prepared to cope with an event of such magnitude. The general lack of contingency planning in either country rendered a coordinated institutional response to the crisis problematic and tensions arose between competing actors in the respective governments and country teams. The situation was saved by an extraordinary outpouring of generosity by civil society in both countries as borders and communal divisions were forgotten and ordinary people, volunteer workers, private businesses and local authorities did their best to provide food and shelter for the newcomers during the initial, critical days before the organised relief effort could get into gear. Thanks to these initiatives and thanks to the fact that the refugees themselves were not destitute upon arrival the emergency never became a life threatening event for the displaced. There is a consensus in both countries, however, that had the situation continued for a longer period a serious crisis would most likely have arisen.

Mobilisation and deployment

3.   After an initial period of hesitation UNHCR emerged as one of the main actors in the UN Interagency relief effort. Emergency response teams (ERTs) were despatched to Lebanon and Syria, an effective telecommunications system was established and very large quantities of non-food items (NFIs) from UNHCR stocks in Amman were distributed in both countries. In Lebanon, both the deployment of the ERTs and the transportation of NFIs suffered delays due to difficulties with security clearance and transportation arrangements which exposed distinct weaknesses in the UN system-wide response. The administration of the relief effort was, moreover, hampered by the fact that ERT staff were not adequately conversant with the new Management Systems Renewal Project (MSRP) in use in the UNHCR Offices in Beirut and Damascus.

4.   In both countries UNHCR national staff played an indispensable role in the relief effort. National staff in Lebanon who had been relocated to areas outside Beirut worked hard in difficult conditions to organise the first UN funded assistance to the IDPs in the country. In Syria national staff not only proved instrumental in helping the newly arrived ERTs to become operational but also played a key role in the rapid opening of Sub-Offices and in providing administrative and logistical support for the UNHCR operation in Lebanon.

5.   Taking account of the important contribution made by them, a member of the evaluation team held separate meetings with UNHCR national staff in Beirut, Tyre and Damascus so as to elicit their views on the operation. While staff in Tyre and Damascus provided a generally positive feed back about their experience, some national staff members in Beirut expressed very different views. Several of them who had been instrumental in setting up the UNHCR relief operation in the first two weeks of the crisis felt sidelined and disenfranchised after the arrival of the ERT. ERT members, on the other hand, stated that during the war there had been very little clerical support in the Office as national staff were often absent and that efforts had in any case been made to integrate them into the running the relief operation. While the RTE team noticed some examples of excellent cooperation between certain ERT members and national staff in Beirut it was clear that relations between the two groups had not always been cordial.

6.   Competent national staff are UNHCR's greatest asset in any operation since, in addition to their normal function, they provide a vital bridge to the social, political, cultural and linguistic environment in which international staff are called upon to operate. In emergency situations the pressure of work and the arrival of large numbers of international staff members often unfamiliar with the region can make this bridge-making function exceptionally demanding. When, as was the case in Lebanon, the security of the country of the national staff itself is under threat their position is rendered even more difficult. It is clear that in these situations ERT members must be prepared to show a high degree of sensitivity in their effort to bring national and international staff into a coherent team in which responsibility is adequately delegated and in which each member is felt valued and respected. While this point has been made before, it cannot be stressed often enough in the training of ERT staff.

7.   Generally, there are indications that too many international staff were deployed in the Lebanese operation, often without clear terms of reference and prior knowledge of the region, and that UNHCR could have performed better with smaller, more integrated international teams providing targeted guidance and resources to a greater number of national and locally recruited staff. This observation would seem to be applicable to emergencies in all countries where highly trained personnel as well as sufficient material resources are locally available.

Inter-agency cooperation

8.   The highly politicised nature of the Lebanese crisis meant that a number of strategic decisions governing the UN system-wide response both to the actual emergency and to the recovery phase were taken in New York. While the RTE team did not have the opportunity to address this aspect of the operation in any detail it took note of the fact that UNDSS in New York appeared to be the principal mover behind the UN security arrangements in Lebanon which had a profound effect on the UN operation as a whole and on UNHCR's work in particular. Considering the importance of the New York factor, future emergency task force arrangements put in place in UNHCR Headquarters should include the participation of the UNHCR Office in New York to ensure ongoing coordination and effective representation of UNHCR's concerns at inter-agency level.

