



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency



UNHCR INDIA

KEY PRIORITIES IN 2026



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Background

India continues to be a generous host to refugees and asylum-seekers from across the region and beyond. UNHCR has operated in India since 1981, and its current workforce comprises of 45 staff members. It has offices in Delhi and Chennai, Tamil Nadu. UNHCR's mandate as set out in its Statute, is to provide protection and assistance to refugees and seek solutions to end displacement. At the end of 2025, around 48,382 refugees and asylum-seekers were registered with UNHCR India, the majority coming from Myanmar and Afghanistan as well as countries such as Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, and others. Approximately 52,800 individuals were reported to be in a refugee-like situation in the North-East of India, having fled Myanmar since the military coup in February 2021. In addition, long-standing refugee communities registered directly with the Government of India include 63,167 Tibetan and 89,507 Sri Lankan refugees.

UNHCR conducts registration, issues documentation, and undertakes refugee status determination. Through five implementing partners across 11 locations, the Office provides services and assistance to vulnerable refugees, with a focus on youth, women and children, the elderly and persons with disabilities, including legal counselling, mental health, psychological and educational support, cash assistance, and livelihood programmes aimed at skill-building, training, and promoting well-being and self-reliance.

Additionally, UNHCR supports refugees with durable solutions through resettlement, complementary pathways, and provision of assistance for voluntary repatriation. In 2025, 1233 refugees were supported to depart to third countries through complementary pathways (804), resettlement (280) and voluntary repatriation (149). Under the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), UNHCR contributes to programmes and activities targeting marginalized groups in India including asylum-seekers and refugees in line with the Government of India's commitment of 'leaving no one behind' in the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals.



UNHCR's strategic priorities for sustainable programming in 2026

UNHCR focuses on sustainable responses that promote the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in public services targeting the most vulnerable. A key emphasis is on strengthening self-reliance and resilience, reducing dependency on humanitarian aid, and improving mechanisms to identify and support refugees most in need.

UNHCR works on enhancing collaboration with government institutions, civil society, and development actors to expand access to services and livelihood opportunities for refugees. UNHCR advocates for the development of a national policy or legal framework on refugee protection as an essential step towards a more predictable and inclusive response to refugees. The digital transformation of refugee services is prioritized to improve access to information and connectivity. Measures in support of community empowerment are also in place aimed at promoting refugee leadership and participation.

In line with the principle of responsibility-sharing, UNHCR advocates for enhanced international collaboration in the provision of durable solutions to refugees and resource mobilization. All UNHCR programs are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Government of India-UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2023-2027).

Strategic priorities for 2026

Advocacy with the Government of India

UNHCR works in partnership with the Government of India advocating for expanded access to protection and solutions within the overall objective of a gradual handover of responsibilities for the protection and assistance of refugees and asylum seekers to the authorities. Advocacy efforts focus on:

- a) the development of a domestic refugee policy or legal framework as an essential step towards a more predictable and inclusive response to refugees,
- b) interventions on a case by case or on a group basis to ensure protection from arbitrary arrest, detention, refoulement and to promote alternatives to detention,
- c) facilitating access to public services such as health and education and inclusion in social protection schemes
- (d) facilitating access to solutions including by advocating for exemption from overstay penalties for refugees wishing to voluntarily return to their country of origin or who have been admitted for resettlement or complementary pathways in third countries.

UNHCR programs are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Government of India-UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2023-2027) within the overall objective of ensuring that refugees and asylum seekers, defined as a marginalized group under the UNSDCF, are not left behind.

UNHCR is presently implementing an initiative aimed at adapting tools to better identify risks of trafficking, ensuring that individuals at risk or subject to trafficking are identified and prioritized for referral to appropriate services or pathways. Engagement with relevant stakeholders includes collaboration with academia and national/local NGOs in states where trafficking/smuggling concerns are reported. In parallel and coterminous with the 75th anniversary of UNHCR's establishment followed by the adoption of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, UNHCR plans a series of academic engagements on refugee protection and solutions.

