

## **Update on the operations of UNHCR in Asia and the Pacific**

### **A. Situational analysis, including new developments**

By mid-2022, 10.6 million people in the Asia and Pacific region were of concern to UNHCR, including 4 million refugees; 4.7 million internally displaced persons; 179,000 asylum-seekers; 275,000 internally displaced returnees; 1,500 refugee returnees; and 2.4 million stateless persons.

The region witnessed significant returns of internally displaced persons, with over 1.1 million recorded by UNHCR in Afghanistan as having returned since June 2021 despite challenging conditions. UNHCR worked to enable durable solutions with individual assistance to returnees and through an area-based approach in priority areas of return and reintegration. Internally displaced persons also returned to some locations in Myanmar, although the spread of conflict to new areas triggered further displacement within and from the country.

In response to the dramatic increase in humanitarian needs of the displaced populations in Afghanistan and Myanmar, UNHCR declared internal emergencies in both countries and augmented its protection and assistance activities. UNHCR capitalized on opportunities to improve access to basic services and to build resilience while efforts were intensified to promote more inclusive approaches to find solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons across the region.

Already struggling to overcome the lingering effects of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the region was further impacted by the conflict in Ukraine and heightened food insecurity. Climate change and natural disasters continued to shape the region's risk analysis and response. Floods in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, Typhoon Rai in the Philippines, the earthquake in Khost and Paktika provinces of Afghanistan, and locust infestation and drought in several countries contributed to displacement and compounded vulnerability. Around 19 million people were internally displaced or pre-emptively relocated throughout the region in 2021, accounting for 80 per cent of disaster-induced displacement worldwide. Climate risks further hindered prospects for safe, dignified, and durable solutions to displacement, including return.

#### *Afghanistan situation*

Of the 3.4 million persons displaced internally due to conflict in Afghanistan, 832,400 people were newly displaced in 2021. While displacement decreased in 2022, clashes in some provinces generated fresh internal displacement. According to government sources, there were over one million Afghan new arrivals in Iran and Pakistan since 2021. Internally displaced persons continued to return to their areas of origin in 2022, albeit at a more gradual pace. Since January 2022, some 1,250 Afghan refugees had returned.

UNHCR continued to “stay and deliver” in Afghanistan, despite a volatile security situation, expanding operations countrywide with improved access. With a staggering 95 per cent of the Afghan population suffering from food insecurity and grappling with the effects of drought and the financial crisis, UNHCR prioritized life-saving humanitarian assistance, protection activities for internally displaced persons and community resilience projects, in line with the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees. UNHCR reinforced efforts to reach women and girls with life-saving assistance, despite constraints imposed on them. Cash transfers were scaled up significantly and offered flexibility to address multiple needs, while also stimulating the

local economy. In 2022, some 396,200 persons, including survivors of the earthquake in Khost and Paktika provinces, were supported with cash assistance, core relief items and psychosocial support.

UNHCR and partners sought to build on development gains made in the 80 priority areas of return and reintegration, where access to services was improved for 3 million people. The Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, which draws on international, political and financial commitments, remained the main responsibility-sharing framework for the Afghan refugee situation. The Core Group of the Support Platform, chaired by the European Union, pledged to keep the needs of Afghans in Afghanistan and in the neighbouring countries in focus. UNHCR led the development of the inter-agency refugee response plan. Appealing for \$624 million, the plan aims to address the needs of the refugee population and enhance preparedness.

By the end of 2021, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan hosted 780,000 and 1.3 million registered Afghan refugees respectively, in addition to many more non-registered Afghans. The document renewal and information verification exercise led by the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR resulted in the issuance of over 700,000 biometric smart cards. The smart card serves as an essential protection tool for Afghan refugees, giving them faster and safer access to health care, education, and banking services. A recount programme conducted by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which included a headcount of new arrivals, was reported to have registered 2.2 million Afghans.

