

Initiatives for reaching-out to Afghan refugees in Iran

Afghans situation in Iran is characterized by protracted exile, large numbers, residence in urban areas, emergence of second and third generations, and ownership of assistance operations by the host government. These features have made access to refugees a challenge for needs assessment, information management, assistance and service delivery.

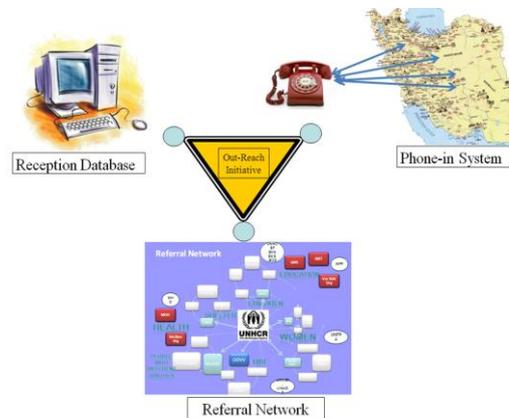
UNHCR has employed various methodologies for (1) reaching out to refugees or (2) receiving them at the reception areas in its offices. Some of these include partnership with different actors, mobilizing refugee contact persons and community leaders, Community Integrated Social and medical Assistance Programme (CISAMAP), using multifunctional team approach, field monitoring mission, home visits and participatory assessment.

The current document is briefly introducing three initiatives by UNHCR and Bureau for Alien and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA) in Iran.

(I) UNHCR Field Unit Tehran triangular Initiative

Phone-in-system

Due to an unprecedented influx of foreign nationals at UNHCR gate in Tehran in October 2009 daily routine of reception was halted for a period of two weeks based on an executive decision. This became a turning point in the reception activities and resulted in a thorough review of the whole reception procedure. Beginning of November 2009, Field Unit Tehran (FUT) introduced the phone-in system through which persons of concern (PoC) could maintain their access to UNHCR.



Currently four land lines are available for PoCs in order to raise their assistance and protection related issues. These four lines are attended to from 8:30 to 15:30. Out of the working hours of reception¹ lines, an automated messaging system is established for the callers to receive informative messages through selecting the desired subject between menus of the messaging system.

Reception database

Throughout the reception² history, there was no systematic data recording. With introduction of the phone-in system, need for a centralized database became more vivid. In April 2010, Reception DataBase (RDB) replaced the old data recording system, i.e. several inconsistent excel sheets.

RDB is a database and software application designed to record individual registration of persons referring to UNHCR and actions taken to address their requests. The software was designed and developed to speed up the procedure of search, registration and reporting of the enormous number of records registered.

¹ For more information please refer to the User Guide for Reception version 2 December 2011 (UNHCR Iran).

² There is no reception center at the border, instead the PoCs used to access the seven UNHCR offices across the country through physical approach.

One of its main features is that actions taken to address the needs of the PoCs can be defined in the database dynamically. The definitions are not fixed and can be defined based on the need of each operation/office at any certain point in time that a need arises.

In Reception software besides registering records in its own database, it is possible to view the bio-data of the cases in proGres and CISAMAP systems and search records in all three databases simultaneously. Reception software can make a link between proGres and its own data. When a record linked with proGres it will be not possible to change fields which are common in two databases, and Reception software automatically updates linked records common fields from proGres on a daily bases. It is not possible to link with records of CISAMAP, but using CISAMAP data to avoid re-typing is feasible while registering people in Reception.

Since the launch of RDB in 2010, about 8,000 cases (approximately 40,000 individuals) have been registered in RDB.

