

## **Update on UNHCR operations in Asia and the Pacific**

### **A. Situational analysis, including new developments**

Asia and the Pacific was home to 14.3 million people who are forcibly displaced, stateless, returnees or others of concern to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This included 7 million refugees (and people in refugee-like situations), 233,300 asylum-seekers and 6,900 refugee returnees; 5 million internally displaced persons and 778,600 internally displaced returnees; and 2.5 million stateless people by the end of 2022. The number of forcibly displaced and stateless people rose significantly during the year, when some 2.6 million Afghans were part of a headcount conducted by Iran (Islamic Republic of), including over 1 million who arrived in the country since 2021. Today, Iran (Islamic Republic of) hosts approximately 3.4 million refugees and individuals in a refugee-like situation, making it the second largest refugee-hosting country in the world.

Amidst challenging conditions, the region is experiencing significant returns of internally displaced persons as well as considerable new displacements. Within Afghanistan, UNHCR has recorded over 1.4 million returns of internally displaced persons since 2021, although the pace of returns dropped significantly in 2022 and 2023. In Myanmar, internal displacement has grown nearly four-fold since 2021, now amounting to nearly 2 million people.

Third-country solutions for refugees were significantly expanded in 2022 and 2023, including through strengthened resettlement programmes for the most vulnerable refugees living in Bangladesh, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan. In 2022, UNHCR submitted over 21,000 refugees for resettlement consideration, a more than four-fold increase compared to 2021. Submissions for resettlement are expected to increase to more than 30,000 in 2023, with scope to expand further depending on Member States' commitments to address the substantial needs in the region. Complementary pathways provided solutions to more than 5,000 individuals in the region in 2022, a number projected to increase in 2023 with continued partnerships on labour mobility, cooperation on family reunification and new avenues in education.

A dramatic increase in irregular maritime movements since January 2022 put more lives at risk. Over 5,400 Rohingya embarked on dangerous sea journeys, seeking protection, family reunification and access to livelihood opportunities. More than 400 individuals were reported dead or missing around the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, with at least two shipwrecks so far this year that resulted in 30 confirmed deaths and 61 people missing. UNHCR continued to call for safe and predictable disembarkation, and for greater responsibility-sharing among States, including through the Consultation Mechanism of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime.

Climate change continues to disproportionately impact the region, driving internal displacement and underlining the importance of strengthening the climate resilience of refugees and displaced people, as well as their inclusion in national adaptation and disaster risk reduction plans. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, some 22.6 million people in the region were internally displaced by disasters in the course of 2022, accounting for 70 per cent of those displaced by disasters globally.

### **Afghanistan situation**

Some 3.25 million Afghans remained internally displaced due to conflict. Internally displaced persons continued to return to their areas of origin, though in smaller numbers compared to the period immediately following the end of the armed conflict. According to government sources, over 1.6 million Afghans have newly arrived in Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan since 2021. To date in 2023, over 12,400 Afghan refugees have voluntarily returned to Afghanistan, mainly from Pakistan, a substantial increase from the more than 6,500 Afghan refugees who returned in 2022. UNHCR and its partners continued their efforts to improve conditions for sustainable return through an area-based approach in priority areas of return and reintegration, also providing individual assistance to returnees.

In view of the enormous humanitarian needs, UNHCR scaled up its operations in Afghanistan in 2022, prioritizing life-saving assistance, protection and solutions for internally displaced persons, while also building community resilience in line with the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees and the inter-agency durable solutions working group in Afghanistan, which is a pilot country for the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda. To date in 2023, UNHCR has assisted over 649,200 people, 80 per cent of whom were women and girls, including some 248,300 people who have received cash assistance.

UNHCR has continued to provide psychosocial support and emergency shelter, establish community centres and schools, and increase small business opportunities, especially for women. However, efforts have been impacted by edicts issued by the de facto authorities restricting women and girls' activities and access to education, work and public spaces, including the ability of Afghan women to work for international non-governmental organizations and the United Nations. In line with the recommendations of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, UNHCR continues to advocate for uninterrupted and non-discriminatory delivery of humanitarian assistance.

In December 2022, Iran (Islamic Republic of) hosted the tenth meeting of the Quadripartite Steering Committee of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, with Afghanistan, Pakistan and UNHCR. The Committee reaffirmed its commitment to ensuring protection and solutions for displaced Afghans, while prioritizing the creation of conditions to enable sustainable return and reintegration in Afghanistan. In July 2023, Qatar became the Chair of the Core Group of the Support Platform of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, with the Netherlands (Kingdom of) as the Vice-Chair. The Core Group continued to urge the international community to support equitable responsibility-sharing and has helped generate some \$700 million in contributions to UNHCR and other significant investments in the region since first convening in 2020.

