

Update on UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

Asia and the Pacific hosts 13.3 million persons of concern to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), including 6.6 million refugees, 215,000 asylum-seekers and 6,600 refugee returnees; 4.6 million internally displaced persons and 434,700 internally displaced returnees; and 2.4 million stateless persons. In 2022, the number significantly rose due to 2.6 million Afghans headcounted by the Islamic Republic of Iran, including over 1 million who have arrived since 2021. Iran (Islamic Republic of) extended its inclusive health and education policies to Afghans in the country. Today, the country hosts 3.4 million refugees and individuals in a refugee-like situation,¹ making it the second largest host country in the world.

Despite challenging conditions, the region also continues to witness the return of internally displaced persons, with over 1.3 million such returns recorded by UNHCR in Afghanistan since 2021. UNHCR continued to prioritize work that enables conditions for sustainable return through an area-based approach in priority areas of return and reintegration, coupled with individual assistance to returnees. In late 2022, a directive of the de facto authorities banning female staff from working for non-governmental organizations hindered efforts to effectively reach women and girls. In line with the recommendations of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, UNHCR continues advocacy with the de facto authorities for authorizations that would allow the participation of female aid workers to ensure the uninterrupted, non-discriminatory delivery of humanitarian assistance to women and girls.

Third-country solutions for refugees were significantly expanded in 2022, including through strengthened resettlement programmes for the most vulnerable refugees living in protracted situations in the region’s largest host countries: Bangladesh, and the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. In 2022, UNHCR submitted the cases of over 21,000 refugees for resettlement consideration, more than a four-fold increase when compared to 2021. Complementary pathways also helped provide solutions for more than 5,000 individuals in the region.

The region saw a dramatic increase in maritime movements in 2022. Seeking protection, family reunification and access to livelihood opportunities, over 3,500 Rohingya, almost half of whom were women and children, embarked on dangerous sea journeys. This represents an increase of 360 per cent when compared to 2021. Nearly 350 individuals were believed to have died or gone missing after boats in distress were lost at sea and failed to be rescued by some States around the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal. UNHCR continues to call for safe and predictable disembarkation and for greater responsibility-sharing among States, including through the activation of the consultative mechanism of the Bali-Process.

Climate change exacerbated conflict-induced displacement and transformed the regional disaster risk landscape, with numerous countries having dealt with multiple disasters in recent years, including floods, droughts, earthquakes, typhoons and cyclones, as well as locust infestation. Analysis from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) shows that under all climate change scenarios, the region will be the most impacted relative to global averages. UNHCR is making climate action a major priority across the region, engaging strategically on issues of climate adaptation, resilience-building and disaster risk reduction.

¹ Persons in a refugee-like situation refer to the 2.6 million Afghans headcounted in Iran (Islamic Republic).

Afghanistan situation

Some 3.2 million Afghans remain internally displaced due to conflict, with approximately 32,500 newly displaced since April 2022. Internally displaced persons continued to return to their areas of origin in significant numbers throughout 2022. According to government sources, there were also over 1.6 million Afghan new arrivals in the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan since 2021. Moreover, in 2022, some 6,500 Afghan refugees voluntarily returned to Afghanistan, mainly from Pakistan.

UNHCR scaled up its operations in Afghanistan last year in view of the vast needs and improved humanitarian access in the country's 34 provinces. UNHCR prioritized life-saving assistance, protection and solutions activities for internally displaced persons, as well as community resilience initiatives, in line with the *Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees* and the newly established inter-agency Durable Solutions Working Group in Afghanistan. In 2022, UNHCR assisted 5.5 million people, including with community-based interventions (4.1 million), cash assistance (975,700) and psychosocial support (41,000).

Assistance for Afghan women and girls was strengthened, including through the provision of psychosocial support and emergency shelter, as well as through the establishment of community centres and schools. UNHCR also enhanced small business development activities. Despite these efforts, without female partner staff able to physically deliver humanitarian aid due to the restrictions in place at the time of writing, these activities and UNHCR's ability to reach women and girls most in need have been severely affected.

UNHCR and partners continued building on development gains made in the 80 priority areas of return and reintegration, where 3.2 million Afghans benefitted from improved access to health, education and livelihoods. In its tenth year, a meeting of the Quadripartite Steering Committee of the *Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees*, which comprises Afghanistan, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan as well as UNHCR, was hosted by Iran (Islamic Republic of) in December 2022. The Committee reaffirmed the focus on protection and solutions for the millions of displaced Afghans, with priority given to the creation of conditions enabling sustainable return and reintegration in Afghanistan. Against this background, the Core Group of the Support Platform of the *Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees*, chaired by the European Union, continued to urge the international community to support equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing. The Core Group has helped generate some \$550 million in contributions since its first convening in 2020.

By the end of 2022, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan continued to host 3.4 million and 1.5 million Afghan refugees,² respectively, in addition to over 3 million Afghans with other statuses. Inflation hit record highs in both countries, increasing the cost of rent and other staples which, coupled with limited livelihood opportunities, severely affected the ability of vulnerable populations to afford basic goods and services. Natural disasters further compounded the situation, including in Pakistan where devastating floods affected 33 million people, including more than half a million Afghan refugees. Additional robust international support for the two principal host countries remains crucial to ensuring adequate protection space for Afghans.

