

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

23rd meeting of the
Standing Committee

5-7 March 2002

I. BACKGROUND

The objectives and strategies of the Bureau for Asia and the Pacific focus on ensuring international protection of refugees, improving the quality of asylum, promoting accession and implementation of refugee and statelessness Conventions, enacting durable solutions and upgrading emergency preparedness and response capacities to address future refugee flows.

II. NORTH, SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Main Populations of Concern

Cambodia 1,027 Vietnamese Montagnards (since Feb. 2001)
Awaiting implementation of solution

China 292,000 Vietnamese refugees (since 1980)
Well integrated, awaiting naturalisation

East Timor 193,460 Returnees (since Oct. 1999)
At various stages of reintegration

Indonesia 70,000 Refugees from East Timor (since Sept. 1999)
Repatriation, local settlement

Thailand 110,000 Refugees from Myanmar (since 1984)
Awaiting implementation of solution

- Budget for sub-regions: USD 32,895,331 (2002)
- Number of UNHCR offices / staff: 20 / 172
- Number of main implementing partners: 26

Cambodia. In February 2001, members of Viet Nam's Montagnard ethnic minority sought asylum in Cambodia's Mondulkiri and Ratanakiri Provinces. Following reports of deportations and in the absence of systematic asylum processing, UNHCR initiated simplified refugee status determination procedures to ascertain claims. UNHCR has since been providing protection and assistance to 1,027 Montagnards.

On 21 January 2002, a tripartite repatriation agreement was concluded between Viet Nam, Cambodia and UNHCR. Viet Nam agreed to grant UNHCR unrestricted access to areas of origin before, during and after the repatriation in accordance with principles of voluntary repatriation.

Strategies:

- Continue to provide protection and assistance to Montagnards who have sought asylum in Cambodia;
- Facilitate the safe and voluntary return of Montagnards wishing to return to Viet Nam; and
- While assisting with repatriation, ensure that Montagnards still in Cambodia continue to be assured asylum and are not returned to Viet Nam against their will. Explore other solutions for those unwilling to repatriate, including resettlement.

Anticipated impact: Durable solutions. Through access to areas of origin, UNHCR will be able to provide factual, first hand information to asylum-seekers so that they can make informed choices about voluntary repatriation. Access will also allow UNHCR to prepare the groundwork for returnee movements, reintegration assistance and monitoring.

China. UNHCR continues to seek durable solutions for Vietnamese refugees, mainly naturalisation and repatriation for a limited number of persons who may wish to return to Viet Nam. A revolving fund-based credit scheme targeting employment opportunities for 30,000 refugees is the basis for co-operation.

East Timor. As East Timor approaches independence on 20 May 2002, UNHCR can point to the successful repatriation and peaceful reintegration of some 193,500 former refugees.

To ensure the sustainability of repatriation and reintegration, UNHCR continues to call on development agencies to assist with the provision of shelter. Lack of support in this sector will affect the fragile socio-economic situation in East Timor. (In 2001, UNHCR achieved its objective of delivering 35,000 shelter units to accommodate some 175,000 persons.)

Strategy:

- In the aftermath of peaceful national elections in August 2001, resulting in repatriation prospects, a re-assessment of UNHCR operations in East Timor was conducted last September. The planned phase-down of activities was postponed until June 2002.

Anticipated Impact: Given on-going constraints to repatriation from West Timor (Indonesia), large-scale returns are not expected until after independence. Renewed reconciliation efforts and the implementation of a pension fund scheme for refugees who were former civil servants are likely to generate larger returnee numbers in mid-2002. An additional 55,000 East Timorese are expected to repatriate by the end of 2002.

Indonesia. UNHCR is concerned about 60 to 70,000 East Timorese refugees still remaining in Indonesia's West Timor and in particular, about the fate of over 1,200 children separated from their families.