9.   In both Lebanon and Syria the emergency was an interesting test-case for the practical workings of the humanitarian reform process. The cluster leadership approach devised by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) for IDP situations was duly implemented in Lebanon and proved its worth despite some weaknesses from which valuable lessons can be learned. Syria on the other hand was facing a classic refugee situation in which UNHCR should normally have assumed the role of lead agency. Instead, the UNCT adopted what seemed to be a hybrid between a cluster and traditional sectoral approach for which each agency had a different description. While this diffuse response seems to have been occasioned principally by unfamiliarity with the details of humanitarian reform among UN staff in the country, it may yet set a precedent for the application of a cluster-type approach also in normal refugee situations and hence call into question the lead-agency role of UNHCR. In the light of the intense and sometimes damaging competition for visibility and control between different UN agencies which was much in evidence during the emergency this is a development which cannot be disregarded and which requires some degree of vigilance on the part of UNHCR.

10.   The Evaluation Team noted a certain ambivalence in UNHCR's assessment of the performance of the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) during the crisis. In both Lebanon and Syria OCHA was in charge of information management and it appears that on more than one occasion information provided by UNHCR was not passed on by OCHA, which resulted in UNHCR's input not receiving adequate mention in high level briefings on the UN emergency response. When it comes to collating information on operational matters, however, it was recognised that OCHA fulfilled an important function once initial coordination difficulties had been overcome. This applies in particular to the Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC) set up as part of the humanitarian hub in Tyre which established a detailed database that may become a helpful resource also for the recovery phase in the war affected area.

11.   It should be noted that the operation also provided numerous examples of excellent and mutually supportive cooperation between agencies, notably between UNHCR and United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) and the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre (UNMACC).

The operation in Lebanon

12.   While UNHCR made a very substantial contribution to the UN relief effort in Lebanon, it appears to have lost precious time in the vital initial phase when a period of indecision in Headquarters delayed the deployment of the Emergency Response Team. A further delaying factor was the lack of a procedure to ensure the rapid authorisation of funds for disbursement in emergencies, such as the 'Emergency Letter of Instruction' which was part of UNHCR's armoury in previous years. Some staff members also commented on the fact that there seemed to be a lack of clarity as to who was ultimately in charge of managing the emergency operation once action was initiated and that this hindered a clear and coordinated response at Headquarters level .

13.   When UNHCR's Emergency Response Team arrived in the region it was, moreover, held up for up to a week in Damascus owing to UN security clearance procedures. By the time the ERT reached Beirut, WFP and OCHA already had teams

of their own in place. During these difficult first days the UNHCR Officer in Charge in Lebanon did a highly commendable job in initiating emergency relief measures. Being the only international staff-member handling the UNHCR emergency response at that stage he rightly gave priority to field operations, but inevitably this did not leave him sufficient time to attend to other matters such as maintaining ongoing contact with other members of the UNCT. This may have been one reason why UNHCR failed to obtain funding from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).The situation shows that early decision making at the beginning of a crisis is of utmost importance in order to ensure that field staff are adequately supported. As one staff member said, 'the basic architecture of an operation is built in the first few days' and missing out on this time can have long-term detrimental consequences.

14. The most significant issues of concern which affected the UNHCR operation in Lebanon were the UN security arrangements and the workings of the cluster leadership approach. These points are discussed in more detail hereunder, followed by some remarks on NFI distribution arrangements, public information activities and donor relations.

UN security management

15. Once security phase IV was introduced in Lebanon early on in the emergency, UN operations were affected by contradictory priorities which were never fully reconciled. On the one hand there was the need to evacuate the majority of UN staff and their dependents and maximise security for those who remained; and on the other there was the need to set up a functioning UN humanitarian relief operation for the IDPs which required the deployment in the country of numerous new UN staff members with sufficient mobility to carry out their respective tasks. This conflict of interest was not well managed and resulted in a range of controversies between humanitarian staff and the security apparatus. Among the many issues raised the following appear to be the most important:

- lack of transparency in the decision making process which appeared to be primarily centred in UNDSS New York and reflected priorities which seemed to be at variance with the realities on the ground.

- security arrangements based on generic plans derived from other operations rather than on security risk assessments in Lebanon, primarily in the post-ceasefire environment.

- discrepancies between the application of security procedures for humanitarian civilian actors who had to move in armoured cars and other UN operational actors (UNIFIL and UNMACC) who could travel in soft skin vehicles; this added to the questionable image of security arrangements.

