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Real time evaluation of UNHCR's response to the emergency in Chad

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Introduction

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 organizational change.

This RTE was undertaken by Dominik Bartsch, Senior Policy Officer of the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) and Nagette Belgacem, Protection Officer with the Regional Bureau for Africa. The team conducted close to 50 interviews with UNHCR staff, implementing partners (IP), government authorities and refugees and the findings of this evaluation are therefore largely based on the testimony of colleagues directly involved in the management of this operation. Following an initial review of documentation and a series of interviews at HQ, the team proceeded on mission to Chad between 12 June and 25 June, and undertook extensive field visits in the operational area in Eastern Chad. Upon return to Geneva, the mission held several interactive debriefing sessions with UNHCR senior managers, donor representatives and NGOs.

This report comprises two main sections; a presentation of findings structured around five general benchmarks and an analysis of the factors that influenced UNHCR's performance in Chad. Some of the lessons learnt from this operation are then translated into recommendations for further action, in the final section of this report. A chronology of events is attached as Annex 1 to help the reader place events within the timeline of the operation, and Annex 2 gives the Terms of Reference for the RTE.

Executive Summary

UNHCR is facing extraordinary challenges in responding to the protection and assistance needs of the more than 180,000 Sudanese refugees who entered Chad between May 2003 and June 2004. What began as a small influx into Eastern Chad last year has now become a very complex emergency relief operation, involving the relocation of refugees from a 600km stretch along the border with Sudan and the setting-up of camp sites in very adverse conditions. The fact that UNHCR and its operational partners succeeded in relocating more than 150,000 refugees into the eight newly-created camp sites against the most formidable logistical odds, is a major accomplishment in its own right.

However, UNHCR is not yet “on top” of the emergency and continues to experience difficulties in managing the transition from a reactive emergency response to a phase of operational consolidation and forward planning. No consistent protection strategy was in place to systematically respond to the manifold protection issues in evidence. On the assistance side, pockets of severe destitution persist both among the population of spontaneous arrivals and in some of the newly-opened camp sites. UNHCR’s field structure is not fully functional and plagued by both communication and coordination problems. The absence of a functioning telecommunications network in this operation, for instance, is a glaring system failure and has had a serious impact on UNHCR’s operational effectiveness. Several factors have contributed to explain why UNHCR has been “behind the curve” in this operation, including the incremental nature of the emergency, the closure of UNHCR’s Chadian office in 2001 and the inadequate attention and support the emergency initially received from critical sections in Headquarters. Another key element in the analysis centres around the flawed handover process between the last Emergency Response Team (ERT) and the country office which has had a profound and continued impact on the operations.

During the field visit, the mission was able to witness significant improvements in terms of accelerated deliveries of relief items and essential equipment as well as the deployment of additional staff. In the perception of the evaluation team, UNHCR is significantly scaling up its response and will be able to consolidate the operation in a short space of time.

Methodology

This evaluation sets out to gauge UNHCR's effectiveness in responding to the Chad emergency. Dealing with a subject matter that defies direct measurement, this enquiry will inevitably produce value judgements even if based on a quasi-empirical approach in collecting information. In an effort to introduce some level of objectivity in presenting its findings, this report uses five broad benchmarks to approximate the effectiveness of UNHCR's emergency response. These abstract benchmarks were formulated by the evaluation team to describe a level of accomplishment by UNHCR that could be expected six months into the emergency, in an operation of this magnitude, though it is understood that there is no accepted standard and that operations differ greatly. The five benchmarks are then used to discuss respective findings of this evaluation and to arrive at a general assertion as to whether or not UNHCR's level of achievement in Chad is comparable with other emergency operations.

One important clarification that should precede the presentation of findings concerns the timeline for the Chad emergency. For the purposes of this analysis, the beginning of the emergency operation is set at the end of December 2003 for the following reasons. For one, yet another sudden wave of new arrivals entered Chad during that month, increasing the refugee population by 30,000 to a new total of 95,000. A series of Janjaweed incursions into Chadian territory highlighted the urgency of relocating the new arrivals away from the border areas while, at around the same time, the first assessment missions into Sudan's Darfur region painted a very grim picture of a protection crisis inside Darfur, thus raising the spectre of further influxes. Lastly, it was during this period that the Assistant High Commissioner visited Chad and, based on the findings of his mission, launched the deployment of a second Emergency Response Team (ERT) to undertake the relocation of refugees from the border areas. His visit also raised the profile of the Chad operation within UNHCR. This timeline places the Real Time Evaluation mission at the six months' mark of UNHCR's emergency response.

Findings

Benchmark 1: Refugees have access to life-sustaining assistance and the overall humanitarian situation is gradually stabilizing.

While emergency assistance is extended in the border areas, it is only after refugees have been transferred into a camp environment that their needs can be assessed comprehensively and respective assistance interventions be scaled up accordingly. One critical gauge in assessing the overall response is the speed with which camp-based relief delivery systems have been set up. Where available, basic welfare indicators should confirm that the assistance interventions are beginning to show a positive impact.

1. Much as the relocation exercise has offered protection from the ongoing Janjaweed incursions, it may not immediately have improved upon the basic welfare of the refugee population, largely because the development of new camp sites could not keep up with the accelerated pace of relocations. Although a phased relocation was originally foreseen, basic services such as health, food and water were only in the process of being developed at a time when growing numbers of refugees were being transferred from the border areas, not to mention those who found their own way into the camps. This, however, is not to say that the pace of relocations should have been dictated by the reception capacity in the camps; after all, the protection situation in the border areas demanded decisive action on the part of UNHCR. The large number of spontaneous arrivals in the camps, at times spurred by nothing more than a rumour that a new site was under consideration, seems to confirm that relocation was indeed the most pressing concern for refugees.

