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Overview of UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific**A. Situational context**

As of February 2016, the Asia and Pacific region was home to over 8.5 million persons of concern to UNHCR, including some 3.9 million refugees, 2.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and an estimated 1.5 million stateless individuals. The countries and territories in Asia and the Pacific continued to uphold their longstanding tradition of hospitality to displaced people. However, only 20 of the 45 countries and territories in the region had acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

The majority of the refugee population in the region originated from Afghanistan and Myanmar. Afghanistan remained the second largest refugee-producing country in the world in 2015. Afghans were the largest protracted refugee population of concern to UNHCR, with 2.6 million Afghan refugees as at February 2016. While Afghan refugees were present in some 70 countries, 95 per cent of them were hosted by the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. These countries have generously hosted Afghan refugees for over three decades.

Positive political developments in Afghanistan in early 2015 generated hope for increased stability and opportunities to find solutions for displaced persons. The National Unity Government’s commitment to including returnees and IDPs in the “national priority programmes” and the establishment of a ministerial-level High Commission on Migration were particularly welcome developments. Numerous tripartite and quadripartite meetings were held between the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, together with UNHCR, each yielding positive results and an unprecedented level of commitment to finding solutions for Afghan refugees.

Unfortunately, however, the deteriorating security situation and increased levels of violence during the latter part of 2015 resulted in large-scale internal displacement. Meanwhile, some 190,000 Afghans sought asylum in other parts of the world, mainly Europe. After Syrians, Afghan nationals made up the second largest group of asylum-seekers in industrialized countries worldwide in 2015, and approximately one fourth of them were unaccompanied or separated children. Despite these challenges, UNHCR continued to work with Afghanistan’s National Unity Government, humanitarian and development partners, civil society and other actors to facilitate the reintegration of returning refugees and to assist IDPs. The Office also advocated support from the international community for the Governments of the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan and the continued protection of Afghan refugees on their territories until lasting solutions were found.

In Myanmar, the recent elections were a major milestone in the country’s history, leading to renewed hope for stability following the establishment of a democratic government in 2016. The National League for Democracy party has made nationwide peace talks the first priority of the new government and has committed to efforts to ensure that all ethnic groups sign the proposed ceasefire agreement.

It is hoped that the newly-elected government in Myanmar will also cooperate with countries in the region to address the root causes leading large numbers of people to risk their lives on dangerous boat journeys through South-East Asia. Some 33,600 refugees and migrants took part in such movements in 2015, resulting in an estimated 370 deaths, mostly from starvation, dehydration, disease and abuse, including by people smugglers. Although departures in the first half of 2015 were 34 per cent higher than in the first half of 2014, the total number of departures from the Bay of Bengal over 2015 as a whole was 49 per cent lower than in 2014. This was the result of a sharp decline in the second half of the year: some 1,600 people were estimated to have left from the Bangladesh-Myanmar maritime border between July and December 2015. More than 40,000 people embarked on this journey during the same period in 2014. The decline has been attributed to heightened scrutiny of maritime movements following a serious incident at sea in the subregion in May 2015 (see below).

More than two thirds of the refugee population in countries in the Asia and the Pacific was hosted in urban and semi-urban areas, a distinct feature in the region. UNHCR, together with partners, continued to work with States and other actors to strengthen the protection of those living outside camps. The Office is focusing its interventions on four priority objectives: undertaking community outreach, strengthening relations with urban refugees, ensuring access to essential services such as healthcare and education, and promoting livelihoods and self-reliance.

In Central Asia, UNHCR continued to support governments in ensuring that national status determination systems were consistent with international refugee law, as well as in the development of protection-sensitive entry systems, including through capacity-building for stakeholders.

B. Achieving the global strategic priorities

Safeguarding access to protection and asylum

In 2016, UNHCR will continue to work with States in the region to improve protection standards, including in the context of mixed movements. While advocating and supporting the establishment of asylum procedures by States, the Office will also promote protection-sensitive migration management systems throughout the region. Detention and other restrictive treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees continue to be of concern to the Office.

Priorities for UNHCR therefore include identifying alternatives to detention of asylum-seekers; alternatives to individual status determination; and mechanisms to provide protection to persons of concern in the region beyond third-country resettlement, including bilateral labour migration agreements.

