
Update on UNHCR's operations in Asia and the Pacific

A. Situational overview

At the end of 2020, 9.8 million people in Asia and the Pacific were of concern to UNHCR, including 4 million refugees; 3.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs); over 200,000 asylum-seekers and returnees; and 2.3 million stateless people, many of whom were also refugees or IDPs.

In 2021, the Asia Pacific region is facing several major humanitarian crises. Since the beginning of 2021, over 700,000 people have been newly displaced within Afghanistan and Myanmar, due to violence and political turmoil. In addition, the accelerating spread of the COVID-19 pandemic across the region has made 2021 the most challenging year in recent memory for persons of concern to UNHCR in Asia and the Pacific.

UNHCR rapidly activated its emergency preparedness and response mechanisms in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and neighbouring countries. Although the security, political, and COVID-19 situations have limited humanitarian access, UNHCR and partners provided protection and assistance to the newly displaced, to the extent possible. Support was also offered to governments and regional organizations to find solutions for the 3.3 million refugees and asylum-seekers in the region from Afghanistan and Myanmar. Other refugees and asylum-seekers in Asia and the Pacific also remain in need of solutions, as well as more inclusive measures in host countries to enable them to withstand the continuing restrictions and socioeconomic impact related to COVID-19.

Afghanistan situation

Conflict and violence dramatically escalated in Afghanistan in 2021, following the announcement of the withdrawal of international troops and with the Taliban accelerating its control over the territory and eventually asserting control of Kabul by mid-August. As a result of the turmoil, some 570,000 people had become newly displaced within the country since January and an increasing number of individuals sought safety in neighbouring countries. UNHCR declared an internal level-3 emergency for the Afghanistan situation and is closely coordinating with governments and partners to prepare for cross-border refugee flows, in line with the refugee coordination model (RCM). As part of its preparedness efforts, UNHCR advocated access to territory in the subregion and ensured prepositioning of core relief items. Despite the extremely fluid situation in Afghanistan, UNHCR is committed to remaining operational to support the humanitarian response and continue investing in the resilience of communities, in line with the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR).

Following the formation in 2020 of the global Core Group of the SSAR Support Platform as the main responsibility-sharing framework for the Afghan refugee situation, country-level Core Groups were constituted in Kabul, Islamabad and Tehran to drive forward localized priorities and partnerships. Chaired by the European Union at the global and country levels, the Core Groups have established and are implementing workplans and will be increasingly activated to coordinate support for the Afghanistan emergency and preparedness in neighbouring countries.

Through the SSAR Support Platform, UNHCR works with the Governments of the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan to support over 2.2 million Afghan refugees through inclusive

national policies. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, a new policy allows refugees who hold Amayesh cards to access financial services. With documentation remaining critical in Pakistan, UNHCR and the Government launched the document renewal and information verification exercise (DRIVE) in April across 35 sites. By 29 August, DRIVE had verified 459,450 refugees and distributed 98,377 proof of registration (PoR) biometric smartcards. It has also equipped UNHCR and partners with comprehensive data on Afghan refugees, including their education and skills, that will enable more targeted interventions for sustainable reintegration in Afghanistan, while improving protection and assistance in Pakistan.

Myanmar situation

Violence in Myanmar following the military takeover on 1 February has internally displaced an estimated 181,000 people, mostly in south-eastern Myanmar, but also in the northern and western parts of the country. Some 22,000 refugees have also fled to India and Thailand since 1 February, though the estimated 7,000 who crossed into Thailand have since returned to Myanmar. Although UNHCR has not been granted access to new arrivals in India and Thailand, it is coordinating with humanitarian partners in neighbouring countries to prepare for further refugee movements from Myanmar.