2. Assigning priority to the relocation of refugees was most decidedly the correct judgement call to make, particularly in the light of the imminent onset of the rains which would render many areas inaccessible. It also set in motion a delayed delivery of life-sustaining services as agencies were struggling to 'catch up' with the multiple demands of setting up functioning camp sites. Water is perhaps the most critical intervention in the arid region of Eastern Chad and one IP staffer rightly observed that "in this operation, protection is water". Given the difficulties of finding water in sufficient quantities, a number of potential sites had to be abandoned, causing further delays in settling the growing number of refugees being relocated from the border. These delivery problems were compounded by the fact that camps were initially designed for resident populations of around 8-10,000 refugees but then had to accommodate much larger numbers on account of the accelerated relocation, thus adversely affecting the sustainability of the camps.

3. Inevitably, the overpopulation of the camps beyond their assessed capacity aggravates the impact that such a large population concentration is bound to have on

a very fragile environment as regards water supply, grazing land and firewood. While refugees could initially depend on an extremely generous welcome from the host population, the first conflicts over resources between refugees and locals around the camp sites have already erupted and are likely to become increasingly virulent. This competition for resources needs to be addressed at the earliest stage if outright conflict is to be prevented and, to the extent possible, both refugee and host communities must directly be associated with the design of the assistance programmes.

4. Several camps have attained a level of development that allows for the effective delivery of basic assistance and the situation of the refugees residing there had indeed stabilized. However, gaps were observed not only with respect to individual sectors but also in geographical terms: less than an hour's drive from one of the most advanced camps, the mission came upon a population of self-settled new arrivals in Am Nabakh without access to even the most basic health services. Although this site had not formally been opened because of its insufficient water supply, it did house a large population of desperate refugees whose humanitarian situation had, in all likelihood, worsened since their arrival.

5. In general, there is only very limited data available to afford a comprehensive analysis of the extent to which minimum standards in humanitarian assistance have been met. Simultaneously with the evaluation mission, a nutritional survey was conducted with UNHCR's support by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) which affirmed a worrying picture in both mortality and morbidity rates. Similarly, the provision of water is most certainly below the accepted standard of 15 litres pp/pd in at least half the camps. However, these spot measurements do not allow for a consistent trend analysis and it is still not possible to verify whether the welfare of the refugee population has improved or indeed worsened. It is for this reason that UNHCR must routinely monitor welfare indicators and track trends over time.

6. One aspect that is easily overlooked in this context relates to the existing coping skills of refugees who have routinely succeeded, some for many months, to survive without any outside assistance in the border areas. Understanding these coping mechanism may offer a key to providing targeted assistance to complement indigenous capacities and will mitigate against the creation of undue dependencies in the long run.

7. Not all refugees relocated to the camps had immediate access to assistance, although a vast majority were in the process of gaining access, based on the rapid site development in evidence throughout Eastern Chad. What creates the impression of a generally uneven response is the fact that the stepping-up of camp-based assistance occurred against the backdrop of pockets of altogether unattended needs outside the camps, especially amongst the spontaneous arrivals. While it is understood that the operation had to constantly recalibrate the many competing objectives it tried to accomplish, it is surmised here that a more consistent delivery of relief assistance could have been brought about through better advance planning.

Benchmark 2: UNHCR's response mode has shifted from being 'reactive' towards a more 'pro-active' approach in planning for at least the medium term.

Despite varying degrees of complexity, emergency operations routinely undergo a transition into a consolidation phase, when the initial emphasis on 'fighting fires' is replaced by a broader approach aimed at stabilizing the caseload. Although there is no fixed timeline at which this transition should occur, there are in UNHCR's history only very few examples of 'prolonged emergencies', defined as operations which could not be consolidated within a timeframe of three to four months.

8. Some six months into the emergency and more than three months after the departure of the last emergency response team, the Chad operation remained very much in a fire-fighting mode. UNHCR was reacting to events as opposed to having decided on an overall strategy that would then determine the most appropriate response. For example, the contingency planning process to prepare for a renewed influx was not given appropriate space, simply because it competed with so many other immediate concerns. At times the impetus for focusing on a particular issue was external in nature, such as the publication of a critical media report which then prompted UNHCR to redirect its attention and resources to that particular site, often at the expense of other ongoing interventions. Such an intermittent approach makes it all the more difficult to look at the 'big picture' and to define priorities accordingly.

9. The area of logistics provides a telling example for this assertion: a thorough logistics assessment in the early days of the operation with strong support from Headquarters could have produced an overall strategy on how to manage the movements of goods into and within the country. In the absence of such a master plan, relief deliveries within the country were arranged in an ad hoc manner and colleagues in the field literally had to board arriving trucks to find out what consignment was being delivered. The fact that the extremely difficult transport logistics translates into very high delivery costs only reinforces the need to maximize the efficiency of the in-country supply chain.

10. Too strong a reliance on 'fixing problems' as they appear may also produce a reluctance to tackle problems that require long and sustained efforts to resolve. The case of Bahai provides one example of an early group of new arrivals which had not been attended to for a prolonged period. Refugees first arrived in Bahai, a remote border village in the northern-most tip of the operational area, in late 2003. Following initial assessments it soon became clear that no suitable site could be identified in the area and a relocation further inland was proposed. However, local authorities expressed their strong reservations, insisting that a site be activated in the immediate vicinity of the village.

