

Remarks by Mr. Indrika Ratwatte,

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United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

86th Meeting of the Standing Committee

Geneva, 7 March 2023

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

I have the honour to update you on UNHCR's work in Asia and the Pacific [and more detailed information is provided in the Regional Update], as well as provide some brief thoughts on the year ahead. I am joined by the Principal Liaison Adviser for Asia and Pacific, Ms. Aurvasi Patel – who is the Bureau's primary point of contact for the Permanent Missions in Geneva.

The last year saw another challenging – and frankly sobering – year for our region, with humanitarian crises in the two major countries of origin– Afghanistan and Myanmar – showing few signs of abating.

The number of people in need in Afghanistan of humanitarian assistance will this year reach some 28 million: that is nearly double the number two years ago. It

is for the people of Afghanistan – nearly half of whom are under 15 years old – that UNHCR has stayed and delivered, reaching some six million people with assistance last year alone. I am immensely proud of our staff and partners – particularly our female colleagues – whom despite great turmoil and uncertainty have dedicated themselves to helping others.

UNHCR – as we have done for years – continues to take an area-based approach to support displaced people to return and re-anchor themselves in their communities in Afghanistan. With more than 1.3 million displaced persons returning home since the end of widespread conflict, this work has never been more important for the stability of the country.

At the same time, we remain extremely concerned that restrictions – particularly on women and girls – will not only deprive Afghans of the futures they so deeply desire and deserve, but also significantly impact economic and social progress – and ultimately drive more Afghans across borders.

Since mid 2021, we have already seen some 1.7 new arrivals to the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan, who, for decades, have already been generously hosting millions of Afghan refugees. Despite challenging economic and security

situations, compounded, for instance, by the devastating floods last year in Pakistan, both countries have remained steadfast in support: however, this cannot be taken for granted.

In support of Pakistan, Iran, and other smaller Afghan hosting countries in Central Asia, UNHCR will soon launch the Regional Refugee Response Plan – known as the RRP – for 2023, which complements the UN Humanitarian Response Plan for Afghanistan. I strongly appeal to the international community to redouble its support this year for the RRP, as we appeal for some 613 million USD to reach 7.9 million people.

Chair,

We talk a lot in the UN about appeals and the need for funding, but it is also important to remember the life-changing impact this has on individuals. I was recently in Peshawar, Pakistan, where I met with a group of young Afghan female scholars, pursuing higher education. They spoke enthusiastically of their love for learning, school, and their hope for brighter futures. They were just a small group of the some 230,000 students who were supported with education

through RRP funding in 2022 – and this was just in one of many sectors where the resilience of refugees and their hosts was enhanced.

We have witnessed the similar impacts that humanitarian action and protection has had on some one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Five years ago – nearly to the day – I briefed you at the 2018 Standing Committee on the need for the international community to step up for the Rohingya; to support them to live with dignity; and to provide them with opportunities in the camps, including to help prepare them for return.

You have done that – and I must again pay testament to the Bangladeshi people and Government for their continued humanitarian leadership. The situation in the camps isn't perfect [as we saw again with the terrible fire two days ago], but many Rohingya now live in improved conditions; are learning in the Myanmar curriculum; supporting their communities as volunteers; and the brown hills have become green again, with fresh growth and life.

Just this morning, we just launched the 2023 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis, totaling some 867 million dollars and targeting 1.5 people. We count on your continued support for this plan and investments in

Rohingya refugees and their hosts [which in 2022 saw a more than 120 million USD decrease in funding]. The consequences of underfunding aren't abstract: they are stark and real, and we have already seen that, for instance, WFP has recently had to cut food assistance for the Rohingya by 17% due to the funding shortfall.

We have increasingly seen the very real impacts of what happens when support decreases – and hopelessness kicks in. In 2022, the region saw a dramatic increase in maritime movements, with some 3,500 Rohingya taking perilous boat journeys. More than 350 people – women, men, children – even babies – perished on route. Safe and predictable disembarkation saves lives, as Indonesia has demonstrated in recent months. And I am therefore encouraged by the activation of the Consultative Mechanism of the Bali Process last month. This must now deliver concrete results.

A comprehensive regional approach is desperately needed for the Rohingya situation, which seeks to expand solutions for Rohingya refugees and sustain support for host countries. We have seen positive progress, with a robust resettlement programme restarting from Bangladesh – and also including other countries in the region. This contributed to the submission of more than 21,000

resettlement submissions last year in Asia. I also welcome the increase in Afghan resettlement from Pakistan and other countries.

Yet, the reality is that most Rohingya still want to return home to Myanmar. The situation – as you know – in Myanmar remains immensely challenging, with the number of internally displaced surpassing 1.5 million in 2022; tens of thousands of refugees fleeing to neighboring countries; and millions remaining with humanitarian needs, in a place where our access to respond is constrained.

We continue to try to improve the humanitarian situation across the country – including in northern Rakhine State – but this needs to be coupled with political action. The leadership of ASEAN remains critical to enable meaningful dialogue, including to preserve the right of refugees to return and allow them to in safe, dignified and sustainable conditions.

The same is required for Afghanistan, and I appreciate that the Islamic Republic of Iran hosted the Quadripartite Steering Committee of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees late last year, which brought together the country of origin, the major hosts, and UNHCR. This work – which will continue – has been assisted by the Support Platform of the SSAR Core Group, chaired by the EU, which has

helped to garner more than half a billion for Afghan refugees and hosts in recent years.

Excellencies,

The rest of this year will inevitably bring more challenges to our region, but we will not stop striving to protect and assist refugees; to reduce statelessness; to mitigate and respond to the impacts of the climate emergency to build resilient communities, and to ultimately find durable and lasting solutions that allow people to live decent lives.

The Global Refugee Forum, which will take place in December this year, presents a unique opportunity for concrete pledges – financial, political, and other kinds – to show support for refugees and their hosts in our region. We look forward to working with you all – including Japan as the co-host this year from the region – in the lead up to the forum, and, more broadly, toward a world where the cruel scourge of displacement and exile no longer exists.

I thank you for your continued attention and support.

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