



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

Country: Myanmar

Planning Year: 2004

2004 COUNTRY OPERATION PLAN: MYANMAR

Executive Committee Summary

Context and Beneficiary Population (s):

Returnees from Bangladesh

As of September 2003, over 235,000 refugees have returned to Northern Rakhine State in Myanmar with UNHCR assistance. Some 19,000 refugees remain in camps in Bangladesh. Following the establishment of a UNHCR Plan of Action for solutions, an agreement was reached with the Myanmar authorities on accelerated procedures to allow for the voluntary return of the remaining refugees willing to return. As a result, over 2,732 persons have returned between January and September 2003. This represents the highest number of returns since 1997. More refugees are expected to volunteer for return in the following months. It is anticipated that some 15,000 refugees may choose to remain in Bangladesh.

The 235,000 returnees constitute almost one-third of the Muslim population of Northern Rakhine State and are also linked to the local population through marriage and kinship. This Muslim population is ethnically distinct from the Rakhine population and is not officially considered as a minority group eligible for Myanmar citizenship. A number of public policy practices affect their reintegration, such as compulsory labour and compulsory contributions or restrictions on their freedom of movement.

The major operational emphasis in Northern Rakhine State in 2004 will be on reinforced monitoring of vulnerable returnees. Building on the results achieved thus far, indicators have been set in each area of UNHCR concern. Progress will be measured through the systematic collection of data, their verification and the analysis of trends, which will provide a basis for a continued dialogue with the authorities.

UNHCR will also continue to cooperate with the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary General, the Special Rapporteur on Myanmar of the UN Human Rights Commission and the International Labour Organisation.

In 2003, UNHCR facilitated a visit to Northern Rakhine State by the ILO Office in Myanmar. This visit was followed by meetings with the National Implementation Committee of Order 1/99 against the use of compulsory labour. The ILO and the committee held discussions with all village leaders and other local authorities in Buthidaung town to further disseminate information and advocate for the eradication of such practices in the area.

The activities of UNHCR in Northern Rakhine State and the results achieved were also outlined by the Special Rapporteur to the 59th session of the Human Rights Commission in Geneva in March 2003 and noted in the Special Rapporteur report on the situation of human rights in Myanmar published in August 2003.

New capacity building initiatives launched in 2003 such as workshops on Human Rights and Refugee Law for Government officials will be pursued and expanded. Such

workshops, covering a wide range of subjects, e.g. refugee protection and durable solutions, statelessness, special needs of women and children, human trafficking issues, protection of civilians in armed conflicts, etc. will contribute to enhance awareness among middle and senior ranking officials from the recently created National Human Rights Committee of Myanmar and various Government departments.

The coping ability of vulnerable returnees and groups in the host Muslim population is seriously affected by their overall situation. Northern Rakhine State is a remote border region, geographically isolated from the rest of the country by mountains in the East, the border with Bangladesh in the northwest and the Bay of Bengal in the south. The three townships comprising the area, Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung, are densely populated with 160 persons per sq. km., against a Myanmar national average of 74 persons per sq. km. The isolation of the area, the absence of basic infrastructure, adverse weather conditions, a high population density and the scarcity of arable land have very seriously affected livelihood. A pre-dominantly agricultural economy, Northern Rakhine State nevertheless suffers from a food deficit, estimated at 20,000 to 40,000 Mt annually.

The very precarious existence of the Muslim population, including returnees, is apparent from a broad range of indicators. 90 per cent of returnees are landless with few skills and survive through seasonal labour work. The Muslim population as a whole has a literacy rate of only 16 to 27 per cent. They speak a dialect of Bengali of which there is no written form. Few are literate in the Myanmar language. Communication between the Muslim population and the authorities is therefore very limited. Recent nutritional assessments reveal that 63.6 per cent of children under the age of five suffer from chronic malnutrition, and 16.4 per cent from global acute malnutrition. A lack of sufficient health care has led to an infant mortality rate which is four times the Myanmar national average.

