Overview of UNHCR’s operational strategies in Asia and the Pacific

A. Situational analysis including new developments

General

Asia remains the region with the largest refugee operations and the region which produces the greatest number of refugees in the world. It includes Afghanistan, the country currently producing the highest numbers of new asylum claims in the world, as well as Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, the two countries which host the greatest numbers of refugees. The largest global return operation has been the repatriation of 5.7 million Afghans since 2002. Asia also has the largest programme of resettlement submissions and departures. A continent where people are “on the move”, Asia houses some of the world’s biggest economies, emerging middle-income countries, developing countries, and countries facing or recovering from conflict. It is also one of the most disaster-prone regions of the world and is significantly affected by consequences of climate change, which also triggers displacement.

Accession to the Refugee Convention remains rare in the Asia-Pacific region and many countries do not have a legal framework that governs refugee protection. Among the few who have acceded, many lack the capacity to effectively put into practice the commitments they have made. This fragile protection environment makes UNHCR the main agent and custodian of protection, which poses significant challenges when geopolitics and national security issues prevail over humanitarian considerations.

This is not to underestimate Asia’s role in generously hosting millions of refugees and other displaced persons over the years. However, the prolongation of some refugee situations without durable solutions in sight, combined with disparities in asylum practices among countries, are provoking irregular movements further afield, as persons of concern seek a better protection environment and solutions to their predicament. Highly mobile, often young, populations of asylum-seekers and refugees are increasingly on the move in search of better protection and durable solutions - often heading to middle income or industrialized nations such as Australia or European countries, with Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and other Central Asian countries often used as transit points.

Safeguarding asylum in the mixed migration context

These movements add to the complexity of mixed migration phenomenon in the region. In light of the inherent challenges of dealing unilaterally or bilaterally with a phenomenon that affects multiple countries, Governments in several sub-
regions of Asia have developed a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to manage these movements.

In South-East Asia the operationalization of the Regional Cooperation Framework under the auspices of the Bali Process has gathered further momentum and it is anticipated that a Regional Support Office will begin functioning in the second half of 2012. In Central Asia, to take forward the Almaty declaration in 2011, an action plan will be formulated followed by national consultations with stakeholders with a view to creating a regional cooperation framework. These regional processes are significant in that they go beyond responses at the national level: they bring together countries of origin, transit and destination, and allow for targeted responses to enhance protection-sensitive migration measures while meeting State priorities for combating people smuggling, trafficking and transnational crime.

Solutions for protracted refugee situations – also addressing host communities

The Afghanistan situation remains the most critical challenge for UNHCR in the Asia-Pacific region. It is the largest protracted refugee situation in the world, with close to 3 million registered Afghan refugees who have been residing in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran for over 30 years. Recognizing the complexity of the refugee and displacement issues still affecting the region and the potential volatility of the transition process in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, in collaboration with UNHCR, initiated a quadripartite consultative process in 2011 to develop the Solutions Strategy for Afghan refugees, to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable integration and assistance to host countries. The Solutions Strategy is the fruit of intense consultations which have led to consensus amongst the three Governments, UNHCR and relevant United Nations agencies, on the development of a multi-year approach to address the Afghan refugee situation. It will be presented at an international conference to be held on 2-3 May 2012 in Switzerland. Underlying the strategy is the need to create conducive conditions for voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration through community-based investments in areas of high return in Afghanistan, notably the promotion of livelihood opportunities, while preserving asylum space in neighbouring host countries. The approach will include enhanced support to refugee-hosting communities, alternative temporary stay arrangements and resettlement in third countries. UNHCR is appealing for the solidarity, engagement and support of the international community for this strategy throughout the coming years.

It is important to stabilize refugee populations pending durable solutions in order to discourage irregular movements. However, the prolonged presence of large numbers of refugees in host countries often generates host community fatigue. UNHCR is pursuing community-based approaches in protracted refugee situations in Asia to improve the services available in refugee-hosting communities and to alleviate the burden borne by host communities. The successful implementation of such joint initiatives with host Governments – notably the Solutions Strategy for Afghan refugees, the Refugee-Affected and Hosting Area (RAHA) Programme in Pakistan, and the Community Based Development Programme in Nepal – will depend greatly upon the strength of the international community’s commitment and support in this respect. UNHCR hopes to be able to initiate similar approaches in other countries in the region as appropriate.

