

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

Standing Committee
20th meeting
12 – 14 March 2001

1. UNHCR's activities in Asia and the Pacific have remained focused on key operations, while simultaneously pursuing initiatives and solutions throughout the region.

A. International protection

2. UNHCR is furthering efforts in **Indonesia** to assist the Government with its intention to sign the 1951 Convention. Meanwhile, UNHCR is involved in screening a sizeable number of asylum-seekers in Indonesia, where they are detained while trying to reach Australia. In West Timor, UN security Phase Five precludes UNHCR from carrying out direct protection activities.

3. A memorandum of understanding signed with **Mongolia** in May 2000 on cooperation with refugee status determination, refugee law training and capacity-building activities, has allowed UNHCR to strengthen the Government's response to asylum issues. Efforts to promote accession to the 1951 Convention are being pursued actively.

4. In **Sri Lanka**, the escalation of the conflict in 2000 displaced an additional 170,000 persons in the Jaffna Peninsula, bringing the total number of displaced, primarily in the northern provinces, to nearly 600,000 persons. UNHCR's presence in conflict areas has helped to promote the physical safety of affected populations, ensure freedom of movement and implement return and reintegration programmes in villages of origin and resettlement in new communities. UNHCR is engaged in discussions with the Government to pursue solutions for displaced persons housed in state-run welfare centres. There have been no large-scale movements of Sri Lankans into India. Over 66,000 Sri Lankan refugees remain in India's Tamil Nadu State.

5. In **Thailand**, UNHCR monitors the protection of over 103,000 Karen and Karenni refugees from Myanmar who are sheltered in 11 camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. Despite incursions by insurgents, which have had a negative effect on public the perception of refugees, the Thai Government pursues a liberal asylum policy. In 2000, several thousand new arrivals passed through the entry procedure for admission into the camps. The harmonization of the procedure applied by the various Provincial Admission Boards, using broader admission criteria, is the subject of regular discussions with the Government. In the meantime, UNHCR continues to seek access to areas of origin in consultation with the Myanmar authorities in order to facilitate and monitor repatriation when conditions permit.

B. Promoting solutions

6. In **East Timor**, UNHCR provides assistance to over 175,500 returnees. To encourage return from West Timor, efforts are underway to try and expand basic assistance to returnees over a limited period until elections in the second half of 2001. As another incentive, UNHCR

is asking partner agencies to join it in increasing assistance to returnees during this period. As of 15 February 2001, close to 80% of the 35,000 emergency shelter kits had been distributed to an estimated 137,500 returnees. The remaining 7,500 kits are to be provided by the end of June 2001, a few months prior to the phase down of UNHCR activities in East Timor.

7. Discussions are underway with UNTAET to clarify policies on the prosecution of persons charged with committing various crimes before and during the 1999 referendum on independence. Such clarification would help dispel refugee concerns about being able to return in safety. In a further attempt to promote repatriation to East Timor, UNHCR has proposed the expansion of "safe houses" which serve as transit centres for returnees who are hesitant to return to their villages of origin immediately after arriving in East Timor.

8. West Timor, **Indonesia** remains under security Phase Five, which precludes the presence of UN agencies in the area. Notwithstanding the situation, since November 2000 UNHCR has pursued *ad hoc* repatriations, allowing for the return of demobilised soldiers and ex-civil servants and other refugees to East Timor. UNHCR and UNTAET are exploring ways of assisting the Government address the issue of pension payments for these categories of refugees who are indigenous East Timorese and interested in repatriation. Payments would be made to those who return before elections take place in East Timor later this year. UNHCR has reiterated its readiness to assist the Indonesian Government with its planned registration of refugees, which is scheduled to take place in April 2001, and to provide technical and funding support to settlement schemes for East Timorese refugees who opt to remain in Indonesia. UNHCR will pursue all possible solutions to the refugee problem in 2001.

9. In **Bangladesh**, the repatriation to Myanmar of the remaining 21,500 refugees who have been in camps since 1991, has been particularly slow. In 2000, only 1,323 persons returned to Myanmar's Northern Rakhine State. Pending the repatriation of those still in Bangladesh, UNHCR, in consultation with the Government of Bangladesh, will expand self-help activities in the camps to reduce dependency. Permission for refugees to work outside the camps on a temporary basis is also being sought.

10. At the close of 2000, UNHCR phased out its reintegration programme in **Cambodia** after establishing linkages with long-term development agencies. Through a reduced presence in Phnom Penh, UNHCR will continue to monitor the well-being of returnees and focus on the establishment of a national legal framework for refugee protection.

