

**STANDING COMMITTEE STATEMENT**  
**REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**  
**24 MARCH, 2026 (v5)**

Chair,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Standing Committee.

The situation in Iran is of grave concern with countless affected across the country. This includes Afghan refugees, who have been generously hosted by Iranians for decades.

Since 28 February, we have seen a dramatic increase in the requests from refugees for our support. I am proud to report that our colleagues and partners remain operational. They are providing protection through legal services, including access to documentation; responding to the significant increase in demand for psycho social and health services; and trying to alleviate the most severe of hardship by delivering cash to the most vulnerable.

And I am grateful for those who have continued to support and resource UNHCR and all the partners involved in the Afghan Refugee Response Plan inside Iran. In view of the new operational context, we have revised our plan – developed with eight partners – to provide support to 1.65 million refugees and others in need of international protection and 1 million host community members in the coming three months. I hope your capitals will generously respond to this appeal.

Mr Chair,

The focus on Iran has eclipsed fighting and violence elsewhere. We heard from Rema about Lebanon and we equally cannot neglect civilian needs there or other parts of the world. Fighting between de facto authority security forces in Afghanistan and Pakistani security forces has, for example, displaced more than 115,000 Afghans and 3,500 Pakistanis.

I echo the appeals for an end to violence; for the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, and adherence to IHL, human rights, and refugee law.

Mr Chair,

I also appeal for the international community to refocus on the root causes of displacement. The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees remains one important platform for support to refugees and hosts, while also stepping up the support inside Afghanistan that could enable voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable returns. Returns – and let's not forget that there were nearly three million returns and deportations in 2025 – are simply not sustainable in a country mired in such deep development challenges, with a struggling economy, and unacceptable human rights conditions, especially for

women and girls. We must do more to remove the obstacles to voluntary return. UNHCR and our dedicated partners will do our part, but humanitarians cannot do it alone.

I wish to thank our outgoing Chair of the SSAR platform, the Netherlands, for your guidance and concrete support during a very challenging year. I look forward to welcoming Switzerland as the incoming Chair of this important platform.

Mr Chair,

All I have said – protection of civilians, need for compliance with law, de-escalation, ending violence and addressing root causes – equally applies to the Myanmar situation. Each week, thousands of civilians in Myanmar are driven from their homes due to escalating violence.

Despite its own complexities, including the recent political transition and elections, Bangladesh has remained a generous host to Rohingya refugees who continue to escape conflict and persecution in Rakhine State.

But Bangladesh cannot be left alone to shoulder the burden.

I'm very grateful that many donors – as demonstrated again at the GRF Progress Review Meeting last December – remain focused on supporting refugees and Bangladesh, and I also thank the engagement of international financial institutions like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, for their steadfast support over the years. A renewed Joint Response Plan that brings together partners will soon be issued and I appeal for your continued contributions to this life saving work.

Mr Chair,

Failure to address the root causes and expand support and opportunities in exile continues to result in onward movement, with deaths at sea reaching new and disturbing levels.

Working with IOM and other partners, we have developed a shared Route Based Approach to save lives, protect, and reduce harm; to increase alternatives to dangerous journeys; and to support states effectively manage onward and mixed movements.

While we will continue to step up this work in support of States, the real solution lies in Myanmar where much more must be done to end the conflict and help people in need at home.

Mr. Chair,

While the state of the world is deeply concerning, we should not be without hope. Hope that comes from the resilience of refugees, but also bold and courageous decisions by States.

Thailand has not only granted legal status to 100,000 registered stateless people, but has also permitted work rights to tens of thousands of long staying refugees from Myanmar. The programme – even ahead of planned improvements – is a success with employers and refugees, who not only graduate themselves out of humanitarian need, but also contribute back to the Thai economy.

Elsewhere, Malaysia is developing a national system for registering refugees and asylum seekers.

The Philippines has continued to reduce statelessness, has included refugees, and has welcomed new ones – including Rohingya refugees - on scholarships.

Indonesia and its people have rescued Rohingya and others adrift at sea, saving lives and upholding one of humanity's most basic obligations.

I welcome India's exemption of Sri Lankan refugees from regulations under the 2025 Immigration and Foreigners' Act and many states in the wider region have made considerable progress towards reducing and ending statelessness.

Both Government and private sector support has also remained strong in countries such as Australia (also the second largest resettlement country globally), China (where we also have an innovative supply initiative), Japan (a steadfast supporter of UNHCR and refugees and GRF co-convenor) and Republic of Korea (which reached a record contribution to UNHCR last year). Support through private partnerships and financial contributions are growing in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, for example.

I hope that this critical support will not only be sustained, but will continue to grow and that other donors will also increase support.

Mr. Chair,

You're aware of the shortfalls, the dramatic cuts to programmes and staff last year. Yet despite significant reductions in resources available, new innovative approaches have been implemented in order to make us more efficient while ensuring effectiveness.

This includes rolling out the use of generative AI tools to analyse complex data, referral pathways, and participatory assessment data synthesis, while maintaining decision making with UNHCR staff. Cooperation with private sector partners, like LG, is enabling us to further collaborate on the use of AI with important efficiency gains.

The Digital Gateway has been rolled out in India, Indonesia, and Pakistan with more countries planned for this year, giving refugees a secure personal digital account that centralises access to key services, while improving efficiency, strengthens monitoring and feedback, and importantly, gives users themselves greater control over their data while reducing fragmented, resource-intensive processes.

In Afghanistan, we have introduced a blockchain-based cash assistance modality with a single, shared digital ledger, enabling automated near real-time reconciliation, full end-to-end traceability of every payment from authorization to redemption, and on-demand reporting for internal oversight and donors.

These are just some of the examples of operational efficiencies. More is in store. But efficiencies do not replace the need for solutions for millions of displaced people in the region, for which we look to our Membership for support and action.

Mr Chair,

The last year has been humbling. Humbling in what we perhaps took for granted could so easily be lost. Humbling in the way the international system has been challenged. Having to make sudden and deep cuts to refugees and staff.

And also humbling by the way in which colleagues continued to respond, many working until the very last minute of their contract demonstrating the determination, courage, and commitment that defined and continues to define UNHCR colleagues around the world.

The challenges are, I'm afraid, not all behind us. But with your support, my colleagues will continue to do all they can to protect, assist, and pursue solutions for refugees.

Thank you.