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Update on UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific**A. Situational context**

There are over 10 million people in Asia and the Pacific of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), including 4 million refugees; 4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs); over 200,000 asylum-seekers and returnees; and 2.4 million stateless people, many of whom are also refugees or IDPs. In 2021, over 1 million people were newly displaced within Afghanistan and Myanmar due to violence and political turmoil. UNHCR rapidly activated its emergency preparedness and response mechanisms in Afghanistan, Myanmar and neighbouring countries in close coordination with a wide range of partners.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic continued to impact humanitarian access, continuity of humanitarian programmes, and the welfare of staff and refugees. It also resulted in restricted access to asylum, services, livelihoods and solutions across the region. Despite some inclusive government policies, refugees and asylum-seekers generally had reduced access, if any, to vaccinations and social protection schemes, increasing their vulnerability. In response, UNHCR expanded cash-based interventions, sustained essential protection services, and enhanced the digital inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers where possible. To improve communications with persons of concern during COVID-19 restrictions, automated information services and online applications were rolled out in Indonesia and Malaysia, in addition to the launch of help.unhcr.org sites across the region.

Access to solutions remained limited for refugees and asylum-seekers, highlighting the need for inclusive measures in host countries to enable them to withstand the continuing restrictions and socioeconomic impact of COVID-19.

Afghanistan situation

Amidst the evolution of conflict and violence, and the fall of the former government in Afghanistan, some 700,000 people were newly internally displaced in 2021. In addition, some 127,000 newly arrived Afghans approached UNHCR in neighbouring countries, while the total number in need of international protection is likely to be much higher. In Afghanistan, UNHCR was able to “stay and deliver” throughout an uncertain security situation during the Taliban takeover. In the last quarter of 2021, UNHCR expanded operations countrywide and rapidly scaled up its staffing and presence in response to dramatically increasing needs, despite the fluid security situation.

As access improved after August 2021, UNHCR scaled up the use of cash transfers and winterization assistance for some 1.1 million displaced and other vulnerable people. With a large portion of the population facing poverty and almost two thirds of Afghans at risk of acute hunger by mid-2022, UNHCR’s priorities remain delivering life-saving humanitarian assistance, ensuring continuity of protection for IDPs and building resilient communities, in line with the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR). UNHCR continues to consolidate development gains in 55 priority areas of return and reintegration, where access to services was improved for 3 million people. With a total of 3.4 million people internally displaced due to conflict or violence at year’s end, efforts to meet basic needs remain

essential. Area-based support for health, education and livelihoods contributed to solutions for the 170,000 IDPs who were able to return home in the last four months of 2021.

The SSAR Support Platform, which draws on international political and financial commitments to support and enable solutions for Afghan refugees, remains the main responsibility-sharing framework for the Afghan refugee situation. The Core Group of the Support Platform, which is operational at the global level and in Islamabad, Kabul and Tehran, shifted its focus to ensure emergency response and linkages to development investments, with the European Union extending its chairmanship role into 2022. UNHCR led the development of an inter-agency refugee response plan covering the countries neighbouring Afghanistan in order to address the needs of the refugee population and enhance preparedness.

The Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan maintained their long-standing hospitality and solidarity with Afghan refugees. By the end of 2021, the countries continued to host 780,000 and 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees respectively, and many more Afghans of other status. The document renewal and information verification exercise (DRIVE) launched by the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR in April 2021 was completed by year-end. This exercise verified or registered comprehensive socioeconomic data for 1.25 million Afghan refugees and resulted in the issuance of over 700,000 biometric smart cards, facilitating programming for resilience and solutions for refugees in Pakistan. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Government continued to provide access to public health and education services for refugees.

Myanmar situation

Violence in Myanmar following the military takeover in February 2021 displaced internally some 440,000 people, mainly in the south-eastern and western parts of the country. Some 39,000 have also sought safety across borders, in India and Thailand. The majority of those who fled to Thailand have returned. Although UNHCR has not been granted access to new arrivals in India and Thailand – with the exception of those approaching its office in Delhi, India – it will continue coordinating with humanitarian partners to prepare for further refugee movements from Myanmar.

The continuing conflict in Myanmar is expected to exacerbate the vulnerability of already fragile communities and provoke further displacement. Despite limited access to those in need, UNHCR and partners delivered core relief items and COVID-19-related equipment to tens of thousands of IDPs, while expanding community-based protection and protection monitoring.

In Rakhine State, Myanmar, quick impact projects implemented by UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme benefited more than 20,000 individuals. More projects are planned within the framework of the tripartite memorandum of understanding. The estimated 600,000 Rohingya in Rakhine State remain subject to restrictions on freedom of movement and access to citizenship, despite continuous advocacy for the restoration of their rights. UNHCR continues to engage with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other regional actors in pursuit of solutions for Rohingya and other refugees from Myanmar and to collaborate with the United Nations Secretary-General's new Special Envoy on Myanmar in efforts to create the conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return, in line with General Assembly resolution A/RES/76/180.