The UNHCR-led 2022 regional refugee response plan, which covered the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan, as well as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, helped provide access to health care for over 527,000 Afghans, access to education for 230,000 children, cash assistance for 210,000 individuals, and access to clean water for 786,000 people. In 2023, the plan aims to broaden its partnership base to reach the most vulnerable Afghans. Over 70 per cent of those targeted this year are women and children.

Myanmar situation

The Myanmar situation accounts for 2.9 million persons of concern to UNHCR, including 1.7 million Rohingya who are stateless and often also either refugees (1.1 million) or internally displaced (153,000). In 2022, displacement within Myanmar continued to grow, with the total number of internally displaced persons surpassing an estimated 1.5 million. Since the military

² This figure includes individuals in a refugee-like situation.

takeover in February 2021, an estimated 1.2 million people were newly displaced in the country. In addition, some 76,600 refugees fled to India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, but the estimated 23,300 people who had reached Thailand have reportedly since returned to Myanmar.

Incremental access to parts of Myanmar enabled UNHCR and partners to deliver shelter and core relief items to 426,000 internally displaced persons and others in need, and to carry out protection activities. In response to smaller returns in north-east Myanmar, UNHCR and partners undertook community-led initiatives that help foster social cohesion and pathways to solutions. UNHCR continues to advocate lifting operational impediments to humanitarian access.

In Rakhine State, renewed conflict during the third quarter of 2022 triggered fresh displacement from communities caught between opposing sides. As the cessation of hostilities remains fragile, UNHCR advocates principled and sustainable solutions for the internally displaced in Rakhine and beyond. Despite these efforts, an estimated 600,000 Rohingya are subjected to restrictions on movement, face difficulties in obtaining documentation and have limited access to livelihood opportunities and services.

A comprehensive regional approach seeks to expand solutions for Rohingya refugees and sustain support for host countries. The focus of this regional approach is on safeguarding the right to return and, as affirmed by recent United Nations General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, on creating conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable repatriation. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) reiterated its readiness to facilitate the implementation of relevant agreements, including the tripartite Memorandum of Understanding between Myanmar, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNHCR. UNDP and UNHCR continue to implement community-led projects in Rakhine State where some 60,000 individuals have already benefitted from these efforts. UNHCR will further strengthen its engagement with host countries, ASEAN, other regional actors and the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Myanmar to help find lasting solutions.

Bangladesh continued to offer sanctuary to some 929,600 Rohingya. In 2022, the joint response plan that amounted to \$881 million was 51 per cent funded. Robust and sustained support for the Rohingya through the 2023 joint response plan will be critical in order to build refugee resilience, improve the protection environment and help prevent perilous onward movements. Thanks to the efforts fostering refugee resilience in Bangladesh, some 256,000 refugee students gained access to primary education in the Myanmar curriculum, and a further 36,000 students are expected to transition to the Myanmar curriculum by July 2023, in a step that will further enhance the prospects of sustainable voluntary return to Myanmar once the conditions allow. Skills development and livelihood activities are also being strengthened. Together with partners, UNHCR continues to advocate alternatives to detention and greater self-reliance for Rohingya in India and Malaysia through community-based initiatives.

In addition, UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund and the World Food Programme will support national authorities and partners in addressing the humanitarian needs of refugees relocated to Bhasan Char, and will advocate voluntary and protection-sensitive relocations. In addition, a sustainable approach on the island will be promoted.

B. Progress and challenges by impact area in 2022 and updated plans for 2023

Access to protection and asylum

Key challenges to accessing to protection and asylum in the region, including restrictions on movement, border closures and the lack of national asylum systems, have contributed to incidents of refoulement, deportation, arrest and detention, including of individuals from Afghanistan and Myanmar for whom the UNHCR non-return advisories remain in effect. In this context, UNHCR continued to advocate alternatives to detention and adherence to the principle of non-refoulement.

UNHCR also supported countries with developing and improving asylum systems in line with international standards. Pursuant to its July 2021 Memorandum of Cooperation with Japan, UNHCR worked with the authorities on enhancing the quality and efficiency of Japan's refugee status determination procedure and held the 5th Protection Dialogue in Tokyo in December 2022. In Thailand, UNHCR continued to assist the authorities in developing a national screening mechanism following the cabinet's approval of the mechanism's draft criteria in October 2022. In the Philippines, UNHCR provided technical assistance on strengthening the Refugees and Stateless Persons Protection Unit and on enhancing refugee status and statelessness determination procedures.

Registration and documentation were important protection tools employed by UNHCR to help foster inclusion and solutions for those who gained access to territory. In 2022, several countries lifted restrictions related to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), resulting in a significant improvement in the access of refugees and asylum-seekers to registration. Registration in the region doubled in the third quarter of 2022 when compared to the first quarter of 2022 and reached the highest quarterly figure in over three years. Notably, registration figures grew due to the resumption of the registration of new births in Bangladesh and the recording of Afghan asylum-seekers for resettlement and solutions purposes in the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan.