#### *Myanmar situation*

The Myanmar situation accounted for a total of 2.9 million persons of concern to UNHCR, including 1.7 million Rohingya in the Asia and Pacific region. Displacement within and from Myanmar continued, with the total number of internally displaced persons surpassing an estimated 1.3 million by September 2022. Since the military takeover in February 2021, an estimated 903,000 persons were internally displaced, while some 59,000 refugees had fled to India and Thailand. Most of the estimated 17,000 who crossed into Thailand have reportedly since returned to Myanmar. Although UNHCR has not been granted access to new arrivals in India and Thailand, community-based organizations have facilitated the provision of assistance.

UNHCR declared internal level-2 emergencies to respond to the needs in south-eastern and north-western Myanmar in 2021 and 2022. UNHCR continued to respond to protracted displacement, while scaling up its response to new displacement. Incremental access to parts of the country has enabled UNHCR and partners to deliver core relief items to 260,000 internally displaced persons. It has supported community-based protection activities to mitigate protection risks and negative coping strategies. In response to smaller returns in north-eastern Myanmar, UNHCR and partners supported community-led initiatives to build social cohesion. UNHCR continued to advocate to lift operational impediments that limited humanitarian access.

In Rakhine State, the outbreak of renewed conflict threatened to disturb the fragile communities caught between opposing sides. An estimated 600,000 Rohingya were subjected to discriminatory restrictions on movement, challenges in obtaining documentation and limited access to livelihoods and services. UNHCR continued to advocate principled and sustainable solutions for the internally displaced in Rakhine.

For Rohingya refugees, a comprehensive approach, which will expand solutions and sustain support in host countries, is being pursued. The focus remains on safeguarding the right to return and creating the conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable repatriation. More than 35,000 individuals in Rakhine State have benefited from community-led projects, supported by UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme. In countries hosting Rohingya refugees, efforts to enhance education and livelihood programmes continued, while opportunities for third country solutions were being expanded. UNHCR continued to engage with host countries, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other regional actors, and the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Myanmar, to find lasting solutions to the Rohingya crisis.

As solutions are pursued, parallel action is needed to build refugee resilience and discourage perilous onward movements. In Bangladesh, where 929,600 Rohingya are hosted, a joint response plan to address the Rohingya humanitarian crisis (January-December 2022) was launched, appealing for \$881 million. Ninety-one per cent of the eligible refugee population received their first COVID-19 vaccination. The enrolment of 10,000 students in the Myanmar curriculum was achieved under a pilot project in Cox's Bazar, and the Government of Bangladesh endorsed a framework for skills development and policy guidance on volunteer engagement, which will help build resilience.

Safe access to fuel, reforestation activities and support to health infrastructure contributed to mitigating the impact of the refugee presence on the host community. A long-term environmental strategy for the camps complemented these efforts. In a welcome initiative, the Asia Development Bank approved a \$41.4 million grant to improve infrastructure and manage the basic needs of refugees in Cox's Bazar. Following the signature in 2021 of a memorandum of understanding between the United Nations and the Government of Bangladesh, UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP have been able to support the national authorities and partners to address the humanitarian needs of refugees relocated to Bhasan Char. Movements to and from the island have been closely monitored, and protection has been enhanced through regular dialogue with the authorities.

## **B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2022 plan – by impact area**

### *Access to protection and asylum*

Despite concerted UNHCR advocacy, restrictions on movement and border closures, coupled with the lack of national asylum systems in most countries, have continued to limit the ability of individuals to seek asylum and access assistance, and have contributed to incidents of refoulement, arrest and detention. UNHCR advocated access to and the release from detention of those who may need international protection and urged States to implement alternatives to detention and adhere to the principle of non-refoulement.

Most refugees travelling by sea were denied disembarkation and access to asylum. In 2022, almost 1,600 persons (mostly Rohingya refugees and some Sri Lankans), many of whom were women and children, attempted to undertake onward movements by sea, with 65 having lost their lives or gone missing. UNHCR pressed for greater responsibility-sharing among States, improved protection space and the development of safe and legal pathways to protection for refugees.