UNHCR welcomed recent Government statements giving priority to voluntary repatriation as the durable solution of choice. However, reports of intimidation and misinformation continue to inhibit repatriation; the perceived lack of security in East Timor, as well as inadequate shelter and employment opportunities are prompting refugees to hesitate to repatriate. Clarification of entitlements for former civil servants is another factor.

United Nations agencies in Jakarta are discussing an Exchange of Letters, rather than a Memorandum of Understanding, with the Government on security arrangements in West Timor. A signed document is expected in the coming month.

In its pursuit of durable solutions, UNHCR participated in a joint appeal for East Timorese in West Timor in November 2001. UNHCR welcomed donor support for local settlement and is working with the Government and other United Nations agencies to finalise implementing arrangements.

Strategies:

- UNHCR's priority in Indonesia remains finding solutions for East Timorese refugees. (UNHCR does not plan to re-establish a permanent presence in West Timor. Instead, it will continue to liaise with local authorities and refugees through frequent missions from Jakarta and Dili.);
- While efforts have yielded the return of 700 separated children, UNHCR will continue to work with the East Timorese and the Indonesian authorities to resolve the situation of 1,200 who remain; and
- The Office will continue to work with the Government and United Nations agencies to implement local settlement schemes in West Timor.

Anticipated impact: The success of local integration plans is dependent on the outcome of discussions involving Indonesian authorities, United Nations agencies and most importantly, refugee groups. Refugees express concern about being settled in areas beyond West Timor; many express hope of an eventual return to East Timor.

Thailand. The Government has generously hosted Karen and Karenni refugees over the years. UNHCR is working with the authorities to improve the quality of asylum while pursuing solutions for these persons.

III. SOUTH ASIA AND MYANMAR

Main Populations of Concern

Bangladesh	21,000 Muslim refugees from Myanmar (since 1992) Awaiting durable solution
India	64,000 Sri Lankan Tamils in camps in Tamil Nadu 40,000 Sri Lankan Tamils outside camps (estimate figure) 13,000 Urban refugees, mostly Afghans (since 1981) Only group assisted directly by UNHCR
Myanmar	235,000 Returnees (since 1994) Returnee reintegration
Nepal	100,000 Bhutanese refugees (since 1992) Awaiting durable solutions
Sri Lanka	800,000 Internally-displaced persons (estimate) (since 1987) Awaiting resolution of conflict
• Budget for sub-region:	USD 23,787,082
• Number of UNHCR offices / staff:	14 / 209
• Number of main implementing partners:	36

N.B. As refugee situations in South Asia have been protracted in nature, the anticipated impact of strategies in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka is grouped together.

Bangladesh. Following the successful repatriation of 232,000 Muslim refugees to Myanmar's Northern Rakhine State over ten years, the return of 21,000 refugees remains slow. UNHCR welcomes the Government of Myanmar's recent agreement for the return of 5,000 refugees already cleared for repatriation, as well as the lifting of conditions which barred their return.

Strategies:

- Intensify efforts with the Governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar to reactivate repatriation and bring operation to a close by the end of 2003; and
- Using the recently-completed refugee population survey, develop plan for durable solutions.

India. UNHCR continues to focus on durable solutions of 13,000 individual refugees recognised under its Mandate of whom the majority are Afghans. Other refugees are under direct assistance of the Indian government including Sri Lankan Tamils. With recent developments in countries of origin, i.e. Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, voluntary repatriation may become a viable solution for these groups.

Strategy:

- Maintain close contact with UNHCR's offices in the neighbouring countries with the view to exploring the possibility of the voluntary return of refugees to their country of origin.

Myanmar. Long-term reintegration activities for more than 230,000 returnees continue in Northern Rakhine State of Myanmar. Certain activities carried out by UNHCR's implementing partners will be funded directly by donors allowing the Office's phase down in Northern Rakhine State.

Strategy :

- Maintain continuity of international assistance to the returnee community by encouraging direct funding to development agencies in Northern Rakhine State.