11. This stalemate in the negotiations for a site lasted for several months while in the meantime the numbers of refugees increased substantially, most arriving with large numbers of camels and donkeys, thus exerting extreme pressure on the local infrastructure. When UNHCR established a field presence in Bahai in early June, there was still no clear indication what solution should be pursued for this group. Only one food distribution had taken place and by late June, the ground water was exhausted, raising the prospect of a major humanitarian crisis at a time when the

rains would make access very difficult indeed. Bahai serves as an example of a steady deterioration in the humanitarian situation which, in all likelihood, could have been avoided through better foresight and a more assertive negotiation stance.

12. In hindsight, it is easy enough to admonish the lack of planning and strategic prioritization when in reality the UNHCR team in Chad was forced to make judgement calls in the face of the many competing issues that arose on a daily basis and required immediate trouble-shooting. That said, there is a strong case to be made for striking a balance between immediate operational responses and the preparation for more sustained interventions. Not all of the strategies developed in N'Djamena have translated into an operation-wide coherent planning framework that the field offices could relate to. In a similar vein, many of the recommendations tabled by the numerous technical support missions fielded in areas such as registration, public health or water to assist UNHCR Chad, do not seem to have been followed through consistently.

Benchmark 3: Effective refugee protection

Six months into an emergency operation, UNHCR should be expected to have made significant advances in safeguarding the admission of refugees and in ensuring their safety in the country of asylum. UNHCR would furthermore have conducted a comprehensive assessment of the key protection concerns and developed a broad strategy on how to address them.

13. The most urgent security concern identified in this operation was the need to relocate refugees away from the border to protect them from ongoing Janjaweed incursions. The Chadian authorities effectively assumed their responsibility for the security and safety of the new arrivals and actively engaged in the identification of appropriate sites. However, in some instances as was the case in Bahai, objections were raised by both local and traditional authorities resulting in lengthy delays in the process. Most refugees sites are now located at more than the requisite 50 km distance from the border but given the audacity with which incursions into the isolated landscape of Eastern Chad have taken place, there is no guarantee that this minimum distance will provide adequate protection. The presence of combatants among the refugees population has been suspected since the earliest interaction with the caseload, especially in Bahai, and more protection assessments are required. At the time of the mission, UNHCR was in the process of negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding with the Chadian authorities covering the deployment of security personnel to safeguard the civilian character of the camps.

14. The need to comprehensively assess and address Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) issues was identified early, especially in the light of the appalling reports from Darfur, both before and during flight, but only resulted in the deployment of a SGBV specialist by June 2004. In some camps such as Kounoungo, gender-related protection considerations were included in the lay-out and camp design by involving the refugee community in the planning process. However, in other sites such as Bredjine, the distance between the tents was minimal and therefore did not allow refugees to improve upon it or to protect themselves from the existing fire hazard.

15. Most agencies operating in the camps sought to ensure a gender balance in the refugee leadership structure and some refugee committees already had some representation of refugee women. UNHCR acknowledged the need to recruit more female staff, particularly at local level, in order to enhance its capacity to handle SGBV and gender issues in general.

16. Only limited interventions have taken place to identify cases of separated children. While some basic training on separated children has been provided to the government partner undertaking pre-registration at the border, it was not clear whether contact had been established with the ICRC to set up an effective tracing mechanism. No accurate figure for the number of unaccompanied and separated children among the refugee population in Eastern Chad is available and the three cases reported from Farchana are most likely a serious underestimation. Emergency education as a means of preventing child recruitment or sexual violence did not routinely feature in UNHCR's initial response and was often referred to as an intervention for later stages because of budgetary constraints. Overall, the lack of a systematic and concerted approach on separated children constitutes a major protection concern.

17. Registration activities have been entrusted to the Commission Nationale pour l'Accueil et la Réinsertion des réfugiés (CNAR) which instituted simple procedures for the pre-registration and registration of new arrivals, including the recording of the head of household and basic demographic breakdown on a simplified control sheet. Families are then provided with a token, indicating the number of family members.

18. The present system of pre-registration and registration only provides rough population estimates which are considered as preliminary planning figures. Problems have occurred in the context of adding on newly-arriving family members and, more worryingly, with respect to the many spontaneous arrivals in the camps who may not have been pre-registered and would therefore forfeit assistance for prolonged periods. In at least one camp, spontaneous arrivals were obliged to reside outside the camp perimeter for several weeks without being attended to.

19. CNAR is not yet fully equipped to provide refugees with appropriate documentation. There is no standard approach on birth and other civil acts registration and documentation, which is leading to varying practices being conducted informally by an NGO or, in many instances, not being conducted at all. It is widely agreed that the registration procedures need to be improved upon, particularly since the current registration system does not allow for the identification of individual protection cases. On several occasions colleagues made reference to the fact that the initial design of the registration system was well-functioning but subsequently fell into disrepair, both on account of partner capacity and the lack of UNHCR Protection staff to maintain the system accordingly. Indeed, upon the departure of the second emergency response team in March which included one Senior Protection Officer, the operation remained without any protection staff on the ground for more than two months.

20. While UNHCR was highly successful in delivering a primary protection response through the relocation of very large numbers of refugees away from the border areas, this singular focus may have diverted attention from the many other protection concerns in this operation. UNHCR had very limited knowledge of the

refugees and their profile and was not immediately concerned with understanding the underlying dynamics of this caseload.

21. Without a comprehensive assessment of all these protection concerns, UNHCR lacked the ingredients to formulate an overall protection strategy. In the absence of such a strategic protection approach, protection staffing was considered a secondary response which in turn produced further gaps in protection monitoring. One NGO, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), was engaged to fill these gaps and developed a well-structured and self-funded protection programme, including regular meetings with community leaders who not only provided crucial information on new arrivals and vulnerable cases but also prepared a detailed community map identifying each dwelling and its respective protection concerns. This gap in protection, however, should not have been there in the first place.