- the establishment of a UN staff ceiling of 180 persons which was purportedly based on the capacity to evacuate staff rather than on the needs of the humanitarian operation on the ground; this led to intense and wasteful competition between agencies to fill the available slots.

- the deployment of security officers without a background in humanitarian operations or the benefit of regional experience, which added to the disconnect between humanitarian agencies and the security management system.

- the establishment of a concurrence system with the IDF which de facto made all UN movement throughout the country subject to IDF control until one week after the ceasefire; more efforts could have been made by security, humanitarian and political actors to develop a risk management system that favoured the delivery of assistance and placed the onus of responsibility on the parties of conflict to prevent UN casualties.

- the failure to undertake a sound formal security risk assessment once the ceasefire was declared.

- the decision to maintain security phase IV for an extended duration after the ceasefire, a fact which severely hindered assistance operations for returning IDPs.

16. In the light of its protection leadership responsibilities in conflict induced internal displacement situations, UNHCR is arguably the UN agency whose international staff are most in need of direct humanitarian access to beneficiaries. Since other agencies did not share UNHCR's need for access in equal measure, its concerns seem not to have been much supported by members of the Security Cell and the SMT, nor, for that matter, by the DO who gave the impression of being fully satisfied with the status quo. UNHCR's delayed presence in the incipient stages of the crisis may also have added to the disconnect between the Office and the security management system. Consequently, UNHCR operations were probably the ones most affected by the security restrictions in force in Lebanon and it appears that its staff were for some period of time only able to carry out their work by operating on and beyond the margins of official procedures. This is a highly undesirable state of affairs.

17. While the politicised nature of the Lebanese crisis made for a UN security environment which is not likely to be replicated in this form in other operations, there are certain basic lessons to be learnt for UNHCR. The following would seem to be the most important:

- in view of its special need for humanitarian access and its leadership role in key clusters under its responsibilities notably protection, camp coordination/management and emergency shelter, it is vital for UNHCR to be strongly represented from the beginning of an operation not only in the local Security Cell and the SMT but also in UNDSS New York, so as to ensure that its concerns are adequately addressed;

- UNHCR should prepare itself better to operate in a phase IV environment by having adequate stocks of armoured vehicles and other required equipment readily available; had this been the case in Lebanon the impact of security restriction would have been far less great;

- UNHCR should initiate and support in-house training efforts to bring security and humanitarian staff together and engender greater mutual awareness of their respective priorities and working methods;

- UNHCR (in collaboration with other humanitarian partners, e.g. OCHA, WFP, UNICEF, etc.) should promote the full understanding of its mandate and modus operandi with the security management community;

- in order to give sufficient weight to humanitarian priorities UNHCR should advocate for the Humanitarian Coordinator to be appointed as Designated Official for security in emergency situations.

18.   While it is right for UNDSS and the wider security management system to be extra vigilant following the events of Baghdad, the Lebanese experience shows that excessively stringent security procedures which are not seen to be based upon a sound risk assessment will undermine the credibility and authority of the security apparatus. It may result in staff ignoring security rules altogether and possibly putting themselves in danger.

The cluster experience: general remarks

19.   As required by the cluster leadership approach recently adopted by the IASC, UNHCR chaired the protection and shelter clusters, while the logistics cluster managed by WFP was also of key relevance to UNHCR. All in all, the cluster approach showed its worth in that it provided a viable forum for information sharing and forward planning among different actors. Communications between agencies could be facilitated further if identical or mutually compatible IT networks were introduced throughout the UN-system. Successful cluster management, however, depends first and foremost upon the skills of the cluster leader. He or she needs to have the necessary seniority and interpersonal skills so as to chair cluster meetings effectively and make them into a genuine forum for prioritisation and decision making, otherwise they risk turning into frustrating 'talking shops'.

20.   The informal and voluntary nature of cluster membership proved to be a potential source of difficulty. Some agencies were found to refuse work they deemed to be less interesting while others moved extremely slowly; in certain cases agencies ceased to attend cluster meetings once they had obtained funding for their activities. This raises the question to what extent cluster leads should be given the authority to assign tasks to agencies and to what extent agencies should be accountable to clusters.

21.   As a matter of principle, cluster leaders should put the interests of the cluster members and the UN as a whole above those of their own organisation. Yielding to the temptation of using a cluster so to further the priorities of a particular agency is likely to de-motivate cluster members and undermine the effective operation of the entire enterprise. Another, related question is the unresolved issue when and under what conditions an agency should disengage itself from cluster leadership, especially in circumstances when the activities of the cluster no longer correspond fully to its operational priorities. It is issues such as these which may in the long run determine the success or failure of the cluster approach.

