

**Presentation to the 59<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee  
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Mr. Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address you on the occasion of the 59<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee. Since we met a year ago, when I addressed you for the first time as the Asia Bureau Director, there have been some important developments in the Asia-Pacific region.

**Protracted refugee situations**

I will focus the first part of my presentation today on recent developments in two of the most protracted situations in the Asia-Pacific region – Afghanistan and Myanmar – both of which continue to be the reason for the presence of large refugee populations in neighbouring countries, as well as of ongoing irregular movements in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. I will then give an update on our work with refugees in urban situations as well as other populations of concern: internally displaced populations and stateless persons.

Before I begin on Afghanistan, I would first like to share with you some good news. In **Nepal**, some 87,000 refugees from Bhutan have been given the chance to begin new lives in third countries since the start of the large-scale resettlement program in late 2007. To date, the camp population has been reduced by two-thirds: from the initial figure of close to 110,000, only some 30,000 persons remain in need of a durable solution. This has been achieved with excellent cooperation from the Government of Nepal and the strong commitment and support of the Nepal Core Group members.

Mr. Chair,

I would now like to turn to the **Afghan refugee situation**, which remains the most critical protracted situation in our region. Even though some 5.8 million people have returned to Afghanistan since 2002, thereby making nearly a quarter of the population in Afghanistan former refugees, there are still some 2.5 million Afghans spread all over the world. Over 2.4 million registered refugees are currently being hosted in the two neighbouring countries – 1.6 million in Pakistan and 840,000 in the Islamic Republic of Iran – together with some 2 million undocumented Afghans. The Afghan situation is still the largest protracted refugee situation in the world, spanning over three decades, and the two host countries have displayed extraordinary generosity in hosting these refugees for such an extended period of time.

The year 2014 will be a significant transition year for **Afghanistan**, with the upcoming elections on 5 April, the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force, and a complex economic transition in the years ahead. We can expect all these processes to have a substantial impact on the prospects for peace, security and development in Afghanistan. We can be certain, however, that the humanitarian needs in Afghanistan will continue to remain at least as big after 2014 as they are today, if not bigger.

2014 marks the third year of the **Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees**, and I am pleased to report that there has been recognition at both international and national levels that the Solutions Strategy constitutes a relevant regional framework, both to address the needs of Afghan refugees and to advance solutions. Afghanistan needs the continued backing and solid commitment of the international community to support the return of Afghans and to help them rebuild their lives. Support to the two main hosting countries until returns can happen is also crucial. New governments in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan have advanced progressive policies on Afghan refugees, and both should be commended for them.

**Pakistan's** new national policy on Afghan refugees includes the extension of Proof of Registration cards until the end of 2015. Country-wide issuance of new refugee cards has begun in February, and all expired cards will be replaced by June. Furthermore, from July until the end of the year, the Government of Pakistan will register and issue individual cards to some 150,000 children born in the past five years as well as birth certificates for some 330,000 Afghan children under the age of 18. We greatly welcome the issuance of birth certificates as this offers important protection for refugee children by helping to prevent statelessness and enabling children to access social services and basic rights, such as enrolment in school.

The Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas programme, or RAHA, remains an important initiative in Pakistan. Since the launch of the RAHA programme in 2009, it has reached over four million people (both Pakistanis and Afghan refugees) and over 2,000 community-based projects have been implemented in some 40 districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Punjab and Sindh provinces and five agencies in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

In the **Islamic Republic of Iran**, progressive arrangements by the Government allow for registered refugees to benefit from education, access to work permits and health insurance. Over 300,000 children presently attend school, and literacy amongst Afghan children has increased from 6 to 60% over the last 3 decades. A comprehensive regularization plan for undocumented Afghans has been put in place by the Government, providing temporary stay arrangements on the basis of renewable residence permits placed on Afghan passports, which allows them to apply for work permits. To date, Afghan Consulates in the Islamic Republic of Iran have issued some 135,000 Afghan family passports - covering 600,000 to 800,000 individuals - and Iranian visas have reportedly been issued to previously undocumented Afghans in the country.