Addressing gender-based violence and child protection remains a priority for UNHCR. In Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand dialogues with community members, including men and boys have been initiated which aim at behavioral transformation and promoting non-violence and respect for women and girls. Collaboration with a regional women's network is facilitating a conversation between UNHCR and refugee women on gender-based violence and child marriage, a significant concern in the region. UNHCR in Bangladesh and Indonesia has reinforced the prevention and case management of child marriage through the training of case workers, and further interventions are aiming to strengthen operational capacity to address child marriage. In 2023, life skills for adolescent girls and mental health and psychosocial support for children are other key areas of engagement.

Expanding solutions for protracted situations

Building on significantly increased opportunities for resettlement and complementary pathways in 2022, UNHCR will further expand third-country solutions from host countries in Asia, with plans for over 35,000 submissions in 2023. The submissions of the cases of refugees from Afghanistan and Myanmar will represent a large proportion of these. UNHCR will also build on existing complementary pathways, including through continued partnerships on labour mobility, cooperation on family reunification and new avenues in education.

UNHCR continued to address barriers to voluntary repatriation through integrated programming in areas of return. Ongoing instability in Afghanistan and Myanmar hindered large-scale voluntary return, though UNHCR will ensure that Afghan refugees voluntarily returning are adequately supported with their reintegration. Efforts to advance solutions for 93,000 Sri Lankan refugees living in a protracted situation in India intensified, with advocacy continuing on pathways to local integration for those refugees wishing to assimilate and enhanced reintegration support for individuals who choose to return to Sri Lanka in the course of 2023.

Bringing together the unique expertise and comparative advantages of both organizations, a UNHCR-World Bank Strategic Analysis Hub was launched in 2022 to assess the challenges and opportunities presented by forced displacement in Afghanistan and beyond. This initiative aims to better inform durable solutions in the subregion.

Protection and solutions for internally displaced persons

In Afghanistan, UNHCR continued to work with both humanitarian and development partners towards solutions to internal displacement, in line with the commitments set out in the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement. To harmonize data on internally displaced persons and internally displaced returnees, UNHCR worked with the International Organization for Migration to operationalize the International

Recommendation on Internally Displaced Persons Statistics. Discussions are ongoing with the de facto authorities in view of lifting the ban on female staff from working for non-governmental organizations. Standardized, coordinated and common data collection and indicator development ultimately remain a goal in Afghanistan in order to advance an integrated, solutions-oriented approach.

In Myanmar, UNHCR will continue to support solutions wherever possible. Shelter assistance and livelihoods opportunities will be provided for internally displaced persons who plan to leave displacement sites. Under the leadership of the United Nations Resident Coordinator, UNHCR will continue to promote protection standards in the case of premature returns and relocations in the context of camp closures and in the search for solutions. In the Philippines, UNHCR will support local and national authorities in their response to internal displacement by providing technical expertise on laws and policies and capacity-building. UNHCR will also promote programming across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and a whole-of-society approach to help seek solutions from the onset of a displacement situation. Efforts will continue to secure the passage of national legislation on internal displacement with a view to further supporting a framework for solutions.

Eradication of statelessness

While the situation remained largely unchanged for most of the region's stateless populations, notable achievements include progress in the resolution of individual cases of statelessness in all Central Asian countries. The Philippines also reduced the risk of statelessness by moving towards universal birth registration, enabling children from the Sama Bajau community and displaced children to be registered.

A national statelessness network of 18 civil society organizations was launched in the Philippines in 2022 with the aim of eradicating statelessness in the country by 2024. Moreover, capacity-building, media outreach and events to enhance UNHCR's coordination with governmental and United Nations agencies were held in a dozen countries in the region to promote laws, policies and practices that help reduce the risk of statelessness.

As part of ESCAP's regional steering group on civil registration and vital statistics, UNHCR supported the development of subregional networks of civil registrars, including a south-east Asian network to be launched in February 2023. Ensuring universal civil registration to prevent statelessness will continue to be a regional priority.

In November 2022, Nationality for All, a regional movement addressing statelessness, organized the first in-person meeting of the regional civil society network on statelessness, giving people with lived statelessness experiences an opportunity for meaningful participation. In 2023, UNHCR will encourage the network to broaden its geographic coverage and strengthen coordination with the Central Asian Network on Statelessness.

C. Financial information

In October 2022, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme approved the 2023 annual budget of \$944.7 million for the Asia and the Pacific region. The region's annual budget for 2023 later increased by \$55.8 million to \$1.00 billion due to the flood response in Pakistan. The refugee programme represents 74 per cent of the funding requirements for the region. All UNHCR country operations in Asia and the Pacific have now transitioned to multi-year planning. As of 31 January 2023, operational needs for Asia and the Pacific were approximately 18 per cent funded with \$176.9 million in voluntary contributions, including the indicative allocation of flexible funding.