Benchmark 4: An effective UNHCR management structure has been put into place

The process of consolidation is not only limited to UNHCR's operational activities but equally extends to the manner in which administrative structures have been set up to render effective support to the operation. Six months into an emergency response, UNHCR is expected to have established functioning offices in the field, fully equipped with communications and transport equipment. Initial emergency deployments would have largely been replaced by staff formally assigned to the operation or at least deployed for missions longer than three months.

22. At face value, the office structure set up in Chad follows the traditional hierarchy of a capital-based office, a sub office in Abeche and five field offices reporting to Abeche. This basic structure is then fitted out with various functions to support and direct UNHCR's operations. However, all these offices were essentially newly-established in late 2003 and early 2004, following the closure of UNHCR's presence in Chad in late 2001. This meant that significant time and effort had to be expended in setting up the offices in N'Djamena and Abeche.

23. Much as this focus on creating a functional office at central level is a normal function of organizational development, it also implied that, at least during this initial period, less direct support could be extended to the field offices. Compared to the office in N'Djamena and the sub-office in Abeche, the field offices visited during the evaluation were indeed ill-equipped and had not yet attained an adequate level of functionality. Most worryingly, these difficulties in providing administrative support to the point of delivery also extended to basic staff welfare considerations and some UNHCR colleagues were living in most deplorable conditions. This is all the more disturbing since basic initiatives such as the setting-up of regular food deliveries from the capital or shelter improvements could have been put into place much earlier.

24. Another important indicator to ascertain the functionality of UNHCR's structure is the effectiveness of its communications network. Inadequate communications not only hampers efficient management and coordination amongst

different offices but is also a critical component of staff safety. The mission was disturbed to find a patchy and largely dysfunctional communications network with many field offices relying on the rather delicate Thuraya phones to maintain occasional voice contact, at best. VHF and HF equipment had not been installed in many locations and radio contact could only be established from the few vehicles thus equipped. Being dependent on HCR supplies, many operational partners experienced similar handicaps. The prolonged difficulties in setting up basic communications, compounded by manpower shortages and software glitches in Geneva resulting in procurement delays, had a profound impact on UNHCR's overall effectiveness.

25. Good communication depends on both the hardware and the structure set up to facilitate the flow of information. This flow of information appeared to be disrupted and most of the field offices visited received only a trickle of the information that was processed by the sub-office in Abeche or the capital-based office of the Chief of Mission. Similarly, the authority to act upon information and take decisions had gradually shifted away from the operational theatre in the field, towards the country office in N'Djamena. This process created significant co-ordination problems among UNHCR staff in the two offices but also produced unclear lines of authority and slowed down decision-making.

26. A management structure may describe the functions that need to be performed but they in turn need to be filled with the appropriate staff. Both headquarters staff and colleagues in the field unequivocally agree that staffing for this operation has been the biggest concern and also the greatest impediment to an effective performance. By June, out of 39 approved professional functions, only nine were filled through staff being formally assigned to the operation while another 14 were deployed on missions of varying durations. The remaining 17 staff comprise a variety of non-UNHCR staff, including secondments, UN Volunteers or SURGE deployments. This amounts to a rather high ratio of supplementary staff over core staff with all its negative repercussions including a high turnover and lengthy induction periods to brief new colleagues not always familiar with basic UNHCR procedures. It also generated an environment in which colleagues were obliged to fill knowledge and performance gaps by assuming functions outside their assigned responsibility.

27. UNHCR's management structure in the Chad operation was not fully functional and suffered from a number of shortcomings, both in design and implementation. The high ratio of secondments, UNVs and other categories of additional workforce over UNHCR core staff, raises some concern about UNHCR's ability to effectively staff an emergency operation of this magnitude with its own resources. The many non-UNHCR colleagues who make outstanding contributions to the operation need to be integrated into a core management structure that provides both supervision and accountability. That observation made, virtually all agencies involved in this operation experienced very similar problems in setting up functional offices and staffing them appropriately, a fact which again underscores the extraordinary challenges created by this operation.

Benchmark 5: *Viable implementation arrangements.*

During the early stages of an emergency, many partnership agreements are concluded informally, based on mutual trust rather than extensive negotiations. Within a three to four months period, such flexible arrangements are ordinarily replaced by formal sub agreements between UNHCR and its partners, reflecting a clear consensus between the two about the activities that should be undertaken, their time frame and budgetary implications.

28. As was to be expected, financial issues have dominated the partnership agenda in the early stages of the operation, with implementing partners (IPs) insisting on rapid disbursements of instalments whereas UNHCR, not having received the requisite cash, encouraged partners to pre-finance operations with their own funds. However, such pre-financing set into motion a spiral of recurrent debt: when first instalments were eventually received, they barely covered the debt incurred and IPs continued to operate on the basis of deficit financing. The delays in disbursing funds to IPs also extended to assets as many partners were obliged to rent vehicles for several months at exorbitant cost to the project. Even more worrying was the fact that UNHCR was obliged to compromise on minimum standards on account of the financial situation: one partner NGO, for instance proceeded to construct rows of latrines rather than the initially agreed concept of family latrines because the limited funds available had to be stretched to reach the largest possible number of beneficiaries.

