

**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner’s Programme**

7 March 2018
English
Original: English and French

Standing Committee
71st meeting

Update on UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific

A. Situational context

The Asia and Pacific region hosts 8.3 million people of concern to UNHCR, including 4.4 million refugees, 1.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and an estimated 1.4 million stateless people.

Despite only 20 of the 45 countries and territories in the region having acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the long-standing tradition of hospitality towards refugees remains strong across the region, as demonstrated by Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh has maintained an open-door policy and assisted more than 680,000 refugees from Myanmar since August 2017.

Triggered by security operations in the northern part of Rakhine State, in response to attacks on police and military posts, the most recent exodus of refugees from Myanmar has been the largest and most sudden the region has experienced in recent decades. Half a million refugees arrived in Bangladesh from Myanmar in little more than one month alone.

In response to the emergency, UNHCR rapidly expanded its operational capacity, mobilizing airlifts of humanitarian aid and increasing its presence in Bangladesh, in support of the Government. UNHCR and its partners continue to mobilize resources to address the immediate needs of the refugees and affected local communities, while seeking solutions at the same time.

Access to the areas of origin, from where the refugees fled, in the northern part of Myanmar’s Rakhine State has been severely constrained since August 2017. UNHCR encourages the Government to grant humanitarian access and allow operations to resume in Rakhine State and to work towards the implementation of the recommendations made by the Advisory Commission of Rakhine State in August 2017, so that the conditions conducive for voluntary and sustainable returns can be put in place. UNHCR stands ready to support the Government of Myanmar in these efforts.

In November 2017, the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh agreed on an arrangement for the voluntary return to Myanmar of the Rohingya refugees who arrived after October 2016. The bilateral arrangement outlines commitments by both governments to ensuring the voluntary and safe return of refugees to their places of origin in Myanmar. Although UNHCR was not a party to the agreement, it has extended an offer of support to both governments, including by participating in the joint working group established for its implementation.

In Afghanistan, violence and insecurity have continued to trigger displacement and have made sustainable returns more challenging. Between 1 January and 31 December 2017, UNAMA documented 10,453 civilian casualties (3,438 deaths and 7,015 injured). In 2017, more than 470,000 individuals in Afghanistan were newly displaced, with 31 out of 34 provinces affected by conflict.

Approximately 96 per cent of all Afghan refugees live in the neighbouring Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan, which remain steadfast in their generosity towards this population.

Pakistan, with 1.4 million refugees, is the second largest host country worldwide. In 2017, almost 60,000 registered Afghan refugees opted to return home under the UNHCR-facilitated voluntary repatriation programme, mostly from Pakistan. The voluntary repatriation process has been suspended for the winter, as of 1 December 2017, and is expected to recommence on 1 March 2018.

In support of the host communities, the Government of Pakistan has been implementing the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative, with assistance from UNHCR, since 2009. In 2017, RAHA benefited more than 623,600 people (31 per cent of whom were Afghan refugees), focusing on youth empowerment through education, skills training and livelihood support.

The Islamic Republic of Iran also hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world, with 950,000 Afghan refugees and almost 30,000 refugees from Iraq. In 2017, refugee access to healthcare through the universal public health insurance scheme was expanded. Some 125,000 refugees are now registered under the scheme, giving them access to the same level of services as Iranian nationals. In addition, over 420,000 Afghan and Iraqi children were enrolled in primary and secondary school during the 2016-2017 academic year.

The protracted Afghan refugee situations in the two main host countries continue to require long-term solutions, with a focus on the creation of conditions conducive to voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan and support for refugee-hosting communities. In this regard, the fifth Quadripartite Steering Committee meeting, involving the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, together with UNHCR, took place on 1 December 2017 in Istanbul. The participants reaffirmed the significance of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) and their commitment to continue to work together to ensure the voluntary return of Afghan refugees in safety and dignity and to undertake joint resource mobilization efforts to support these efforts.