UNHCR's assistance programme will be directed at increasing the capacity of the most vulnerable returnees and groups in the host community to handle their situation and facilitate sustainable reintegration. Ongoing needs assessment surveys show that some 80,000 persons are vulnerable individuals, and some 35,000 of them are extremely vulnerable individuals. Assistance interventions will therefore continue to focus on this segment of the population, being the most prone to renewed displacement. The challenge for UNHCR will be to ensure that the largest possible number of vulnerable individuals gain a level of control over their lives within the year, thereby reinforcing their integration.

UNHCR will focus on targeted community-based assistance activities leading to self-reliance and empowerment. Myanmar language training will be provided to selected adult beneficiaries to enable them to understand official communications and deal with procedures relating to travel permissions and the registration of births, marriages, etc. Skills training will be given to vulnerable groups to provide for a supplementary source of income. Community savings and loans associations will be strengthened to promote self-help. Health education will constitute another essential self-help tool. Knowledge of basic hygiene and health principles, emphasizing mother and childcare and birth spacing education will enable women to gain greater control over reproductive issues. Assistance interventions will be aimed at increasing communication and interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim communities as an essential means towards sustainable returnee reintegration.

These community-based activities will provide a critical framework for UNHCR's daily inter-action with vulnerable groups and monitoring activities. Identified issues will be discussed with the beneficiaries and the local authorities. Close interaction will also be maintained with all humanitarian agencies working in Northern Rakhine State to strengthen synergy between programmes and avoid duplication or gaps.

UNHCR will maintain implementing arrangements with two national NGOs, the Myanmar Red Cross Society and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association. The Department of Immigration and National Registration will carry out the registration of the population and will provide logistic support for the operation. The Japanese NGO, Bridge Asia Japan (BAJ), will assist in the maintenance of equipment, vehicles and boats. The Philipino NGO, Community and Family Services International (CFSI) and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) will second one international expert each for literacy training and income generation activities respectively to the UNHCR operation. Other previously funded partners will continue their activities in 2004 through independent funding identified with UNHCR's assistance. Efforts will also be pursued to facilitate the involvement of new agencies in returnee assistance and promote their direct funding support to ensure that progress made in past years is sustained.

Myanmar refugees in Thailand

Further efforts will be pursued for UNHCR to gain access to areas of origin of the 110,000 refugees in camps in Thailand. A proposal for needs assessment and limited assistance to former returnees to Mon State submitted to the authorities could lead to the initiation of targeted interventions on the Eastern border.

Potential returnee areas cover four states and one administrative division of Myanmar. Depending on progress in discussions between the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and fighting factions in those areas, a cease-fire could be reached paving the way for the organised voluntary return of refugees. The Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Commission in an address to the Commission strongly called for access for UNHCR to the Eastern border of Myanmar to pave the way for repatriation of refugees in safety and dignity. He also emphasized that UNHCR could play a crucial role in the peace and reconciliation building process.

Selected Programme Goals and Objectives:

Caseload #1

Number of Beneficiary Population: 80,000 particularly vulnerable returnees in Myanmar and related groups in the host community.	
Main Goal(s): Promoting the sustainable reintegration of vulnerable returnees to prevent renewed flight.	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building on progress achieved on protection issues to reach a situation by end 2004 in which the most vulnerable can deal with their environment in a dignified manner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The incidence and impact of public policy practices such as compulsory labour is considerably reduced by end 2004. The most vulnerable segments of the population achieve basic self-reliance and no mass displacement occurs.

Caseload # 2

Name of Beneficiary Population: Myanmar returnees from Thailand	
Main Goal(s): Monitor the voluntary repatriation, protection and reintegration of returnees from Thailand as required.	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Secure access and establish limited assistance activities in returnee areas of the Eastern border of Myanmar.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Access, protection monitoring and limited assistance to returnees in Mon State and/or in Kayin and Kayah (Karen and Karenni) States is permitted by Government of Myanmar.

Theme # 1

Theme: Human Rights Committee of Myanmar and senior Government officials.	
Main Goal(s): Raise the awareness of Government circles on refugee and humanitarian law and build the capacity of the Human Rights Committee of Myanmar.	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Establish a promotion of refugee law programme in Myanmar.	Refugee and humanitarian law seminars organised for government officials at central and local levels. Regular cooperation established with the Human Rights Committee of Myanmar and the Law Faculty in Yangon.