Protection and the protection cluster

22.   The acute protection concerns that arose at the height of the Lebanese emergency were violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, and threats to the physical safety and security of civilians due to UXOs. Another problem that became increasingly apparent as time went by and which may continue to affect the victims of the conflict in the coming months was non-equitable access to relief and services.

23.   In keeping with the cluster approach UNHCR assumed chairmanship of the protection cluster and developed a comprehensive cluster strategy. A positive move in this respect was UNHCR's initiative to invite the Ministry of Social Affairs to co-chair protection cluster meetings, though government attendance appears to have been sporadic of late. Feed-back on cluster meetings received by the evaluation team was somewhat critical. It seems that the meaning and practical relevance of protection concerns for the operation may not have been spelled out clearly enough and that the issues could have been better prioritised. All in all, there appears to have been a perception on the part of some that UNHCR's protection cluster leadership lacked a clear sense of direction, especially with respect to the initial period.

24.   When it came to action on the ground UNHCR's input proved effective. When MRE for adults was identified as one of the protection gaps (MRE for children having been taken care of by UNICEF) the Office took the initiative to disseminate MRE awareness messages throughout available media outlets. Generally, cooperation between UNHCR and the UN agency charged with UXO removal, UNMACC, was exceptionally good. The agency which had already been working in South Lebanon for several years put its population records at UNHCR's disposal, engaged in joint a mine awareness raising campaigns and played a pivotal role in clearing areas of return from UXO. For its part, UNHCR assisted UNMACC through the provision of trucks, fuel, storages space and other resources for use by the Mine Action teams and implementing partners.

25.   With respect to the issue of human rights violations, monitoring and gathering evidence on the subject would normally have been the responsibility of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). When OHCHR staff were, for a variety of reasons, unable to operate in South Lebanon it fell to UNHCR in its role as 'provider of last resort' to take urgent action to gather such evidence since it was rapidly being removed by clean up operations. However, a shortage of resources, including a lack of armoured vehicles, is said to have prevented UNHCR from attending to this task effectively. The incident shows that cluster leadership may require the mobilisation of additional resources at short notice and may oblige the Office to take forceful initiative in domains which are not normally part of its concern.

26.   In the light of the protection cluster experience in Lebanon BO, Beirut has identified the following issues which should be taken into account in future operations of this kind:

- to act as protection cluster leaders, UNHCR needs to deploy senior staff equipped to address a range of protection issues beyond traditional UNHCR responsibilities; they should remain for the first phase of the

emergency; a pool of protection staff specially trained for this purpose should be on stand-by;

- in addition to the cluster leader, a protection officer should be deployed to deal with operational protection issues;

- a close interface should be maintained between the protection cluster and UNHCR's protection activities; to this effect UNHCR field staff should be encouraged to attend protection cluster meetings whenever possible;

- there is a need to develop joint inter-agency assessment procedures, with particular emphasis on participatory assessment techniques, to avoid duplication and prevent multiple assessments being carried out by different agencies (a problem which also surfaced in Syria, as noted below).

27. In addition to chairing the protection cluster UNHCR undertook a number of protection initiatives of its own. The most significant of these was the establishment of a working relationship with Social Development Centres run by the Ministry of Social Affairs in South Beirut. UNHCR intervention resulted in IDPs being registered at the centres, informed of their rights and provided with advice and material support. The same services are now also being made available also to refugees and asylum seekers. It is much to be welcomed that this valuable initiative is currently being built upon and expanded further as needed.

Shelter cluster

28. The shelter cluster was strongly and consistently led, and resulted in a work plan negotiated with the government and other concerned agencies which foresaw the distribution of shelter repair kits to assist persons whose houses had been partially destroyed so as to make them habitable before the winter. The plan was developed with the help of a substantial input provided by the Technical Support Service (TSS) in UNHCR Headquarters, in cooperation with staff from Red R and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). It is regrettable that UNHCR had to withdraw from its proposed participation in the shelter programme after the government decided to abandon the originally agreed policy and opted for the erection of prefabricated houses instead. This move could not be supported by UNHCR and its donors.

Logistics cluster

29. Leadership of the logistics cluster was assumed by WFP which was able to mobilise a high level team with great speed and establish a sophisticated operation making use of air, land and sea routes. As stated in the standard operating procedures of the logistics cluster group, the entire UN trucking fleet was to be managed by WFP on behalf of the UN agencies.

