

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

19 September 2017
English
Original: English and French

Sixty-eighth session
Geneva, 2-6 October 2017

Overview of UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific

A. Situational context including new developments

As of 31 July 2017, there were some 9.5 million persons of concern to UNHCR in Asia and the Pacific, including 3.7 million refugees, 2.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 1.6 million stateless persons. Despite the generosity and good practices evident across the region, only 20 of its 45 countries and territories had acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, posing challenges in terms of refugee protection and solutions.

Afghans remained the largest refugee population of concern to UNHCR in Asia and the Pacific. In total, there were more than 2.2 million Afghan refugees worldwide, the vast majority of which were hosted in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. Both countries have provided protection and assistance to Afghan refugees for almost four decades. The volatile security situation in Afghanistan continues to drive displacement, with more than 192,000 people forced to flee their homes in the first eight months of 2017. Over half of those displaced were under the age of 18.

The Islamic Republic of Iran continued to expand refugees’ access to healthcare through the universal public health insurance scheme supported by UNHCR. As of the end of July 2017, some 125,700 refugees were registered in the scheme, giving them access to the same level of services as Iranian nationals. Following last year’s presidential decree on equal opportunities in education, some 400,000 Afghan and Iraqi children, including 46,000 undocumented children, have been enrolled in school in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The second largest source of displacement in Asia and the Pacific was Myanmar, where conflict has forced people to flee internally and across borders for more than thirty years. By the end of 2016 there were more than 490,000 refugees from Myanmar, most of which were hosted in Bangladesh (276,200), Thailand (102,600), Malaysia (87,000) and India (15,600). While a landmark conference was held in May 2017 to address obstacles in Myanmar’s peace process, a number of key issues remain unresolved.

To address the root causes of violence in the area, the Myanmar Government appointed an Advisory Commission for Rakhine State in September 2016, led by former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. The Commission submitted its final report on 23 August 2017¹, recommending urgent and sustained action on a number of fronts to prevent violence and foster reconciliation. On 25 August 2017, armed non-State groups launched a series of attacks on government security forces in northern Rakhine State. As of 19 September 2017, an estimated 415,000 people had fled into neighbouring Bangladesh to escape the ensuing violence. UNHCR appreciates the role that Bangladesh has played in hosting refugees from Myanmar. The Office is working with local authorities and other

¹ See: http://www.rakhinecommission.org/app/uploads/2017/08/FinalReport_Eng.pdf.

partners to provide protection and life-saving support to new arrivals, including through the delivery of relief supplies.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Safeguarding access to protection and asylum

UNHCR continued to undertake refugee status determination in countries without national asylum procedures and to promote protection-sensitive systems. In Pakistan, the Government adopted a comprehensive policy on the voluntary repatriation and management of Afghan refugees in February 2017, extending the validity of proof of residence cards until the end of 2017. The policy foresees the adoption of a draft refugee law and the creation of asylum and migration management regimes, including visas for Afghan refugees with specific profiles. In line with this policy, the Government launched a six month programme in July 2017 to register undocumented Afghans. UNHCR welcomed this initiative and is working with the Government on its implementation.

For the eighteenth round of lending (2017-19) since the concessional facility was established, the World Bank's International Development Association allocation included \$14 billion for fragile and conflict-affected States and a special \$2 billion sub-window for refugee host countries. UNHCR was working closely with the World Bank to secure a portion of the funding allocated for refugee host countries to support Pakistan in easing the pressure on host communities' services and infrastructure.

In Central Asia, a number of positive changes were made to refugee and citizenship laws. In June 2017, UNHCR commended the adoption of a law on refugees in Turkmenistan that included temporary and complementary forms of protection, established a clear referral mechanism for access to asylum procedures, defined the responsibilities of different government bodies and improved child protection mechanisms. Also in June 2017, Uzbekistan issued a decree outlining procedures for the granting of political asylum.

Concerned by the responses of some States to increased mixed movements by sea in the region, particularly reports of boats being pushed back and other deterrent and punitive measures, the Office reiterated its call for States to respect international refugee and human rights law, including the principle of non-refoulement. The High Commissioner called for an end to Australia's practice of offshore processing and urged that solutions be found for those affected.

Seeking solutions for protracted refugee situations

The "Solutions strategy for Afghan refugees to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance to host countries" remained the overarching framework for solutions to Afghan displacement. Given the ongoing conflict in the country and its limited absorption capacity, UNHCR did not promote refugee returns to Afghanistan. However, in accordance with its mandate, the Office assisted those who chose to return. More than 42,000 refugees have done so since the beginning of the year.

In July 2017, a delegation of 160 Afghan refugees travelled from Pakistan to Afghanistan to advocate that the Government put in place measures conducive to return, including in relation to land, employment, shelter, health and education. Data from UNHCR's protection-based monitoring in Afghanistan has helped address protection issues in the country, supported the transition between humanitarian assistance and development work, and informed Government-led reintegration activities.

During his mission to South East Asia in July 2017, the High Commissioner advocated increased regional support to help the Government of Myanmar arrive at solutions to address the root causes of displacement by providing temporary protection for refugees and sharing good practices on peaceful co-existence, inclusive development, and preventing and

reducing cases of statelessness. In Myanmar, the High Commissioner and Myanmar's State Counsellor agreed that refugee returns to the country must be voluntary and sustainable.