In Sri Lanka, UNHCR advocated continued access to territory and asylum. Considering the political and economic crisis in the country, it also supported the humanitarian response for refugees and asylum-seekers who remained in the country and for some 300 returnees who returned since January 2021.

UNHCR supported efforts by countries in the region to develop and improve asylum systems in line with international standards. In Thailand, UNHCR assisted the Government to operationalize the national screening mechanism, while it signed a memorandum of understanding with Japan aimed at enhancing the national asylum system.

Registration and documentation were important protection tools employed by UNHCR to secure inclusion and solutions for those who gained access to territory. In 2022, several countries in the region lifted COVID-19 related restrictions, resulting in a significant improvement in access by refugees and asylum-seekers to registration. Registration doubled in the first quarter of 2022 compared to the same period in 2021. In Bangladesh, registration figures increased significantly as the registration of new births resumed, while in-person registration reopened in India for new asylum-seekers who were mainly from Afghanistan and Myanmar.

Most refugee, asylum-seeker, internally displaced, returnee and stateless children in the region continued to face barriers to access basic services and remained at heightened risk of human rights violations. UNHCR and partners worked to prevent harm and respond to the specific

needs of children. In Bangladesh and Indonesia, research into child marriage has informed capacity-building efforts, which will strengthen the way UNHCR works on prevention and case management through greater emphasis on social behavioural change in communities, and improved counseling and referral pathways.

Gender-based violence remained pervasive and a life-threatening risk in the region. UNHCR and partners delivered life-saving assistance to assist survivors of gender-based violence and implemented prevention programmes. Community members, in particular men and boys, were engaged in the prevention of intimate partner violence in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Thailand.

As gaps in basic needs persisted for many persons of concern, particularly for those living outside of camps, UNHCR scaled up multipurpose cash grants to further enhance protection.

#### *Expanding solutions for protracted situations*

UNHCR worked to address barriers to voluntary repatriation through integrated programming in areas of return. However, continuing instability in Afghanistan and Myanmar, from where 83 per cent of the region's refugees originate, has hindered large-scale voluntary return.

UNHCR sought to expand resettlement opportunities, particularly for populations in protracted situations. In 2022, the cases of nearly 20,000 refugees will have been submitted for resettlement consideration, up from some 4,800 in 2021. The number is expected to increase in subsequent years, as a result of reinvigorated State resettlement programmes. Efforts are also underway to find solutions for refugees who remain displaced following Australia's offshore transfer agreement with Nauru and Papua New Guinea. Throughout the region, UNHCR strengthened partnerships to help refugees access family reunification, education, labour mobility and sponsorship opportunities with new initiatives being developed in Japan, the Philippines, and the Republic of Korea.

As third-country solutions were possible for a relatively small fraction of refugees, UNHCR and partners continued to enhance protection, strengthen resilience, and advocate greater inclusion in national systems, until solutions can be realized. All countries in the region included refugees in their COVID-19 response plan and more than 5.25 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines were administered. UNHCR and development partners invested in health infrastructure in Bangladesh, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Nepal, and Pakistan, which led to increased access by refugees. Initiatives were also stepped up across the region to improve access to livelihoods. To address inclusion in the labour market, partnerships with national vocational training organizations were established in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. In Malaysia, the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement supported an assessment of labour market outcomes and prospects for refugees, aiming to inform policy reform. In Pakistan, a flagship household-level survey was developed, to generate data and better inform programme and policy design. Entrepreneurship programmes were enhanced and complemented in the region by micro grants and skills-building initiatives in Afghanistan and India, as well as on Bhasan Char Island in Bangladesh. In Nepal, UNHCR supported the recommendations of the Government towards refugee inclusion in national and local services, including healthcare and education, and the expansion of livelihood opportunities.