29. Aside from these cash flow constraints, negotiations with partners as such were often protracted and agreements reached with UNHCR had to be re-examined at higher levels, thus frustrating partners eager to commence implementation. In the perception of many NGOs, these delays were a direct function of the internal co-ordination problems between UNHCR N'Djamena and Abeche, although some of the delays could legitimately be attributed to headquarters. A clear definition of the implementation arrangements took quite some time to establish and a sizeable number of sub-agreements was still awaiting finalization by the end of June. These delays in regularizing agreements also meant that some partners were not fully aware of the role they were expected to assume and the implicit expectations with respect to their performance.

30. Just like UNHCR, almost all international NGOs were establishing a new presence from scratch and could therefore not fit into an existing co-ordination framework but had to join hands in creating a functioning mechanism. This has not always been easy and the co-ordination process in Abeche, for instance, appeared to confine itself to a mere exchange of information but was not geared to a collective analysis or a prioritization of interventions. There is only one local NGO operating in Eastern Chad which has traditionally been focusing on community development and infrastructure. Many international NGOs are directly collaborating with this local partner thereby enhancing its implementation capacity. That same local NGO, on the other hand, represents one of the few pools of trained staff and quite a number of them have already been headhunted into working for international NGOs or UN agencies.

31. Some concern has been expressed about the large number of partners involved in this operation. However, 16 NGOs is not an excessive number considering the complexity of the operation and the large geographical area to be covered, even if it does create additional challenges for the coordination process. At the same time, UNHCR needs to ensure that there is minimum consistency in the provision of services across the various camp sites and that closer collaboration amongst NGOs with the same sector portfolio but different geographical coverage, should be enhanced further.

32. The process of determining appropriate implementation arrangements in Eastern Chad has not been without controversy and some NGOs publicly raised their concerns about UNHCR's approach. However, at least some of the anxieties related to the coordination between UNHCR and its partners are not unique to the Chad emergency but were probably magnified on account of the fact that these difficulties were encountered both at the level of individual agencies and also collectively. Although the concept of partnership has been subjected to some harsh endurance tests in this operation, it was still found to be alive and well.

Conclusion

33. The above discussion of the evaluation's findings against the five benchmarks confirms both the achievements and the shortcomings of this operation. While the relocation of more than 150,000 refugees into camps is without doubt a most significant accomplishment, it may well have contributed to creating gaps in other areas, notably in the consolidation of the camps and the roll-out of a comprehensive protection approach.

34. Considering the findings in their totality, one cannot help but conclude that UNHCR has been 'behind the curve' in its response to the Chad emergency, an assertion which is based on what UNHCR could have been expected to achieve as compared to what it actually did achieve. Many of the activities that were being implemented in June should indeed have been pursued months earlier. For example, the fact that UNHCR has not been able to set up a functioning communications network six months into the emergency is tantamount to a breakdown in the organization's ability to deliver effective support to an emergency operation.

35. However, much as being 'behind the curve' circumscribes a delay in responding, it also implies the solution, namely to get 'ahead of the curve'. During the mission, the evaluation team found ample evidence of the very serious efforts that are being made to reverse the situation, from the massive airlifts delivering relief supplies to the many competent staff who have been newly deployed to the operation. These and many other measures initiated by Headquarters confirm that corrective action is being taken and that the operation is now ascending. That notwithstanding, UNHCR needs to scrutinize very closely why those problems occurred in the first place and what lessons can be learnt from this experience to ensure that they will not recur. The following section seeks to identify the underlying causes that may have contributed to UNHCR's uneven response.

Seeking the explanations

36. The influx of Sudanese refugees into Chad occurred over the period of one year in an incremental manner and was, during most of that time, perceived to be a 'manageable' operation, despite the increasingly strong warnings issued in UNHCR's monthly review of global 'Hot Spots'. It is not surprising, then, that many headquarters colleagues observed that this crisis had never been formally declared as an emergency within the house. As a consequence, there was no immediate sense of urgency which could have prompted staff to "go the extra mile" and accelerate processes related to staffing, procurement and budgeting in order to support an overriding corporate priority. Powerful as this assertion may be, UNHCR does not have a formal mechanism which would trigger the declaration of an emergency or the sounding of an internal alarm bell. How then did UNHCR succeed in responding so much more actively to past emergencies? The answer, at least partially, concerns intuitive perceptions: staff do recognize organizational priorities even if they are not formally spelled out. For example, the issuance of an All Staff email from the High Commissioner, encouraging staff to volunteer for missions to a particular country, clearly marks that operation as the one receiving priority attention within the house. In the case of Chad, such an executive message had indeed been issued by June but, at least in the view of this evaluation, this should have happened much earlier, perhaps even as early as January of this year.

37. Many reasons have been advanced to explain the difficulties in staffing the operation, including the limited number of French (and Arabic) speaking colleagues available in UNHCR or the absence of financial compensation for what indeed are most difficult working and living conditions. It is true that, unlike previous emergencies such as Afghanistan, UNHCR staff did not volunteer in large numbers to join the Chad operation but is equally true that the operation had not been 'marketed' internally either and therefore did not stimulate such interest. The comparison with Afghanistan would also point to a breakdown of the fast track procedure in assigning staff although it is recognized that the budgetary provisions to activate newly-created posts also contributed to significant delays.

38. This prevailing uncertainty about the nature and gravity of the Chad emergency was heightened by the fact that no formal headquarters-based Task Force had been set up during the most critical period of this operation. A Task Force not only improves information-sharing and response coordination but also provides an important forum to directly associate the various support services in the house with the management of the operation. Without the support of such a Task Force, and one chaired at an appropriately senior level, the responsibility for following-up with the various support services in the house on the plethora of actions they needed to undertake was relegated to an already overstretched Desk in the Africa Bureau. Within the Bureau, the Chad operation was increasingly overshadowed by the potentially large repatriation operation into Southern Sudan and the priority that is accorded to an imminent durable solution.

