

Update on UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific

A. Situational overview

UNHCR remains committed to pursuing solutions for forcibly displaced and stateless people in Asia and the Pacific, despite persistent challenges of conflict, discrimination and, now, the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the Office is seeking to ensure that the region’s 9.2 million persons of concern are included in the response to address the pandemic’s far-reaching impacts. Mobilizing international solidarity and focused regional support for refugees and affected communities, while pursuing comprehensive approaches to solutions in line with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), are key in this regard.

By mid-2020, there were 4.2 million refugees, 3.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 200,000 asylum-seekers and returnees in Asia and the Pacific, as well as some 2.3 million stateless people, many of whom were also refugees or IDPs. Roughly three quarters of persons of concern to UNHCR in the region were from Afghanistan or Myanmar.

COVID-19 pandemic response

In Asia and the Pacific, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need to ensure that persons of concern to UNHCR are included in national systems. Most countries were quick to include refugees and asylum-seekers in their public health responses, while working with UNHCR on prevention measures and equal access to testing and treatment. UNHCR also advocated that Governments include displaced people in national vaccination plans, and Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan and Uzbekistan have already indicated they will do so. Despite these efforts, the pandemic exacerbated the exclusion refugees already faced in other ways, including in terms of education, livelihoods and social safety nets.

In a region where the majority of countries are not party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, sweeping restrictions on movement and the significant socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 have exposed refugees and asylum-seekers to protection risks and vulnerabilities that will likely remain heightened in 2021. This includes incidents of xenophobic hate speech, limited access to asylum, pushbacks at sea, more stringent detention measures, increased domestic violence, child protection concerns and mental health issues.

Although lockdowns have resulted in a reduced physical presence, UNHCR, partners and persons of concern have adapted their means of responding to protection needs. In order to maintain access to asylum and essential protection services, UNHCR operations in Asia and the Pacific adopted remote management tools for community outreach, registration, status determination and resettlement processing. In 2020, with support and training from UNHCR and its partners, refugees led community-based protection initiatives in the region, serving as front-line responders – not only in the context of COVID-19, but also in addressing broader protection matters and preparing their communities for natural disasters.

Together with its partners, UNHCR expanded cash-based assistance for the most vulnerable refugees to cope with the economic downturn resulting from the pandemic, although funding was insufficient to meet the critical needs. In 2020, expenditures from cash-based initiatives

in the region were approximately \$25-27 million, an increase of more than 60 per cent compared to 2019. In Pakistan, UNHCR cash-based initiatives had a particularly significant impact, benefiting some 50,000 vulnerable families.

UNHCR received \$53 million for its COVID-19 pandemic response in Asia and the Pacific in 2020. In 2021, COVID-19-related needs are estimated at \$45 million.

Global Compact on Refugees

At the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in 2019, 114 pledges were made by States and other entities in Asia and the Pacific towards advancing the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees. Since then, despite challenges and delays linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, progress has been made in the areas of jobs and livelihoods, protection and solutions. In the second half of 2020, for example, UNHCR supported the convening of a business forum to facilitate refugee employment, the organization of a conference on women and peace, and the provision of pro bono legal assistance to refugee organizations. In 2021, UNHCR will seek to build on the full range of GRF pledges, pursuing comprehensive approaches to solutions, expanding its evidence base through more rigorous and systematic data collection and analysis, and expanding its network of partners.

Afghanistan situation

Despite escalating violence in Afghanistan, the initiation of the intra-Afghan peace negotiations presents an opportunity for a gradual progression towards peace and stability, which could pave the way for the voluntary repatriation of refugees. Solutions to displacement for Afghan refugees were also reflected in commitments made by the international community at a donor's conference in November 2020. Following its formation in 2020, the Core Group of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) Support Platform comprises 13 members: Denmark, Germany, Japan, Qatar, the Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America, together with the Asian Development Bank, the European Union, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank. Under the chairmanship of the European Union, the Core Group aims to build momentum in 2021 towards mobilizing new partnerships and galvanizing support for the implementation of the SSAR.

Under the responsibility-sharing framework of the SSAR, the Government of Afghanistan has agreed to double the number of priority areas for return and reintegration (PARRs), from 20 to 40. In 2020, more than 900,000 returnees, IDPs and community members in these areas were assisted by UNHCR and its partners. UNHCR will work with the Government to ensure that investments in the PARRs are fully aligned with the outcomes of the 2020 donor's conference and Afghanistan's development priorities, as reflected in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework II for 2021-2025, the forthcoming National Priority Programme on Reintegration, and the Afghanistan Partnership Framework.