In the context of the Route-Based Approach - a regional framework for anticipating and responding to mixed movements by aligning protection, asylum systems and solutions across countries connected by displacement routes - UNHCR advocates for principled responses to refugee arrivals in accordance with international standards, access to registration, documentation, basic services and solutions and provision of legal counselling and representation.





Registration and documentation

Persons in need of international protection are registered with UNHCR and provided with documentation. Based on 2025 trends (5524 registered in total), UNHCR has in place plans for the registration of up to 4000 individuals in need of international protection in 2026. In parallel, ten thousand asylum-seekers and refugees will be processed for continuous registration while 14,000 asylum-seekers and refugees will be issued with documentation. Birth and death registration of refugees and asylum-seekers will continue to be an area of focus through a self-service application – Digital Gateway - that promotes digital inclusion.

UNHCR will continue the biometrics enrolment of refugees and asylum seekers age five and above, across India. Biometrics (fingerprints and iris) help UNHCR to protect the digital identity of refugees and asylum seekers, to prevent identity theft and fraud and thereby to maintain the integrity of the asylum system. Biometrics is verified at all stages of processing of asylum seekers and refugees by UNHCR including during registration and continuous registration. Biometrics enrolment in 2026 will be at 85% of the population



Refugee Status Determination (RSD)

Refugee Status Determination is the legal or administrative process by which UNHCR determines whether a person seeking international protection is considered a refugee under UNHCR's mandate. RSD is a vital process in helping refugees realize their rights under international law. UNHCR India has revised its RSD strategy to enhance efficiency and strengthen anti-fraud measures to prevent and mitigate against integrity risks.

In 2026, UNHCR will continue to implement measures to ensure that RSD procedures are fair, efficient, are in line with integrity requirements and deliver quality decisions. Considering the funding limitations and in line with UNHCR's strategic use of RSD, RSD will only be conducted for individuals in immigration detention, those at risk of forced return or in situations where the determination of status will entail concrete protection dividends for refugees. UNHCR will continue to advocate with the Government of India to extend legal recognition to refugees in India by issuing long term visas or extending other temporary stay arrangements as deemed appropriate.



Durable solutions

Durable solutions will be pursued for refugees and asylum seekers, including through resettlement, complementary pathways to third countries and voluntary repatriation. In 2026, there is a quota of 100 places for resettlement submissions to Australia. The reduction in the resettlement quota is likely to affect refugees in prolonged detention, as it will impact UNHCR's ability to facilitate release through access to solutions in a third country. Nevertheless, in 2026, UNHCR expects that it will assist 250 refugees to depart on resettlement while also planning to support 600 refugees to depart on complementary pathways to third countries.

In parallel, UNHCR aims to provide voluntary repatriation assistance to 250 refugees registered with UNHCR and 200 Sri Lankan refugees registered with the authorities in Tamil Nadu opting to voluntarily return to Sri Lanka. UNHCR is working to expand refugee access to education and labor mobility pathways in third countries.



Legal advice and support

UNHCR along with partners will support refugees and asylum-seekers in accessing legal services and remedies, including advocating for the release of persons in detention and supporting those who might have come in contact with the law, for immigration related reasons. Awareness-raising sessions for refugees and asylum-seekers on rights and obligations, and training for legal-aid providers (lawyers, legal-aid authorities, paralegal volunteers, prison authorities) will continue to be pursued where feasible. UNHCR shall promote awareness on alternatives to detention amongst the government stakeholders and advocate for release from detention starting with the most vulnerable.

In parallel, UNHCR will continue conducting awareness raising for refugees and asylum-seekers on the importance of adhering to the laws of the land.



