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**Update on UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific****A. Situational context**

By mid-2019, there were over 9.2 million persons of concern to UNHCR in the Asia-Pacific region, including 4.2 million refugees, 2.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 275,000 asylum-seekers and returnees. There were also some 2.1 million stateless persons, many of whom were also refugees or IDPs. In 2019, a lack of progress in resolving the root causes of displacement meant a continued scarcity of durable solutions. At the same time, UNHCR, in collaboration with governments and other partners, made progress in securing the inclusion of the displaced. With several ongoing refugee and IDP emergencies and half of the world’s identified stateless population located in the region, UNHCR will build on the Global Compact on Refugees to broaden the base of support for refugees and host communities and enable durable solutions.

UNHCR recognizes the resilience of Afghan refugees, who after 40 years of displacement constitute the world’s second largest refugee population in 2020.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 2.4 million Afghans are registered and hosted by the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. Together with these two countries and Afghanistan, UNHCR launched the support platform for the “Solutions strategy for Afghan refugees to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance to host countries” (SSAR) at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019. The aim of the platform is to strengthen international solidarity and responsibility sharing for the Afghan refugee situation through expanded partnerships and additional investments for coherent humanitarian and development responses. It prioritizes support to enable solutions in Afghanistan, while also easing the burden on host communities in the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan.

In 2020, it will also have been two and a half years since over 700,000 Rohingya refugees from Rakhine State in Myanmar fled to Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh. In 2019, UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh completed the biometric registration of the refugees, including those who arrived during previous waves of displacement. A total of 855,000 stateless Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are now in possession of identity documents, many for the first time in their lives. UNHCR continues to respond to the needs of the Rohingya on both sides of the border, supporting the refugees in Cox’s Bazar, as well as the communities who remain stateless in Rakhine State. The organization is also helping Rohingya refugees elsewhere in Asia, particularly India and Malaysia, where some 120,000 people have sought protection.

The Bangladesh situation remains a level-2 emergency for UNHCR. Through the 2019 “Joint response plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis”, which was 69 per cent funded, UNHCR and its partners supported the Government of Bangladesh to strengthen the protection environment, provide life-saving assistance and enhance public services, including in the areas of education, environmental rehabilitation, energy and social safety nets. By mid-2019, all refugees had gained access to safe water and were receiving food assistance. In addition, over

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<sup>1</sup> The Government of Pakistan hosted an international conference marking 40 years of hosting Afghan refugees in February 2020, which recognized the resilience of refugees and called on the international community to help find solutions for the protracted displacement situation.

30,000 children under the age of five received treatment for malnutrition, and 65,000 emergency kits were pre-positioned for the monsoon and cyclone seasons.

The 2020 joint response plan includes activities to provide refugees with vital services and skills development, so that they are better equipped to sustainably reintegrate and rebuild their communities when they are able to go home. Following a January 2020 decision by the Government of Bangladesh to allow the Myanmar school curriculum to be taught to refugees, UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other partners aim to enrol 10,000 refugee children in a pilot programme by the end of 2020. UNHCR continues to advocate for the expansion of formal education for Rohingya children in both Bangladesh and Myanmar.

In August 2019, a repatriation movement planned by the Governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar did not materialize, as no refugees indicated a willingness to return. That same month, a large, peaceful demonstration by refugees to mark two years since their arrival prompted tightened restrictions on refugees, including construction of fencing around much of the refugee settlement. UNHCR continues to work with the Government of Bangladesh to address security concerns, including through community policing and other community-based protection initiatives.

Throughout 2019, UNHCR liaised closely with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on their projects in Cox's Bazar, which totalled \$240 million and \$100 million, respectively. This financing funded infrastructure, health, education, resilience and disaster preparedness projects, benefiting both refugees and host communities. In 2020, the World Bank (under the International Development Association sub-window for refugees and host communities (IDA 18)) and the ADB have planned further support of \$350 million and \$100 million, respectively.

In Myanmar, UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) continue to work with the Government to improve conditions for the communities that remain in Rakhine State. Access is sporadic and limited to 10 per cent of the villages affected by the intensified armed conflict. Under the tripartite memorandum of understanding, UNHCR and UNDP conducted multi-sectoral needs assessments that covered 102 villages in the northern townships of Rakhine State and implemented 45 quick impact projects as of January 2020. Authorization has been requested to assess the needs in 75 additional villages, and 42 additional quick impact projects have been proposed.

