



South Asia

Recent developments

UNHCR welcomed recent statements by the Governments of Nepal and Bhutan that they would pursue solutions for camp populations in Nepal (after a delay of some ten months). Nearly four years have now passed since the commencement of a joint verification exercise in just one of the seven camps in eastern Nepal, and, at the time of writing, not one refugee has found a durable solution. The population of the remaining six camps is yet to be verified. It is hoped that further talks between the two Governments will soon result in the implementation of durable solutions for this protracted situation. Meanwhile, UNHCR continued to advocate a comprehensive approach for durable solutions involving burden sharing by all stakeholders. More recently, the deteriorating security situation has heightened a sense of the urgent need to resolve this refugee situation. The Office's proposed approach has yet to be endorsed by both the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal.

Bangladesh

India

Nepal

Sri Lanka



UNHCR has presented a proposal to the Government of Bangladesh for a self-reliance programme for the Myanmar refugees pending their return. Currently, some 20,000 refugees remain in two camps in the country. UNHCR maintains its programme for the facilitation of voluntary repatriation, although the numbers of those returning are small.

In Sri Lanka, the peace process is at a difficult juncture. Despite relatively calm elections in April 2004, an upsurge in levels of violence in the east remains a serious concern, adversely impacting current efforts to restart the peace talks. The Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have yet to agree on an agenda for future peace talks. The current security situation has given rise to serious protection concerns, including many allegations of military recruitment, abduction and hostage-taking by the LTTE. Nevertheless, by July 2004, over 371,000 IDPs and 12,500 refugees had spontaneously returned to their homes from India since the February 2002 ceasefire agreement.

Strategic objectives

UNHCR's priority remains the active promotion of lasting solutions for refugees and persons of concern in the region. The Office will continue to explore the resolution of protracted refugee situations, and meanwhile to pursue possible self-reliance activities for refugees pending the identification of durable solutions. Lengthy dependence on external assistance for more than a decade leaves refugees in an untenable situation. The self-reliance activities can alleviate this state of "limbo" somewhat, by helping refugees to develop their skills, equipping them to contribute to society whatever the solution: voluntary repatriation, resettlement or local integration.

Meeting the needs of refugee women and children remains a central objective for all country programmes. India was a pilot country in 2004 for the gender and age mainstreaming exercise, and the initiative is to be extended to the rest of the region in 2005. Prevention of SGBV is a primary goal in the region.

Operations

UNHCR's operations in **Nepal** and **Sri Lanka** are covered in separate country chapters.

UNHCR has provided humanitarian assistance to refugees in **Bangladesh** since 1992 to meet their basic needs and facilitate voluntary repatriation to Myanmar. Ninety-five per cent of the 250,000 refugees who initially sought asylum in Bangladesh have so far repatriated. Among the current remaining population of 20,000, a certain number prefer to postpone their return pending improvement of the situation in Myanmar. Recognizing that the continuation of assistance activities is no longer a viable option for this group, UNHCR has proposed a self-reliance programme aimed at helping the refugees to acquire education and skills appropriate to their return. The Office is discussing with the Government of Bangladesh the construction of improved shelters for the refugees, and in 2005 will look into further practical measures to improve their well-being.

In **India**, UNHCR focuses on providing protection and assistance to some 11,500 urban refugees, most of them from Afghanistan. The Office will continue to pursue durable solutions for these persons, focusing on voluntary repatriation and resettlement. In addition, Afghan refugees of Indian origin, who entered legally and have stayed in India for more than ten years, qualify for naturalization. Although 2,724 persons are in this

category, only one fifth of them have actually applied to be naturalized. A major hindrance is a lack of enabling procedures within the Delhi State Government, and consequent backlogs. While seeking durable solutions for the refugees, the Office continues to promote self-reliance activities designed to strengthen their coping mechanisms and thereby reduce their dependence on UNHCR's assistance. Individual and family subsistence allowances are being gradually and progressively phased out, while vocational training has been offered to prepare refugees to seek employment.

A total of 1,180 refugees were assisted to return to Sri Lanka by air during the first seven months in 2004, bringing the cumulative figure since 2002 to 2,345 persons. UNHCR verifies the voluntariness of return. In addition, the Office provides refugees with counselling and essential information on the various procedures to be followed.

| Budget (USD) | |
|--------------|-------------------|
| Country | Annual Programme |
| Bangladesh | 3,343,316 |
| India | 3,758,837 |
| Nepal | 6,398,200 |
| Sri Lanka | 8,870,031 |
| Total | 22,370,385 |



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Nepal: Bhutanese refugees in Jhapa District. *UNHCR / A. Hollmann*