

92nd Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of UNHCR

Remarks of the UNHCR Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, Ms. Hai Kyung Jun

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Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

I am honored to address you today for the second time as UNHCR's Director for Asia and the Pacific [having assumed this role just ahead of last year's meeting].

Since then, I have been pleased to visit many of our operations in the region – meeting with displaced communities, Governments, and partners.

I have been looking closely at ways we can enhance our protection and solutions efforts.

Ways we can strengthen partnerships to enable sustainable responses.

And ensuring our resources are used most efficiently and impactfully.

I will share with you today some brief reflections from my first year – as we look ahead for 2025 and beyond.

Excellencies,

Today, we have in Asia the highest numbers of displaced people since records began.

Some seven million refugees are in largely protracted, challenging situations, longing for a solution to their plight.

Our collective efforts therefore remain as crucial as ever.

Chair,

Nowhere is that more evident than in Bangladesh, where I just returned from last month with our High Commissioner, on the eve of Ramadan.

This is the seventh such Holy Month many Rohingya refugees spend in exile, since violent events in Myanmar pushed some 750,000 from their homes in 2017.

Bangladesh today continues to generously host the world's largest refugee camp, most reliant on humanitarian aid.

I met with refugees in the camps – particularly women and girls – who told me of the many hopes they still harbor for the future.

But also, how critical the humanitarian support they receive remains – for their safety, for their families, for their survival.

As you have heard, cuts to funding – however – threaten to exacerbate their hardships, the insecurity.

WFP, for instance, warns that it will have to cut food rations by half from April.

We will soon launch the Rohingya Humanitarian Response Plan, together with senior officials from Bangladesh.

Now, more than ever, Rohingya refugees and their host communities count on your support.

Back in Myanmar, the situation has sadly not improved.

Violence and conflict mean there are now an over 3.5 million internally displaced people across the country.

I travelled to the country in October last year, visiting Rakhine and Shan states.

And held constructive discussions with key stakeholders on how we could scale up assistance.

Despite access constraints, I am pleased to report that UNHCR reached more than 1 million people last year.

[And I want to here pay testament here to our colleagues in Myanmar – but also across our region – for their efforts and the risks they take each day]

With current funding, however, we will not be able to provide planned assistance and shelter support to some 300,000 displaced people this year.

Due to the situation in Myanmar, refugees, as you know, have also been forced across borders.

UNHCR continues to call on countries neighboring Myanmar to provide safety and refuge to those who may be in need.

The combination of protracted displacement, escalating conflict, and a lack of solutions, has sadly also led to more desperate, dangerous journeys by sea.

9,200 Rohingya refugees took such journeys last year.

Three quarters of them were women and children.

Many disembarked in Indonesia – and I want to thank the Indonesian authorities and people for their life-saving efforts.

UNHCR continues to support those who disembark with essential protection and assistance – though received little support for our emergency appeal last year.

Excellencies,

Turning to the Afghanistan situation.

Millions of Afghan refugees, as you know, remain in neighboring countries – largely Iran and Pakistan.

I visited both countries in the second half of last year, holding constructive meetings with officials and partners.

Let me be clear: UNHCR recognises the very real challenges that Pakistan and Iran face in generously hosting large numbers of people – and for so long.

But we also appeal that Afghans continue to be provided protection, until they can return voluntarily and safely.

Together with partners, UNHCR continues to support efforts in the neighbouring countries through the Regional Refugee Response plan.

We are targeting some 7 million people – both Afghans and host communities.

Inside Afghanistan, the situation remains complex and challenging.

Edicts from de facto authorities – particularly impacting women and girls – compound an already dire humanitarian situation.

High numbers of returns and deportations from Iran and Pakistan – some 1.6 million in 2024 – have stretched Afghanistan's ability to absorb and reintegrate people.

And UNHCR is therefore prioritising protection and assistance for returnees in Afghanistan, particularly cash-based interventions, shelter, and livelihoods.

In 2024, we assisted over 1.7 million people in Afghanistan – more than half of whom were women and girls.

We will continue to support Afghans as they return – but we will require additional, urgent support to do so.

We will also continue to maximise the SSAR Support Platform to garner attention and support for the situation.

And I would like to here thank the Netherlands for their leadership as Chair.

Excellencies,

I am pleased to report that we have worked further in the region on efficiencies and rationalization. Let me provide some brief examples:

In 2024, we reduced our operational footprint in Sri Lanka to reflect the current needs in the country, marking 37 years of partnership since the civil conflict.

As mentioned, we have also “reimagined” our presence in Afghanistan to reflect new operational and funding realities.

Elsewhere, we are also consolidating our office presences with other UN agencies.

Distinguished delegates,

Statelessness today remains a major issue in our region.

And Asia remains host to the most stateless people in the world.

So let me close today by highlighting three examples of hope.

First, last September, Turkmenistan became the latest country in the world to resolve all known cases of statelessness.

Together with our Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, I visited Turkmenistan in November for the regional Ministerial conference.

The conference led to a milestone declaration on Ending Statelessness in Central Asia.

Second, in Thailand, the Government in November adopted a pathway to nationality for nearly half a million stateless people, which UNHCR is supporting.

And lastly, in the Philippines, the authorities continue to implement new legislation, resulting in 8,000 people at risk of statelessness being confirmed as citizens so far.

UNHCR and UNICEF have been supporting these efforts.

These examples show us that political will and humanitarian action can meet, resulting in life-changing and sustainable solutions for the people we work with and for.

I hope these give us food for thought, as we navigate these challenging times – together.

Thank you. And I look forward to our exchange.

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