30. WFP and UNHCR staff interviewed by the evaluation team had very different perceptions of the functioning of the system. According to WFP, the trucking system was efficient, always had spare capacity and was able to move cargo within 24 hours; moreover neither UNHCR nor any other agencies had queried the standard logistics

operating procedures when they were shared with other agencies for clearance. UNHCR staff, on the other hand, felt that WFP was using its position as head of the logistics cluster to enhance its own visibility at the expense of other agencies and to exert an undue measure of control over the relief operation; moreover the system was not reliable and UNHCR's first NFI shipment bound for Lebanon was unaccountably delayed for over a week in Syria. As a result, UNHCR was prevented from reaching the displaced immediately and missed out on a rapid response opportunity which would have enhanced UNHCR's visibility vis-à-vis donors and international media. In the end UNHCR decided to set up its own trucking system for NFI delivery in Lebanon. However, having initially relied on WFP, the UNHCR logistics operation was severely understaffed and its capacity was not subsequently reinforced.

31. As a result of this experience and judging also by other operations a consensus has arisen within UNHCR that the Office should, as in the past, establish its own independent logistics capacity in emergency situations and make this available to the logistics cluster as needed rather than relying entirely on the cluster lead. This requires, however, that UNHCR should pay greater attention to strengthening its logistics capacity both in Headquarters and in the field and bring it back to the level of competence it had acquired during the 1990s.

32. Since close cooperation between UNHCR and WFP is of fundamental importance for the successful delivery of emergency assistance, the discord which arose between them during the Lebanon operation is a matter of serious concern. It is recommended that the two agencies engage in consultations in order to determine jointly what lessons both of them can learn from the Lebanon experience and how future workings of the logistics cluster can be structured in such a way as to avoid a repeat of these difficulties.

Non-food items (NFIs)

33. By far the most significant contribution UNHCR made to the UN relief effort was the delivery of over 500,000 NFIs to some 250 collective centres and villages, a complex operation which was effectively planned and coordinated in the initial stages by the ERT in collaboration with logistics staff and field teams; at a later stage coordination was delegated to the shelter cluster. The items involved comprised tents, blankets, mattresses, plastic sheeting, kitchen sets, hurricane lamps, cooking stoves, jerry cans, soap, diapers, sanitary napkins and underwear. While most of these were welcome and fulfilled genuine needs – in particular the mattresses and the kitchen sets – the distribution of large numbers of tents to this caseload was somewhat questionable since they were used as shelter only in a limited number of areas; they proved useful for other purposes, however, including storage of goods and agricultural produce, and as summer camps for children. The only items which aroused persistent complaints were the blankets which proved too warm for the season and appeared to be of very poor quality (stiff, rough and smelly). As part of emergency preparedness more thought should be given to establishing geographic stockpiles of key relief items appropriate for different climates and regions.

34. While the secondary distribution of relief items to IDP centres appears to have been rapidly and successfully organised, the evaluation mission noted that secondary distribution in villages in South Lebanon was occasionally problematic.

Fluctuating population movements and lack of access owing to security restrictions made for unreliable assessment figures which in turn resulted in an insufficient number of NFIs being channelled to certain villages. The mayors of villages visited by the evaluation mission were found to be withholding secondary distribution pending the arrival of additional NFIs in order to avoid protests and disagreements. UNHCR's implementing partners Samidun and Civil Campaign for Relief which were in charge of monitoring secondary distribution also reported a number of difficulties. The issue of negotiating a system of prioritisation for secondary distribution with the municipal authorities was being discussed by the protection cluster during the visit of the evaluation mission. It would have been preferable if this issue had clarified at an earlier stage of the operation.

Public information

35.   UNHCR's public information campaign during the Lebanon emergency was successful both within the country and abroad. The national staff member dealing with PI in the Beirut Office was supported by the deployment of two international PI staff, one of them proficient in Arabic, as part of the ERT. Being incorporated in the emergency team, PI staff were able to issue daily updates, media stories and press releases many of which were reproduced both locally and internationally. UNHCR also received coverage by major TV channels such as the BBC and Al-Jazeera.