In the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan, which together host 2.2 million registered Afghan refugees, UNHCR is seeking to support the inclusive policies of both Governments by channeling investment into the national public service delivery systems and through efforts to secure documentation for refugees. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Government launched the re-registration exercise for Afghan refugees, known as Amayesh XV, in July 2020. It is also exploring ways to support the Government of Afghanistan to verify the identity of all Afghan nationals in the Islamic Republic of Iran so that they can receive electronic Afghan identity cards and apply for Afghan passports. In Pakistan, the Government and UNHCR plan to launch the Document Renewal and Information Verification Exercise (DRIVE) in 2021 to verify the registered Afghan refugee population, provide all registered refugees with new biometric smartcards, and update and expand the dataset on refugees. These efforts will help enable more effective protection and assistance in Pakistan, and more targeted investments in solutions to facilitate sustainable return and reintegration in the PARRs in Afghanistan.

Myanmar situation

In 2021, UNHCR is pursuing comprehensive and regional approaches to solutions for the 1.1 million refugees from Myanmar (the vast majority of whom are Rohingya from Rakhine State), with efforts anchored in improved conditions in Rakhine State. Notwithstanding the military takeover in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, UNHCR's focus remains on creating conditions in Rakhine State conducive to the voluntary repatriation of refugees. Under a 2018 tripartite memorandum of understanding between the Government of Myanmar, UNHCR and UNDP, community-based projects that expand access to education, livelihoods and health care continue being carried out. Some of these projects, as well as those to improve repatriation prospects planned by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), were delayed in 2020 due to both the COVID-19 pandemic and intensified armed conflict between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army. The conflict has displaced over 106,000 people within Rakhine and Chin States since late 2018.

UNHCR will continue to seek international and regional support to implement the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, particularly the lifting of discriminatory restrictions on freedom of movement and ensuring effective pathways to Myanmar citizenship for the estimated 600,000 Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State and the nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees hosted in Bangladesh and other countries of the region.

Outside of Myanmar, UNHCR continued to lead efforts to protect and assist Rohingya refugees across the region. Humanitarian organizations worked closely with the Government of Bangladesh throughout 2020 to successfully implement COVID-19 mitigation measures aimed at preventing the spread of the virus among the 866,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, while also supporting the pandemic response for local communities. Some 79,000 hand-washing taps were installed in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, and hundreds of women from both refugee and host communities produced over half a million face masks. In 2021, UNHCR and its partners in Bangladesh will seek to implement important initiatives that were delayed by COVID-19 restrictions, such as a pilot programme to introduce the Myanmar curriculum to refugee students. The United Nations will continue to seek authorization to visit Bhasan Char, where the Government has relocated some 10,000 refugees from Cox's Bazar, in order to assess their protection needs and the safety and sustainability of the facilities.

Donors maintained strong support for the Myanmar situation in 2020, particularly through pledges made towards the 2020 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Response in Bangladesh and at the Conference on Sustaining Support for the Rohingya Refugee Response held in October 2020. Merely maintaining the humanitarian status quo for Rohingya refugees, however, is unsustainable. As the situation becomes protracted, a range of challenges have arisen in host countries, including security challenges in Bangladesh, the increased detention of refugees in Malaysia, and the refusal of several States to rescue and disembark a growing number of Rohingya who undertake life-threatening journeys by sea. To address these and other protection challenges, UNHCR will seek broader support from the region and the international community in 2021 to enable solutions and build the resilience of Rohingya refugees through opportunities for education and livelihoods.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Safeguarding access to protection and asylum

Access to territory and asylum systems remains a challenge in Asia and the Pacific, where only 20 of the 45 countries and territories have acceded to the 1951 Convention. In a region where many asylum-seekers seek access to territory by air, COVID-19-related travel restrictions have curtailed this option. When individuals sought asylum and access to territory by sea in 2020, as was the case for an estimated 2,400 Rohingya refugees, the lack of predictable and equitable regional mechanisms for disembarkation resulted in vessels stranded

at sea for several months, repeated abuses by smugglers and traffickers, and the loss of as many as 200 lives. Persisting unmet needs in countries of departure are expected to drive more Rohingya movements in 2021. UNHCR will continue advocating – with States and in regional fora such as ASEAN and the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime – shared responsibility for rescue and disembarkation and the development of safe and legal pathways for refugees to reduce risky journeys by sea.

