Iris-scanning technology streamlines refugee registration process — UNHCR

by Gaelle Sundelin | Jul 21, 2013 | 23:07

A Syrian refugee registers using the Iris Recognition Technology at the UNHCR premises in Khalda last Thursday (Photo by Gaelle Sundelin)

AMMAN — Scores of Syrians waiting to register at the newly opened UN Refugee Agency registration centre in Khalda last Thursday experienced their first iris-scanning.

The Iris Recognition Technology was recently implemented to streamline the refugee registration process and to tackle the backlog of 60,000 Syrians awaiting registrations at the Anmar Hmoud Centre for Refugee Registration and the Irbid centre.

“The iris scan was introduced because we are dealing with over half-a-million people in various locations so we needed to prevent multiple registration,” said Nihad Hota, a UNHCR registration officer at the Khalda centre.

Developed by the Jordan-based IrisGuard company, the technology uses the iris instead of fingerprints to identify a person.

“The eye is a muscle with involuntary movements; it captures the light and works as a camera lens, and if the eye is dead, it can’t react anymore, so there is no chance of fraud,” Alaa Bilbeisi, IrisGuard technical support engineer, told The Jordan Times on Sunday.

Iris-scanning completes the traditional registration where biometric data such as names and addresses are recorded along with testimonies and lists of relatives.

“This way, we have a complete and proper data registration of each refugee. We are coming out of the emergency phase now so we are trying to collect more information,” Hota noted.

After they register, Syrian refugees are entitled to free education, healthcare and food in addition to financial assistance for the most vulnerable, which can be withdrawn using a bank card.

To avoid the risk of theft or of the pin code being forgotten, the iris identification allows refugees to withdraw their assistance from a Cairo Amman Bank ATM using only their eyes.

“It [ensures] that the person entitled to the assistance is the only one benefiting from it. Returnees could sell their card to someone staying in Jordan, it could be stolen… this way we are sure that the money is collected by the right person,” Hota said.
For the World Food Programme (WFP), which is in charge of providing food support to the refugees, the technology will be most beneficial when implemented in the Zaatari Refugee Camp as it ensures that the right number of refugees gets the assistance.

“Most of the time, we don’t face too much fraud, but with Ramadan and the additional food packages we received from Saudi Arabia, it attracted a lot of people back into the camp who double-registered,” WFP emergency coordinator Jonathan Campbell said over the phone on Sunday.

Before winter comes, the donations of material items and foodstuff increase, posing an accrued risk for double-registration and fraud, but by then, the system will have been implemented in Zaatari, according to Campbell.

Every month, WFP spends $29 per refugee in the Zaatari camp and $40 for those living in host communities, where retail prices are higher.

UNHCR Senior Protection Officer Susanne Butscher noted that the system will help save costs as it allows the identification of multiple registration cases “and the donors feel that the right person gets the assistance”.

IrisGuard confirmed that the Amman Cairo Bank and the UNHCR are the only entities with a database of Syrian refugees and that the information is not shared with any government or intelligence body.

So far, over 60,000 Syrian refugees have been registered through the technology in the Irbid registration centre and more 5,000 in the Khalda facility, according to the UN agency.

Iraqi refugees have also been entitled to withdraw their assistance through the system since last month, and 2,800 of them are already using it, according to IrisGuard personnel.