

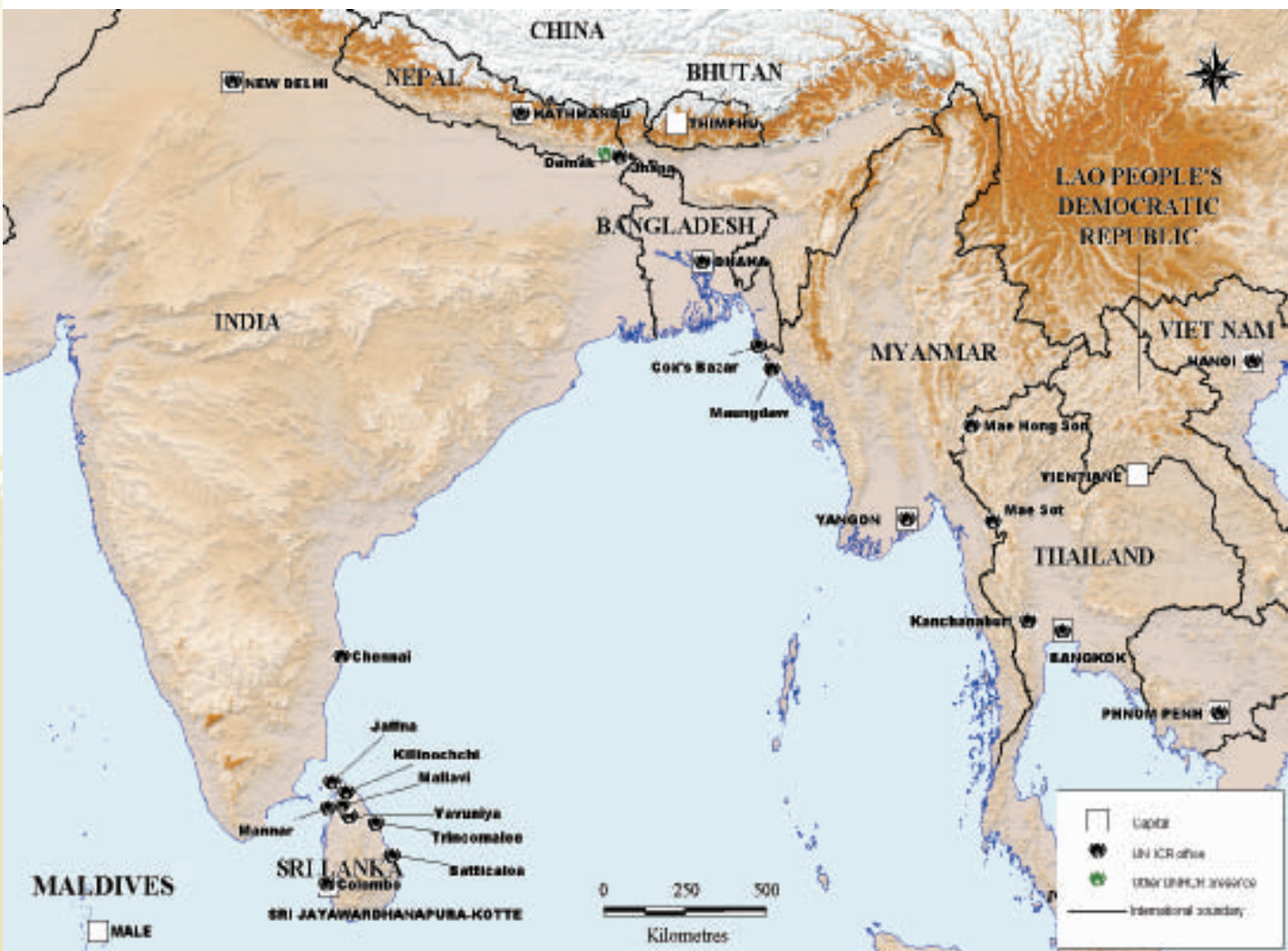


South Asia

Recent Developments

In 2002, the most welcomed development in the region was the commencement of the peace process in Sri Lanka. In February, the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed a cease-fire agreement effectively ending all hostilities. A series of confidence building measures by both parties followed, including improved freedom of movement of people and essential commodities to and from the former conflict zones. The first round of peace talks took place in September 2002 in Thailand, with encouraging results. The positive environment since February prompted the spontaneous movement of tens of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to their home villages. By the end of August 2002, over 183,000 IDPs had returned. The movement is expected to continue throughout 2002 and 2003. In addition, over 1,000 refugees spontaneously returned from India. As a result of these