Meanwhile, UNHCR will build on the progress made in 2020 towards developing national asylum systems in the region. In Thailand, the regulation establishing a national screening mechanism entered into force in June 2020. Although implementation has been delayed, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR has provided capacity-building and technical support to Government counterparts with regard to international standards for refugee status determination and protection.

In 2021, UNHCR will continue to strengthen documentation for refugees that secures their rights, including legal stay, and broadens their inclusion in national systems, both while in exile and upon return home. The Amayesh XV exercise in the Islamic Republic of Iran has expanded the eligibility criteria for identity document renewal to include Afghan refugees who missed the previous four rounds of registration, presenting a unique opportunity for former Amayesh card holders to regain their status. For the first time in a decade, undocumented family members of Amayesh card holders will also be able to enrol in the Amayesh process. Meanwhile, UNHCR and the Government of Pakistan’s new DRIVE initiative, in addition to verifying Afghan refugees in Pakistan, will play a critical role in informing programmatic interventions in Pakistan. In Afghanistan, it will also inform investments in PARRs, in the context of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, and enable sustainable return and reintegration. Elsewhere in the region, UNHCR is working with the Malaysian Government towards the joint registration of asylum-seekers, alongside discussions on granting refugees the right to work in certain sectors. Technical support is also being offered in Bangladesh and Myanmar to improve the integrity and efficiency of verifying Rohingya refugees’ prior residence in Myanmar.

Across the region, UNHCR operations have implemented action plans to prevent and respond to risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, and gender-based violence, particularly in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. A series of trainings and surveys among UNHCR staff have informed strategies for 2021 to address gender-based violence and child protection. Community engagement is a critical part of these strategies, with the challenges of COVID-19 leading UNHCR to rely upon and empower refugees to provide critical services to their own communities. UNHCR will build on these efforts in 2021. In Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and Thailand, technical and material support provided by UNHCR to community-based organizations, together with an increase in the number of female refugee outreach volunteers, has reinforced community networks and enhanced support for vulnerable members of their communities, particularly women and girls. An application called “myUNHCR” that allows refugees to remotely update information concerning their protection needs is being piloted.

Seeking solutions for protracted situations

While exacerbating the vulnerabilities of persons of concern to UNHCR, the COVID-19 pandemic also stalled the limited opportunities for solutions that were available in Asia and the Pacific. Related restrictions hindered resettlement case identification, processing and departures; temporarily suspended facilitated voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka; and, in some cases, triggered premature returns or onward movements, as individuals faced difficulties in their host countries. In the first six months of 2020, UNHCR facilitated the voluntary return of 662 refugees, with 436 to Afghanistan and 210 to Sri Lanka, compared to 4,031 in the first six months of 2019. Nevertheless, remote processing modalities established by UNHCR allowed some refugees in the region to access third-country solutions in 2020, including over 3,000 who departed for resettlement, and will contribute to the more efficient processing of solutions in 2021 and beyond. UNHCR advocacy efforts in 2020

continued to build momentum towards opening up complementary pathways in Asia and the Pacific. Complementary pathways are an important element of regional solidarity, as planned cuts to resettlement in some countries within the region outpace pledged increases in others.

In 2021, UNHCR is seeking to open up pathways for persons of concern in the region; resume facilitated voluntary repatriation (particularly for refugees in protracted situations in the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan, as well as in Thailand); and advance comprehensive approaches to solutions in the spirit of the GCR. In addition to the comprehensive approaches for Afghan refugees, and displaced and stateless Rohingya from Myanmar, UNHCR will seek to operationalize a multi-solutions strategy for the 93,000 refugees from Myanmar who remain encamped in Thailand. It will also work with the Governments of India and Sri Lanka towards finding a dignified and sustainable resolution of the situation of Sri Lankan refugees in India.

Ensuring protection and solutions for IDPs

With active conflict-related situations of internal displacement in Afghanistan, Myanmar and the Philippines, UNHCR, in 2021, will seek synergies across IDP operations in the region to strengthen both its operational delivery and cluster leadership in support of data-driven protection and solutions strategies, in line with the 2019 “Policy on UNHCR’s engagement in situations of internal displacement”.