Addressing the root causes of violence, discrimination and displacement in Myanmar remains a priority. UNHCR is advocating the full and effective implementation of the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, including freedom of movement and a clear pathway to citizenship. Dialogue with refugees on this process is encouraged, as are confidence-building measures that would demonstrate Myanmar's commitment to lasting, peaceful solutions for the Rohingya and all communities in Rakhine State.

In November 2019, UNHCR welcomed the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The declaration acknowledged the need to enhance the identification and protection of child refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs and to register all births. Through the ASEAN Commission on the promotion and protection of the rights of women and children, UNHCR continued to support member States in the sharing of good practices and research on birth registration, legal identity and the right to nationality. In 2020, the Office will also provide protection training to ASEAN's emergency response and assessment team.

During the GRF, over 50 pledges were made by 17 States in the region – in areas ranging from asylum capacity and access to education, to the inclusion of refugees, IDPs and affected communities in development planning, data collection and documentation. These were accompanied by wide-ranging pledges from civil society and the private sector. Supporting States in implementing their pledges, as well as helping match the support pledged by States and other partners to the needs of refugees and host communities, will be a priority for UNHCR.

## B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

### *Safeguarding access to protection and asylum*

While only 20 of the 45 countries and territories in the region have acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the long-standing tradition of hospitality towards refugees remains strong. As reflected in the pledges made at the GRF, the inclusion of refugees in national systems progressed in 2019, with several governments pursuing policy shifts that will improve refugees' access to basic rights.

The Islamic Republic of Iran remained committed to ensuring that all refugee children have access to education, regardless of status or documentation. This enabled more than 480,000 Afghan and Iraqi children to enrol in primary and secondary public schools in 2019. The commitment to education has proved transformational, as it was reported by the Government that the literacy rate of Afghan refugees in the country has increased from 6 to 65 per cent during the 40 years of exile. In 2019, some 60,000 new places were created for Afghan students, and UNHCR and the Government funded the construction of a dozen school buildings for both refugees and Iranian children. In line with the key principles of the Global Compact on Refugees, the Islamic Republic of Iran has facilitated refugees' access to existing national health systems, with primary health care available at no cost. All refugees are able to enrol in the national health insurance system, and UNHCR will cover health insurance premiums for up to 92,000 vulnerable refugees in 2020. The process of renewing Afghan refugee cards, referred to as Amayesh XIV, concluded in November 2019. In the context of the SSAR support platform, priorities include the creation of 15,000 additional classrooms; support for vocational training, free primary health care and subsidized secondary and tertiary care; and access to financial services, including loans, to strengthen refugee entrepreneurship.

The Malaysian Government is finalizing plans to grant refugees the right to work in certain sectors. In Indonesia, refugee children can now enrol in public schools. In December 2019, Thailand enacted a regulation establishing a screening mechanism to identify persons in need of international protection. UNHCR supported Thailand in adopting alternatives to immigration detention, enabling the release of refugee children and their mothers.

UNHCR continued to undertake refugee status determination (RSD) in countries without national asylum systems and to support countries seeking to develop them. The Republic of Korea strengthened its RSD capacity by significantly increasing the number of staff working in this area and, at the GRF, pledged to establish an appellate division.

In Central Asia, UNHCR supported the Almaty Process to address complex population movements, in collaboration with other organizations, border officials and asylum authorities. UNHCR provided technical support on mixed movements in the context of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime. In collaboration with the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process, the Office will train border officials on the identification of persons with specific needs.

In Pakistan, the refugee-affected and hosting areas (RAHA) programme remains the cornerstone of national implementation of the regional SSAR. Since the inception of the SSAR in 2012, some 4,260 RAHA projects have benefited over 12 million refugees and community members. As the principal responsibility-sharing platform to ensure protection space, mitigate the impact of the protracted refugee presence and support refugees and host communities, RAHA prioritizes the sectors of education, health, livelihoods, water and community infrastructure. The SSAR support platform will pursue a broad and consistent base of support for RAHA from a range of stakeholders, including from the private sector and civil society.

In Bangladesh, the recent completion of the joint registration exercise by UNHCR and the Government has not only secured the identity of refugees and provided them with documentation, but also facilitated better coordination and the prioritization of assistance. The data compiled has been entered in UNHCR's registration and case management database, which enables secure data-sharing with partners.

