

**Presentation to the 74th Meeting of the Standing Committee
Geneva, 5 March 2019
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Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am extremely pleased to address you once again on behalf of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific.

I am joined on the podium by my Deputy Director, Mr. Bernard Doyle.

The Asia-Pacific region is extremely vast and populous; extending east from Iran to the South Pacific and home to 60% of the world's population. While the region continues to enjoy overall economic growth, in 2019, millions of people remain impacted by forced displacement, without a nationality, documentation, or a place to call home.

With approximately 9.5 million people of concern to UNHCR in the region, we are faced with a set of complex situations, all requiring UNHCR's presence across the spectrum of forced displacement.

We have shared with you our regional update, which I hope has provided an overview of UNHCR's important work in the region. My presentation today will provide a broad overview of our operations, focusing on protection, solutions, and partnerships.

Chairman,

First, allow me to focus on **significant institutional developments that will impact and shape our work in the region.**

UNHCR is in a **process of transformation by regionalising, decentralising, and redesigning our organizational architecture and processes**, and adopting more efficient ways of working. In this evolving humanitarian landscape, partnerships are

being strengthened and decisions are increasingly being made at regional levels. The future Asia-Pacific Bureau will not only be closer to the point of delivery, but also strategically located to increase our engagement with member states and regional bodies, including ASEAN. Crucially, the Bureau will be redesigned and capacitated to provide more effective support and oversight to country operations. I would like to express my appreciation to the Royal Thai Government for their agreement to locate the regional Bureau in Bangkok.

The groundbreaking adoption of the **Global Compact on Refugees** last year is expected to lead to positive developments in the Asia-Pacific region in terms of managing the complex situations present. In the context of the Afghan situation, the GCR complements the existing regional framework - the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees - and last year, **Afghanistan joined the comprehensive refugee response framework** as a country of origin. This will serve as a platform to ensure more equitable and predictable responsibility-sharing within the region. It also presents an opportunity to find solutions and address mixed flows of Afghans in the sub-region and beyond.

Chair,

On **protection and assistance**, let me begin with **Bangladesh**. UNHCR continues to respond to the emergency in Cox's Bazar, responding to the needs of some 900,000 stateless Rohingya refugees being generously hosted by the Government of Bangladesh. This year, UNHCR will work to strengthen the protective environment for Rohingya refugees, improve the living conditions for refugees in settlements while bolstering peaceful coexistence with host communities, and seek solutions.

A critical component of the **protection of refugees is registration** as it allows for the identification of individuals with specific needs, ensures access to essential services, and generates data for pursuing durable solutions. The start of the **joint verification/registration exercise by UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh** last June was therefore a positive development. To date, nearly 100,000 individuals have been registered.

Last month, the UN and NGO partners launched the **2019 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis**, appealing for US\$920 million. With this plan, we reiterate our commitment to meeting the needs of refugees in Bangladesh and urge the international community to support these efforts.

On the **Afghan situation**, 2019 marks **forty years since the start of the large-scale displacement of Afghans**. After all these years, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan continue to generously provide protection and assistance to some **2.4 registered Afghan refugees and others undocumented on their territory**.

Last year, the **Government of Pakistan**, in close collaboration with the Afghan Government, registered close to 880,000 undocumented Afghans and provided them with Afghanistan Citizen Cards. It is expected that the card holders will return to Afghanistan and obtain Afghan documentation and then avail themselves of the flexible visa regime introduced by the Government of Pakistan.

Ten years on from the start of the **Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative** in Pakistan, it continues to foster social cohesion between refugees and host communities, with 4,000 projects completed to date.

In the **Islamic Republic of Iran**, despite an **increasingly difficult economic situation**, the Government continues to implement **inclusive policies in the sectors of education and health**. Close to 500,000 Afghans have access to primary education, of which more than 100,000 are undocumented, and in 2018, the innovative health insurance scheme benefitted 92,000 vulnerable refugees. Additionally, all registered male refugees and women heads of households can apply for work permits in Iran.

As the Government of the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan continue to provide protection to Afghan refugees, I cannot stress enough that increased support from the international community is needed for this protracted refugee situation.