In Myanmar, UNHCR declared an internal level-2 emergency to respond to growing humanitarian needs. Continuous armed conflict across the country since 1 February, the worsening COVID-19 situation and heavy flooding have aggravated the humanitarian landscape and exacerbated the vulnerability of already fragile communities. Despite limited humanitarian access, UNHCR and partners succeeded in delivering core relief items and COVID-19-related personal protective equipment to tens of thousands of IDPs, while also engaging in remote protection monitoring and strengthening community-based protection.

In Rakhine State, UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have maintained access and continue to implement community-based projects that contribute to creating conditions conducive to the voluntary repatriation of refugees. However, the estimated 600,000 Rohingya in Rakhine State remain subject to discriminatory restrictions on their freedom of movement and citizenship. UNHCR continues to advocate the restoration of their rights – as well as those of some 1 million Rohingya refugees in the region – and for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other regional actors to support implementation of the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State.

The challenges in Myanmar heighten the need to seek comprehensive solutions for Rohingya and other refugees from Myanmar, including greater support and opportunities while they remain in exile. In Bangladesh, the Government's inclusion of the 890,000 Rohingya refugees it hosts in the national COVID-19 response, including vaccination plans, has prevented a public health crisis in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar; however, most humanitarian services in the camps remain suspended due to preventive measures. UNHCR and partners have been able to respond to fires, floods and landslides in the camps, though not before these disasters claimed the lives of several refugees and destroyed thousands of shelters. To address the humanitarian challenges facing Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, the 2021 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis was launched, amounting to \$943 million. In March and May respectively, a United Nations delegation comprising UNHCR and other partners visited Bhasan Char, where the Government has relocated some 18,000 Rohingya refugees. Since then, discussions are underway with the Government on a framework for United Nations operational engagement on Bhasan Char that would address the humanitarian needs of the refugees.

COVID-19 pandemic response

COVID-19 transmission has surged in Asia and the Pacific in 2021, with vaccination rates lagging behind other regions. With lockdowns imposed across much of the region and socioeconomic recovery stalled, persons of concern to UNHCR have remained extremely vulnerable. Despite being included in some national vaccination plans, refugees and asylum-seekers have generally had less access to vaccinations and little, if any, access to economic assistance. The pandemic continues to deepen their isolation and heightens risks, such as

detention and intimate partner violence. Refugee children remain cut off from the limited educational opportunities available to them.

UNHCR has continued to adapt to the COVID-19 situation through new and enhanced methods of maintaining connectivity with refugees and asylum-seekers in the region and ensuring that they can communicate their needs. These have included automated information services and online applications rolled out to refugees in Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as expanded cash-based interventions and volunteer programmes that have empowered refugees to act as frontline responders.

Global Compact on Refugees

In the lead-up to the December 2021 High-Level Officials Meeting, UNHCR has been facilitating or participating in stocktaking dialogues with diverse stakeholders in Asia and the Pacific to assess progress toward implementation of pledges made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum and to identify new opportunities for strategic partnerships. UNHCR also held regional consultations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that put forward recommendations to ensure refugee participation and leadership from the region in the process of realizing the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Safeguarding access to protection and asylum

Access to asylum in Asia and the Pacific in 2021 has been increasingly restricted. Despite concerted UNHCR advocacy, including for refugees fleeing Afghanistan and Myanmar to have access to the territory of neighbouring countries, movement restrictions and border closures prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic have limited the ability of individuals to seek asylum and access assistance. Thousands are detained indefinitely, particularly in India and Malaysia, many as a result of large-scale immigration raids conducted under the pretence of COVID-19 prevention.

Such restrictions, coupled with the pre-existing lack of national asylum systems in most countries, have led to several dozen incidents of refoulement in 2021. UNHCR continues to strongly encourage the development of national asylum systems in the region that are in line with international refugee protection standards. In Thailand, a Screening Committee and a Sub-Committee on Criteria has been established to implement a national screening mechanism.