Prevention, risk mitigation and response to sexual and gender-based violence remains a priority. Operations in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have developed operational action

plans for mitigating risks of sexual and gender-based violence. In Bangladesh, India and Malaysia, UNHCR trained refugees on preventing and reporting sexual exploitation and abuse, and Bangladesh and Myanmar developed inter-agency standard operating procedures on this issue.

With more than two thirds of refugees in the region living in urban and semi-urban areas, community engagement and communication is critical to informing the response and ensuring accountability to affected populations. In Malaysia, UNHCR developed a community-based protection assessment tool to ensure that the population is at the centre of interventions. Outreach volunteer programmes in Bangladesh, Malaysia and Pakistan have enhanced community mobilization and the identification and referral of individuals at risk.

In late 2019, approximately 200 people from West Papua, Indonesia fled violent unrest and security operations to remote areas in Papua New Guinea. UNHCR provided emergency assistance to the asylum-seekers through a local faith-based partner and will support the capacity of the Government to register and provide protection to the refugee population in Papua New Guinea.

#### *Seeking durable solutions for protracted refugee situations*

Due to protracted conflict and insecurity in countries of origin, a drop in resettlement spaces, and few opportunities for formal local integration, the achievement of durable solutions remained challenging in 2019. Despite resettlement needs of over 100,000 individuals, space was provided for only 5,500 refugees, and fewer than 7,000 individuals departed. Restrictions on certain ethnicities and nationalities further limited resettlement opportunities for some with the greatest needs. Meanwhile, some 4,440 refugees found a solution through resettlement in the region in Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand.

UNHCR estimates that some 2,500 persons of concern were able to access complementary pathways in 2019, primarily in Australia and Canada, through humanitarian admission and private sponsorship programmes. The Office continued to work with governments and partners to expand opportunities for both resettlement and complementary pathways, including by increasing the number of spaces and participating States. The creation of labour and education pathways in Asia could benefit refugees and host communities alike.

Some 8,080 refugees voluntarily returned to Afghanistan in 2019, nearly a 50 per cent drop over 2018. In 2019, UNHCR and partners assisted around 357,000 returnees, IDPs and community members in 15 priority areas for return and reintegration. Projects included cash and in-kind support for vulnerable families; shelter; education; livelihoods, skills training and entrepreneurial support; and enhancements to public infrastructure, such as schools, healthcare facilities, community centres and roads. Further efforts will be made to ensure that short- to medium-term community-based protection projects are linked to longer-term development programmes by the Government and other partners, including non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies, development actors, civil society and the private sector.

Around 880 refugees returned from Thailand to south-eastern Myanmar in two facilitated return movements in 2019. UNHCR is working with the respective governments on a multi-solution approach to enable a dignified, sustainable and comprehensive end to the decades-long encampment of the remaining 93,200 refugees in Thailand. Some 1,060 refugees made use of UNHCR's facilitated voluntary return programme to return to Sri Lanka, the majority arriving from India. UNHCR and its partners worked with the Sri Lankan Government to facilitate the return by providing cash grants for travel and reintegration, clearing overgrown land and roads, providing legal support and assisting extremely vulnerable individuals.

Following the terrorist attacks in April 2019, the Government of Sri Lanka extended its full support to refugees by providing them with security and assisting with relocation. UNHCR submitted 810 individuals for resettlement to 11 countries in 2019. Through the solidarity of resettlement countries, 368 individuals who faced significant risk in the wake of the attacks departed Sri Lanka (160 via resettlement and 208 through complementary pathways), primarily for Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America. All other persons of

concern who were displaced in the immediate aftermath of the attacks have since returned to private rented accommodation.

As of January 2020, close to 500 individuals remained in Papua New Guinea and Nauru as a result of Australia's offshore processing policy. Approximately 200 individuals are in various stages of the resettlement process, with the remaining individuals still in need of solutions.

#### *Ensuring protection and solutions for IDPs*

With over 400,000 IDPs across the country, Myanmar adopted a national strategy on camp closure and IDP return in November 2019. In coordination with the Resident Coordinator, UNHCR will work with the Government and partners to apply the principles of freedom of movement and non-discrimination. Camp closure in Rakhine State in line with international human rights standards, and specifically including the right to return to one's place of origin, would contribute to confidence-building among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and beyond.