Across the region, strengthening protection for people of concern living outside camps will remain a priority in 2018; two-thirds of refugees in the region are now estimated to live in urban areas.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Safeguarding access to protection and asylum

While advocating and supporting the establishment and improvement of asylum procedures by States, UNHCR promoted protection-sensitive systems for the management of mixed movements in the region and will continue to do so in 2018.

UNHCR continues to undertake refugee status determination (RSD) in countries without national asylum procedures and to support governments that undertake RSD. The Office also works with States and other stakeholders to identify alternatives to the detention of asylum-seekers; influence government legislation and policy relating to refugee matters; and seek solutions for people of concern, including through regional schemes beyond resettlement to third countries, such as labour mobility agreements.

In February 2017, the Government of Pakistan adopted a comprehensive policy on the voluntary repatriation and management of Afghan refugees, extending the validity of “proof of registration” cards until the end of March 2018. UNHCR hopes this will be extended through 2018. The Government also launched a six-month programme in July 2017 to register undocumented Afghans, under which 800,000 people have now been registered.

In 2017, Australia’s policy of offshore processing continued in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, which denies access to asylum in Australia for refugees arriving by sea without a valid visa. UNHCR has exceptionally agreed to help with the relocation of some refugees to the United States of America following a bilateral arrangement between the two countries. UNHCR

continues to urge the Government of Australia to take responsibility for those who will not be relocated under this arrangement and find solutions for them.

In South-East Asia, UNHCR continues to engage extensively with the Bali Process at the regional level. Building on its 2016 Ministerial Declaration, the Bali Process established a Task Force on Planning and Preparedness, which held two meetings and an exercise on irregular and mixed maritime movements in 2017. UNHCR has also been active in other Bali Process fora in 2017, including the Working Group on Trafficking in Persons, the Bali Process Steering Committee, the Senior Officials Meeting, the Following the Money Consultation Workshop, discussions on the new consultative mechanism being triggered in respect of the Myanmar situation, and the first Government and Business Forum.

UNHCR has also increased its engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on addressing the root causes of displacement, particularly in the context of the Myanmar situation, which would allow for safe and sustainable returns.

Seeking durable solutions for protracted refugee situations

Given the ongoing violence in Afghanistan and the country's limited absorption capacity, UNHCR is not promoting refugee returns to Afghanistan. However, it will continue to assist those who voluntarily chose to return in 2018, in accordance with its mandate and within the framework of the SSAR. In July 2017, a delegation of 160 Afghan refugees travelled from Pakistan to Afghanistan to advocate that measures be taken to ensure return is sustainable, emphasizing the importance of reintegration assistance, land rights, employment, shelter, health and education.

Since 2015, UNHCR and the World Bank have also supported the Government of Afghanistan in obtaining a better understanding of the displaced population through joint data collection and analysis and through implementing medium to longer-term development programmes in areas of high displacement and return. In November 2017, UNHCR and the World Bank Group signed a data sharing agreement to better support the reintegration of Afghan refugee returnees through strengthened data collection and analysis.

Nearly 1,600 Sri Lankan refugees returned home in 2017, many to the northern and eastern parts of the country. UNHCR staff met each family upon return and provided cash grants for transportation and reintegration, as well as basic household items. These efforts augmented the support the Government provided for the sustainable return of the refugees. The Office also carried out protection monitoring in areas of return.

In Nepal, the large-scale Bhutanese resettlement programme, which was launched in 2007, drew to a close, with over 112,000 refugees resettled to third countries as of 31 December 2017. A population of around 7,000 refugees remain in Nepal, approximately 900 of whom have already been processed for resettlement and are expected to depart by mid-2018. For the remaining refugees UNHCR will pursue alternative durable solutions, including maintaining the right to return for those who voluntarily choose to do so.

Elsewhere, UNHCR will continue to encourage facilitated voluntary return for approximately 100,000 non-Rohingya refugees from Myanmar who remain in the nine temporary shelters along the Myanmar-Thai border. The Office will also advocate protection-sensitive case processing, including in the context of registration, RSD and resettlement, as well as measures to enhance livelihoods for refugees in urban areas in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

Also in the region, UNHCR advocates alternative pathways for refugees. Currently, it is supporting scholarship programmes sponsored by the Japanese Government, which started in 2017, to enable Syrian refugees to pursue post-graduate education. This will continue into 2018, and the selection process is ongoing.