UNHCR strengthened collaboration with development actors, private sector partners, financial institutions, United Nations entities, non-governmental organizations, academia, governmental institutions, civil society and refugee-led organizations. Partnerships with global private companies yielded funding for livelihood initiatives, advocacy efforts, skills-building, and employment initiatives. The Asian Development Bank introduced a dedicated financing mechanism to address larger-scale cross-border displacement, following in-depth exchanges between the two institutions.

#### *Protection and solutions for internally displaced persons*

In Afghanistan and Myanmar, UNHCR responded to complex displacement involving new and secondary movements as well as to spontaneous returns. The emergency response of UNHCR

to internal displacement in both countries focused on strengthening cluster coordination in the field; building the capacity of national partners and community-led organizations; delivering protection and shelter assistance, where access was possible; and enhancing community-based protection.

Improved access and return movements in both countries created opportunities for UNHCR and partners to support solutions to internal displacement, in line with the commitments contained in the Action Agenda on Internal Displacement of the United Nations Secretary-General. In Afghanistan, the primary focus was on priority areas of return and reintegration. To harmonize data on internally displaced persons and internally displaced returnees, UNHCR worked with the International Organization for Migration to operationalize the International Recommendation on Internally Displaced Persons Statistics. Standardized, coordinated and common data collection and indicator development is an essential tool to advance an integrated, solutions-oriented approach. In Myanmar, some opportunities for solutions for internally displaced persons presented themselves in Kachin State, while in Rakhine State continued advocacy was undertaken to ensure conditions were in place for sustainable and voluntary return. In the Philippines, UNHCR continued to build the capacity of local and national authorities, to strengthen their responses to internal displacement. UNHCR promoted programming across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and a whole-of-society approach towards ensuring solutions from the onset of displacement.

#### *Eradication of statelessness*

The situation of the largest stateless groups in Asia and the Pacific, in particular the Rohingya, remained mostly unchanged. In 2022, UNHCR supported efforts to implement the pledges made by States at the 2019 high-level segment on statelessness at the seventieth session of the Executive Committee. Although, accession rates in the region remained steady, the Philippines acceded to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Advancements in legal frameworks for statelessness determination procedures made by Kazakhstan and the Philippines in 2022 opened the opportunity to eradicate statelessness in the two countries. While Uzbekistan managed to resolve statelessness for half of those affected, the Islamic Republic of Iran, with the reform of its 2019 law, established a mother's right to confer nationality to her children. Japan committed to resolve the legal status of a group of 300 children and make possible their eligibility to obtain Japanese nationality. The significant increase in statelessness in Thailand was a reflection of a better functioning of the identification and registration system. Partnership with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women resulted in a regional roundtable on gender and nationality, laying the foundation for advocacy on gender equality in nationality matters in Malaysia and Nepal.

Member States of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific adopted a ministerial declaration renewing their commitment to universal civil registration in November 2021. Several ASEAN countries continued to strengthen the capacity of local authorities in charge of civil registration as a follow-up to the "Report on legal identity for all women and children in ASEAN" submitted by the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children in 2020. Pakistan, Thailand, and Viet Nam addressed inequalities in civil registration using the Bali Process Civil Registration Assessment Toolkit. In Central Asia, a joint project supported national statistical offices in the collection of data on statelessness through national population censuses.

In April 2022, UNHCR held regional consultations on statelessness with civil society organizations, ensuring significant participation of stateless persons and building a multistakeholder alliance. This civil society network has grown significantly, and a regional statelessness hub has been established.

### **C. Financial information**

The Executive Committee initially approved a budget for Asia and the Pacific of \$848.1 million for 2022, which was later increased to \$1,081.6 million due to additional emergency

preparedness and response activities in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. The refugee programme constituted 64 per cent of the funding requirements for the region. By 2023, all UNHCR operations in the region will have transitioned to multi-year planning. As of mid-September 2022, the budget was 57 per cent funded, considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.

---