As of the end of 2022, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan continued to host 3.4 million and 1.7 Afghan refugees, including individuals in a refugee-like situation, respectively, in addition to over 3 million Afghans of other status. Iran (Islamic Republic of) extended its health and education policies to include Afghans in the country, working in partnership with UNHCR to further extend secondary health care to the most vulnerable refugees. However, record high inflation in both countries increased the cost of rent and other staples, which, together with limited livelihood opportunities, severely affected the ability of vulnerable populations to afford basic goods and services. Additional robust international support for the two principal host countries remains crucial to ensuring adequate protection space for Afghans.

The 2023 Refugee Response Plan covers Iran (Islamic Republic of), Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, targeting some 7.9 million people, comprising 5.2 million Afghan refugees and 2.7 million members of the host community. The plan aims to ensure basic needs are met while applying a longer-term vision towards solutions through coordinated humanitarian-development-peace nexus programming that reinforces local and national systems in host countries. With the Regional Response Plan funded at only 6 per cent, coupled with the humanitarian response plan funded at only 24 per cent as of August 2023, several partners have had to scale back operations, including the World Food Programme (WFP), which dropped 10 million people from food assistance, and the International Committee of the Red Cross ending its financial support to 25 hospitals.

## Myanmar situation

The Myanmar situation accounted for 3.6 million people of concern to UNHCR including 1.7 million stateless Rohingya, as of the end of 2022. As conflict in Myanmar continues unabated, an estimated 1.9 million persons were displaced internally as of September 2023, including more than 1.5 million newly displaced since the military took over in February 2021. In addition, some 108,000 refugees fled to India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, although the estimated 44,000 people who reached Thailand include those who may have subsequently returned to Myanmar.

Compounding the humanitarian and protection crisis, Cyclone Mocha had a devastating impact on 2.3 million people in Bangladesh and 7.9 million in Myanmar in May 2023, destroying homes, infrastructure and farmland. In Myanmar, UNHCR and partners delivered humanitarian assistance where access was permitted, while the United Nations country team advocated for unrestricted access to affected communities in Rakhine State and the North-West. The long-term impact on livelihoods is likely to push already vulnerable communities into greater socioeconomic difficulties, and in turn, towards dangerous irregular movements. In Bangladesh, UNHCR worked with trained refugee volunteers and supported the government-led response in Cox's Bazar.

A comprehensive regional approach seeks to expand solutions for Rohingya refugees and sustain support for host countries, with a focus on safeguarding the right to return, and as affirmed by 2022 United Nations General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, creating conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable repatriation. UNHCR and partners continue to support the refugee response across the region, seeking opportunities to expand solutions for Rohingya refugees, advocating for alternatives to detention, and enhancing the resilience of refugee and host communities in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Indonesia as the Chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) maintained attention on the plight of the Rohingya, and in 2023, ASEAN reiterated its support for voluntary return, recalling its efforts to facilitate repatriation through the implementation of projects in Rakhine State.

In 2023, Bangladesh and Myanmar stepped up bilateral preparations for a small-scale return pilot, including a “go and see visit” by 20 refugees to observe conditions in Maungdaw in northern Rakhine State, and a “come and tell visit” during which Myanmar authorities visited Bangladesh. The 630,000 Rohingya remaining in Rakhine State continue to face restrictions on movement, difficulties in obtaining documentation, and limited access to livelihoods and basic services. UNHCR has engaged in bilateral and multilateral efforts to mobilize resources and advance solutions for Rohingya refugees, while continuing to implement community-led projects with the United Nations Development Programme in Rakhine State, including programs to create conditions conducive for voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration.

Bangladesh continues to offer sanctuary to some 960,000 Rohingya. As of mid-September 2023, the Joint Response Plan amounting to \$876 million was 34 per cent funded, leading to a 33 per cent reduction in food rations in the first half of the year. Refugee families have had to contend with a concerning increase in criminality and killings, while the Government of Bangladesh has intensified law enforcement efforts and coordination, amidst calls for more and protection-sensitive policing. UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund and the WFP continue to support the national authorities and partners in addressing the humanitarian needs of some 32,000 refugees relocated to Bhasan Char, while advocating for sustainable government investment in the project.

Some 295,000 refugee students in Bangladesh have gained access to primary and secondary education, with many Rohingya students following the Myanmar curriculum since July 2023. These efforts are expected to further enhance prospects for sustainable voluntary return once conditions allow. Robust and sustained support through the 2023 Joint Response Plan remains critical to build refugee resilience, improve the protection environment and reduce perilous onward movements.