36.   The publicity received by UNHCR during the emergency is an opportunity which the Office should build upon as part of a wider strategy to engage more effectively in the Middle Eastern region. Activities to be considered include

- recruitment and/or deployment of more PI staff proficient in Arabic;

- empowerment of national staff in the PI domain;

- establishment of an Arabic PI network;

- consolidation of relationships with Arab print and media outlets;

- design of an Arabic logo and brand image for UNHCR.

Donor relations

37.   Donor response to the Lebanon emergency was generous and the revised UN flash appeal of US$98.3 million was well-funded. UNHCR's total budgetary requirements of US$ 18.8 million were funded up to US$15,504,217. The governments of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have also shown interest in directly funding UNHCR's operation in Lebanon and discussions on the subject are still ongoing.

38.   From the perspective of donor relations in the field, there seemed to be a considerable disconnect between the UN relief operation principally supported by traditional Western donors and implemented in part by Western NGOs on the one hand, and the substantial relief effort funded and supported by Middle Eastern countries including Turkey on the other. Moreover, while the UN relief effort appeared to function in relative isolation from the authorities, a considerable proportion of assistance from Middle Eastern donors was channelled through the

High Relief Committee of the Lebanese government. Considering the fact that both groups of donors were there to support the same relief effort, it was remarkable that there appeared to be very little interaction between them. While the UNHCR Representative has taken valuable steps to maintain good contacts with Arab ambassadors in Beirut, the design and implementation of the UN relief effort as a whole could have been better coordinated with the support provided by Middle Eastern donors.

39. It would seem to be in the interest of UNHCR to use the Lebanon emergency as an opportunity to engage in more regular dialogue with Middle Eastern donors and aid agencies, in particular the Red Crescent Societies, by keeping them regularly informed of developments, inviting them to participate in the cluster system whenever possible and organising seminars and round table discussions with a view to preparing the ground for better cooperation in future relief programmes. This could be part of an overall strategy to be implemented both in Headquarters and in the field.

The operation in Syria

40. Soon after the start of hostilities on 13 July, Lebanese refugees began crossing into Syria in ever-increasing numbers, reaching a peak of 30,000 new arrivals per day in early August. ERT members started arriving in Damascus from 21 July and UNHCR Sub-Offices were opened in Homs, Tartous and Aleppo. Mass repatriation started straight after the ceasefire on 16 August and within a week most refugees had left the country. In addition to running the relief effort for the Lebanese, the UNHCR office in Syria also played a pivotal role in supporting the IDP operation in Lebanon by organising the onward transportation of relief goods and assisting in the deployment of ERT staff.

Lack of preparedness

41. While the refugees were generously welcomed and supported by civil society, both the government and the UNCT found themselves in some disarray owing the lack of a shared contingency plan and the resulting uncertainty about the roles and responsibilities of different actors. This led to competition between different government ministries and tensions between some members of the UNCT and the Syrian Red Crescent Society which played a leading role in the relief effort. Possibly owing to the flux created by a humanitarian reform progress not yet fully grasped by UN field staff, the UNCT itself failed to reach a unanimous stance on the approach that needed to be taken to deal with the crisis. While some, in particular the UNDP Resident Coordinator, described it as a cluster approach, others only spoke of sectoral coordination.

42. No one mentioned the lead agency function which UNHCR would normally be expected to carry out in a refugee situation of this kind. This is principally due to the fact that the UNHCR office in Damascus was not in a position to push for such a role at the outset of the crisis. Its standing both within the UN system and with respect to the government had been somewhat diminished on account of circumstances surrounding the former Head of the Office, which made it difficult for his newly arrived successor to become fully operational. The de facto vacuum left by UNHCR

was filled by the UNDP Resident Coordinator who quickly discussed the situation on behalf of the UN system and whose experience and contacts proved to be an asset in the early phase of the emergency.

43. However, the lack of preparedness of both the UNCT and the government meant that the coordination of the operation was sporadic, especially in the initial stages. Information flow also was deficient, and agencies resorted to making their own arrangements in logistics and needs assessment. The latter was particularly problematic as agencies repeatedly sought the same information from beneficiaries which led to 'assessment fatigue' and negative perception of the UN relief effort on their part. From the perception of UNHCR, the arrival of the OCHA team which involved a high turn over of relatively junior staff also failed to improve matters at first. Subsequently, however, OCHA played a significant role as a clearing house for information on the UN relief operation.