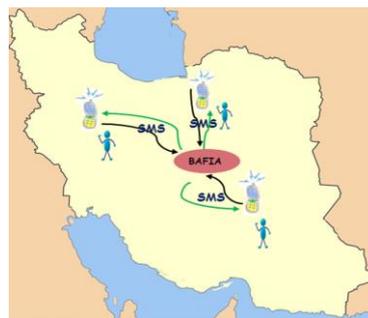
Referral network

With increased access of refugees to UNHCR through phone-in-system and establishment of the RDB, the need for a more systematic referral system with government institutes, charities and NGOs became evident. The list of the institutes and NGOs and their areas of work was reviewed and in several gatherings they were briefed on UNHCR services and the need for establishment of a more systematic referral system. In addition to the NGOs that are UNHCR partners, 33 other NGOs were activated in the referral network. These NGOs receive in kind assistance (used but functional copier, computer, printers, etc.) from UNHCR.

The network advocates for protection of UNHCR's persons of concerns and has relative sustainability as some actors are also providing services to nationals of the country. The system aims to mobilize the current mechanism in place (NGO Connections) to target as many persons of concern to UNHCR as possible and if one of the NGO s is off the network the whole system is not turned off. The system helps extension of a network to different provinces and capacity building of smaller NGOs outside the capital. The system enhances out-reach activities by involving as many NGOs as possible

(II) BAFIA Text messaging system

In 2010, BAFIA initiated information sharing activities which included text messaging through mobile phones. This system of communication enables the government keep refugees informed of the developments regarding refugee matters in Iran. Given the wide distribution of registered refugees throughout the country and the existing challenges towards accessing them, the text messaging system helps facilitate the effective communication channels with refugees.



The main objectives of the system are;

- Enhanced authorities-refugee communications through text messaging
- Enhanced refugee-authorities communications to resolve their issues/problems through reply system

Implementation of the text messaging and reply system in the previous years enhanced targeted communication with refugees and put them through appropriate channels to sort out their concerns. The

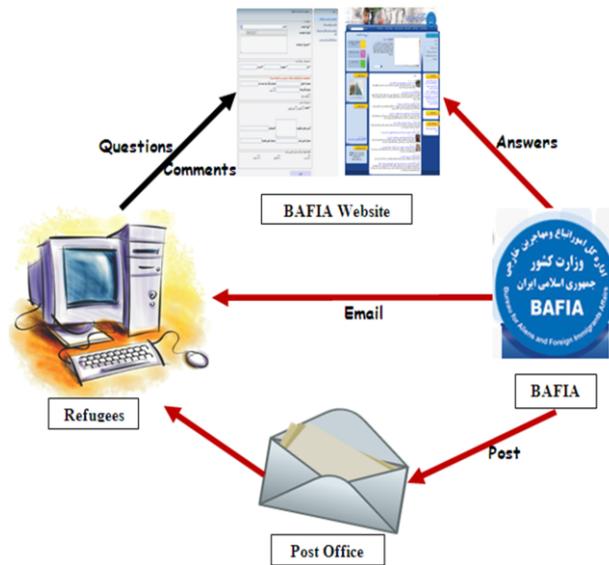
system prohibits rumors and incorrect information to refugees while increased interactions with refugees through text messaging and their analysis would help authorities in decision makings as well.

In 2011 about 731,000 messages (SMS) were sent to refugees on 110 topics including circulars for registrations and commemoration of different events such as the Refugee Day. About 35,000 messages (SMS) were also received from refugees on topics such as renewal of registration cards, mixed marriages, school enrolment, travel permits, resettlement, etc which were attended to by BAFIA.

UNHCR Iran has been supporting BAFIA’s messaging system (SMS) and continues to support this project in 2013.

(III) BAFIA Website Project

To streamline the communication channels between the refugees and the authorities, BAFIA, in 2010, established a website which enables the users including refugees to correspond their concerns, questions, etc. with the authorities in a systematized manner. Administered by BAFIA personnel, the website is featured in such a way that the users can raise their questions concerning variety of different issues such as education, re-registration exercises, legal disputes, etc. and request for advice or guidance.



There are three reply systems which the users can choose; they can select to receive feedbacks either through the website, email or post mails. Depending on the type of questions, they will be forwarded to respective bodies and relevant feedback will be shared accordingly. UNHCR Iran has been supporting BAFIA for implementation of the project and continues to support this project in 2013.