11. In **China**, UNHCR is seeking naturalisation for most of the 230,000 Vietnamese refugees who want to settle in the country and voluntary repatriation for a limited number who may wish to return. UNHCR is also advising the Government on the management of a revolving credit scheme which provides opportunities for self-reliance to vulnerable refugees. Discussions continue with the authorities on issues concerning North Korean asylum-seekers in need of international protection.

12. In **India**, UNHCR received Government endorsement of a plan for refugees to pursue self-reliance activities. This will reduce refugee dependency on UNHCR allowances. Funding

permitting, income-generation and vocational training activities will be carried out to benefit an estimated 14,000 refugees, most of them Afghans, who are living in urban areas. At the same time, UNHCR will continue its efforts to find durable solutions for those who qualify under the recognition criteria as well as facilitate voluntary repatriation for those wishing to return to their countries.

13. In the **Lao People's Democratic Republic**, UNHCR continues to provide reintegration assistance to some 29,000 returnees in spite of budgetary cutbacks. UNHCR has fostered links between the Government and development agencies to assist 40 returnee settlement sites. These efforts are part and parcel of the gradual hand-over of assistance activities to the Government and UNHCR's phase down of operations in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

14. A lessons-learned workshop was held in October 2000 to assess UNHCR's repatriation and reintegration programmes in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Vietnam and Cambodia. The results of the workshop are to serve as reference materials for similar operations in other parts of the world.

15. In **Myanmar**, UNHCR continued to assist with the reintegration of 230,000 returnees to the Northern Rakhine State. It is also actively pursuing efforts to ensure that reintegration activities are sustained, allowing UNHCR to gradually reduce its assistance programme. The five-year multi-sectoral UN Integrated Development Plan has been replaced with the Basic Needs Assistance Programme (BNAP), which is to be launched by the middle of 2001 under the leadership of UNDP. UNHCR will continue assistance activities in key sectors until the BNAP is operational. Returnee monitoring will also continue.

16. In December 2000, a significant development took place in the search for durable solutions affecting an estimated 98,500 Bhutanese refugees in **Nepal**. The Governments of Bhutan and Nepal agreed on the unit of verification for determining those who are eligible for repatriation. In January 2001, a joint team visited refugee camps to put in place logistical arrangements for the intended verification which is due to start shortly. UNHCR is providing technical expertise and financial support to the Government of Nepal for the verification process. A similar offer has been made to the Government of Bhutan.

C. Emergency preparedness and response

17. UNHCR continued to monitor the situation in several countries of the region where events threatened to result in displacement and refugee flows. The office in Canberra has been closely following events in **Papua New Guinea** which to date have resulted in the arrival of some 400 persons, mainly women and children, from Papua (Irian Jaya). The authorities are providing basic assistance to the refugees pending their repatriation when conditions permit. In December 2000, UNHCR sent an emergency officer to Papua New Guinea to assess the situation and make preparations for the establishment of a Liaison Office in Port Moresby. The office was opened in January of this year.

18. Since the launching in mid-2000 of the UNHCR Regional Training Centre for International Humanitarian Response (e-Centre) in **Japan**, several emergency management

training activities and distance learning programmes have been carried out. Additional activities are being planned for government officials, NGO and UN staff in the Asia-Pacific region during the course of 2001.

19. In the **Philippines**, UNHCR is to provide emergency management training to government officials and NGO personnel who are involved in providing assistance to displaced persons in Mindanao. An emergency management training workshop will be held from 14 to 20 March 2001.

20. In **Malaysia**, UNHCR will conduct a contingency planning exercise for government officials from 26 to 28 March 2001.

21. The training workshops in Malaysia and the Philippines are being organised in co-ordination with the e-Centre and the Regional Office in Jakarta.

D. Regional initiatives

22. The Fifth Annual Plenary Meeting of the **Asia-Pacific Consultations** (APC) on Refugees, Displaced Persons and Migrants was convened in Hong Kong on 13-14 November 2000. The Meeting considered, *inter alia*, responsibility-sharing among governments in the region. UNHCR provided the legal and normative framework for this concept, its rationale and the parameters for its successful implementation. The next APC Plenary Meeting is to take place in South-East Asia in November 2001. The role and interaction between countries of origin, transit and destination, as well as measures to maximize opportunities for capacity-building, were discussion themes proposed for the Meeting.

23. The **Eminent Persons Group** has continued regional consultations on refugee and migratory movements in South Asia. A model national law on refugees and asylum is being promoted for adoption in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries.