

**Remarks by Mr. Indrika Ratwatte,
Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific,
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

**77th Meeting of the Standing Committee
Geneva, 10 March 2020**

Chairman, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

I am pleased to join you once again to discuss UNHCR's work in Asia and the Pacific. With me is the Bureau's Principal Regional Liaison Officer in Geneva, Mr. Kevin Allen.

Since we last met, two emerging environmental risks have highlighted the imperative of international cooperation and solidarity, from the global to the regional and the local.

Globally, the **COVID-19 virus** is known to have infected almost 115,000 persons to date, with Asia and the Pacific at the centre of the outbreak. UNHCR is advocating with national and local authorities to ensure that the displaced -- among the most vulnerable, often living in compromised conditions -- have access to public health services and outreach. The virus does not discriminate based upon status or one's access to care. We must ensure that no one is excluded...left unprotected...or left behind.

Regionally, environmental disasters exacerbated by **climate change** have raised serious concerns. Bushfires ravaged 10 million hectares of land across Australia; elsewhere drought and crop failure have pushed communities further into poverty. Sea levels are rising, and habitable land is shrinking. These realities affect not only the citizens of the 45 Member

States in Asia and the Pacific, but also the approximately 9.2 million people of concern to UNHCR living in the region.

It is **the most vulnerable** — communities impacted by forced displacement, people without a nationality, those with no place to call home — who most need our support. Now more than ever, there is a pressing need to build upon collective efforts to mitigate and address these global challenges — to act decisively, together.

Examples of this spirit of solidarity abound in Asia and the Pacific. Allow me to touch upon a few.

At the first **Global Refugee Forum** held in Geneva less than three months ago, Member States, the private sector and civil society from the Asia-Pacific region made over 80 pledges to address needs in the areas of protection, solutions and international burden-sharing.

Several States made significant pledges to enhance access to education, livelihoods and healthcare for refugees, while others committed to strengthening asylum systems and including refugees in their national development planning.

We welcome these initiatives, and our teams on the ground stand ready to support Member States to fully realize their commitments.

Under the umbrella of the GCR, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and the High Commissioner launched the **Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR)**. The Support Platform seeks to redefine how the international community responds to the Afghan refugee

situation by broadening the base of support for voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance to host communities. I appeal to all stakeholders to engage – whether through the proposed “Core Group” of States, through development investments that complement humanitarian action, or through private sector engagement to solve environmental, energy or connectivity challenges, to name just a few, and to provide livelihoods for the displaced and the communities hosting them.

We need **all actors** -- especially international financial institutions, multi-lateral and bi-lateral development actors, and the private sector -- **to bring their unique expertise, skills and resources to bear**. This is precisely what the Global Compact is all about.

This is absolutely vital as the displacement of Afghan refugees enters its fifth decade. The Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan maintain their generosity in providing sanctuary to some 2.4 million registered Afghan refugees as well as other undocumented persons on their territory. Yet their continued ability to do so necessitates international solidarity through support for host communities in the areas of education, health and livelihoods. In parallel, investments in the 20 identified priority return areas inside Afghanistan to create conditions enabling sustainable voluntary repatriation and reintegration through the Support Platform, remain key.

The Afghan Refugee Situation is not the only protracted situation requiring vital support. **Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Nepal and Thailand** have hosted significant numbers of refugees for decades. Although these situations no longer receive the international attention they deserve, the hopes, dreams and capacities of the refugees in these countries burn no less brightly.

Chairman,

While working to find solutions for these protracted situations, we must strive to ensure that recent crises do not follow a similar trajectory. In several months, we will mark three years since over 700,000 **stateless Rohingya refugees** fled from Myanmar into Bangladesh. UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh recently completed the biometric registration of the refugees. Today, 855,000 Rohingya refugees hold identity documents, many for the first time in their lives.

In **Bangladesh**, UNHCR has focused on building the resilience of refugees and improving conditions in the camps with attention to environmental sustainability. The distribution of LPG fuel for cooking and reforestation projects have dramatically greened the hilly landscape of the world's largest refugee camp, Kutupalong. We welcome the Government of Bangladesh's decision to allow the use of the Myanmar curriculum; this year, UNHCR and UNICEF will work to enroll an initial 10,000 refugee students in an educational pilot programme for children from grades 6 to 9, with additional grades and students to follow.

At the same time, UNHCR, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank are working with local authorities to implement service and infrastructure projects that benefit refugees and host communities alike.

Your support for the refugees and host communities in Bangladesh remains critical: last week, UNHCR and 116 partners -- more than half local Bangladeshi organizations -- launched the **2020 Joint Response Plan**, appealing for USD 877 million.

At the same time, we know that the solution to this crisis rests inside Myanmar. The Rohingya have been clear and consistent: they want to return home. But they want to do so **when it is safe, when they can be sure of access to basic rights and services, and when a pathway to citizenship in Myanmar has been established.** The way forward remains addressing the root causes of displacement, in line with the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. In the meantime, under the tripartite MOU, UNHCR and UNDP have conducted needs assessments in some 10% of villages in Northern Rakhine State and are implementing quick impact projects (QIPs) in roughly one-third of these. The QIPs include support for schools, water, local transportation infrastructure, solar energy and livestock breeding.

Today these projects remain modest in reach; additional project approvals and expanded humanitarian access are necessary to implement them at scale.

Chairman,

Like the Rohingya, the vast majority of refugees yearn to return home. Elsewhere opportunities for sustainable and voluntary return in 2019 remained equally scarce. Returns to Afghanistan dropped by half. Some 880 refugees were assisted to return to south-eastern Myanmar from Thailand, while 1058 refugees received assistance to return to Sri Lanka from India.

With **resettlement** quotas dramatically cut in 2019, departures from Asia and the Pacific continued to decline. But when compelling protection cases emerged, UNHCR and resettlement countries responded: we are

grateful for the generous support of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America, who promptly provided emergency resettlement for 368 refugees at significant risk in the wake of the terrorist attacks that rocked Sri Lanka last April.

In line with the Global Compact and commitments made at the Global Refugee Forum, we are working closely with States to expand **complementary pathways**, including labour and education visas and community sponsorship.

Solutions are also needed for the 2.7 million **internally displaced persons** in the Asia-Pacific region, including some 1.9 million in Afghanistan, followed by Myanmar and the Philippines, which is affected by cycles of displacement due to natural disasters as well as conflict. Together with partners in an inter-agency response, UNHCR is coordinating protection responses and providing core relief items and shelter to IDPs, while supporting governments to address obstacles to safe, voluntary and sustainable return.

Chair,

An area of laudable progress has been the reduction of **statelessness** in the region, particularly in Central Asia. The Kyrgyz Republic became the first country in the world to end statelessness. Azizbek Ashurov and his organization Ferghana Valley Lawyers Without Borders were honored as the winner of the Nansen Refugee Award last year.

Similarly, the Government of Uzbekistan recently announced that some 50,000 registered stateless residents are to be granted nationality. Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan also continue their efforts.

All told, more than 79,000 people in Asia have obtained a national identity since the start of the #IBelong campaign in 2014. Even as much more remains to be done for the 2.2 million persons in the region still without a nationality, we must pause and recognize tremendous contribution of these States for restoring a fundamental right – the right to a nationality - and the impact this has in the lives of every one of these individuals.

Chairman,

Let me conclude by expressing my sincere gratitude to those countries generously hosting and protecting refugees, IDPs and stateless persons. I also convey my appreciation to Member States for their financial and political support to host governments and UNHCR's operations in the region.

I appeal for your continued solidarity.

Thank you.