44. The emergency was something of a 'shock to the system' in Syria, and considerable debate is now taking place on how the institutional response capacity could be improved. Both the Syrian Red Crescent Society and OCHA have already produced useful 'after action review' papers and an internal government evaluation is in progress. Discussions on contingency planning and emergency preparedness are currently taking place under the stewardship of UNDP and WFP.

Protection

45. Unlike some Iraqis and Palestinians who were held up at the border, Lebanese refugees were able to enter Syria unhindered and faced no protection problems. The Syrian government welcomed them as 'brothers' and 'guests' but did not wish to designate them as refugees. UNHCR Headquarters for its part hesitated for some time whether to consider the fleeing Lebanese 'refugees', despite urgent requests for clarification from the field. Not until two weeks after the crisis began did DIP declare that Lebanese civilians fleeing the armed conflict should 'prima facie be eligible for mandate refugee status on the basis of the extended definition under UNHCR's international protection mandate'.

46. While this delay did not hinder UNHCR's relief effort on the ground, it weakened the credibility of the Office vis-à-vis other actors in the Country Team. Field staff felt that the issue should have been settled far sooner, notwithstanding the position of the Syrian government. The evaluation team discussed the matter with concerned staff in UNHCR Headquarters but could find no valid reason that would have justified the prolonged hesitation in giving prima facie status to the Lebanese.

47. With the introduction of the cluster approach the question whether beneficiaries in an emergency are refugees or not must be clarified from the very start since the answer may determine whether the cluster approach should be invoked or whether UNHCR should assume its lead agency function in the operation.

Assistance

48. As in Lebanon, UNHCR's assistance programme during the emergency concentrated principally on the provision of NFIs. Starting from 25 July, some 60,000 items were shipped to distribution outlets in different parts of the country. The items

were generally welcome, with the exception, once more, of the blankets which were found to be inappropriate for the season. While making great demands on the staff, the operation worked well and an excellent team spirit seems to have prevailed among both national and international staff.

49. The massive relief effort for the Lebanese and UNHCR's role in the operation led, however, to feelings of bitterness among Iraqi refugees of whom there are some 400,000 in Syria. Similar frustration has also been reported on the part of Palestinian refugees tragically caught in no man's land on the border between Syria and Iraq. UNHCR considers Iraqi asylum seekers in Syria not as refugees but as persons in need of temporary protection, and they receive very little UNHCR assistance. National staff in BO Damascus who deal with them on a daily basis are now faced with upset clients and find themselves hard put to explain what seems to be a discriminatory approach taken by the Office. In the light of this, the forthcoming review of the Iraqi caseload in the Middle East is much to be welcomed.

Repatriation

50. When a ceasefire resolution was about to be agreed at the Security Council BO Damascus realised that repatriation would be quick and started making preparations to despatch border monitoring teams, assist returnees with relief items and, where needed, transportation. At the same time leaflets were prepared warning returnees to exert extreme caution in areas where there had been military activities. The leaflets were handed out together with mine and UXO awareness leaflets produced by UNICEF. BO Damascus should be commended for having rapidly, judiciously and responsibly facilitated the spontaneous return of the Lebanese. Nothing would have stopped the mass return that was taking place and the Office acted in the best interest of the returnees.

Public information

51. The reputation of the United Nations in Syria took a battering during the crisis as the organisation was deemed to tolerate if not condone the Israeli onslaught on Lebanon. Especially in the initial period UN staff had to keep a low profile and visibility items were rarely on display. According to some it was wise not to publicise the UN relief operation too much in the local media since this might have been seen as provocative in the circumstances, while others felt that an enhanced PI effort should have been undertaken in order to make the public understand the difference between the humanitarian action of the UN and the politics of the Security Council.

52. Lacking an Arabic speaking PI Officer in Syria, UNHCR's substantial PI output was principally directed at the international media and seems to have made relatively little impact upon media outlets in Syria. In view of the image problem faced by the UN in Syria and the Middle East in general ongoing media and communication efforts are required, not just in periods of crisis, to increase public awareness of agencies and their work. With respect to UNHCR there is the added problem that the term refugee itself is loaded with negative political connotations on account of the Palestinian issue. Much more needs to be done to engender a better

understanding of the situation of refugee issues from a global perspective, and of UNHCR's work in particular.

Donor relations

53. Only one high level donor briefing convened by the UNDP Resident Coordinator took place during the emergency, and there was a feeling that information flow would have been greatly eased if there had been more regular working level briefings for donors. Members of the UNCT felt let down by the fact that the Syria component of the flash appeals lost its visibility once it was incorporated into the wider Lebanon appeal. The after action review undertaken by OCHA recommended that in future flash appeals a prominent and clearly demarcated section should be introduced for each country.