39. Interestingly, the Chad operation cannot be said to have been deprived of attention in its broader sense; it benefited from a strong and largely sustained media exposure, it received two consecutive missions by the Assistant High Commissioner and the High Commissioner, not to mention high profile visits by UNHCR Goodwill Ambassadors Julien Leclerc and Angelina Jolie as well as numerous donor delegations. Yet this did not translate into a full blown commitment by the organization to assign this operation the priority status it warranted. Priorities, after all, are pursued through the allocation of resources, some of which may initially be moved across from other operations but will ultimately have to be backed by new income. Although the Chad emergency received several allocations from the Operational Reserve (UNHCR's internal cash advance mechanism) to front-load key operational investments, they ultimately amounted to stopgap measures and were not sufficient to adequately fund the operations. The availability of donor funding therefore assumes an even more critical role in the early stages of the operation. It will be useful here to situate the refugee situation in Chad for a moment within the broader context of the Darfur crisis as this perspective may offer a possible explanation for the hesitant approach not only of UNHCR but also of some of its operational partners and donors.

40. Although the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in Darfur had become widely known by late 2003, the international community displayed a certain degree of ambiguity towards the refugee situation in Chad. While recognizing the refugee influx as the most manifest expression of an ongoing disaster in Darfur, some donors may have been rather more cautious to commit resources to Chad knowing that Darfur, once accessible, would constitute an even larger and more intricate humanitarian crisis. A few donors openly questioned UNHCR's refugee statistics, seemingly intent on downplaying the magnitude of the crisis in Chad. While UNHCR's registration data has since been vindicated, these expressions of doubt may also have influenced other donors in taking a more cautious approach toward this operation. Although some donors generously responded to UNHCR's appeal, the operation to date still has the highest ratio of allocations from the operational reserve over actual income, in itself an indication that the operation has been constrained by the availability of both adequate and timely contributions.

41. Some of UNHCR's operational partners, for their part, pursued a 'wait and see' approach in the early stages of the operation. Starting from a low base of just two international NGOs when the influx first occurred, UNHCR now collaborates with 16 implementing partners. Some NGOs commenced operations in Chad with the expressed purpose of 'getting ready to move into Darfur', a position which perhaps did not equate to an unequivocal commitment towards the refugee situation in Chad. This approach has clearly changed since that time and most NGOs spoken to are indeed preparing to invest, for at least the medium term, in Chad.

42. In making reference to the attitudes of donors and NGOs, the intention is not to explain away what still amounts to a slow and uneven response on the part of UNHCR but rather to describe more comprehensively the backdrop against which this occurred. At field level, a number of concerns relate to the country level management of UNHCR operations in N'Djamena. The office's effectiveness in providing a clear sense of direction and strategic planning for the operation has been adversely affected by the high turnover of staff on short term missions including the two consecutive emergency response teams, coupled with an inconsistent approach

in following-up with UNHCR headquarters on the many deliverables the field operation depended upon.

43. However, it should also be noted that the OCM was only reopened in late 2003, following the discontinuation of UNHCR activities in Chad in 2001 and its subsequent coverage from neighbouring Bangui. Being obliged to start from scratch in setting-up a UNHCR country presence is tantamount to a 'cold start', in the words of one interviewee. This is not just a concern with respect to the accreditation of the Representative. It touches upon virtually every aspect of a functioning country management and field support office, including rather mundane but nonetheless crucial working level contacts such as those required for an expeditious customs clearance. The closure and subsequent reopening of UNHCR's presence in Chad within the space of just two years is a key element in explaining the operational delays incurred in responding to the emergency: a country office cannot provide effective support to the field operation and, at the same time, set up all necessary systems to be able to do so. This observation constitutes a central lesson learnt and should lead to a policy review of the mechanisms and criteria applied in the closure of UNHCR offices.

44. Perhaps the most critical field level process to have impacted on UNHCR's overall effectiveness is the handover between the last Emergency Response Team (ERT), deployed from end December until mid March and the, by then established, country office. The deployment of an ERT constitutes a key component in UNHCR's repertoire of emergency response measures and a certain degree of friction has always been present between the colleagues dispatched to manage an emergency for a short period of time and those staff assigned to the operation and expected to follow through on many of the processes started by the former. Importantly, such a handover is not just a one-time debriefing session between the outgoing ERT and the country office but ultimately stretches across the entire deployment period, since the operational accomplishments achieved during the emergency response stage should be fully integrated into the country management of the operation.

45. It is the view of this evaluation that many of the problems in the operation identified and analyzed in earlier sections of this report can be traced back to an ineffective relay process. This includes the continued efforts to define the right level of authority between UNHCR N'djamena and its sub office in Abeche and the resultant co-ordination difficulties with partners, many of whom complained about UNHCR's unwillingness to honour budgetary commitments entered into by the ERT. Key achievements of the ERT, such as the setting up of pre-registration system, fell into a state of disrepair upon the departure of the emergency team. While numerous detailed handover notes had been prepared by the members of the ERT, they do not appear to have been analyzed or used in the evolving management of the operations. An effective handover is premised on a thorough review of the state of the operation leading to a shared vision on further action that is required. The fact this has not taken place points to the malfunctioning of a key mechanism which was originally designed to firmly anchor UNHCR's emergency response within the respective country operation.

46. The above analysis indicates that a number of different and perhaps unrelated trends have had a cumulative and mutually reinforcing effect in undermining the effectiveness of UNHCR's response. At the same time, the analysis hopefully

provides some pointers to the lessons that need to be learnt from this experience. The recommendations tabled below attempt to translate some of the lessons learnt into specific proposals for follow-up action.