In Afghanistan, the internally displaced population increased by over 380,000 in 2020 to 4.8 million, with needs increasing exponentially in the wake of increased violence and the global health situation. Recognizing that a projected 18.4 million individuals across the general population, including the displaced, will have humanitarian needs in 2021, UNHCR is taking an area-based approach, consistent with its mobilization of investments in the PARRs. The Office continues to strengthen community-based protection mechanisms within displaced communities and leads the inter-agency protection and shelter responses for IDPs.

In Myanmar, UNHCR is part of wider United Nations efforts to support the implementation of the 2019 “National strategy on resettlement of IDPs and closure of IDP camps”, particularly in areas where near-term IDP solutions are achievable, such as in Kachin and northern Shan States where 104,000 individuals remain internally displaced. UNHCR will also seek to assist more Rohingya IDPs in Rakhine State, who were displaced in 2017, to return to their places of origin. At the same time, it will continue advocacy efforts to end the now eight-year displacement of 130,000 mainly Rohingya IDPs in central Rakhine State. UNHCR coordinates and delivers humanitarian assistance for the additional 106,000 IDPs displaced in Rakhine and Chin States since late 2018.

In the Philippines, UNHCR has nationalized its office as part of its responsible disengagement from leading the protection cluster in Mindanao and is in the process of handing over responsibility to national actors, as guided by the 2019 policy. In 2021, UNHCR will continue to conduct regular trainings for local officials and provide technical support on IDP legislation currently under consideration at the national and regional levels. Pending full handover to national actors in 2022, UNHCR will maintain its leadership in coordinating protection responses to the 274,000 individuals displaced within Mindanao. In coordination with the Government and other partners, in 2020 UNHCR delivered core relief items to over 60,900 individuals and implemented some 40 quick-impact projects that promoted self-reliance and improved protection conditions for 104,000 people.

Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless people

In addition to its efforts to protect the largest stateless group in the region – the 1.6 million Rohingya denied citizenship in Myanmar – UNHCR works to reduce and prevent statelessness throughout Asia and the Pacific.

Since the start of UNHCR’s #IBelong campaign to end statelessness in 2014, Central Asia has made significant progress. The nationality issues of an estimated 80,000 individuals have been

resolved, and all central Asian States have made commitments to provide universal birth registration and ensure safeguards against childhood statelessness. In 2020, Kyrgyzstan became the first State in the region to completely resolve statelessness on its territory, while a new citizenship law in Uzbekistan grants nationality to registered stateless residents, with as many as 20,000 people expected to acquire citizenship in 2021. More than 7,400 stateless people received citizenship in Uzbekistan, and over 2,500 people received citizenship in Turkmenistan in 2020. In Kazakhstan, statelessness determination procedures were approved.

Elsewhere in the region, a 2020 amendment to the Islamic Republic of Iran's nationality law enables children of Iranian mothers and foreign fathers to obtain Iranian nationality. In Thailand, as a result of reforms to nationality and civil registration laws, and the adoption of a progressive nationality strategy to address statelessness, over 100,000 stateless people have acquired Thai nationality since 2008. In the Philippines, the Special Committee on Naturalization has been established to facilitate the proceedings for refugees and stateless people, while NGO partners in Malaysia are pursuing gender equality in the context of nationality.

In 2021, UNHCR will continue cooperating with regional institutions – such as the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children, the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process, and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific – to strengthen birth registration processes and civil documentation. Efforts towards implementing the 29 pledges made by States in the region at the 2019 high-level segment on statelessness, which took place during the seventieth session of the Executive Committee, will also be supported.

C. Financial information

UNHCR's initial budget for Asia and the Pacific in 2020, as approved by the Executive Committee, was \$777 million. Increases made during the year, including to address needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic, brought the final budget to \$808.2 million, which was 58 per cent funded. The refugee programme constituted 77 per cent of the region's funding requirements, and the South-East Asia subregion was allocated the largest share of the region's budget, at 53 per cent.

The Executive Committee approved a 2021 budget for Asia and the Pacific of \$755 million, however additional COVID-19-related requirements have increased the total budget to \$800.6 million. As of February, the 2021 budget was 11 per cent funded, considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and earmarked contributions.