

Azerbaijan: internally displaced amidst a booming economy

Petr Kostohryz



**NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL**

Although the number of IDPs in Azerbaijan continues to be among the highest per capita in the world, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is leaving Azerbaijan in 2008, after 13 years of operations there.

Despite the booming economy, Azerbaijani IDPs continue to rank among the most vulnerable social groups, largely dependent on external assistance. What is now required, however, is a gradual shift to assisting the IDPs on the same basis as other vulnerable people within broader social development and poverty reduction strategies. NRC's decision to leave Azerbaijan is based on the acknowledgement that most of the assistance required now is beyond its mandate and expertise.

framework and a comprehensive state IDP strategy aimed at improving living conditions and employment. The government provides monthly allowances to over half a million displaced people, distributes food – with the World Food Programme – to some 270,000 people, pays for domestic utilities and winter fuel, and provides for several tax exemptions for IDPs. Within the housing programme some 70 collective centres have so far been rehabilitated and 56 new settlements constructed

Armenia and Azerbaijan are technically still in a state of war. Their conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh halted with a 1994 ceasefire with the province and surrounding districts fully or partially remaining under Armenian control. There are 686,586 IDPs from Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding occupied territories in Azerbaijan.

NRC's decision to leave was primarily motivated by Azerbaijan's economic growth and the state's substantial investments in IDP-related programmes. There is therefore a diminishing need for NRC to substitute for government assistance. In addition, there is limited potential to contribute to durable solutions as long as the status of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region and the ongoing Armenian occupation of the surrounding territories give little hope for return, and while resettlement is perceived as temporary and local integration is not promoted by the authorities.

The last few years have seen a significant increase in the government's programmes and in their willingness to allocate funds to address the needs of the displaced population. With the benefit of increased oil revenues, the government has been able to introduce an extensive legal IDP

with individual houses for over 15,000 families; this programme will continue until 2011. The government has even contributed financially to one of NRC's shelter projects.

These genuine positive efforts notwithstanding, Azerbaijan is still a country in transition, with remarkable resources but limited technical capacity to make best use of the financial and human potential available. Further assistance and guidance is needed in several areas, primarily in:

- reducing the dependence of IDPs on external assistance through more emphasis on enhancing their economic opportunities and including them more fully in national social and economic development plans
- ensuring that IDP wishes are taken into account when programmes on their behalf are being

developed and implemented, especially programmes that involve their relocation

- removing practical and institutional barriers and practices that may be perceived as discriminatory, in order to further enhance the rights of IDPs to become fully-fledged members of Azerbaijani society. Among these barriers are: the inflexible system of registration of IDPs based on their place of origin instead of their actual residence, having separate schools and the construction of new settlements in remote areas.

Azerbaijan has already done much to address the needs of IDPs but still has a long way to go. While a lasting and peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict may still remain elusive, all displaced people need to be given the opportunity to enjoy decent and dignified lives, and to develop their skills in preparation for eventual return. The human potential of IDPs in Azerbaijan is enormous. It is up to the authorities to channel it in directions that will be beneficial for the overall growth of the country.

Petr Kostohryz (petrk@nrc-az.org) is Country Director for NRC's Azerbaijan office (www.nrc.no/?did=9168609).

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) works to provide assistance and protection to refugees and displaced people in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. www.nrc.no/engindex.htm

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is part of NRC and is an international non-profit organisation that monitors internal displacement caused by conflicts.

www.internal-displacement.org

Contact : IDMC, 7-9 Chemin de Balxert, 1219 Chatelaine, Geneva, Switzerland. Email: idmc@nrc.ch