Concluding observations

54. There is a wide-spread perception that with the end of the humanitarian emergency, the crisis in Lebanon is over. This is not the case. Due to the massive destruction of civilian housing, some 200,000 Lebanese, many of them among the poorer sectors of society, have lost their homes and often their livelihoods. Most of them have found shelter with relatives and neighbours but many are facing a winter of severe hardship and deprivation while communal tensions in Lebanon are once again on the rise and little of the promised aid has so far been delivered. Moreover, up to one million pieces of unexploded ordinance preclude the resumption of agricultural activities in much of South Lebanon for the time being.

55. In its capacity as leader of the protection cluster for IDPs UNHCR would seem to have an obligation to remain engaged with this caseload also during the forthcoming recovery phase of the international relief effort. In particular during the coming critical winter months the Office should aim to support and widen protection related community development activities some of which have already begun. Such an initiative will not only benefit the remaining IDPs but is also likely to strengthen UNHCR's ability to seek the cooperation and understanding of the government for the purpose of providing protection and assistance for refugees and asylum seekers in the country.

Regional implications

56. Perhaps the most important outcome of this short-lived crisis is that is has served as a wake-up call to governments and aid agencies in the region by demonstrating that far more needs to be done to ensure an organised institutional response to a situation of this kind, both at the national and the international levels. The need for better contingency planning and emergency preparedness has become patently obvious and governments are now receptive to new initiatives in this domain. In Syria an extensive dialogue among all concerned actors has already begun. This represents an important opportunity for UNHCR to make its experience in this domain available and forge new alliances and cooperation agreements as part of a wider strategy to enhance its reputation and credibility in a region where protection challenges abound and further emergencies cannot be discounted. Donor

support for such initiatives may well be forthcoming and a detailed work programme should be established without delay.

Annex 1

Terms of Reference

Real-time evaluation of UNHCR's
response to the Lebanon and Syria emergency

Under the terms of its Evaluation Policy, UNHCR is committed to undertaking a review of all new emergency operations. In its efforts to meet this commitment, the organization has made extensive use of 'real time evaluations' (RTEs), reviews that are completed at an early stage of an operation, and which provide senior management with findings and recommendations that can be put to immediate use in the policymaking, planning and programming process.

In accordance with this commitment, UNHCR is undertaking an RTE of the organization's response to the crisis that erupted in Lebanon in mid-July 2006, when nearly a million Lebanese left their homes to escape the conflict in that country. While the current cessation of hostilities has allowed a growing number of those people to go back to their homes, the process of return, reintegration and reconstruction will almost certainly prove to be a lengthy one, raising questions concerning the scale and scope of UNHCR's future role in the operation.

The principal objective of this RTE is to determine the operational effectiveness of UNHCR's response to these events and to identify lessons learned and examples of effective practice that might be of relevance to operations elsewhere in the world. More specifically, the RTE will focus on the role, effectiveness and impact of UNHCR in the following areas, as well as any other issues deemed to be of relevance and importance by the evaluation team:

- the protection of refugees, IDPs and civilian victims of violence, including the terminology employed by UNHCR in relation to these groups;

- the neutrality, impartiality and independence of UNHCR operations;

- operations management, internal coordination and decision-making procedures;

- human resource mobilization and management;

- financial resource mobilization and management;

- procurement and logistics, as well as the delivery and distribution of relief;

- inter-agency coordination and the cluster approach;

- external relations, including liaison with governments, NGOs, civil society and the media;

- security management;

- return, reintegration and reconstruction.

The evaluation will be undertaken in accordance with UNHCR's evaluation policy and RTE guidelines. The evaluation team will provide a debriefing to senior UNHCR staff in the region prior to their departure and a debriefing to senior management at Headquarters within two days of their return to Geneva. Subsequent briefings may also be organized for Excom members and NGOs.

Upon their return to Geneva, the team will produce a concise report providing the key findings and recommendations of the evaluation. The report, which will undergo an internal consultative process, will be considered as a PDES document and placed in the public domain.

The evaluation team will ideally undertake a select number of interviews and review key documents prior to their departure to the region. The evaluation mission will leave Geneva by mid-September 2006 and will remain in the region for 7-10 days. The evaluation team will consist of up to three people with an appropriate mixture of competencies.

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