Currently there are some 131,000 mostly Rohingya IDPs in central Rakhine State, displaced since 2012; 52,000 people displaced in Rakhine and Chin States due to the Arakan Army conflict and others displaced within northern Rakhine since 2017; and 107,000 IDPs in Kachin and northern Shan States. Together with partners, UNHCR coordinates protection responses, carries out advocacy and assists vulnerable households. In 2019, core relief items were provided to around 66,000 people and shelter support to 34,000 people.

Armed conflict and natural disasters continued to drive internal displacement in the Philippines, with over 388,000 IDPs in Mindanao, including more than 157,000 who were displaced by earthquakes in late 2019. UNHCR provided some 2,730 affected families with core relief items and supported the authorities with protection interventions, capacity-building, and technical advice on emergency preparedness and response. With the support of the Joint IDP Profiling Service, a profiling exercise reached around 2,430 households and resulted in a better understanding of the situation in the island provinces of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and the IDPs' capacities in realizing solutions.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) reported that almost 437,000 individuals had been newly internally displaced by conflict in 32 of the 34 provinces in Afghanistan in 2019. During the year, UNHCR and partners reached some 40,530 IDPs through protection monitoring activities and 237,550 IDPs through community-based protection projects, while 5,430 vulnerable IDPs were assisted through UNHCR's programming for persons with specific needs.

#### *Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless persons*

Among the pledges made by States, civil society organizations, and international and regional organizations in the context of the high-level segment on statelessness during the seventieth session of UNHCR's Executive Committee in October 2019, 29 were made by States in the Asia and Pacific region. Many of the pledges related to registration and documentation, helping to prevent and reduce statelessness. UNHCR is providing technical support and capacity development in the region to assist States in fulfilling their pledges.

Central Asia has seen significant progress in the reduction and prevention of statelessness, with more than 79,000 individuals having nationality issues resolved since the start of the #IBelong campaign to end statelessness in 2014. Notably, Kyrgyzstan became the first State to resolve statelessness on its territory. This progress was made possible through the commitment of all central Asian States to achieve universal birth registration, in line with the sustainable development goals (target 16.9), and to ensure safeguards against childhood statelessness. In November 2019, Uzbekistan announced plans to grant nationality to almost 50,000 registered stateless residents and to facilitate the naturalization of other stateless groups through its new citizenship law. Turkmenistan is implementing its national action plan to end statelessness by accelerating naturalization and improving statelessness determination procedures. Kazakhstan amended its code on marriage and family in December 2019, enabling all children born in the country to be registered at birth and issued birth certificates regardless of their parents' legal status.

In South-East Asia, halfway into the #IBelong campaign, almost 60,000 formerly stateless individuals in Thailand have either acquired nationality or had their nationality confirmed. Nationality and civil registration laws and policies have been reformed to address statelessness, particularly among foundlings and older persons. In the Philippines, collaboration between UNHCR and several government departments on the national action plan to end statelessness serves as a good practice example in the region. Malaysia is resolving existing stateless cases among ethnic Tamils of Indian descent, while also studying statelessness and the status of individual documentation in the eastern part of the country. Viet Nam is reviewing its policies and laws on nationality and developing a strategic plan to address statelessness, while both the Philippines and Viet Nam are in the process of acceding to the statelessness conventions. In November 2019, Kiribati held national consultations on every child's right to nationality and gender equality in conferral of nationality, with support from UNICEF and UNHCR.

In India, a "national register of citizens" exercise completed in Assam State in August 2019 found that some 1.9 million residents had been excluded, posing a potential risk of statelessness pending the outcome of tribunal and judicial review. The Government has clarified that exclusion from the final national registry will have no implication on the rights of individual residents and that those excluded will not be rendered stateless nor detained. UNHCR stands ready, in line with its mandate, to support the Government to prevent and reduce statelessness.

### **C. Financial information**

UNHCR's 2019 budget was 55 per cent funded, with an indicative gap of \$353 million. The 2020 budget, approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme in October 2019, remained constant at \$777.1 million. The refugee programme amounts to 78 per cent of the region's funding requirements. The South-East Asia subregion will continue to receive the largest share of the region's budget, at 52 per cent. As of 30 January 2020, the budget was 8 per cent funded, considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and earmarked contributions.

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