## **Fact Sheet**

Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Washington, DC January 16, 2004

## Refugee Admissions Program for Near East and South Asia

## **Background**

Since 1980, more than 133,000 refugees from Near East and South Asian countries have been offered resettlement in the United States. Most have been Iranian (over 61,000), Iraqi (37,000), or Afghan (35,000). The majority of refugees currently identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as in need of third country resettlement are Iranians and Afghans, often members of religious and ethnic minorities or extremely vulnerable women at risk who have sought temporary asylum in other countries in the region. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) conducts quarterly refugee interviewing visits to Turkey and Egypt and periodic visits as needed to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, and Kuwait. DHS also interviews from permanent offices in India and Pakistan. Although large—scale repatriations have significantly diminished the pool of Afghans in need of resettlement, UNHCR continues to refer particularly vulnerable Afghans for whom repatriation is not a viable "durable solution" to the program for U.S. resettlement.

The success of U.S. arms and diplomacy has had a dramatic impact on the region. The changed political environment in Iraq has also reduced the number of refugees in need of resettlement in the United States. Some 4,260 refugees from the region were admitted to the U.S. Resettlement Program in FY 2003, a significant decrease from the 12,000 persons admitted in FY 2001.

Iraqis. Nearly two million Iraqis fled the repression in Iraq that followed the first Gulf War. Though most returned at the end of the war, significant numbers remained in countries of first asylum, fearing persecution in Iraq. More Iraqis fled during the second Gulf War. There are an estimated 850,000 Iraqi refugees worldwide, and several hundred thousand more in refugee-like conditions, mostly in Iran, Jordan, and Syria. Since the fall of the Iraq regime, UNHCR has organized returns for about 4,500 Iraqis. An additional 50,000-100,000 Iraqis have spontaneously returned. Another 500,000 Iraqi refugees may return to Iraq over the next 2-3 years. Following September 11, processing of Iraqis in the region ceased as new security procedures were implemented. Only 130 Iraqis were admitted in FY 2003. As order returns to post-Saddam Iraq, we expect repatriation to continue as it has in Afghanistan. UNHCR is no longer referring Iraqis for resettlement, although it has not issued a Cessation Proclamation, and we expect Iraqi referrals in FY 2004 to be minimal.

Iranians. In Iran, the Islamic Government restricts religious freedom and subjects certain religious minorities to widespread discrimination and harassment. Members of these groups often face legal penalties and persecution. As persons of special concern to the United States, refugees who are members of Iranian religious minorities are eligible to apply to our program regardless of family links and without UNHCR referral. Most Iranians are now processed in Turkey and Austria.

Afghans. More than two million Afghan refugees who fled from civil war and Taliban oppression to neighboring Iran and Pakistan have repatriated to Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban. Despite this massive repatriation, there remain a number of refugees for whom resettlement is the only viable durable solution. Urban Afghan women who may have worked outside the home before the Taliban took power and who have no immediate male family members have been identified by the Department of State and UNHCR as most in need of resettlement. Processing of vulnerable Afghan refugees in Pakistan continues despite a difficult security environment and of Indo-Pakistani tensions.

## FY 2004 Admissions Program

The FY 2004 ceiling for refugee admissions from the Near East and South Asia is 2,000. The Department of State is working with UNHCR to identify refugees in the region requiring resettlement, especially women-at-risk. Small numbers of refugees from the Middle East are also processed from central Asian and Caucasus countries.



Published by the U.S. Department of State Website at http://www.state.gov maintained by the Bureau of Public Affairs.