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Update on UNHCR's operations in Asia and the Pacific

A. Situational analysis including new developments

The Asia-Pacific region is home to the world's largest and oldest refugee populations. The protection environment continues to be fragile with very few countries having signed the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Asia remains, however, a region with a good record of providing asylum to large numbers of refugees.

The region is characterized by population movements, with asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka representing the three largest groups moving irregularly. The majority of these individuals settle in urban areas.

UNHCR, in close collaboration with concerned States, has made progress in addressing protracted refugee situations and mixed migration flows. There is an increasing willingness on the part of States within the region to address the stagnation of long-standing refugee situations in a more comprehensive way, working towards the preservation and expansion of asylum space and longer-term solutions. There is also a greater recognition among States that in addressing irregular movements, law enforcement and border control measures must be complemented by cooperative and regional approaches that respond to the humanitarian and protection needs of asylum-seekers and refugees.

B. Progress made and challenges encountered in achieving strategic priorities

Mixed migration

Significant progress has been made in the context of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, including the adoption of a cooperation framework on mixed migration at the Regional Ministerial Conference held in March 2011. A Regional Support Office is being launched in Bangkok in order to strengthen cooperation on refugee protection and international migration through information sharing, capacity building and the pooling of resources. UNHCR also plans to organize a Regional Roundtable on Irregular Migration by Sea later in the year. The aim of the meeting is to promote the development of bilateral and multilateral arrangements among interested States affected by irregular maritime movements.

In Central Asia, a consultations process between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan resulted in a draft Regional Cooperation Framework and a Regional Action Plan to strengthen refugee protection and address mixed migration. This is in line with the Almaty Process adopted in March 2011. A ministerial meeting is planned for the first quarter of 2013 to endorse the arrangements.

Protection and self-reliance for urban refugees

The majority of refugees in Asia live in urban areas, and asylum-seekers moving irregularly in the region also settle in cities. UNHCR initiated an internal review of the implementation of its Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas. The exercise covered selected UNHCR operations in the region hosting urban refugees including China (Hong Kong SAR), India, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Malaysia and Thailand. The review concluded that UNHCR activities had only a limited effect on ensuring urban refugees' access to basic rights and services. This was due, in part, to the absence of appropriate legal and institutional frameworks and predictable inter-agency partnerships. UNHCR hopes that the respective Regional Cooperation Frameworks in South-East Asia and Central Asia will provide opportunities for the development of collaborative approaches and enhanced engagement by States and other actors involved in refugee protection, to address some of the above challenges.

The role of civil society in advocating for improved protection of asylum-seekers and refugees was highlighted during the Asia-Pacific session of UNHCR's Annual Consultations with Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) in July. Among the achievements cited was the sustained dialogue between NGOs and the Government of India, resulting in a recent decision to provide eligible refugees with long-term visas and work permits.

Solutions for protracted refugee situations

UNHCR is encouraged by the efforts of States in the region to address protracted refugee situations. In May, an international stakeholders' conference endorsed a new Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries, which was developed by the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan with the support of UNHCR. The Solutions Strategy aims to strengthen investments in areas of high return in Afghanistan while preserving asylum space for Afghan refugees by providing assistance to host communities. International commitment to the Solutions Strategy was re-affirmed in a series of ministerial meetings, notably the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Conference on Refugees in the Muslim World in Ashgabat in May, the Istanbul Process meeting in Kabul in June, and the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan in July. Follow-up consultations will be held with interested States on 5 October in Geneva to report on progress in the Strategy's implementation.

The number of Bhutanese refugees living in camps in Nepal is now less than half of what it was in 2008. Some 47,000 refugees now remain in two camps. This progress is due to a concerted effort by resettlement countries. UNHCR hopes that the momentum of the resettlement programme will encourage the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal to resume talks on voluntary repatriation. The Office also anticipates the launch of an inter-agency community-based development programme later this year, under the Transitional Solutions Initiative and led by the Government of Nepal, which will benefit both refugee and host communities while promoting peaceful co-existence.

In Sri Lanka, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has decreased substantially. Fewer than 6,000 people remain in the Menik Farm IDP camp, while a smaller, though still significant, number of people remain displaced in the north and east of the country pending the re-opening of high security zones and demining operations. The return of Sri Lankan refugees, mainly from India, also continues at a steady pace, and UNHCR is preparing for the voluntary repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees from other countries within and outside the region.

Positive political developments in Myanmar over the past year have raised the prospect of finding durable solutions for IDPs and refugees. In both Thailand and Myanmar, UNHCR, together with the governments and partners, has begun preparatory activities for potential voluntary repatriation. These include profiling of refugees to determine their return intentions and assessing the reintegration needs in areas of return.

The eruption of inter-communal violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State in June resulted in loss of life, widespread destruction of homes and property and the displacement of an estimated 65,000 people. UNHCR has been providing assistance to approximately 45,000 IDPs in Rakhine State as part of an inter-agency response, based on the principles of neutrality and impartiality. The Office has expressed its readiness to the Government of Myanmar to help address the root causes of the disturbances, including the issues of statelessness and legal status. UNHCR will continue its work with countries hosting refugees from Rakhine State and is expanding its engagement with regional and intergovernmental bodies to address the needs of those displaced.

Statelessness

UNHCR welcomed Turkmenistan's recent accession to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Having already acceded to the 1954 Statelessness Convention in 2011, this latest decision reflects Turkmenistan's commitment to addressing statelessness. UNHCR hopes that this may encourage other States in the region to emulate this commitment.

C. Financial information

The approved initial 2012 budget of US\$ 502 million for Asia and the Pacific has increased to US\$ 523.5 million as of mid-September, mainly to address the additional requirements related to the emergency response for the situation of displaced populations in Myanmar's Kachin and Rakhine States, and to accommodate additional requirements in water, sanitation, health and education for the refugees in Bangladesh. The budget for the Afghan refugee situation, consisting of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, represents 63 per cent of the total budget for the Asia-Pacific region, while the other 37 per cent is shared by 19 medium to small-scale operations in other sub-regions.

While a funding shortfall for South-West Asia would undermine the momentum for solutions gained by the launch of the multi-year Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, a funding shortfall for other sub-regions would have a grave impact on the ability of UNHCR to deliver key protection activities. Should there be a need to assist in the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees from Myanmar, substantial additional financial support would be required.