

Update on UNHCR's operations in Asia and the Pacific Executive Committee 2007

(Revised version)

Part A: Major Developments

- In terms of durable solutions, Asia remains the region with the largest number of resettlement submissions: over 23,000 for the first six months of this year alone (compared with almost 27,500 in 2006). To date, more than 353,000 Afghans repatriated voluntarily from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Sri Lanka, by mid August, some 104,600 persons displaced by the events in the eastern part of the country in early 2007, had returned to the places from where they had been displaced. Unfortunately, achievements in resettlement and voluntary repatriation have not been matched with progress towards local integration in the region, with the exception of countries in Central Asia.
- Over 5,500 Myanmar refugees mainly from camps in Thailand, Bangladesh and urban areas in Malaysia and India, had departed for resettlement countries by August 2007. In some countries and for certain caseloads, it is still a challenge for UNHCR to achieve durable solutions for refugees even when they have been identified; for example, when host countries are unwilling to issue exit permits for refugees accepted for third country resettlement.
- Working groups on drafting of national asylum legislation have been convened in China, Kazakhstan and Mongolia. In spite of these positive developments, asylum space has shrunk considerably in some countries in Asia. Uzbekistan no longer recognizes the mandate refugee certificates previously issued to refugees by UNHCR and has announced its intention to deport all recognized refugees who do not legalize their stay by obtaining visas. UNHCR has been requested by Thailand and Nepal to put on hold its refugee status determination of urban refugees, pending further consultations on possible modalities for future cooperation. There has been an increase in the detention of asylum-seekers and refugees, including children. Access to asylum seekers, refugees and other persons of concern held in detention has also become more difficult in a number of countries.
- In Nepal, UNHCR with the support of the Norwegian Refugee Council, has successfully organized a number of community dialogues and seminars throughout the country to facilitate the return and reintegration of internally displaced persons (IDPs). At the end of June 2007, UNHCR phased out its IDP operations in Timor-Leste and handed protection-related IDP activities over to the United Nations Mission (UNMIT). In Sri Lanka, UNHCR has expanded its programme to provide protection and emergency assistance to successive waves of displaced people and to facilitate their voluntary return whenever possible.
- Some three million registered Afghans still remain in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran and UNHCR is working with both States on the conditions for their continued stay and, where appropriate, is assisting voluntary returns. Between 1 March and 15 April, 203,000 non-registered Afghans returned from

Pakistan with UNHCR assistance and support from the Government of Pakistan which had granted an exceptional period of grace. A further 145,000 registered Afghans have returned home from Pakistan. Following several months of preparatory work, one large camp, Katcha Gari, was closed as planned at the end of July. Preparations for the closure of another large camp, Jalozei, were initiated in 2007 and will be completed in 2008. Some 5,500 registered Afghans have voluntarily returned in 2007 from the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran has recently increased the number of areas designated as “off-limits” for foreigners. UNHCR is currently discussing with the authorities the timing of the implementation of this decision and relocation alternatives.

- The difficult security environment for humanitarian staff and limited access to persons of concern due to safety considerations in several countries have made delivery of protection and essential services difficult, both for UNHCR and its partners.

Part B: Progress on Strategic Objectives and Agenda for Protection

Ensuring international standards of protection are met for all persons of concern to UNHCR taking into account their age, gender or personal background (Global Strategic Objective 1, AfP Goals 1, 5 and 6)

- The census of the refugee camp populations in Nepal, which had been launched by the authorities and UNHCR in November 2006, was completed in May 2007. Final results will be announced soon and identity cards will be distributed to over 106,000 registered individuals by the end of this year.
- Major donor support has been received to strengthen protection programmes for the benefit of populations in the camps in Thailand, allowing the enhancement of activities to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In cooperation with the Ministry of Justice and implementing partners, the administration of justice in the camps in Thailand has been markedly improved. The health and nutrition status of refugees in the camps in Nepal and Bangladesh, as well as that of returnees to areas in northern Rakhine State in Myanmar has greatly improved since the launch of additional programmes in April 2007.

Advocating for and supporting Governments in the development and maintenance of an international protection regime including its implementation at the national level (Global Strategic Objective 2, AfP Goal 1)

- There has been a positive indication from the Government of Indonesia regarding its interest in acceding to the 1951 Convention. UNHCR has also had positive exchanges with the authorities in China, Kazakhstan and Mongolia on the drafting of national refugee legislation through workshops facilitated at the national level. In countries where a legal refugee framework is lacking or where its applicability to certain categories of people of concern is not possible, UNHCR is encouraging the use of alternative migratory mechanisms such as temporary work permits.

- A number of countries have shown positive developments in addressing the issue of statelessness. From November 2006 to September 2007, the Government of Nepal issued more than two and a half million identity cards to individuals previously considered stateless. The past few months have also seen progress toward the resolution of statelessness in Viet Nam and in Turkmenistan, with the registration of some 10,000 people in the latter case. The distribution of temporary registration cards in northern Rakhine State in Myanmar started in March and is an important first step toward resolving the situation for a large number of persons there.

Redoubling the search for durable solutions (Global Strategic Objective 3, AfP Goal 5)

- UNHCR is providing assistance to support the return of IDPs to the eastern part of Sri Lanka and is working with all stakeholders to ensure that all returns are voluntary and that other standards are met. UNHCR has also facilitated the voluntary return of Afghans from Pakistan and from the Islamic Republic of Iran by providing repatriation grants and transport assistance. More than 10,000 shelter units were constructed in Afghanistan for vulnerable returnees. The Governments of both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan have extended the validity of their Tripartite Agreements with UNHCR and the Government of Afghanistan.
- There has been significant progress over the last few months toward resolving protracted refugee situations in camps and urban environments in several States in south and south-east Asia. In India, durable solutions are being found for Afghan refugees through both resettlement and naturalization. In Malaysia, the rate of resettlement referrals has increased, with over 6,300 by the end of June. Resettlement from Thailand is also proceeding apace, with more than 6,300 departures as of 31 July against a target for the year of 15,000 persons. With the support of a number of very engaged resettlement countries, preparations are underway to start a large-scale programme in Nepal as part of a solution for this protracted refugee situation.

UNHCR
28 September 2007