

**Remarks by Mr. Indrika Ratwatte,
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United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

**78th Meeting of the Standing Committee
Geneva, 23 March 2021**

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Madame Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

I am pleased to join you once again to discuss UNHCR's work in Asia and the Pacific. With me today is the Bureau's Deputy Director, Mr. Bernard Doyle.

When we last met, just over a year ago, the world was a markedly different place, global COVID cases stood at 115,000. Sadly, the global pandemic has now claimed over 2.6 million lives. In March 2020, we had little sense of what the longer term implications of COVID19 would be, but it was clear from the outset, that the most vulnerable amongst us, would be at the greatest risk and would bear the heaviest consequences.

The majority of States in Asia Pacific were swift to include refugees and asylum seekers into public health responses, and now pledge their equal access to screening and vaccination. As governments begin to roll out vaccination programmes, the UN and public health experts led by WHO, have stressed the essentiality for States to ensure that displaced persons – many of whom live in difficult conditions – have *real* access to vaccines, public health services and outreach. It will also be imperative that their needs are part and parcel of an inclusive policy response. No one is safe, until everyone is safe.

Thanks to your support, UNHCR was able to rapidly provide over 4 million face masks, 6 million surgical gloves, hundreds of items of essential medical equipment including ambulances and ventilators to protect communities, mitigate the spread of COVID and prepare for possible outbreaks.

As lockdowns resulted in a reduction of our physical presence, UNHCR operations adapted to this “new reality” by harnessing technology and community based initiatives to maintain our capacity to protect and deliver assistance - adopting remote management tools for outreach, registration, status determination and resettlement processes. UNHCR has also expanded cash assistance programmes designed to support refugees to meet their basic needs. Some 29 million USD, including 19 million earmarked for the COVID response, was provided to more than 200,000 of the most vulnerable families across the region including in Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Thailand. Protection remains at the heart of what we do.

As well as amplifying the health needs of refugees and other displaced persons, the COVID19 pandemic has exacerbated the exclusion and fragile coping mechanisms that many already faced. Particularly, in respect to access to education, livelihood opportunities and social protection, widening already gaping inequalities. A whole generation of refugee children and youth, whose education and vocational training has already been disrupted due to displacement, is now being pushed towards an age of lost opportunity.

In rising to the challenge of building back better, partnerships will be key. We need *all actors* – member states supported by international financial

institutions, multi-lateral and bi-lateral development actors, and the private sector -- to bring their unique expertise, skills and resources to bear as pledged during the Global Refugee Forum. Solidarity in action is more vital now than ever.

Added to the challenges brought about by the pandemic are internal conflicts and escalating violence, which could potentially give rise to further displacement and roll back the progress made towards durable solutions. The internal instability resulting from the military takeover in Myanmar, has reinforced the need for member states have safe and predictable asylum systems by which to manage forced population movements. This will enable persons facing persecution to seek protection, without resorting to measures that further risk their life and liberty. Nowhere is this more pressing than for those who have made the desperate decision to cross the sea to reach safety. A predictable and equitable regional mechanism for disembarkation is urgently needed. Principled leadership, regional cooperation and responsibility-sharing will save lives. Last year alone, over 200 refugees lost their lives or went missing in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. This need not be inevitable.

In 2020, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrated the kind of leadership and humanitarian spirit emblematic of the region's long history of providing refuge, by enabling Rohingya refugees to disembark. I would like to thank the Governments and people of Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia for their compassion and generosity.

Madam Chair,

Real progress cannot be achieved in isolation, as collective challenges must be met with collective efforts. Embodiment of this abounds in the region. States maintained their strong support for Rohingya refugees through the 2020 Joint Response Plan and at the Conference on Sustaining Support for the Rohingya Refugee. In doing so, the international community reaffirmed that it remains steadfast in sharing the responsibility for assisting Rohingya refugees and the countries that generously host them. However, more needs to be done to address root causes. Despite recent developments in Myanmar, we must remain focused on solutions and reinforce the role of regional leadership and of regional bodies, such as ASEAN, to facilitate solutions.

In Bangladesh, UNHCR has focused on building refugee resilience and improving conditions in the camps, with attention to environmental sustainability and support to host communities. The devastating fire last night in the camps in Cox's Bazar and the tragic loss of life underscores the importance of ensuring safety of refugees, while they remain in Bangladesh. Although the humanitarian footprint in the camps reduced by 80% due to the pandemic, UNHCR has relied on refugee volunteers for frontline protection work, including emergency preparedness for the monsoon and cyclone seasons and awareness raising of public health measures. These are but few examples of what can be achieved if refugees are given the chance to put their capabilities to work.

Another exemplar model of a regional approach to solutions is provided by the 'Support Platform' for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR). Upholding the commitment to Global Refugee Compact, in 2020 eight States, the European Union, and development actors came together

to form the ‘Core Group’ of the SSAR, to galvanize partnerships and support its implementation.

I appeal to all stakeholders to engage – whether by participating in the “Core Group”, or through humanitarian action, development investments, and private sector engagement, to support the solutions objective of the SSAR and the two principal countries of asylum, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan, who continue to generously host millions of Afghan refugees for over four decades. As Afghanistan embarks on its complex peace process, we need to also ensure that the voice and aspirations of refugees and the displaced are reflected in this nation building endeavor.

Madame Chair,

In the midst of all these challenges, we cannot afford to take our sights off investing in sustainable solutions. In 2020, despite identified resettlement needs of over 100,000 individuals across the region, resettlement space has been secured for fewer than 3,000 refugees. Although global resettlement was suspended due to pandemic, exceptional measures were undertaken for departure of over 300 emergency cases. I sincerely thank receiving States for enabling this, as these individuals were in extremely precarious protection situations. I encourage states to enhance resettlement opportunities and to further expand complementary pathways, particularly around employment and education – harnessing the wealth of skills and talents that refugees offer – which will be of mutual benefit to refugees and the countries that would host them.

While resettlement remains an important solution the hope of returning home, in safety and dignity remains the preferred solutions for the majority

of refugees and IDPs. The region's facilitated voluntary repatriation programs from Iran, Pakistan, Thailand and India, were also severely impacted by COVID and conditions in the countries of origin, with the total number of returns dropping from over 10,300 in 2019 to just 584, in the first half of 2020. Despite complex challenges, UNHCR will continue to pursue solutions through building partnerships to create conditions conducive for voluntary repatriation and working with key stakeholders to address root causes.

Solutions are also needed for the 3.3 million internally displaced persons in the Asia-Pacific region, three quarters of whom are from Afghanistan, Myanmar and the Philippines. Together with partners, UNHCR is coordinating protection responses and providing core relief items and shelter to IDPs affected by cycles of displacement due to conflict and natural disasters, while supporting governments to address obstacles to safe, voluntary and sustainable return.

Excellency,

Let me conclude by expressing my sincere gratitude to those countries generously hosting and protecting refugees, IDPs and stateless persons. I also convey my appreciation to Member States for their financial and political support to host governments and UNHCR's operations in the region.

I appeal for your continued partnership and solidarity.

Thank you.