Access to assistance and public services

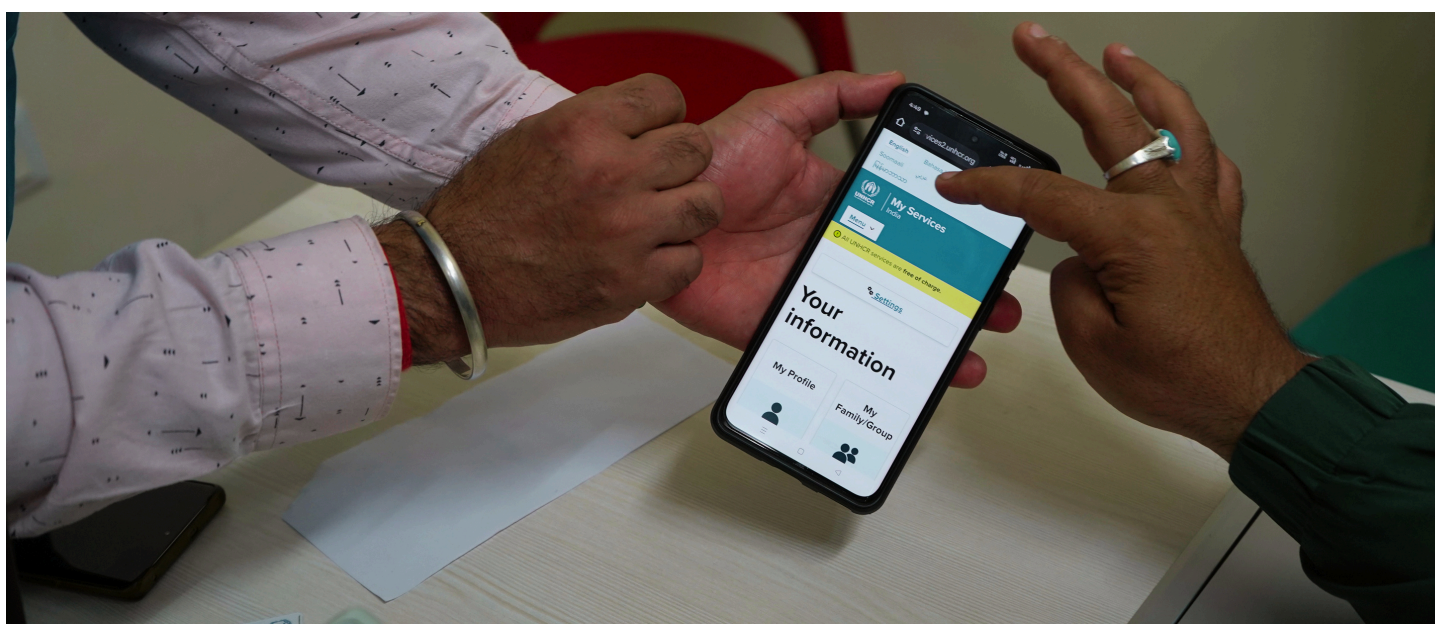
UNHCR India and its partners will continue to strengthen area-based advocacy efforts to enable refugees and asylum-seekers to secure access to government schools, public health facilities, and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services offered through public institutions. These efforts aim to reduce barriers to essential services and enhance inclusion within local systems.

Due to ongoing funding constraints, cash assistance will be limited to one-time emergency financial support to be made available by UNHCR partners to the most vulnerable individuals and households, prioritizing those facing acute protection or subsistence risks. In parallel, UNHCR will collaborate closely with community-based structures to strengthen and expand access to safe community spaces for refugees and asylum-seekers providing supportive environments, information, and referral pathways.

Capacity-building initiatives will be conducted to enhance the skills and leadership of community members in managing these spaces and responding to protection concerns. Furthermore, UNHCR and partners will deliver awareness-raising activities on gender-based violence (GBV), child protection (CP), access to education and related pathways, and psychological first aid, fostering safer, better-informed, and more resilient communities.