## **B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2023 plan for the Asia and Pacific region**

### **Access to protection and strengthening asylum capacities**

Challenges to accessing protection and asylum in the region, including restrictions on movement, border closures and the lack of national asylum systems, have contributed to incidents of refoulement, deportation, arrest and detention. This included individuals from Afghanistan and Myanmar, for whom the UNHCR non-return advisories remain in effect. In this context, UNHCR continues to advocate alternatives to detention and adherence to the principle of non-refoulement.

UNHCR supported countries with developing and improving asylum systems in line with international standards, including collaborating with authorities in Japan to enhance the quality and efficiency of refugee status determination procedures. In Thailand, UNHCR continued to assist authorities in developing a national screening mechanism following the Government's approval of draft criteria in October 2022. In the Philippines, UNHCR provided technical assistance on strengthening the Government's Refugees and Stateless Persons Protection Unit, and enhancing refugee status and statelessness determination procedures.

With a view to addressing gender-based violence and child protection, programmes have been implemented in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand to promote behavioural change and non-violence through community dialogues that include men and boys. UNHCR has reinforced prevention and case management of child marriage in Bangladesh and Indonesia by training case workers and developing standard operating procedures, with efforts under way to strengthen operational capacity in India and Malaysia.

### **Expanding solutions for protracted situations**

UNHCR continues to address barriers to voluntary repatriation through integrated programming in areas of return. Ongoing instability in Afghanistan and Myanmar has hindered large-scale voluntary return, though UNHCR ensures that Afghan refugees voluntarily returning are adequately supported with their reintegration needs.

Efforts to advance solutions for 93,000 Sri Lankan refugees living in a protracted situation in India have intensified through a verification exercise to digitize data. Advocacy continues on identifying pathways to local integration for those refugees wishing to assimilate, with enhanced reintegration support for individuals who choose to return to Sri Lanka in the course of 2023.

Bringing together the unique expertise and comparative advantages of both organizations, a UNHCR-World Bank Strategic Analysis Hub was launched in 2022 to assess the challenges and opportunities presented by forced displacement in Afghanistan and throughout the region. Regional consultations between UNHCR and non-governmental organizations in September 2023 convened participants representing 161 organisations from 19 countries. Under the theme of promoting inclusion for sustainable solutions, participants acknowledged the important role that refugee-led organizations play in the refugee response, encouraged countries to support resettlement and complementary pathways, and emphasized the need for predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing.

### **Protection and solutions for internally displaced persons**

In Afghanistan, UNHCR works towards solutions to internal displacement, in line with commitments set out in the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement. To harmonize data on internally displaced persons and returnees, UNHCR collaborated with the International Organization for Migration to operationalize the International Recommendations on Internally Displaced Persons Statistics. Standardized, coordinated and common data collection and indicator development remain a goal in Afghanistan to advance an integrated, solutions-oriented approach.

In Myanmar, UNHCR has prioritized life-saving assistance and community-based protection activities based on need and available access, continuing to provide shelter and livelihoods,

and support solutions, wherever possible. Under the leadership of the Resident Coordinator, UNHCR promotes protection standards in the case of premature returns and relocation in the context of camp closures, while building capacity in addressing legal rights, including citizenship and housing, land and property.

In the Philippines, the House of Representatives approved the Bill on Internally Displaced Persons in August 2023, which, if passed by the Senate, will provide a national legal framework for the protection of the rights of internally displaced persons and for seeking durable solutions. UNHCR has supported the development of the bill through advocacy and the provision of technical guidance.

### **Eradication of statelessness**

Throughout the region, policy advocacy and capacity-building activities to identify, reduce and prevent statelessness were jointly conducted with government and United Nations partners. Some countries managed to resolve a considerable number of individual cases, particularly those in Central Asia. A senior officials' roundtable on ending statelessness hosted in Almaty in May 2023, and attended by representatives from Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, generated momentum to achieve the #IBelong campaign to end statelessness goals and develop pledges for the Global Refugee Forum 2023.

UNHCR continues to advocate for the inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless persons in national civil registration systems, through a regional steering group of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Decisive steps towards inclusive birth registration systems have been achieved in the Philippines, where efforts to address gaps among ethnic minorities and displaced people have been redoubled, and in the Kyrgyz Republic, where an enhanced legislative framework for the registration of children born to undocumented parents is now in place.

## **C. Financial information**

The Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme initially approved the 2023 budget of \$944.7 million for Asia and the Pacific. The budget was later increased by \$55.8 million to \$1,000.6 million to support the government-led flood response in Pakistan. The refugee programme represented 74 per cent of the funding requirements in the region. As of 31 August 2023, the Asia and the Pacific region was approximately 48 per cent funded with \$479.1 million, including the indicative allocation of flexible funding. All UNHCR country operations in Asia and the Pacific have now transitioned to multi-year planning.

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