In each of the three countries, National Steering Committees for the implementation of the Solutions Strategy have been established, and with the support of UNHCR, they have led the development of the Portfolio of Projects aimed at addressing the needs of refugees and host populations alike. These Portfolios, focusing *inter alia* on youth empowerment through education and skills training, will form the basis for advocacy by the three concerned Governments, UNHCR, and the participating organizations, to keep the international community engaged in supporting the outcomes of the Solutions Strategy. During his recent mission to Tehran, the High Commissioner launched the Iran portfolio together with the Deputy Minister of Interior.

Mr. Chair,

Let me now address another long-standing refugee situation in Asia: **Myanmar**.

Over the past two weeks, together with the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations Ms. Janet Lim, I have visited our operations on the Thai-Myanmar border as well as inside Myanmar. The main objectives of our mission were to get a first-hand update on the situation at the Thai-Myanmar border as well as in Rakhine state.

We are encouraged by the progress reached in bilateral peace negotiations with ethnic minority groups and hope that the long-announced nation-wide ceasefire will be agreed to in the near future, as this will greatly impact on the return of IDPs and refugees.

Refugees and their leaders in the camps in Thailand follow the developments inside Myanmar with great interest. However, they expressed a fair amount of anxiety at the prospect of return to Myanmar. The decreasing food rations and reduced activities of some of the NGOs due to lack of funding are perceived by the camp-based refugees in Thailand as a push to return.

Refugees have requested better access to detailed information on the conditions of return, in particular as regards access to land, livelihood and documentation. I appeal to donors to exercise some caution before shifting the major part of their funding from Thailand to Myanmar as conditions are not yet fully met for the implementation of return and for large-scale reintegration projects to begin in the south-east of Myanmar. UNHCR will continue its preparedness activities on both sides of the Thai-Myanmar border in close consultation with governments, partners, as well as refugees, while maintaining that return must be voluntary and must take place in safety and dignity.

Inside **Myanmar**, some 140,000 IDPs still remain in Rakhine, 85,000 in Kachin, and 230,000 in the south-east. I personally witnessed the very difficult situation of the IDPs in Rakhine state and can testify to the immense humanitarian needs in the country. Unfortunately, there is a risk that temporary shelter for a large part of the IDPs is becoming permanent – especially in the Sittwe area. UN agencies and international NGOs are facing great difficulties in implementing their protection and assistance programmes for the benefit of displaced persons. Access to the populations continues to be difficult and aid workers are often perceived to be biased towards one part of the population and have therefore at times been subject to hostility from other parts of the population. In Nay Pyi Taw, we raised this issue with the Union Minister for Peace, and the Union Deputy Ministers of Border Affairs and Immigration and asked for their help to fight this perception by providing public support for the humanitarian work of UNHCR and other agencies. I also appeal to you, the members of UNHCR's Executive Committee, to continue supporting our work for the benefit of the displaced populations in Myanmar.

### **Irregular movements**

I would now like to say a few words on the issue of **irregular movements of persons**.

In 2013, the number of irregular maritime departures from the Bay of Bengal area was reported to have reached some 30,000 persons. During the same period, more than 600 persons are reported to have lost their lives or to have gone missing at sea in the Asia-Pacific region.

Irregular movements in the region also included persons from further afield, from other refugee-producing countries – including Afghans, Syrians, Somalis, Iraqis and Palestinians. The irregular provision of protection and assistance across the region, compounded by the need for livelihood and lack of access to legal migration opportunities, contribute to onward movement throughout the region, all the way down to Australia.

Moreover, **smuggling networks** that help reinforce established travel routes further aggravate the situation, leading to the tragic maritime incidents that we witness on a distressingly frequent basis. There have also been several accounts of illegal detention by smugglers in slave-like conditions in some countries in the region.