Chairman,

On **solutions**, despite ongoing challenges and new displacement, thousands of refugees and IDPs in the region were able to return home in 2018, in countries like Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

While violence in Afghanistan impedes large scale returns, over **15,000 Afghan refugees returned home in 2018**; the majority from Pakistan. UNHCR continues to assist those who choose to return, monitor their reintegration, and strives to create conditions conducive to voluntary repatriation. However, the situation requires innovative longer-term solutions, in line with the SSAR and in the spirit of the GCR.

In **Nepal**, with the end of 2018 came the end of the large-scale resettlement programme of **Bhutanese refugees from Nepal**. More than 113,000 refugees were resettled to eight resettlement countries – an extremely important gesture of the international community and we hope that UNHCR and the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal will work together to find solutions for the refugees who remain.

UNHCR continues to advocate for increased **resettlement** opportunities for refugees in the region, while **exploring alternative pathways to resettlement** across the region.

Returning to the Myanmar situation, there is an urgent need for **solutions to the challenges facing the people of Rakhine State**. In this light, UNHCR continues to underscore the need to improve conditions there and address the root causes, in line with the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. This includes the Government of Myanmar guaranteeing security, ensuring a meaningful enjoyment of basic human rights, and providing a pathway to citizenship.

In this regard, in 2018, UNHCR began to promote the “**Solidarity Approach for the People of Rakhine State**”. In the spirit of the GCR, the approach aims to bring together a host of actors to identify comprehensive solutions for the people of Rakhine State, both inside and outside Myanmar.

A key component of solutions in Rakhine State is creating conditions that are conducive for a safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya refugees to their places of origin or of their choosing. To this end, UNHCR, the United Nations Development Programme, and the Government of Myanmar signed a Memorandum of Understanding last June. While the signing of the MoU signified an important first step, nine months on, progress in the way of granting UNHCR and UNDP effective access to villages to carry out assessments and, more importantly, to implement the approved quick impact projects, is still urgently needed.

Moving to **Australia**, UNHCR welcomes the recent departure of the last children from Nauru and encourages Australia to find solutions for all of the remaining asylum seekers who have been the subject of offshore processing.

Solutions are also needed for the **2.7 million internally displaced persons in the region**. There are **1.9 million IDPs in Afghanistan** and their situation remains critical, due to ongoing violence and the drought. In the Philippines, more than 106,000 IDPs remain in Mindanao. UNHCR has supported the Government in the voluntary, safe and dignified return of displaced families, and in finding alternative solutions for those from the most affected areas who are unable to return.

We will endeavor to be more decisive and predictable in responding to situations of internal displacement in the region.

With **2.2 million stateless persons** in the Asia and the Pacific region, addressing statelessness remains a key strategic priority.

From adopting a national action plan to end statelessness by 2024 in the Philippines, to reviewing laws and policies with a view to preventing and reducing statelessness in Vietnam, and putting in place progressive measures to address statelessness, including a registration exercise, in Thailand, the region has witnessed significant progress in addressing statelessness in the past few years. In Central Asia, the number of stateless persons in the sub-region has been reduced by almost 40,000 and Central Asian countries continue to strive towards further reduction and prevention of statelessness.

Chairman,

UNHCR's ability to carry out its work in the region is entirely dependent on the strong **partnerships** it has fostered with other actors. From the persons of concern themselves, to national actors, civil society, sister UN agencies, regional bodies, the private sector, development actors, and Member States, we will continue to strengthen these collaborations and partnerships.

Due to the growing recognition that forced displacement is not just a humanitarian but also a political, peacebuilding and **development challenge**, UNHCR is scaling up its partnership with development actors in the region, including the **World Bank and the Asian Development Bank** in Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The Global Compact on Refugees also provides a platform for stronger collaboration in this respect and count on your support.

Chairman,

In line with **UNHCR's zero tolerance policy on sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment**, UNHCR has made significant efforts in the region to address and eradicate this serious form of misconduct against the people served by UNHCR and its partners, and sexual harassment within our operations. This month, a regional training will be organized in the region for all PSEA and SH focal points, in order to equip them to fulfil their roles and responsibilities, deliver briefings and trainings upon return to their operations, share good practices and experiences, and replicate progress made in one operation to another.

Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by expressing my sincere gratitude to host countries for their continued generosity towards refugees.

I would also like to convey my appreciation to member states for their financial and political support to host governments and UNHCR's operations in the region.

As we confront some of the greatest challenges in the field of displacement globally, I appeal today for your continued support of refugees, stateless persons, and internally displaced populations in the Asia and the Pacific region.

Thank you for your solidarity.