Community empowerment and digital inclusion



In 2026, UNHCR will focus on digital inclusion through the implementation of the Digital Gateway, a self-service application for refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR India, in New Delhi and Hyderabad. The Digital Gateway promotes timely birth and death registration and digital inclusion.

UNHCR will strengthen communication with communities through a project titled BRIDG-AI using an AI-based model to semi-automatically process, deduplicate, anonymize, categorize, prioritize, refer emails received on UNHCR's mailboxes, thereby significantly reducing response times, improving consistency and accuracy of case handling, strengthening data protection and workflow efficiency, and enhancing UNHCR's accountability and responsiveness to refugees through more timely, transparent, and needs-based communication.



In 2026, UNHCR will expand its support to refugee-led initiatives, designed and managed by refugees themselves, to strengthen community empowerment, resilience, and leadership. These initiatives promote refugee participation in decisions that affect their lives and focus on key community priorities, including learning support for children, safe spaces for children and adolescents, gender-based violence (GBV) awareness and prevention, child protection (CP) awareness, and improved access to health services.

By investing in refugee-led structures, UNHCR aims to foster stronger ownership within communities while enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of protection and assistance efforts.



Solutions Strategy for Sri Lankan Tamils

UNHCR will work in partnership with the Government of India and the State Government of Tamil Nadu in the implementation of the Solutions Strategy for Sri Lankan refugees . As part of the strategy, UNHCR will facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees who wish to return home. Subject to availability of funds, in 2026 UNHCR aspires to provide support to approximately 200 refugees with voluntary repatriation. UNHCR will also provide technical assistance in the identification of local solutions for refugees as relating to access to citizenship for eligible individuals under applicable law and inclusion in the labor market through skills development, education, and other assistance.

Engagement with the private sector will be pursued in partnership with the South India Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SICCI) as well as a multistakeholder Partnership Forum set up by SICCI to advance refugee self-reliance through structured private sector engagement. The Forum brings together corporate CSR leaders, industry associations, government stakeholders, civil society organizations, and refugee community members to identify scalable, CSR-compliant interventions in areas such as livelihoods, skills development, entrepreneurship, education, and women's empowerment.



Leaving no one behind' under the UNSDCF

UNHCR's priority and plans are aligned with UNSDCF in which refugees and asylum-seekers are included as one of the marginalized groups. UNHCR will strengthen strategic partnerships with government institutions, UN agencies, NGOs, academia, faith groups, and donors in support of inclusion in public and community services and programs as part of the commitment to 'leave no one behind' in the realization of Agenda 2030, including with UNICEF (with a focus on youth) and UNDP (with a focus on livelihoods in the north-east).

Working Modalities

UNHCR has signed annual partnership agreements with five local NGO partners to provide protection, solutions, and assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers across 11 locations. These agreements establish the framework for collaboration between UNHCR and its partners, grounded in mutual respect, trust, and shared values. The agreements outline the general roles and responsibilities of all parties, as well as the communication and reporting mechanisms, project work plans, and specific output targets to be achieved and monitoring and evaluation frameworks.



Below is the list of UNHCR partners:

- Action Aid (Jammu, Punjab, Haryana, Manipur)
- DAJI (Rajasthan)
- MARI (Telangana)
- BOSCO (New Delhi)
- ADRA (New Delhi, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Mizoram, Chennai)

UNHCR monitors and exercises operational and financial oversight of partner activities through monitoring visits to all partner locations at least twice a year. These visits also aim to build partner capacity for the effective implementation of project activities. During monitoring visits, regular meetings are held with refugees and asylum-seekers to gather their feedback on partner activities, address their concerns, and ensure that services are aligned with their needs.

As part of the dialogue with refugees, UNHCR also undertakes to raise awareness among refugees and asylum-seekers on the importance of compliance with national laws including ensuring respect for applicable rules as relating to identity integrity. Meetings are also held with different stakeholders to enhance support for refugees and asylum-seekers and strengthen collaboration across sectors.

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