Refugees travelling by sea are routinely denied access to disembarkation and asylum. In the first half of 2021, over 600 persons (mostly Rohingya refugees departing from Bangladesh) – two-thirds of whom were women and children – attempted the sea journey, with nine recorded deaths. Most were prevented from disembarking by maritime authorities, and one vessel carrying 81 Rohingya refugees was at sea for over four months before being rescued by the Indonesian Coast Guard in June.

For individuals who do gain access to territory, a key element of UNHCR's protection work in the region in 2021 has been reinforcing registration and documentation. The number of individuals who registered with UNHCR decreased significantly in 2020, mostly due to COVID-19 restrictions. In 2021, UNHCR has implemented innovative approaches to conduct remote registration across the region, including online self-service portals and videoconferencing, to ensure continuity of critical protection activities. As a result, UNHCR registered some 22,000 individuals in the second quarter of 2021, more than four times as many as in the second quarter of 2020.

Registration data and documentation are also crucial to securing refugee inclusion and solutions. With a view towards inclusion, UNHCR continues to seek verification of Rohingya refugees' prior residence in Myanmar, while the registration and issuance of biometric smartcards for Afghan refugees under DRIVE in Pakistan has ensured their continued access to services. Across the region, UNHCR is building on the example of DRIVE to explore other initiatives to utilize socioeconomic data on refugees to expand education and livelihood opportunities.

Most refugee, IDPs and stateless children in Asia and the Pacific – who comprise 38 per cent of persons of concern to UNHCR in the region – continue to face barriers to education and other basic services, even as they face heightened risks of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. In areas of conflict and displacement in Afghanistan and Myanmar, children have been subject to grave violations of human rights, including killing and maiming, recruitment by armed forces and armed groups, and sexual violence. UNHCR implements targeted programmes to prevent harm and respond to children’s specific needs. Examples include awareness sessions in India for over 100 children and community members on preventing child labour and child marriage, which have been on the rise since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has exacerbated many forms of gender-based violence, which remains a pervasive and life-threatening risk for women and girls of concern to UNHCR in Asia and the Pacific. UNHCR and partners continue to deliver life-saving assistance for survivors of gender-based violence and implement community-based prevention programmes. In Bangladesh, the Armed Police Battalion that maintains law and order in refugee camps joined a project that engages community members to change norms and prevent intimate partner violence, while in Malaysia, UNHCR and partners supported virtual safe spaces to provide psychosocial support for 135 refugee women.

Seeking solutions for protracted situations

The current crises in Afghanistan and Myanmar – the countries of origin of 83 per cent of refugees in the region – have resulted in more displacement and seriously hindered initiatives to create conditions for voluntary repatriation. UNHCR is redoubling efforts towards comprehensive solutions, in particular through enhanced protection and greater inclusion in host countries, in addition to expanded resettlement and complementary pathways to third countries, while continuing to address barriers to eventual voluntary return.

Although the rate of return of Afghan refugees has remained low due to COVID-19 restrictions and rising insecurity in Afghanistan, UNHCR has assisted returnees with cash grants and access to a range of services, such as information on school enrolment, access to COVID-19 vaccinations and mine risk awareness. In the first half of 2021, 1,148 refugees returned to Afghanistan with UNHCR assistance, compared to 377 in the first half of 2020 and 3,070 in the first half of 2019. The extremely volatile situation following the fall of Kabul has led to a suspension of UNHCR-assisted voluntary returns.

As resettlement from the region significantly declined in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions, in 2021 UNHCR has sought to restore resettlement processing and departures to pre-pandemic levels. In the second half of 2021 and 2022, UNHCR will further scale up resettlement in light of an increase in places now available in third countries, particularly the United States of America. UNHCR has also expanded partnerships to establish new complementary pathways in the region, and is working to enable refugees to access pathways to countries such as Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea.

