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Briefer: Ron Redmond / UNHCR spokesman

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This is a summary of what was said by the UNHCR spokesperson at today's Palais des Nations press briefing in Geneva. Further information can be found on the UNHCR websites, www.unhcr.org and www.unhcr.fr, which should also be checked for regular media updates on non-briefing days.

1 - Iraq humanitarian effort needs ongoing support

Although the humanitarian situation in Iraq has been largely out of the spotlight recently, UNHCR remains extremely concerned about meeting the needs of millions of uprooted people both within the country as well as outside.

These concerns were conveyed to donor countries at a UNHCR meeting on Thursday in which the Director of our Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa, Mr. Radhouane Nouicer, said Iraq is currently in a difficult and fragile transition phase that still requires the urgent attention of the international community.

While overall security conditions have improved, they are not yet sustainable enough to have encouraged massive returns of Iraqis. There are still well over 1.5 million Iraqis outside the country -- mostly in Syria and Jordan -- and another 2 million internally displaced. Although some returns have taken place, many have been neither safe nor sustainable. It is UNHCR's opinion that Iraqis should not be forced back, which would be detrimental to the safety of those concerned and would negatively affect the fragile absorption capacity of the country.

At the same time, the government of Iraq is itself torn between numerous priorities in the political, electoral and national reconciliation spheres. It has many challenges ahead in relation to socio-economic issues and the requirements for the smooth and sustainable return and reintegration of refugees and internally displaced people. The government needs to make further progress in the implementation of

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its national policy on displacement and return; to take decisions on land allocation and property restitution and compensation; and to launch a major housing and rehabilitation programme that is commensurate with the huge dimensions of the housing problem.

In addition to these internal challenges, UNHCR and its humanitarian partners remain handicapped by a shortage of funds as well as heavy security arrangements that hamper our mobility and our ability to deliver assistance. Nevertheless, we have steadily built up our presence in 14 of Iraq's 17 provinces and many of our partners are doing the same. But these efforts will remain piecemeal if not integrated into a national, government-led framework aimed at addressing the myriad social and economic challenges that must be overcome. On the funding side, UNHCR's \$299 million Iraq operation for 2009 is only 48 percent funded and we're not going to be able to implement certain programs if more money is not received soon.

Outside Iraq, asylum countries continue to carry a huge burden and are increasingly concerned over what they fear is gradually becoming a protracted refugee situation. They need and deserve continuing international support.

In our briefing for donors, Mr. Nouicer noted that UNHCR's work is focusing on four areas. First, the need to maintain the "protection space" for uprooted Iraqis, many of whom are still unable or unwilling to return home. Second, the need to do more inside Iraq itself to prepare for returns of internally displaced people and refugees. This includes more support to the government and local authorities in ensuring the adequate reception and sustainable reintegration of returnees. Third, resettlement will remain a major component of the Iraq operation in 2009-10. UNHCR estimates that more than 60,000 Iraqis in neighbouring countries are eligible and in need of resettlement. We have already submitted some 70,000 referrals to resettlement countries, but fewer than 25,000 Iraqis have actually departed. Fourth, UNHCR will continue to focus on other refugee groups inside Iraq, including Palestinians, Iranians, Turks and others who are in precarious conditions.

So we remind the international community that it would be far too risky to reduce support or engagement in the Iraq humanitarian operation at this fragile stage. Iraq has experienced waves of mass displacement over the last 40 years that have resulted in deep social dislocation and complex humanitarian problems. What we are dealing with today is the accumulation of these problems. Bringing stability to such a complex situation is going to take time and requires the collective and continuous engagement of all.

2 – Pakistan displacement update

Thousands of people took advantage of the lifting of a curfew over the weekend to flee from their villages and towns in the Swat Valley to reach safer areas in Mardan, Swabi and Charsadda districts of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). This was the first opportunity in some time for people trapped in those areas to escape to safer zones. Thousands of people have fled their homes in the past days, mainly from the Mingora and Char Bagh areas in Swat district, although it is difficult to

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confirm figures. To respond to this new influx, UNHCR, its partners and NWFP authorities have established two new camps in Charsadda and Peshawar districts. Sugar Mill camp, in Charsadda, received 400 families, or 2,400 individuals, yesterday (Monday) and more people are expected to arrive today (Tuesday). Some families who arrived in Sugar Mill yesterday told our teams that they had been living in their basement for a month. They said they were about to run out of food when the curfew was finally lifted last Saturday and Sunday and they were told to evacuate the area. One family said they ate spinach and bread for 25 days before they were finally able to leave their home for safety. The displaced cited shortages of food and medicine as major problems for those who remain stranded in the conflict zone.

Many of the families said they were transported out of Swat Valley by government arranged trucks which took them to Yar Hussain camp in Swabi or Sugar Mill in Charsadda. Others said they had walked some of the way before taking buses to reach safer areas, then renting private accommodation or finding a place to stay with host families or in schools.

In the new Sugar Mill camp in Charsadda, UNHCR has provided relief kits for 850 families, including mats, plastic sheeting, kitchen sets, jerry cans, and blankets. Tents have been provided by the governmental District Coordination Officer (DCO), who is working with a local NGO (IDRAK) to provide equipment and labor to clear and level the site. UNICEF is taking care of installing latrines with its partner Humanitarian Resources Development Society (HRDS). Basic health facilities should be in place in the next few days. UNHCR is working to install electricity. As in other camps, we're also providing materials to erect sun screens and privacy walls and bricks for fire pits.

On registration, the fast-track registration data is currently being cross-checked and verified by the National Database Registration Authority (NADRA) and we expect to be able to confirm updated registration figures later today.

