



Context of UNHCR's Shelter programme in Armenia¹

In Armenia there are some 300,000 refugees who had fled during the Kharabakh conflict in 1988 -1992 mainly from Azerbaijan and some from other CIS countries. Since in the current context, especially the stalemate over Nagorno Karabakh, the prospects for repatriation of ethnic Armenian to Azerbaijan are unlikely, the Government of Armenia has adopted a policy for their local integration. Since 1993, UNHCR has assisted and promoted integration of refugees into the Armenian society as a durable solution. UNHCR through assistance programmes in the social, naturalisation and shelter sectors as well as through the development and implementation of legal instruments continues to promote their local integration.

Strategy

Adequate shelter is one of the main priorities for refugees from Azerbaijan. Since **1995, 3,281 refugee families have been provided with individual houses/remodelled apartments** funded by UNHCR and its donors. However, some 9,000 refugees or some 3,100 families (estimates of the Government of Armenia) are still residing in communal centres and other types of temporary, largely substandard shelter in Yerevan and the other ten regions of the country.

UNHCR has over the years developed its approach to provision of permanent accommodation for the refugees that have opted for local integration in Armenia as their preferred durable solution.

The Office has re-oriented its strategy for refugee shelter to a more human rights based approach and will continue to follow a multi-faceted shelter strategy which goes beyond the physical repair and reconstruction of buildings.

UNHCR's strategy will continue to include the protection of property rights and the improvement of the legal framework for the transfer of ownership title of certain buildings and houses to refugees.

In addition, UNHCR has been lobbying for the Government to develop a comprehensive national housing strategy for all vulnerable groups in Armenia living in sub-standard and temporary housing, including refugees, which should address all the inter-related issues preventing people from having adequate permanent shelter.

UNHCR activities in 2003

In 2003, UNHCR supported the Department for Migration and Refugees (DMR) to conduct a new assessment and prioritisation of refugee housing needs which has laid the basis for a new refugee housing programme which could eventually be presented to other donors for funding.

¹ Adapted from the UNHCR 2004 project proposal to SDC

Moreover, the Office continued to remodel communal centres and complete a limited number of half-finished buildings. This included the provision of technical support for the identification of technically feasible buildings for remodelling or construction. In order to meet the shelter needs of the most needy refugees living in substandard communal centres, UNHCR provided permanent accommodation to 119 vulnerable refugee families, mainly elderly refugees, women headed households and families with many children living in dilapidated communal centres as well as 8 vulnerable local families. A total of 282 vulnerable individuals hence benefited from the 138 apartments provided in 2003.

Description of the Shelter Programme:

UNHCR will continue to advocate for and raise the awareness of national and international institutions as well as donors on the housing needs of the refugees as a socially disadvantaged group.

UNHCR will continue to support DMR in implementing the law, which will allow refugees to own and enjoy the property rights of donated apartments and houses, following the enactment of the Law on the Transfer of Ownership Rights of UNHCR and other international donor constructed houses in 2003.

UNHCR will also continue to either remodel communal centres or complete a limited number of half-finished buildings. This will include the provision of technical support for the identification of technically feasible buildings for remodelling or construction. The average costs are expected to be some US\$ 4,500 per unit. In order to meet the shelter needs of the most needy refugees living in substandard communal centres, some 120-150 vulnerable refugee families (360-450 individuals), mainly elderly refugees, women headed households and families with many children living in dilapidated communal centres will benefit from this activity in 2004.

UNHCR will continue to coordinate its shelter activities with other partners active in the provision of housing, particularly the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), as well to seek opportunities to expand the involvement of development agencies and private donors, including Diaspora organizations, in providing shelter solutions for refugees living in temporary accommodation, a process which has begun in 2002. Specifically, UNHCR will continue to identify and monitor available ways to increase the opportunity for refugees to have access to adequate housing by other means than UNHCR Shelter Programme, such as the Housing Purchase Certificate Programme which was piloted with USAID in 2002.

Contribution of SDC

Objective of the SDC programme: To strengthen the housing program of UNHCR in Armenia towards the turn over of these activities to the local government

Switzerland has contributed to UNHCR shelter programme in past years as followed since 1997 until 2004 with a total amount of CHF 4.7 million.

A joint evaluation SDC/UNHCR of UNHCR shelter programme has been conducted in 2001. The results can be summarised as followed:

- The current beneficiary selection procedure ensures that the most vulnerable refugees are reached by the programme through a time-consuming but very thorough selection procedure with involvement of UNHCR, DMR and local NGO.
- The implementation strategy (finalisation of existing buildings) is appropriate and cost effective when compared to other shelter programmes implemented in the earth quake zone.

The UNHCR program has been supported by shelter advisor sponsored by SDC. His main tasks are to advise the UNHCR and give guidance to the implementing agency YMCA. The shelter advisor assesses the proposed buildings to be rehabilitated, he approves the plans and monitors the execution of the works, he approves namely the completion of the buildings. Per year the advisor has carried out three to four missions. The deployment of the shelter advisor contributed significantly to the success of the project.