In a welcome move, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran included refugees in its universal public health insurance scheme. The authorities have also allowed Afghan children of school age to access formal education, regardless of documentation status. In Pakistan, refugees' proof of registration cards are valid until June 2016, and UNHCR is working with the Government of Pakistan on a further extension.

After some 5,000 refugees and migrants were abandoned in the Andaman Sea by smugglers in May 2015, a series of regional meetings took place to address States' concerns with respect to unsafe mixed movements by sea. Affected countries met in Putrajaya and in Bangkok in May 2015, in Kuala Lumpur in July 2015, in Jakarta in 28 November 2015, and again in Bangkok in December 2015. Common priorities emerging from this series of meetings included saving lives, combating people smuggling and trafficking, expanding legal pathways for migration, and addressing the root causes of such movements.

UNHCR continued to work closely with governments in the South-East Asia subregion to respond to unsafe mixed movements by sea, in close coordination with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). In 2016, UNHCR will contribute to ongoing consultations on this issue, including in the context of the Bali process on people smuggling, trafficking in persons and related transnational crime, as well as other regional platforms. The upcoming Bali process ministerial meeting in March 2016, as well as a Senior Officials' Meeting of the Ad Hoc Group in February 2016, will provide opportunities to advocate a coordinated, protection-sensitive response.

Seeking durable solutions for protracted refugee situations

In 2016, the search for solutions for different populations of concern to UNHCR will remain a priority in the region. However, in the face of the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, the identification of durable solutions for Afghan refugees will continue to be challenging.

Nonetheless, the renewed commitment expressed by the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan to work towards durable solutions, especially voluntary repatriation, made at the high-level segment of the sixty-sixth session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme in October 2015, provided an important platform on which to build. The three countries reiterated the importance of the "Solutions strategy for Afghan refugees to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance for host countries" as a regional, multi-year framework for solutions. The high-level segment also confirmed the need for the international community to strengthen its efforts and advocacy to remove the fundamental causes of protracted displacement in Afghanistan. In 2015, UNHCR facilitated the return of more than 58,000 Afghan refugees from neighbouring countries, while continuing to support host countries and communities.

It is anticipated that the political developments in Myanmar, referred to above, will have a significant impact on the lives of large numbers of refugees from the country, in the region and beyond, as well as on UNHCR's operations in 2016. UNHCR and its partners will continue preparations for the voluntary return of refugees from Myanmar in the camps in Thailand and other neighbouring countries.

A major milestone was reached in 2015, with the resettlement of over 100,000 refugees from Bhutan out of camps in Nepal to third countries, facilitated by UNHCR together with IOM. As at February 2016, approximately 17,000 refugees from Bhutan remained in the camps. In 2016, UNHCR will seek comprehensive and lasting solutions for this population, including solutions going beyond resettlement.

UNHCR will continue to work together with concerned governments to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees, notably from India. While some positive developments in Sri Lanka have facilitated the process of the reintegration of returnees, there continued to be challenges, including ensuring access to livelihood opportunities, land and documentation. The Office, together with the Sri Lankan Government and other partners, will further efforts to enhance reintegration prospects for returnees in 2016.

Some 230,000 persons who were displaced from North Waziristan in Pakistan in 2014 remained in Khost Province of Afghanistan. UNHCR and its partners will continue to work closely with the relevant authorities to support this population and seek durable solutions.

For the large numbers of refugees living in urban and semi-urban areas in the Asia and Pacific region, UNHCR will continue to adopt a pragmatic approach to solutions. This will include emphasizing the self-reliance and empowerment of refugee communities, pending a durable solution; advocating with States, regional entities and other partners; and seeking to ensure the inclusion of refugees in existing services run by national authorities or other United Nations entities.

Ensuring protection and durable solutions for internally displaced persons

The promising political developments in Myanmar may be significant for the some 380,000 people who remained internally displaced in different parts of the country. Many of these IDPs were forced to flee violence in Rakhine state in 2012, but they also included some 100,000 people who were displaced in Kachin and northern Shan states following the resumption of violence there in 2011. UNHCR is leading the combined cluster for shelter, camp coordination and camp management, and non-food items, and coordinating the protection sector. The Office will also continue efforts to find durable solutions as part of the inter-agency response.

In Pakistan, over 700,000 former IDPs have returned home since March 2015, when the Government of Pakistan began large-scale return operations to Khyber Agency, South Waziristan and North Waziristan. UNHCR will continue to support the Government of Pakistan through the provision of tents and basic household items to the returning IDPs. Some 1 million people were still internally displaced as of February 2016. It is foreseen that most of the remaining IDPs will have access to a durable solution by the end of 2016.

The deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan led to the internal displacement of over 200,000 Afghans in 2015, a 40 per cent increase compared to 2014. This added to the existing internally displaced population of 1 million persons, present in 31 out of 34 provinces. UNHCR will continue to work with the Afghan Government on the implementation of the national IDP policy.

Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless people

Addressing statelessness is a key strategic priority, with over 1.5 million people falling within UNHCR's statelessness mandate in the Asia and Pacific region. Guidance was issued to country operations to implement UNHCR's "Global action plan to end statelessness", with a view to identifying priorities and supporting planning.

In 2015, solutions to protracted statelessness situations have continued to progress in South-East Asia. In December 2015, new figures released by the Government of Thailand showed that over 18,000 stateless persons had acquired Thai nationality since the beginning of 2012. In the southern Philippines, more than 7,000 persons of Indonesian descent were registered and provided with legal assistance in a joint project undertaken by the Governments of Indonesia and the Philippines, together with UNHCR. Over 600 people have been found eligible to have either their Indonesian or Filipino nationality confirmed. In Malaysia, a UNHCR partner community organization has registered over 11,000 stateless persons of Tamil origin since mid-2014. Over 5,600 applications for nationality have been made with the assistance of community-based paralegals, and some 450 applicants have acquired Malaysian nationality.

In 2016, UNHCR will continue to promote the inclusion of births, marriages and deaths for all populations of concern in Asia in national civil registration systems. Since May 2015, UNHCR has been a member of the inter-governmental regional steering group, which supports States in implementing their commitments under the 2014 ministerial declaration and "Regional action framework on civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific".¹ These instruments were adopted by States at a ministerial conference in Bangkok in November 2014.

UNHCR will also continue to facilitate the exchange of established and emerging regional good practices in relation to nationality and birth registration. A regional workshop for Member States of the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) on the right to a

¹ Available from:
http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Asian_and_Pacific_Civil_Registration_and_Vital_Statistics_Decade2015-2024_Booklet.pdf.

nationality was held by the Government of Viet Nam in early 2016, in the context of the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children. UNHCR and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have also provided workshops on nationality and birth registration for the authorities in Myanmar.

In Central Asia, statelessness remains an area of focus for UNHCR. Since 2014, projects funded by UNHCR’s “Seeds for Solutions” programme have been implemented in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. They have focused on identifying, registering and providing legal assistance to stateless persons or those at risk of statelessness; facilitating the acquisition of identity documentation; encouraging the waiver of administrative fees and documentation required for naturalization; supporting amendments to nationality legislation; undertaking awareness-raising and capacity-building for government counterparts; and advocating accession to the statelessness conventions.

The subregion has made remarkable progress towards resolving existing cases of statelessness, as well as in preventing new ones. In 2015, some 7,820 individuals obtained citizenship or had their nationality confirmed, and received identity documents. In Turkmenistan, important strides were made towards resolving statelessness through government naturalization programmes. Draft amendments to the Law on Citizenship were under review by the Parliament in Kyrgyzstan, while the Law on Citizenship in Tajikistan was amended and signed. The Government of Tajikistan formed an inter-ministerial working group on statelessness and developed a multi-year national action plan for the profiling and registration of, and provision of solutions for, stateless persons and those at risk of becoming stateless by no later than 2018.

In 2016, UNHCR will continue to work with governments in the subregion to prevent statelessness through the insertion of safeguards in legislation, as well as to promote government-led national action. Resolving a majority of the existing cases of undetermined nationality and statelessness are among the targets UNHCR hopes to achieve by 2020.

C. Financial information

UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific were hampered by financial and human resources constraints. Emergencies in other parts of the world resulted in budget and staffing cuts, which have forced the Office to greatly scale back operations. The 2016 comprehensive needs assessment budget for Asia and the Pacific, approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme at its sixty-sixth session, was US\$ 534 million. The financial requirements for South-West Asia, comprising operations in the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, represent some 63 per cent of the total budget for the region. The remaining 27 per cent of the budget is shared among 18 small and medium-sized operations. A shortfall of funding for the Afghan situation combined with deteriorating security conditions and restricted access may impact solutions in this critical year, and could affect the delivery of key protection activities throughout the region.