Recommendations

47. Recommendations here below are sub-divided into those systemic issues that require follow-up at headquarters level and warrant formal endorsement by Senior Management to ensure their consistent follow-up. Strategic recommendations deal with issues concerning the broader management of the operations involving both the field and relevant headquarters sections, whereas 'operational recommendations' are primarily addressed to UNHCR managers in the field.

Systemic recommendations:

- 1) The headquarters response to the Chad emergency clearly highlights the need to develop an appropriate mechanism to declare an emergency, based on pre-defined triggering events that would then set off a chain response. This analysis has already started (Emergency and Security Management Initiative) and it is recommended that this review process be further expedited and strongly supported by the Executive Office.
- 2) One of the most critical support functions to be performed by headquarters is the provision of telecommunications equipment. The long delays in dispatching the hardware and, equally important, in deploying the technical staff to oversee its installation, highlight the need to undertake a process review that will result in a significant reduction of the lead time required in setting up basic communications in the field.
- 3) A similar process analysis should be undertaken with respect to the deployment of staff in an emergency and, in particular, the continued relevance of fast track procedures. This review should also include an evaluation of existing compensation schemes and a possible extension of their applicability to situation such as the one in Chad. Minimum levels of UNHCR core staff need to be defined to provide a structure that can effectively utilize secondments, UNVs and other non-UNHCR staff.
- 4) UNHCR should also set up a formal mechanism to handle office closures and develop general criteria to inform such policy decisions. These elements could be captured in an 'executive checklist' to ensure that no critical aspect in the analysis is omitted before effecting the closure of a UNHCR country presence.
- 5) While a number of constructive suggestions have been tabled to improve upon the handover process from the Emergency Response Team to the established country office, this evaluation must prompt a more comprehensive review of UNHCR's emergency response mechanisms and its continued relevance as a service delivery in a global operational environment that has fundamentally changed over the past decade or so. The experience in Chad suggests that a standard two or three months' ERT deployment may not be an adequate intervention any longer if the purpose is to respond effectively to the emergency and, at the same time, to ensure the sustainability of that response.

Strategic recommendations

- 1) UNHCR should start to plan for the decongestion of camps after the rains to improve upon their sustainability. Where appropriate, new camp sites may need to be identified. Potential conflicts with the host population over scarce resources need to be anticipated and factored into the planning.
- 2) UNHCR should review the lessons learnt from other operations in arid regions (e.g. Sahrawi refugees) which may offer valuable insights into the sustainability of refugee sites and particular concerns such as firewood.
- 3) A comprehensive protection strategy should be developed together with field staff which addresses the physical security of refugees, their legal protection, including registration and documentation, as well as their material and social protection.
- 4) The logistics capacity of UNHCR Chad needs to be reinforced and sustained for the duration of the operation. This involves the setting-up of a proper logistics cell with very experienced staff.

Operational recommendations

- 1) Efforts should be undertaken to further support the harmonization of assistance across camp locations by facilitating visits from both UNHCR and IP staff to sites they are not covering directly. Such visits should also seek to identify best practices (e.g. foyer ameliores) to be promoted across the operational area.
- 2) UNHCR Chad should conduct more frequent border monitoring to improve upon early warning mechanisms and also channel relevant information into the Contingency Planning process.
- 3) Much closer interaction needs to take place with the refugee community and UNHCR should strategize with partners on the establishment of appropriate community networks to obtain a better picture of their welfare and protection concerns.
- 4) Adequate training opportunities need to be offered for all staff in the field, especially newly-recruited protection and community services staff, as well as staff from partners. This training is a crucial investment in future performance and should not be considered as a non-essential activity that could be postponed until after the emergency.
- 5) The roles and responsibilities of the various HCR offices need to be better articulated. The coordination process with partners at all levels (OCM-SO-FO) warrants further streamlining to ensure that all relevant information is exchanged.
- 6) UNHCR officers should adopt a proactive approach to identifying unaccompanied and separated children, setting up appropriate tracing mechanism as early as possible and cooperating closely with ICRC and other child protection agencies.

Annex 1. Chronology of events

December 2001: UNHCR closes its offices in Chad in a global prioritization exercise.

October 2002: Refugees from the Central African Republic start to arrive in Southern Chad.

April 2003: Fighting breaks out in Northern Darfur province, Western Sudan, between the rebel Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM) and Sudanese Government forces over areas reportedly under rebel control. First arrival of refugees from Darfur into Chad reported.

July 2003: The Chadian Government reports that 65,000 refugees had fled into Chad.

September 2003: Joint assessment mission of UNHCR, WFP and the Chadian Government. First deployment of ERT (4 persons) is underway to begin emergency response.

18 September 2003: UNHCR is approaching other partners such as WFP, World Vision, UNICEF and ICRC to determine what interventions can be launched in the short term. Logistics and funding constraints are hampering a rapid response.

2 October 2003: During a meeting of its Executive Committee, UNHCR launches a supplementary appeal for US\$16.6 million for emergency assistance to 65,000 refugees in Eastern Chad to cover 2003 and 2004.

15-19 December 2003: Visit to Chad by the Assistant High Commissioner; decision to start relocation from the border and to deploy another ERT.

December 2003: Another 30,000 new arrivals are reported during this month, bringing the total number of refugees to 95,000 at the end of December.

end December 2003: Arrival of second ERT comprising five UNHCR colleagues deployed to Eastern Chad to begin the relocation of refugees.

mid-January 2004: Relocation starts to newly-opened refugee camp of Farchana, initially accommodating 9,000 refugees. Other sites are being assessed and prepared.

