UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

DPSM
KEY INITIATIVES

Through its Key Initiatives series, UNHCR'S Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM) shares regular updates on interesting projects that produce key tools, practical guidance and new approaches aimed at moving UNHCR operations forward.

UNHCR Thailand/ Karenni
A refugee provides his iris scan and fingerprints as part of a verification exercise jointly conducted by UNHCR and the Royal Thai Government in January 2015 regarding the identities of 120,000 persons of concern in Western Thailand. (UNHCR/ S. Jefferies/ January 2015).

Biometric Identity Management System

Enhancing Registration and Data Management

In February 2015, DPSM and the Division of Information Systems and Telecommunications (DIST) completed development of UNHCR's new biometric identity management system (BIMS), building on the successful use of biometrics across a number of UNHCR operations globally. When rolled out, BIMS will support all standard registration activities and help to better register and protect people, verify their identity and target assistance for the forcibly displaced in operations around the world.

Re-establishing and preserving identities is key to ensuring protection and solutions for refugees. By linking new technologies, such as biometrics to existing registration data, UNHCR can strengthen the integrity of existing processes and significantly improve efficiency for operations. Being able to verify identities is extremely important and a matter of human dignity.

USING BIOMETRICS TO SAFEGUARD IDENTITIES

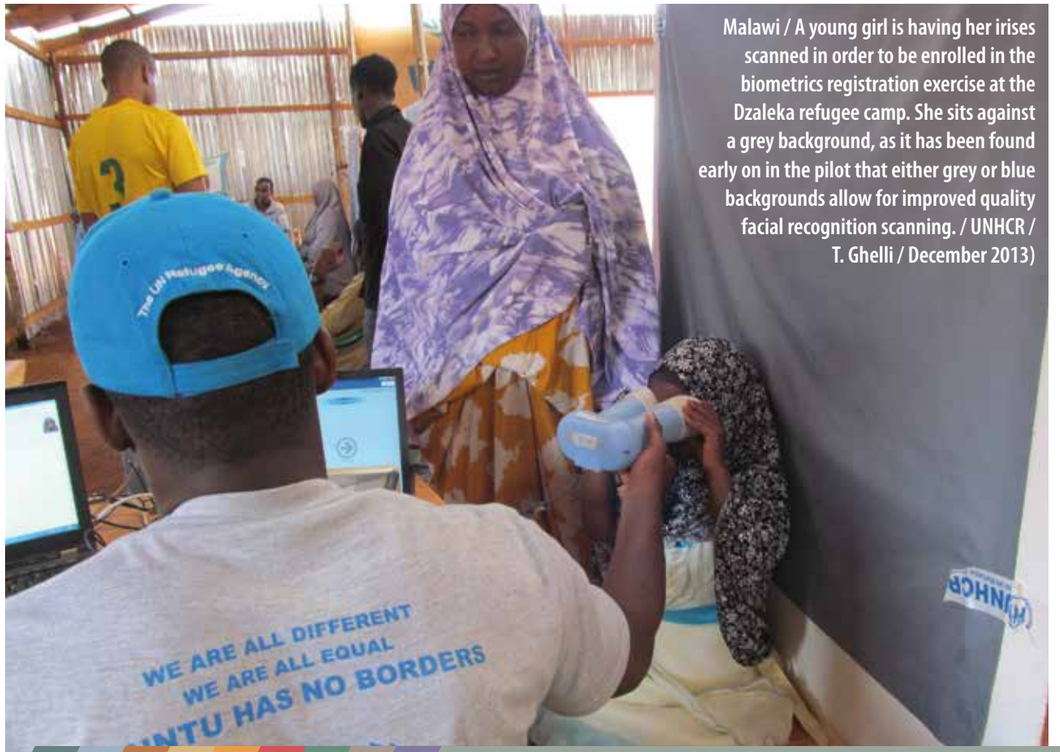
The use of biometrics provides an accurate way to verify identities using unique physiological characteristics, such as fingerprints, iris and facial features. In accordance with UNHCR's *Policy on Biometrics in Refugee Registration and Verification* (2010), biometrics should be used as a routine part of identity management to ensure that refugees' personal identities cannot be lost, registered multiple times or subject to fraud or identity theft.

FIELD TESTING OF BIOMETRIC IDENTITY MANAGEMENT

Since 2013, UNHCR has been developing a new global Biometric Identity Management System (BIMS). During initial pilot testing in Malawi, 17,000 refugees were enrolled into the system and a variety of field conditions were tested.

"I can be someone now. I am registered globally with the UN and you'll always know who I am," said 43-year-old Congolese refugee Olivier Mzaliwa, registered through biometrics in Malawi's Dzaleka refugee camp.

In January 2015, with essential support from UNHCR Thailand, a joint DIST – DPSM team conducted final field testing of BIMS in Thailand. The new system permits the much faster and accurate verification of identities than the manual search for records in UNHCR's database that was previously required. This allows UNHCR to assist large volumes of refugees and others of concern more quickly and efficiently.



Malawi / A young girl is having her irises scanned in order to be enrolled in the biometrics registration exercise at the Dzaleka refugee camp. She sits against a grey background, as it has been found early on in the pilot that either grey or blue backgrounds allow for improved quality facial recognition scanning. / UNHCR / T. Ghelli / December 2013)

INNOVATIVE SYSTEM DESIGN

BIMS operates under a wide range of infrastructure conditions and can provide numerous operational and protection benefits to existing identity management practices.