In the first half of 2021, UNHCR organized extensive consultations with Rohingya refugees across the region about solutions and how they envision their future. Notwithstanding the current situation in Myanmar, a large majority of Rohingya refugees indicated that they wish to return to Myanmar. Until they are able to do so, they voiced an overwhelming desire for education and livelihood opportunities, and UNHCR will seek to expand such opportunities for Rohingya refugees, particularly in Bangladesh (890,000), Malaysia (103,000) and India (20,000).

Ensuring protection and solutions for IDPs

Renewed and escalating conflict in Afghanistan and Myanmar has significantly increased internal displacement and stalled progress on solutions for the hundreds of thousands of IDPs already displaced prior to 2021. UNHCR’s emergency response to IDPs in both countries has focused on strengthening cluster coordination in the field, delivering protection and shelter assistance where access is possible, and enhancing community-based protection where access is limited or restricted.

In Afghanistan, under UNHCR's leadership, the protection and shelter/non-food item clusters spearheaded programmes such as Co-PROSPER, a community-based protection system that also supports livelihoods in the priority areas for return and reintegration. UNHCR delivered critical support to the most vulnerable IDPs through cash-based interventions, which benefited 3,000 people in the first half of 2021. Given the inter-related challenges of disparate IDP data and uneven access to civil documentation, UNHCR is also supporting a Government initiative to harmonize IDP data in a way that facilitates access to documentation.

In Myanmar, rapid needs assessments conducted by UNHCR and partners have identified gaping security, food and shelter needs among those newly displaced since 1 February. Some 80 per cent of the newly displaced are concentrated in south-eastern Myanmar, where UNHCR and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) have reinforced coordination. Across the country, UNHCR and other humanitarian actors have prepositioned material assistance, but delivery has been impeded by access restrictions imposed by the de facto authorities and compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and flooding. As efforts by ASEAN to channel humanitarian assistance into Myanmar commence, UNHCR seeks to help ensure it reaches the most vulnerable IDPs, including 130,000 IDPs (mainly Rohingya) who have remained displaced in central Rakhine State since 2012.

In the Philippines, where 120,000 people remained internally displaced in the Mindanao region as of 30 June 2021, UNHCR has provided capacity-building for the local and national authorities, with a view for them to assume and lead current and future responses to internal displacement. UNHCR has also continued to provide technical support on IDP legislation currently under consideration at the national and regional levels.

Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless people

The situation of the largest stateless groups in Asia and the Pacific remains largely unchanged. In 2021, UNHCR supported efforts to implement the 29 pledges made by States in the region at the 2019 high-level segment on statelessness at the seventieth session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. Further progress is needed in addressing the large statelessness situations in Myanmar, Thailand and Uzbekistan, as well as the situation of stateless Rohingya refugees throughout the region.

Regional efforts to address civil registration and legal identity documentation gaps as risk factors for statelessness have translated into action in various countries. Member States of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) submitted midterm reports for the ESCAP Decade on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics. Several ASEAN countries followed up on the recommendations of the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children "Report on legal identity for all women and children in ASEAN" launched in 2020. Pilot projects testing the Bali Process Civil Registration Assessment Toolkit were also rolled out in Pakistan and Viet Nam, and concluded in Thailand.

UNHCR held regional consultations with civil society organizations in June 2021 on strengthening partnerships to improve access to health, education and livelihoods for stateless persons. Such initiatives have already led to United Nations country teams, particularly in Malaysia and Nepal, undertaking research on the protection needs of persons at risk of statelessness and establishing national working groups to promote the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda. UNHCR supported academic institutions, such as the Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness at the University of Melbourne, to help strengthen the expertise of government officials in the area of statelessness and the advocacy skills of NGOs through capacity-building programmes.

C. Financial information

The Executive Committee initially approved a 2021 budget for Asia and the Pacific of \$755 million, which was later increased to \$832 million due to additional COVID-19-related requirements, and emergency preparedness and response activities in Afghanistan and Myanmar. The refugee programme constituted 77 per cent of the region's funding

requirements. As of the end of July, the budget was 48 per cent funded, considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and earmarked contributions.
