

Summary of the Strategic Oral Presentation on UNHCR's Operations in Asia and the Pacific

Standing Committee 18th meeting 5 – 7 July 2000

1. UNHCR's principal objectives in the region are:
 - To safeguard asylum and promote international protection;
 - To achieve durable solutions;
 - To provide sustainable reintegration assistance in returnee areas;
 - To strengthen emergency preparedness and response capabilities; and
 - To facilitate a regional and sub-regional dialogue on refugee and migratory issues among concerned governments.

I. International Protection

2. The Government of **Indonesia** has expressed its intention to sign the 1951 Convention and UNHCR is advising the authorities on the technicalities of accession. Meanwhile, UNHCR is involved in screening a sizeable number of asylum-seekers who find themselves in Indonesia, where they were detained en route to Australia.
3. A memorandum of understanding has been concluded with Government of **Mongolia**, which provides for cooperation with UNHCR in refugee status determination, refugee law training and capacity-building activities. The Government has also expressed an interest in acceding to the 1951 Convention.
4. In **Sri Lanka**, an escalation of the armed conflict has resulted in renewed population displacement in the north of the country and raised serious concerns regarding the safety and well being of the civilian population. Due to recent hostilities in the Jaffna Peninsula, an estimated 170,000 persons have been displaced and civilians have been caught in the conflict. UNHCR has increased its interventions with the Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to ensure access to displaced populations, their freedom of movement and the provision of humanitarian assistance. In addition, UNHCR continues to promote solutions for displaced populations by facilitating their reintegration in home areas and settlement in new communities. There has been no large-scale movement of Sri Lankan asylum-seekers into India in recent weeks. UNHCR continues to monitor the situation closely. Over 66,000 Sri Lankan refugees remain in India's Tamil Nadu State.
5. In **Thailand**, UNHCR continued to monitor the protection of over 100,000 Karen and Karenni refugees from Myanmar who are accommodated in 11 camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. Since the establishment of three UNHCR field offices on the border, the refugee population has been registered, and camps, which had been subject to cross-border attacks in previous years, were relocated to safer sites inland. Discussions are continuing with the authorities on the establishment of provincial admission boards to provide new arrivals with access to the camps in accordance with a broader admission criteria.

6. Events in Thailand in late 1999 and early 2000 involving persons from Myanmar have had a negative impact on public perception of refugees from Myanmar. The Government of Thailand has pledged to maintain its liberal asylum policy.

II. Promoting Solutions

7. Over 163,000 refugees have returned to **East Timor**, the majority under the auspices of UNHCR. In an attempt to promote reconciliation and sustainable reintegration, increased efforts are being made to promote the voluntary return of refugees with past links to militia or pro-autonomy groups. Extensive discussions have been held with local leaders to ensure the community's readiness to accept the returnees. Their return is being closely coordinated with the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), which provides security upon arrival.

8. Under UNHCR's shelter programme, 16,000 housing units have been delivered, benefiting approximately 70,000 returnees. The distribution of another 19,000 housing units is planned in the coming months. UNHCR also continues to implement small-scale community based infrastructure and income-generating projects. UNHCR expects to disengage from East Timor by mid-2001, maintaining a small presence for protection and advocacy purposes.

9. In **West Timor**, the promotion of solutions for over 100,000 East Timorese continues to be seriously affected by a lack of access, threats and intimidation by militia groups and misinformation to prevent repatriation. A UNHCR mass information campaign, started in November 1999, has played an important role in the search for a lasting solution by giving refugees the means to exercise a free and informed choice regarding their future and contributed to the repatriation process.

10. In May 2000, the rate of repatriation declined sharply due to a wait-and-see attitude among refugees, the majority of whom have family or other links to pro-integration groups. Misleading reports of harassment of returnees in East Timor and concern about a lack of food stocks contributed to this development. UNHCR has intensified its mass information campaign to provide refugees with realistic expectations upon return to East Timor. To this end, "go-and-see" visits by refugee leaders to East Timor and visits to West Timor by leaders and respected personalities from East Timor, have provided for a more balanced perception of conditions in East Timor.

11. While voluntary repatriation will continue to be the primary aim of UNHCR, some 50,000 to 60,000 refugees are expected to choose to remain in Indonesia. Discussions are underway with the authorities on the local integration of refugees who will remain in West Timor with a view to supporting government efforts to settle refugees over a specified period of time. UNHCR plans to conclude its operation in West Timor by the end of 2001.

12. Efforts continue in **Bangladesh** to expedite the voluntary repatriation of the remaining 22,000 Muslim refugees from Northern Rakhine State in Myanmar. Although the repatriation process resumed in November 1998 following UNHCR interventions, only some 2,000 persons have returned due to procedural difficulties. UNHCR has been promoting bilateral discussions between the two Governments to simplify procedures and accelerate the repatriation. UNHCR also remains concerned that all the refugees may not

be willing or able to return to Myanmar in the near future and interim solutions will need to be found. Following discussions with the authorities, some self-help activities have been introduced in the camps.