Ensuring protection and solutions for IDPs

UNHCR will continue addressing the needs of IDPs in Afghanistan, including through in-kind and cash-based assistance. The latter helps these populations meet urgent medical expenses and cover the cost of legal assistance, while promoting self-reliance. The Office, in coordination with other humanitarian actors, leads the emergency shelter and non-food items cluster, and also provides assistance to families newly displaced by conflict.

In Myanmar, as part of an inter-agency response, and as the lead of the protection, shelter and camp coordination and camp management clusters, the Office will continue working with partners and the Government to protect and assist approximately 100,000 IDPs in Kachin and northern Shan States. In central Rakhine State, there are an estimated 130,000 IDPs. At present, UNHCR's operations are constrained and most of the Office's work is carried out through implementing partners.

In Pakistan, as part of its responsible disengagement strategy, UNHCR will phase out from its protection cluster responsibilities in relation to IDPs in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by 2018, where the authorities will assume responsibility. UNHCR has supported the Government in the voluntary return of some 1.8 million IDPs since 2015.

In the Philippines, the 2017 conflict and subsequent internal displacement of an estimated 400,000 people resulting from the siege of Marawi have changed the operational context for UNHCR in Mindanao. UNHCR is committed to strengthening its protection presence in support of IDPs in Mindanao, including reinforcing information management and monitoring, and catalysing the support of development actors.

Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless persons

Building on the progress made in previous years, States in the region continue to take concrete steps to prevent and reduce statelessness. The support of UNHCR and civil society remains crucial in this regard. The Office remains determined to strengthen its engagement with States and other partners in 2018 to achieve the goals of its “#IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024” and to build on the region's related successes.

The Thai Government provided Thai nationality to more than 30,000 stateless persons between 2012 and mid-2017. In 2018, UNHCR will continue to work closely with the Government of Thailand on the granting of nationality to an additional 80,000 stateless children and young adults.

Over 6,000 people have had their nationality conferred through an ongoing tripartite registration exercise conducted by UNHCR and the Governments of Indonesia and the Philippines. In 2018, UNHCR will further support the Governments in these efforts.

In Central Asia in 2017, 16,000 individuals had their statelessness situation resolved, bringing the total number of people who found a solution to 36,000 between 2014 and 2017. The naturalization of 1,690 stateless persons by Turkmenistan in 2017 and a similar initiative in Uzbekistan, which led to the nationalization of 930 persons between 2016 and 2017, represent positive examples in this regard.

A number of positive changes have also been made to refugee and citizenship laws. In June 2017, Uzbekistan issued a decree outlining procedures for the granting of political asylum. UNHCR will continue to work with countries in Central Asia and across the region to bring about the necessary changes to refugee and citizenship laws to ensure people of concern have nationality and legal status and to reduce statelessness.

In South East-Asia, UNHCR's efforts on the resolution of non-Rohingya stateless populations will focus in 2018 on its multi-year partnership with the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children on the right to a nationality. In conjunction with the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process and the United Nations

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, UNHCR will also step up its cooperation on civil registration and vital statistics, including the piloting of a jointly prepared toolkit to facilitate efforts in this area. UNHCR will also enhance its partnership on the reduction and prevention of statelessness with civil society and continue to coordinate and support the efforts of stateless operations in the region.

C. Financial information

The budget for Asia and the Pacific approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, during its sixty eighth session in October 2017, amounted to \$492.3 million for 2018. By end-January, the budget stood at \$518.4 million.

The refugee programme, constituting UNHCR's core work in the region, amounts to \$329 million or 67 per cent of the region's funding requirements. The South-West Asia subregion will receive the largest share of the region's budget, with needs representing nearly 65 per cent.

As of 22 January 2018, contributions totalling \$42.28 million towards the region's 2018 financial requirements had been recorded, representing about 8 per cent of the total requirements. As of February 2018, the supplementary appeal in response to the refugee emergency in Bangladesh, launched in September 2017, was 94 per cent funded.