3 - Chad issues first identity cards to refugees Darfur

About 110,000 Sudanese refugees over the age of 18 in eastern Chad will receive identity cards under a new programme that started yesterday. The ID cards are the equivalent of a "refugee passport" allowing free movement within the host country and providing access to some basic in line with the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention.

UNCHR distributed the first 10 ID cards in a symbolic ceremony yesterday (Monday) in Gaga refugee camp, near Abeche, together with local authorities and the Chadian government's refugee commission (CNAR).

The ID cards, which are printed by UNHCR and issued by the government of Chad, were warmly welcomed by the refugees who said that they now feel protected and fully accepted in Chad.

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Preparations for this joint initiative have been underway since the end of 2006. Identity and age verification exercises in all 12 camps in eastern Chad hosting some 250,000 refugees from Sudan's Darfur region were initially scheduled to start in 2008. However, due to lasting insecurity in eastern Chad, these activities began only in April this year. So far, we have processed some 37,000 refugees in Gaga and Farchana camps.

We plan to distribute all 110,000 ID cards by the end of this year, provided that the verification process is not interrupted again. Since the latest Chadian rebel incursion on 4 May, our regular daily access to refugee camps is still problematic due to security restrictions. For example, humanitarian convoys to Oure Cassoni refugee camp near Bahai last Friday had to be temporarily suspended after a military plane bombarded an area some 2 kms from the camp, which is close to the Sudanese border.

Meanwhile, refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR) continue to arrive in small groups in the village of Daha, in south-eastern Chad's Salamat region, as well as in the vicinity of Danamadji in southern Chad. They fled fearing new confrontations between rebel groups and the CAR army.

Some 17,000 CAR refugees found shelter in six spontaneous sites which sprung up in Daha and Massambagne villages since mid-January. In southern Chad, we now care for 73,000 refugees hosted in five refugee camps and six spontaneous sites. Our teams in this part of Chad provide protection and emergency assistance. We continue to distribute shelter material (plastic sheeting) and household items to all newly arrived families -- mostly women and small children. UNHCR also supports the work of the local health centre.

Together with our partner agencies we secured refugee access to education and clean water and built latrines, and we are pre-positioning food-rations sufficient for six months. As of mid-June when the rainy season will start, the CAR refugees in south-eastern Chad will be basically cut off from assistance as it will be physically impossible to reach them.

4 – Sri Lanka displacement update

With fighting now at an end in Sri Lanka's north, UNHCR is working with the government of Sri Lanka and other humanitarian agencies to provide urgently needed aid to hundreds of thousands who fled the former conflict zone in the last several months.

Some 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDP) are accommodated in the 40 emergency shelter sites spread across the districts of Vavuniya, Jaffna and Trincomalee. UNHCR and partners are carrying out emergency shelter work, regular non-food distributions and protection monitoring.

UNHCR and shelter agencies have erected some 8,800 emergency shelters and more than 14,000 tents so far and will continue to set up more as land clearance continues. This year alone, we have distributed some 66,000 bed sheets, 73,000

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plastic mats, 31,000 kitchen sets, tens of thousands of hygiene kits and hundreds of thousands of men's and women's clothing and other items. UNHCR is transporting additional aid from Colombo to replenish stocks in the areas concerned.

We continue to work closely with the government to better respond to the emergency -- from central government level to the local government officials who are involved with direct assistance activities on the ground.

The priorities are to decongest and improve conditions in the sites, stabilize the population and prepare for return. UNHCR is also in close dialogue with the government to ensure that the IDPs in the camps have freedom of movement. The government has taken positive steps on this front by releasing categories of persons with special needs, including the elderly and pregnant women, to specialized institutions as well as reunifying families separated during flight. We are encouraging the government to complete screening as soon as possible and separate the ex-combatants, so that the civilian population can be allowed to move freely in and out of the camps.

UNHCR's ultimate objective is to support government efforts to restore normalcy in the lives of this population by ensuring that they can return home as soon as conditions are in place. This includes addressing security issues; de-mining and removal of unexploded ordnance; village profile assessments and reconstruction of damaged homes; infrastructure and livelihood development; and reviving of the civil administration in the affected districts and provinces.

5 - UNHCR appeals to the EU for protection-sensitive measures

In advance of the European Union (EU) Justice and Home Affairs Ministers on 4-5 June, High Commissioner António Guterres is calling on the EU and its Member States to ensure that migration control measures do not undermine fundamental rights of asylum seekers and refugees. In a letter addressed to the Czech EU Presidency last week, Mr. Guterres expressed concerns about the situation of persons intercepted at sea in the Mediterranean and the responses of governments to this, including those of Italy.

The High Commissioner called for EU support to Libya to improve the general conditions for asylum seekers and refugees in the country. He appealed to EU Member States to admit those who appear to be in need of international protection.

UNHCR recognizes the challenges which irregular migration poses both to North African and southern European countries. UNHCR would welcome further EU support for its work, but emphasizes that its activities cannot be a substitute for State responsibility. For that reason UNHCR continues to call on EU countries to offer resettlement places for refugees who are currently without solutions in Libya and other countries where durable solutions are not available.

The High Commissioner is aware that some EU Member States, and particularly those located along the Mediterranean, face particular pressures from the arrival of asylum-seekers and refugees. UNHCR is prepared to support responsibility-sharing

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mechanisms within the EU, including some relocation of people found in need of international protection, when reception and asylum systems in specific Member States are under strain. At the same time it is important for EU Member States to redouble their efforts to improve asylum facilities and procedures, as part of the effort to build a Common European Asylum System.

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