13. In **Cambodia**, linkages are being established with the United Nations development agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government institutions to ensure continued assistance in returnee areas prior to the conclusion of UNHCR operations by the end of 2000.

14. In **China**, UNHCR has phased out its local settlement programmes on both the mainland and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR). On the mainland, UNHCR is actively pursuing durable solutions for Vietnamese refugees in the form of naturalization and voluntary repatriation. In Hong Kong, the Pillar Point Vietnamese Refugee Centre, the last refugee camp on the territory, ceased operations on 31 May 2000. The local settlement scheme devised by the Government has been extended to include the remaining 1,400 Vietnamese refugees and so-called non-nationals. UNHCR continues to discuss the situation of persons from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in China's northeast with the authorities.

15. In the **Lao People's Democratic Republic**, UNHCR continues to provide reintegration assistance to some 29,000 returnees from Thailand, China, and other countries, including 1,162 screened out Laotians who were repatriated from Thailand during the last quarter of 1999. UNHCR plans to hand over these activities to the Government and the United Nations development agencies and phase out its activities by the end of 2001.

16. In **Myanmar**, UNHCR has been facilitating the establishment of a five-year, multi-sector United Nations Integrated Development Plan in Northern Rakhine State that will permit a handing over of activities to development agencies in 2001. As a result, UNHCR's activities will be significantly reduced next year. UNHCR will, however, maintain a field monitoring presence for the 230,000 returnees from Bangladesh and for new returnees. Community development activities will also be conducted for groups with special needs in 2001.

17. The search for solutions for some 97,000 Bhutanese refugees in eastern **Nepal** was given an impetus by the High Commissioner's visit to Bhutan and Nepal in April-May of this year. The visit provided for high level discussions with the two Governments on the practical modalities for a verification of the refugees, to determine those who could return to Bhutan. UNHCR has provided the two Governments its electronic database on the refugees to facilitate the verification process and offered technical expertise. Following the High Commissioner's visit, the bilateral talks between the two Governments resumed in Thimphu and progress was made on several long-standing issues. However, agreement on the unit for verification of the refugees remained contentious. UNHCR has suggested a formula to resolve this matter and it is hoped that the verification of refugees in the camps can begin in the coming weeks.

18. In **Papua New Guinea**, 171 Papua New Guineans (Irian Jayans) from East Awin Settlement Centre repatriated under the supervision of UNHCR between March and May 2000. Another 558 persons are scheduled to return in July 2000. In 1999, the Government of Papua New Guinea granted 1,000 residents at the Centre "Permissive

Residency", allowing refugees to enjoy rights similar to those of its citizens. A further 1,000 persons are expected to receive such residency during 2000/2001.

III. Emergency Preparedness and Response

19. UNHCR is closely monitoring the situation in the South Pacific where events in several countries have the potential to result in internal displacement and refugee flows. The regional office in Canberra is following developments closely in Fiji and the Solomon Islands. Together with voluntary repatriation from Papua New Guinea to Indonesia, UNHCR's main activity in the former, the need to reinstate a limited presence in Port Moresby is under consideration. Further west, the regional office in Jakarta is assessing developments in Irian Jaya, Aceh, the Maluku Islands and West Kalimantan. A series of five sub-regional workshops on emergency management and capacity-building are to be held in Indonesia to train national and provincial government officials, operational partners and the United Nations staff in emergency preparedness and response.

20. In **Japan**, UNHCR is establishing a Regional Emergency Training Centre for International Humanitarian Response. The Centre will provide training to government officials, non-governmental organizations and United Nations staff in the region through seminars and distance learning via the Internet.

IV. Regional Initiatives

21. The **Asia-Pacific Consultations** (APC), which are in their fourth year of existence, have become a self-sustaining process for the discussion of refugee and migration issues. Given the diversity of the Asia-Pacific region, the decision of the APC, in June 1999, to convene sub-regional and expert group meetings has proven effective. Two sub-regional meetings, for Mekong countries and the Pacific, have been held to discuss, *inter alia*, returnee reintegration and human trafficking. Additional sub-regional and expert group meetings, as well as the annual plenary session, are scheduled for later this year.

22. The **Regional Consultations on Refugee and Migratory Movements in South Asia** drew up a model national law on refugees and asylum-seekers at the fifth annual consultations in Kathmandu in 1998. A meeting of the Eminent Persons Group who led the consultations is scheduled to take place in Colombo to assess country-specific efforts to promote the adoption of this national law by States in the sub-region.