A number of governments have strengthened their legislation and taken measures to curb the influx of mixed migration flows. Among some of the recent developments, according to Australia's new legislation, Nauru and Papua New Guinea are designated as "regional processing countries" and all asylum-seekers arriving by boat in Australia are now subject to transfer to Nauru or Manus Island in Papua New Guinea for processing. The previous Government announced that no asylum-seekers arriving in Australia by boat on or after 19 July 2013 without a valid visa would be settled in Australia, but would be settled either in Nauru or Papua New Guinea; this policy has been maintained by the new Government. UNHCR has undertaken multiple monitoring missions to Nauru and Manus Island and has published reports on its findings.

UNHCR has been advocating for improved protection in the context of irregular movements, as well as for a change in approach, from bilateral to multilateral, in addressing refugee and migratory flows in the region. UNHCR has continued its efforts to address the causes of and solutions to irregular movements, acknowledging the role of the countries of origin in helping to reduce the very reasons for people taking flight and promoting burden-sharing mechanisms and inter-State collaboration.

We commend the steps taken by the States in the region, particularly within the framework of the **Bali Process**, to address irregular movements as well as other issues. Based on the conclusions from the Regional Roundtable on Irregular Maritime Movements by Sea that took place in Jakarta last year, a regional meeting to discuss disembarkation options is currently taking place in Bangkok (3-5 March). We hope that this initiative will lead, in the longer term, to the development of regional guidelines on disembarkation.

UNHCR supports other multilateral initiatives in the region such as the Special Conference on the Irregular Movement of Persons, which was convened by Indonesia in August last year.

The challenges that we face in the Asia-Pacific region are complex and multi-faceted, and we realize that they cannot be managed by one country but need a **comprehensive multi-lateral approach**.

Similarly, on the Central Asian side, we are pleased to see that States in Central Asia are working through the framework of the **Almaty Process** to foster differentiated but protection-sensitive border management and asylum systems. At the second Ministerial Conference on Refugee Protection and International Migration, hosted by Kazakhstan last June, the operating modalities were adopted, which will help advance regional dialogue and practical cooperation on issues of common concern within irregular movements.

Mr. Chair,

It is important that we build on the momentum gained in the Asia-Pacific region so far and move beyond the language of cooperation towards practical measures. Ensuring that appropriate **protection safeguards** are incorporated into migration and border management is therefore imperative to protect the life and the dignity of people on the move.

One way that this could be achieved is by granting **temporary protection and stay arrangements** that allow access to the labour market. UNHCR stands ready to assist States in the region in their efforts to improve reception conditions, processing mechanisms and stay arrangements for refugees and asylum-seekers and to explore ways of providing temporary protection within the existing national legislative and instructional framework. Constructive dialogue is currently ongoing in this regard between UNHCR and a number of governments in the region.

Addressing the challenges of irregular movements will continue to be a priority for the organization in 2014. I would like to urge States to continue their collective efforts to act practically and effectively, in respect of international principles, to address irregular movements. Our common goal is to have a more cohesive and predictable asylum system that will protect asylum-seekers and refugees and ultimately stem the tragedies at sea caused by dangerous and exploitative boat journeys.

### **Urban refugees**

Mr. Chair,

The vast majority of our persons of concern in Asia are located in **urban environments**, and the number of urban refugees and asylum-seekers continues to grow. In many countries, urban refugees co-exist with migrant populations, and the situation of urban refugees is closely linked with the issues around irregular movements and discussions on solutions, including alternative stay arrangements.

UNHCR, in strong cooperation with governments, has continued to register persons requesting asylum in urban environments in a large number of countries in the region. Whilst some countries provide temporary protection based on registration, others undertake refugee status determination directly or with the help of UNHCR. I am pleased to confirm that the Republic of Korea has started implementing its new RSD legislation since July 2013. Major progress has also been achieved in Hong Kong with regard to the hand-over of status determination by UNHCR to the Hong Kong authorities.

Urban refugee situations in Asia-Pacific are highly diverse. This requires a tailored approach to the varied operational environments and contexts in the region, ranging from temporary protection arrangements to alternate stay arrangements (with work permits), which refugees have been able to access in a number of countries. Meanwhile, UNHCR continues to process large numbers of refugees – many in urban contexts – for resettlement to third countries.