In Bangladesh, an inclusive national COVID-19 response resulted in nearly 80 per cent of the 890,000 Rohingya refugees receiving a vaccination by mid-January 2022. Humanitarian services in the refugee camps, which had been limited due to COVID-19 measures, were restored by the end of 2021. UNHCR and partners addressed critical protection issues and responded to fires and the effects of natural disasters in the camps. While education was not permissible during the height of the pandemic, UNHCR and partners initiated a pilot project to introduce the Myanmar curriculum. UNHCR also expanded work with refugees and partners to reduce environmental degradation and ensure a more environmentally sustainable response. In 2021, 19,000 Rohingya refugees were relocated to Bhasan Char, an island where the Government made substantial investment to host refugees as a temporary alternative

measure to alleviate cramped camp conditions. UNHCR, on behalf of the United Nations, signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of Bangladesh that provides a protection and policy framework for Bhasan Char. UNHCR is supporting the authorities and national partners to address the humanitarian needs in Bhasan Char and is working with the Government to ensure the voluntariness of relocations and freedom of movement.

The 2021 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis to address the needs of Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh was 69 per cent funded by the end of the year.

Global Compact on Refugees

At the High-Level Officials Meeting in December 2021, pledging entities and stakeholders in the Asia and Pacific region highlighted progress towards the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees and examined challenges, such as the need for better data-tracking on burden- and responsibility-sharing. Multiple States from the region committed to the inclusion of persons of concern in their national COVID-19 programmes and global distribution of vaccinations, while refugees urged decision-makers to ensure their full inclusion as actors in addressing the challenges of displacement. During 2021, within the framework of the Global Compact on Refugee’s Asylum Capacity Support Group, New Zealand helped strengthen the capacity of the Philippines in relation to country-of-origin information in the asylum process.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Safeguarding access to protection and asylum

Access to asylum remained challenging throughout 2021. Despite concerted advocacy, restrictions on movements and border closures prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic limited the ability of individuals to access territory, seek asylum and access assistance. Many individuals were arrested and detained, often as a result of large-scale immigration raids. UNHCR continues to advocate access to and release of those who may be in need of international protection and urges States to implement alternatives to detention and adhere to the principle of non-refoulement. In late 2021, with Afghanistan’s land borders largely closed (except to those with the required passports and visas, as well as some medical cases), UNHCR urged all countries to keep their borders open to Afghans in need of international protection and to refrain from forced returns.¹

In 2021, UNHCR provided support to the Government of Thailand for the operationalization of a national screening mechanism and agreed on a memorandum of cooperation with Japan to share information and enhance its asylum system. In the Republic of Korea, UNHCR supports strengthening of the national asylum capacity, in line with the country’s pledges at the Global Refugee Forum.

Many refugees travelling by sea are denied access to disembarkation and asylum. In 2021, approximately 800 persons – mostly Rohingya refugees departing from Bangladesh, of whom 70 per cent were women and children – attempted movements by sea, with 29 recorded deaths. Most boats were either intercepted by maritime authorities or prevented from disembarking. One vessel carrying 81 Rohingya refugees was at sea for over four months before being rescued by the Indonesian Coast Guard in June 2021. In December 2021, a vessel carrying 105 Rohingya refugees was allowed to disembark in Aceh, Indonesia after drifting for approximately three weeks at sea. UNHCR continues to advocate shared responsibility among States for rescue and disembarkation and the development of safe and legal pathways for refugees to reduce risky movements by sea, in the framework of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime.

Registration data and documentation are essential to enable refugee inclusion and solutions. UNHCR has implemented innovative approaches to remote registration across the region,

¹ See “[UNHCR position on returns to Afghanistan](#)”, August 2021 and “[Guidance note on the international protection needs of people fleeing Afghanistan](#)”, February 2022.

including online self-service portals and video conferencing. As a result, UNHCR registered some 22,000 individuals in the second quarter of 2021, more than four times as many as in the second quarter of 2020, showing significant progress in adapting to operational challenges imposed by COVID-19 and ensuring continuity of critical protection services. UNHCR also welcomed Kyrgyzstan's pledge at the High-Level Officials Meeting to enable refugees and stateless persons to access machine-readable travel documents. With the support of the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, UNHCR is assessing labour market outcomes and prospects for refugees in Malaysia to inform policy reforms for socioeconomic inclusion. In Central Asia, a similar joint project is supporting the collection of statelessness data through national population censuses.

Most refugee, internally displaced and stateless children in the region continue to face barriers to accessing education, civil registration and basic services, resulting in heightened risk of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. To address this issue, UNHCR implemented targeted programmes to prevent harm and to respond to children's specific needs through best interest procedures. In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, for example, such programmes reached some 2,500 children at risk and provided psychosocial support for over 48,800 children.