Significant developments in Myanmar in 2011 may have an impact on two of Asia’s most protracted refugee situations – in Thailand and in Bangladesh.
UNHCR is cautiously optimistic that voluntary repatriation may become a plausible option for refugees residing in camps in these two countries.

**Protection and self-reliance for urban refugees**

Protecting refugees in urban areas and providing for their self-sufficiency continue to pose challenges in the region. Identification and registration, community outreach, improving livelihoods and self-reliance, addressing SGBV and detention are some of the most pressing issues. The effective implementation of UNHCR’s urban refugee policy is not only a question of resources, but also of operational space and a legal framework that justifies and supports it. While the Office will continue to advocate for an enabling legal framework, it will explore innovative approaches to increase protection and self-sufficiency options for refugees who live in urban centres in the Asia region. The Health Insurance scheme for registered refugees residing in the Islamic Republic of Iran which was developed in 2011 with the Government is a welcome response to the needs of refugees in urban settings. UNHCR will explore how to replicate this kind of good practice in other major urban refugee situations in the region. In Malaysia, The Office will continue to work with the Government in the context of its migration management programme to regularize the stay of persons of concern through a possible joint registration exercise.

**Statelessness**

Asia saw important developments in countering and preventing Statelessness during 2011. Two countries in the region (the Philippines and Turkmenistan) ratified the 1954 Statelessness Convention. Turkmenistan also granted citizenship to the first batch of some 3,300 stateless persons as a follow-up to the statelessness registration campaigns carried out jointly with UNHCR, as a result of which some 12,000 persons were registered.

In South-East Asia, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) has become an important partner for addressing Statelessness in the region. A number of important recommendations emanating from a joint AICHR/UNHCR regional workshop on *Statelessness and the Rights of Women and Children* included calls for a gap analysis of nationality laws and how they may conflict at the regional level, and for AICHR to explore ways to collaborate with ASEAN Member States and international organizations on information sharing and on extending universal birth registration through the national legislation.

**Contribute to effective responses to displacement emergencies**

Major natural disasters hit the region in 2011 starting with the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan at the beginning of the year, followed by major floods in Pakistan, Thailand, and the tropical storm that affected the southern Philippines at the end of the year. UNHCR made a symbolic contribution to the relief efforts in Japan and Thailand as an expression of solidarity. In Pakistan and the Philippines, UNHCR was operationally engaged and led the Protection Cluster in both countries as part of the inter-agency cluster arrangements, at the request of the respective Governments and the UN Country Teams.

In response to the 2011 flood emergency in Pakistan, UNHCR and its partners assisted approximately 294,000 individuals, including 3,500 Afghan refugees, with emergency shelter and NFI kits in the flood-affected provinces of Sindh and Balochistan. As co-lead of the Protection Thematic Working Group, UNHCR supported governmental efforts to address key protection issues and concerns. The Office also continued its contribution to the Government’s shelter programme in response to the 2010 floods, with almost 33,000 of the targeted
40,000 shelters completed by the end of 2011. As part of the Government’s response to the displacement in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), UNHCR, in collaboration with other humanitarian partners, provided timely assistance to address the protection and other basic needs of this group and their return communities.

In the Philippines, in response to the Government’s request, through the UN Country Team UNHCR delivered 90 metric tons of critical items for protection kits for over 80,000 people. The Office will continue to co-chair the protection cluster in Iligan and Cagayan de Oro.

B. Financial information

The Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA) budget of $502 million for Asia and the Pacific for 2012, as presented in the Global Appeal 2012-2013, was increased to $514 million in early 2012 mainly due to the continuation of assistance activities for flood-affected populations in Pakistan and additional protection needs identified for IDPs in the Philippines.

Although the budget for other operations has not been modified at this stage, there have been new developments on the ground in some operations which may require a review of the budget to meet additional unmet needs in the course of 2012.