In order to work effectively in the urban context, UNHCR continues to further explore partnerships with other stakeholders to ensure adequate outreach. There have been a number of innovative and good practices implemented in various countries in Asia in collaboration with governments, city and municipal authorities and other national actors.

Mr. Chair,

I would now like to say a few words about IDPS and stateless persons. Information on our assistance to these people is provided in the background document to this meeting, but allow me to give you a quick update on the Philippines emergency.

### **Internally displaced persons**

On 8 November 2013, a devastating typhoon swept through central **Philippines**, which affected 14 million people and displaced over 4 million people. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee declared a Level 3 emergency for Typhoon Haiyan. This was the first Level 3 emergency since the adoption of the Transformative Agenda. As a part of the inter agency response, UNHCR had been invited by the government to co-lead the Protection Cluster with the Government. With the excellent collaboration with the Government of the Philippines, as well as our role as **Protection Cluster co-lead** in the inter-agency context, UNHCR was able to contribute to the response to Typhoon Haiyan by delivering on protection and meeting the critical humanitarian and protection needs of the affected population.

Some of our protection achievements include our support to the local authorities in some 20 worst-affected municipalities to implement a free Mobile Birth Registration program so that people can recover their lost documents. We also advocated for and provided training to female police officers. Some 40 female police officers specializing in women and child protection have been deployed to affected communities, helping to instill a greater sense of security among the most vulnerable populations. Moreover, together with partners, UNHCR undertook outreach protection monitoring to affected populations, including those in remote communities, providing protection by presence and addressing the needs of persons with specific vulnerabilities.

In addition, at the request of the ERC Valerie Amos, UNHCR assisted over 500,000 persons with specific needs by providing solar lanterns, emergency shelter and other relief items. Distribution of relief items was done in a strategic manner to complement the work of the Protection Cluster and to support other Clusters, and to achieve priority objectives such as decongestion of evacuation centres and improving physical security. Following the deactivation of the Level 3 emergency, UNHCR is working to responsibly hand over the field-based protection leadership to national actors, while continuing to support the Government

to address remaining protection issues in line with the Government's efforts and the recovery plan.

### **Statelessness**

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons. In this context, UNHCR will advocate for further accessions to the statelessness treaties in the Asia-Pacific, as well as for the establishment of statelessness status determination procedures. We will also work closely with States in the region to pursue the revision of nationality legislation in a number of countries.

In this regard, I would like to briefly mention the population without citizenship in Myanmar. The current application of the 1982 Citizenship Law has created a large population without citizenship, estimated to be close to one million people. UNHCR promotes a non-discriminatory and inclusive application of the 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law to all minority groups. UNHCR also continues to offer its help for technical support on the implementation of the law, including verification exercises, as well as any longer-term plans to revise the law and to bring it in line with international standards.

Countries in Central Asia continue to make significant progress in addressing statelessness issues in the sub-region. In 2013, Kyrgyzstan allowed 14,000 persons to exchange their invalid Soviet Union passports for Kyrgyz passports and new regulations on citizenship procedures have been adopted. In Tajikistan, an inter-Ministerial Group which was established to revise the Citizenship law, will be submitting the draft law to the Parliament. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan will embark on registration campaigns for undocumented persons with a view to determine the scope of statelessness in these countries and consider solutions for individuals concerned. Last year, the Government of Turkmenistan adopted a new law on citizenship, which is in close compliance with international standards for the prevention of statelessness. Between 2011 and 2013, close to 4,000 individuals have been granted Turkmen citizenship through a Presidential decree and over 6,000 applications for confirmation of citizenship and naturalization are presently being processed.

Mr. Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

As diverse and vast as the Asia-Pacific is, as varied and numerous are the challenges we face in the region. With challenges, however, there are opportunities, and I am confident that we will be able to work together to build on our efforts so far and to continue in solidarity and determination to protect and assist our persons of concern.

Thank you.