Gender-based violence remains a pervasive and life-threatening risk for women and girls of concern. UNHCR and partners delivered life-saving assistance to survivors and implemented community-based prevention programmes. In Afghanistan, despite the various challenges, UNHCR monitored and supported survivors of gender-based violence and women at-risk, including with counselling and referral services, cash-based assistance and non-food items.

Seeking durable solutions for protracted refugee situations

The current crises in Afghanistan and Myanmar are hindering perspectives for voluntary repatriation for refugees. UNHCR continues its efforts towards comprehensive solutions, including through enhanced protection and greater inclusion in host countries, as well as expanded resettlement and complementary pathways, while addressing barriers to voluntary return. Despite the low rate of returns due to COVID-19 restrictions and insecurity in Afghanistan, in 2021, over 1,300 Afghan refugees returned home, received cash grants and accessed a range of services, such as COVID-19 vaccinations and mine risk awareness training.

UNHCR sought to restore resettlement processing and departures to pre-pandemic levels, following the decline in 2020. In 2021, UNHCR submitted requests for resettlement for 4,855 individuals, mainly from operations in India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, with 2,419 departures to third countries.

UNHCR continues to strengthen partnerships with an array of stakeholders to broaden support for protection, solutions and resilience, including complementary pathways through labour mobility, education and family reunification. Access to education, health care, livelihoods and socioeconomic inclusion remain key areas of focus for partnerships with development actors, private sector partners and financial institutions. Collaboration with non-governmental organizations, academia, civil society (including refugee-led organizations), and governmental institutions was also expanded to strengthen access to livelihoods and pursue socioeconomic inclusion.

Ensuring protection and solutions for IDPs

The situations in Afghanistan and Myanmar significantly increased internal displacement and stalled progress on solutions for IDPs displaced prior to 2021. Following the August 2021 crisis, a key priority in Afghanistan was to sustain protection and resilience for IDPs and to enable solutions for IDP returnees, with a focus on priority areas of return and reintegration. UNHCR continued its leadership of the protection and shelter/non-food item clusters, which rapidly scaled up winterization assistance for Afghans in the last quarter of 2021. UNHCR's winterization support reached approximately 263,000 vulnerable Afghans in 2021.

In Myanmar, UNHCR stepped up its response through the cluster system and is working to reach the most vulnerable IDPs, including 130,000 (mainly Rohingya) IDPs who have

remained displaced in central Rakhine State since 2012. UNHCR welcomes regional efforts to channel further humanitarian assistance into Myanmar and will continue to engage with regional actors in this regard.

In the Philippines, UNHCR sought to build the capacity of local and national authorities, with a view to their leadership of current and future responses to internal displacement. In December 2021, after typhoon Rai made landfall, UNHCR deployed an emergency response team to Caraga region to provide protection technical expertise and core relief items to severely affected and hard-to-reach communities. In line with the recommendations of the report of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement and the commitments contained in the Secretary-General's draft Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, UNHCR will further strengthen its IDP strategies in the region in 2022.

Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless persons

Despite more than half of the world's 4.2 million known stateless individuals being from the Asia-Pacific region, most States in the region have not acceded to either statelessness convention. Uzbekistan took a significant step towards eradicating statelessness by resolving over 25,000 cases through recognition of nationality and naturalization. Turkmenistan is among the few countries that have a statelessness determination procedure, with its recently introduced procedure providing a best practice example. At the second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in November 2021, Member States confirmed their commitment to universal birth registration. UNHCR and the Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness co-hosted a regional academic roundtable to pave the way towards improved statelessness mapping, the strengthening of legal clinics and enhanced capacity-building. The International Conference on Statelessness Eradication in Central Asia, co-hosted by UNHCR and the Government of Turkmenistan, created additional impetus to end statelessness in the five central Asian countries. At the same time, the International Workshop on Accession to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, organized by the Ministry of Justice of Viet Nam, facilitated the country's further progress towards accession.

C. Plans for 2022 and financial information

In October 2021, the Executive Committee approved a budget for Asia and the Pacific of \$848.1 million for 2022, which subsequently increased to over \$1,081.6 million due to emergency response activities in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. The refugee programme constitutes 65 per cent of the region's funding requirements. By 2023, all UNHCR operations in the region will have transitioned to multi-year planning.

Due to the continued negative effects of COVID-19 on refugee resilience, innovative programming for livelihoods remains paramount in 2022. Skills-building programmes for wage and self-employment will be facilitated, including in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines and Tajikistan. UNHCR will further increase cash-based interventions to enhance protection and solutions for the most vulnerable and will continue to engage and strengthen partnerships with local and regional actors, including ASEAN, on protection and solutions across the Asia and Pacific region.

As of 25 January 2022, some 22 per cent of the region's 2022 financial requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.