Better coverage

Unlike previous UNHCR biometric systems, BIMS captures and stores all fingerprints and iris scans from refugees and others of concern. Capturing these multiple characteristics, rather than relying for example only on finger-prints, allows for more complete coverage of the population and, thus, more accurate identification.

Operational in various contexts

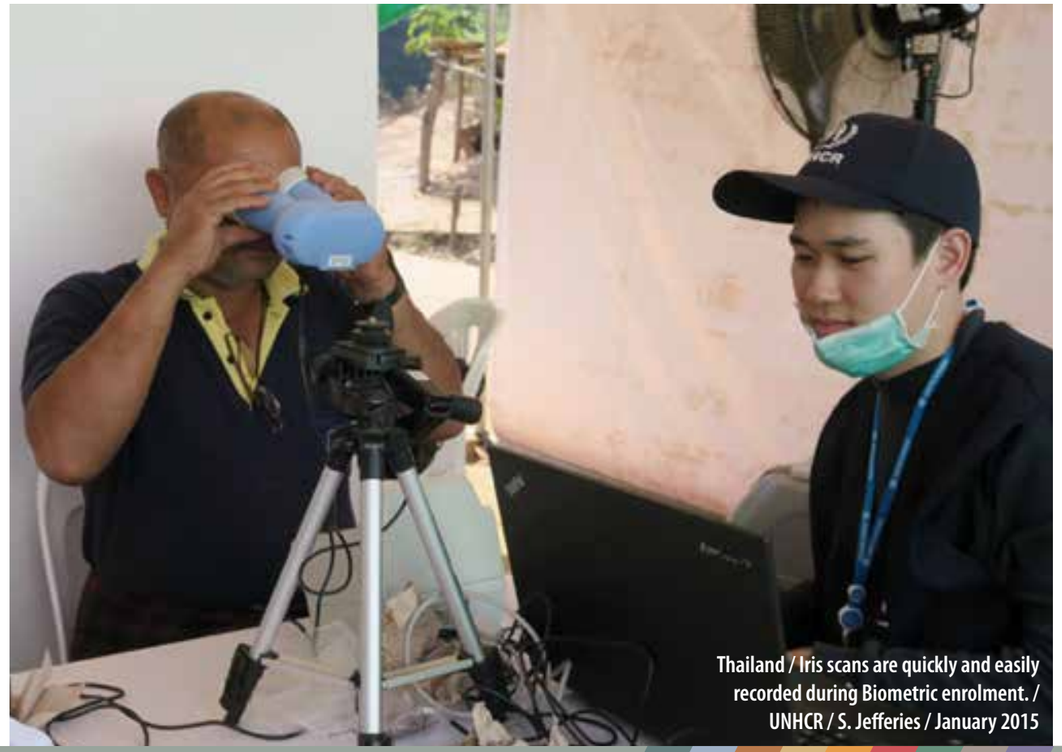
Though benefiting from an online system architecture, BIMS has been designed to also work seamlessly when no internet connection is available due to weak connectivity. BIMS also comes in a portable, mobile configuration using a conventional laptop and requiring no extra source of power to use the USB driven fingerprint scanners, iris scanners and webcams.

"During our recent pilot in Thailand, we had 20 operators working full-time, and not one of them was affected by the fact that the satellite connection was dropping out for several hours a day. The system automatically queued their operations. That kind of service offers some real opportunities for UNHCR"

– BIMS Infrastructure Architect Pat Kartas.

Quick processing

Identifying a person using BIMS is quick and simple. After enrolment, refugees and others of concern need only to present two or more biometric elements (e.g., two fingers, two eyes, or a combination thereof) for BIMS to be able to ascertain their identity within seconds. The matching time for identity checks during the roll out in Thailand was on average five seconds.



Thailand / Iris scans are quickly and easily recorded during Biometric enrolment. / UNHCR / S. Jefferies / January 2015

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Following the rollout of BIMS to Thailand, the UNHCR BIMS team will undertake a number of activities in preparation for the further rollout across operations globally, further enhancing UNHCR's registration and data management.

Development:

- ✓ Resolve development bugs in BIMS identified during the exercise in Thailand to be ready for the next deployment;
- ✓ Make biometric identity verification an integral part of assistance distribution where required;
- ✓ Work to ensure that BIMS can be integrated with proGres - UNHCR's registration and case management tools;

Deployment:

- ✓ DPSM field support team and regional registration teams to plan and prepare for upcoming BIMS roll outs through 2015 and 2016; including:
- ✓ Supporting exercises to verify identities of refugees and others of concern in Chad and India;
- ✓ Maintaining communications with UNHCR operations globally to plan and prepare for BIMS global roll-out;

Support:

- ✓ Developing a support model that ensure a sustainable use of BIMS after its deployment;
- ✓ Establishing network of qualified and experienced BIMS users, reinforcing capacity and ensuring correct system use.

Thailand / Multiple fingerprints are recorded simultaneously with the new BIMS system. / UNHCR / S. Jefferies/ January 2015

MORE INFORMATION

For more information, please contact UNHCR's Field Information and Coordination Support Section at: FICSS@unhcr.org