More than 880 Sri Lankan refugees have returned to Sri Lanka so far this year, many to the country's north and east. UNHCR personnel met each returnee family on arrival and provided cash grants for transportation, reintegration and basic household items. The Office also carried out protection monitoring in areas of return, the results of which helped inform advocacy efforts.

In support of complementary pathways for admission, the Japanese Government announced in May 2016 that some 150 Syrian individuals would be admitted to pursue masters degrees at Japanese universities over the course of five years, starting in 2017. The "Japanese initiative for the future of Syrian refugees", implemented by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) with support from UNHCR, will offer scholarships to 100 Syrian refugees. The existing scholarship programme administered by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology will offer places to a further 50 Syrian refugees. Under the JICA initiative, 19 students, who will be accompanied by a total of 17 family members, have been selected for 2017. The selection process for 2018 is ongoing.

Ensuring protection and durable solutions for internally displaced persons

At the end of 2016, there were 1.8 million IDPs in Afghanistan. UNHCR continued to provide emergency assistance to newly displaced persons, including offering support to 15,000 families to prepare for winter. Together with the World Food Programme (WFP) and United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), the Office established an inter-agency call centre to enhance access to information, services and humanitarian assistance for IDPs and host populations.

In total, there were around 375,000 IDPs of concern to the Office in Myanmar by the end of 2016. An intensification of fighting between non-State armed groups and the Myanmar military in the Kachin and Shan States since August 2016 has created new waves of displacement and presented serious protection concerns. Over 99,000 IDPs live in 150 camps or camp-like settlements in Kachin State, with those in remote areas dependent on humanitarian organizations to meet their basic needs. In Rakhine State, UNHCR continued to provide protection and assistance to 120,000 persons displaced by inter-communal violence that took place in 2012.

While more than 186,000 IDPs in Pakistan returned to their location of origin between January and August 2017, some 266,000 people remained internally displaced. UNHCR interventions in the country have focused on protection, advocacy and capacity-building for government officials.

In Sri Lanka, the Government adopted a national policy on durable solutions for conflict-affected displacement in August 2016. In line with this policy, Sri Lanka has committed to relocating IDPs from welfare centres to resettlement areas, with land from high security zones gradually released to facilitate returns.

Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless people

Building on progress made in previous years, States in the region continued to take concrete steps to prevent and reduce cases of statelessness, often with support from UNHCR and civil society. The Office remained committed to strengthening its engagement with States and other partners to achieve the goals of its #IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024.

In line with this campaign, the Thai Government endorsed the goal of achieving zero statelessness in Thailand by 2024. The Government advised UNHCR that between 2012

and July 2017, more than 30,000 stateless persons acquired Thai nationality. In December 2016, the Thai Cabinet adopted guidance and measures that could result in an additional 80,000 stateless children and young adults acquiring nationality.

Together with a civil society partner, UNHCR has supported over 1,800 stateless persons to apply for and acquire Malaysian nationality. In April 2017, the Prime Minister launched the “Malaysian Indian blueprint”, which was developed in close consultation with civil society and aims to “resolve stateless and documentation issues” for persons of Indian descent living in Malaysia within five years of the start of implementation, with a priority placed on solutions for children and youth.

Over 6,000 people have also had their nationality confirmed through an ongoing tripartite registration exercise conducted by UNHCR and the Governments of Indonesia and the Philippines. In addition, Viet Nam has started a review of its 2008 nationality law, including considering whether improvements could be made to prevent and reduce cases of statelessness.

In July 2017, UNHCR provided a briefing on citizenship, statelessness and international standards to members of Myanmar’s Parliament. Further, UNHCR has worked with civil society organizations to improve research on and the identification of groups at risk of statelessness.

In Central Asia, specifically in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, a total of 29,000 stateless persons acquired citizenship or had their nationality confirmed between 2014 and July 2017. In July 2017, Kazakhstan adopted a new law under which Kazakhs could have their citizenship revoked if they are convicted of various crimes, mostly relating to terrorism. A draft of a similar bill is currently under consideration in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan continues to have the largest population of stateless persons in Central Asia, with over 86,000. A network of practitioners assisting stateless persons was established in 2016.

At the regional level, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children endorsed a three year project in October 2016 that will examine documentation and nationality issues for women and children in ASEAN countries. The following month, civil society organizations, supported by UNHCR and other partners, held a regional conference on statelessness, during which the Statelessness Network Asia Pacific was launched.

In addition, UNHCR has continued to support States in implementing the 2014 “Ministerial declaration on civil registration and vital statistics” (CRVS), which noted the importance of addressing disparities in civil registration coverage, including for asylum-seekers, refugees and stateless persons. UNHCR has also supported the World Bank to develop an e-learning module on refugees, IDPs, statelessness persons and CRVS. The course was launched in the Republic of Korea in June 2017.

C Financial information

The revised budget approved by the Executive Committee in October 2016 for the Asia and Pacific region for 2017 was \$544.9 million and it has not changed since. Funding for future years remains uncertain as a number of key donors have redirected funds to emerging crises outside the region. Foreign aid budgets have also been reduced in several countries in response to domestic developments. As it is unlikely that these trends will reverse in the near future, UNHCR has undertaken a number of prioritization exercises and will continue to focus on innovative ways to engage with States and other partners to deliver protection and assistance to persons of concern. As at 31 July 2017, voluntary contributions earmarked for UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific amounted to \$145.1 million.