Nepal. The Governments of Nepal and Bhutan recently completed the joint verification of 12,000 refugees in one of seven camps, raising the prospect of a solution for those in all camps. The Governments are expected to harmonise returnee criteria at the next Ministerial meeting, which is to be followed by the implementation of durable solutions.

Strategies:

- Enhance contact with the Government of Bhutan in preparation for voluntary repatriation.
- Consolidate plans for returnee reintegration.

Sri Lanka. Recent political developments including the formal agreement of a cease-fire between the Government and LTTE augur well for the revival of the peace process. UNHCR's endeavours over the past several years for the assistance and protection of IDPs in Sri Lanka would provide the Office with grounds to enhance and develop activities for durable solutions of IDPs as well as future returnees from India without unnecessary delays.

Strategies:

- Develop Office's ability to shift focus and resources to respond to needs in rapidly changing circumstances; and
- Prepare for possible return of an increased number of IDPs to their places of origin and the repatriation of refugees from India.

Anticipated impact: Political developments offer renewed opportunities to explore solutions for protracted situations. Intensified efforts will allow the Office to improve service delivery, engage development agencies in reintegration programmes, pursue local settlement with Governments and enhance the capacity of national NGOs as viable partners.

IV. OTHER REGIONAL ISSUES

Emergency Capacity-Building

Asia-Pacific countries continue to be prone to population displacement but their capacity to respond to emergencies remains inadequate. One of the Bureau's main objectives is the strengthening of regional emergency preparedness and response capabilities among Governments, NGOs, the United Nations and UNHCR. In 2000, a Regional Emergency Training Centre for Humanitarian Response (e-Centre) was established in Tokyo.

The e-Centre is a collection of resource persons who conduct training workshops and support distance learning activities. In 2002, e-Centre activities are expected to include: providing training to Government, NGO and United Nations staff; developing a regional network of organisations and persons capable of preparing for and responding to emergencies; and drafting and disseminating technical material on emergency preparedness and response. Training covers contingency planning, emergency response planning, emergency response management and the provision of technical support and advice.

Strategies:

- Strengthen emergency preparedness and response capabilities in the region; and
- Establish partnerships to gradually hand-over e-Centre activities to institutions in Japan and throughout the region.

Anticipated impact: As UNHCR's first training centre of its kind, the e-Centre is expected to improve the ability of Governments, NGOs and other institutions to address refugee emergencies and population displacements.

Advocacy

Later this year, through the Inter-Governmental Asia-Pacific Consultations on Refugees, Displaced Persons and Migrants, and the Eminent Persons Group in South Asia, UNHCR will launch a regional awareness campaign involving, *inter alia*, parliamentarians, judges, local NGOs, the media and refugee groups. The campaign will galvanise Governments' attention on formalising legislative frameworks that incorporate refugee law and asylum standards and furthers accession to the 1951 Convention.

Population Movements and Asylum

UNHCR welcomed the Bali Conference of Foreign Ministers (27-28 Feb. 2002) co-chaired by the Governments of Australia and Indonesia, which considered challenges posed by the mixed movement of refugees and migrants, including their smuggling, in the region and their effects on asylum. UNHCR is ready to play a leading role in developing a comprehensive approach to addressing protection dimensions inherent in such movements.

Gender and Children

The evolving needs of refugee women and children continue to be mainstreamed in country programmes. A demographic profile of refugee women and children in Thailand to identify protection and assistance gaps, as well as training of community service workers on UNHCR guidelines was carried out in 2001. The Bureau aims to establish a co-ordinating function in the region concerning gender and children's issues.

Environment

A pilot project is being carried out in Thailand to examine the viability of environmental programmes in the region. The Bureau is considering the posting of a regional environment co-ordinator to assess conditions in refugee-hosting areas and identify means of reducing the impact of refugee settlements on the environment.

Management

The Bureau is improving the managerial capabilities of staff through tools including 360-degree feedback, the standardisation of performance parameters, particularly those pertaining to protection and assistance programmes, and the promotion of assessment centres for senior managers. The Bureau is continuing to strengthen staff security in the region.