29 January 2004: A series of explosions apparently from aerial bombings strikes areas around the Chadian town of Tine on the border with Sudan, leaving three persons dead and 15 wounded. Direct assistance in the border areas is suspended because of the security situation.

Jan. - Feb. 2004: More than 6,000 Sudanese refugees arrive in Bahai, North Eastern Chad, after their villages in Western Sudan's Darfur region are attacked by armed militia.

13 February 2004: UNHCR is starting daily airlifts to bring more relief supplies into Eastern Chad. Five additional international staff are deployed, bringing the number of emergency staff on the ground to about 20. A third refugee site at Kounoungo is nearing completion (following Farchana and Touloum). However, the difficulty in finding more sites with sufficient water to meet the needs of refugees slows down the relocation exercise.

March 2004: The increasing frequency of cross-border raids by militia from Sudan make it all the more urgent to move refugees to safer sites further inland.

early March 2004: Visit by the High Commissioner.

5 March 2004: The High Commissioner briefs donor governments on UNHCR's emergency efforts in Chad and presents a revised budget of US\$ 20.8 million for the emergency operation, representing a US\$ 10.5 million increase in the 2004 portion of the original appeal.

20 April, 2004: 31,100 Sudanese refugees have been transferred to five camps.

27 April, 2004: According to local authorities in the Chadian border town of Bahai, an estimated 200 to 300 people have been crossing the border from Western Sudan's Darfur into Chad every week since early April. Assistance to these refugees had been delayed due to the remoteness of the area as well as logistical constraints.

14 May, 2004: UNHCR appeals for urgent funds to sustain its assistance programmes ahead of seasonal rains expected in the coming weeks. To date, UNHCR has received only \$13 million out of the nearly \$ 21 million needed. It has spent all the contributions so far and is using funds borrowed from its Operational Reserve to pay for the programme.

20 May, 2004: Addressing the 15 members of the UN Security Council, High Commissioner Lubbers says "If the situation in Darfur does not improve, we will see further refugee flows into Chad".

25 May, 2004: In an effort to pump sufficient aid supplies into eastern Chad before the start of the five-month long rainy season, UNHCR launches a new wave of an emergency humanitarian airlift for the 125,000 Sudanese refugees in Chad.

1 June, 2004: Between 200 and 300 new arrivals are reported in north eastern Chad's Bahai town, already home to more than 14,000 refugees from earlier influxes.

3 June, 2004: UNHCR estimates that some 158,000 refugees from Darfur have fled into eastern Chad of whom 81,000 have already been relocated to seven new refugee camps further inland. In addition to its country office in N'djamena, UNHCR has opened five offices in eastern Chad and is establishing a sixth at Bahai in the north.

4 June, 2004: Hundreds of new refugees continue to arrive around the Chadian border town of Adre, reportedly fleeing new fighting in Sudan's Tundubai, Koulbous and Kornoya districts. Staffing and trucking capacity are increased to quickly move these refugees to the newly-constructed camp of Bredjing.

9 June, 2004: UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie visits Chad. “It stuns me that such a dramatic emergency is nowhere to be found in the headlines” says Jolie.

early June: UNHCR Director of the Department of Operational Support (DOS) and Deputy Director of the Africa Bureau visit Chad and initiate a series of interventions upon return.

11 June, 2004: UNHCR announces that it is revising its 2004 budget for the Chad emergency to US\$55.8 million. This is an increase of \$35 million over the agency’s previous appeal for \$20.8 million. The increased budget takes into account the continued arrival of new refugees in Chad and plans to help 200,000 by the end of the year. The agency has so far received \$18 million in contributions.

mid June, 2004: More than 100,000 Sudanese refugees are now in UNHCR’s eight camps in eastern Chad, less than five months after the relocation from the border first started. UNHCR is still seeking to transfer an estimated 50,000 to 90,000 refugees remaining along a 600-km stretch of border, where they will be cut off from assistance once the seasonal rains make many roads impassable.

12 - 25 June 2004: Real Time Evaluation takes place in Chad.

Annex 2. Terms of Reference

Real time evaluation of UNHCR's emergency response in Chad

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" (RTE) - reviews that are usually completed at an early stage of an operation, and which lead to the production of brief reports with recommendations for action.

Since early 2003, Chad has experienced two distinct refugee influxes from the Central African Republic and the Sudan (Darfur situation). Although the onset of the Chad emergency thus occurred more than one year ago, a Real Time Evaluation is still considered to be pertinent at this point in time given the profound changes the operation is undergoing following the recent relocation of some 80,000 refugees from the border areas.

The overall objective of this RTE is to determine the operational effectiveness of UNHCR's response to the Chad emergency and to identify lessons learnt of possible relevance to other operations. While seeking to obtain an understanding of the complex challenges facing UNHCR in this operation, the RTE will particularly focus on the following questions:

- What were the critical factors affecting UNHCR's initial response capacity, both at country level and with respect to HQ processes such as fast track deployment or procurement of relief items?
- What particular challenges have arisen in the protection of refugees, particularly with respect to the separation of armed elements, camp security and the identification of special protection needs?
- How effective has the co-ordination effort been with implementing partners, other NGOs and Government authorities?
- What are the strategic options available at this juncture to ensure the sustainability of the newly-created camp sites?

The Real Time Evaluation will comprise one staff member each from the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit and the Africa Bureau. The team will engage in extensive Desk research prior to undertaking a ten-day mission to Chad by mid-June. During this mission, interviews will be conducted with UNHCR staff, partner agencies and refugees. The mission will debrief UNHCR Chad on its main findings and compile a summary report upon return to Geneva.

EPAU
30 May 2004