Bangladesh
India
Myanmar
Nepal
Sri Lanka



developments, UNHCR reoriented its programmes in Sri Lanka to effectively address the protection and humanitarian needs of returning IDPs and returnees from India.

The other positive development was an agreement between the Governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar to end the main phase of repatriation of Myanmar refugees accommodated in two camps in Bangladesh. UNHCR's discussions with both Governments since the second half of 2001 have yielded modest but important progress in the search for an early solution to this protracted refugee situation. The Government of Myanmar agreed to lift some conditions barring the return of refugees.

In contrast to the above developments, there has been little progress in resolving the plight of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. There were encouraging developments in 2001 when a joint verifi-

cation team composed of officials from both Governments completed interviews of over 12,000 persons in one of the seven camps in eastern Nepal. However, a subsequent meeting between the two countries at ministerial level has been postponed indefinitely.

In Nepal, the security situation remains tense due to the continuing conflict between the security forces and Maoist insurgents. Since September 2002, a UNHCR Field Safety Advisor has been stationed in the Jhapa and Morang Districts (where UNHCR operates) in order to provide appropriate support and advice to the UNHCR team.

Strategic Objectives

UNHCR will continue to actively promote lasting solutions for refugees and persons of concern in the region. Pending such solutions, UNHCR's

primary objective is to provide protection and assistance to refugees and others of concern. The needs of refugee women and children remain central to all country programmes.

The situation in Sri Lanka presents unique opportunities for UNHCR to secure durable solutions for the remaining 620,000 IDPs and create conditions conducive to the future return of over 84,000 refugees from India. UNHCR will continue to play an active role in the provision of protection and relief to returning IDPs as well as helping the Government to fill gaps in other return-related sectors. UNHCR is already engaged in active discussions with other humanitarian and development actors.

UNHCR will continue to review the operations in the region with a view to facilitating solutions for protracted refugee situations. While the voluntary repatriation of refugees will remain the main focus of UNHCR efforts, other durable solutions will be actively sought with the governments concerned.

As part of a phase down strategy, UNHCR continues to promote self-funding for its implementing partners or to encourage the involvement of new agencies able to contribute to sustainable durable solutions.

Operations

UNHCR conducts operations in five countries in the region, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka (for Nepal and Sri Lanka, please see separate country chapters).

Despite efforts to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of refugees from **Bangladesh** to Myanmar, the rate of return has been low. This can be attributed in part to the complicated return process (albeit slightly streamlined now) and in part to the general reluctance of refugees to return. During their lengthy stay in camps, the refugees have become almost completely dependent on assistance. Continued reliance on external assistance could reduce their ability to cope in a new environment



Sri Lanka: A water well has been constructed to provide clean water in a returnee village. UNHCR / M. Kobayashi

regardless of the type of durable solutions eventually available to them. Bearing this in mind, UNHCR will expedite the identification of solutions to be put in place by the end of June 2003 while it continues to provide basic care and maintenance for the remaining, roughly 22,000 Myanmar refugees.

In **India**, UNHCR will provide protection and assistance to the largest urban refugee population in the region: nearly 13,000 persons, of whom 90 per cent are from Afghanistan. UNHCR has been pursuing three forms of durable solutions: repatriation, naturalisation, or resettlement. Following recent developments in Afghanistan, some refugees have opted for voluntary repatriation. While the number remains small, others contemplate return but carefully observe the situation as it unfolds. Meanwhile, 100 refugees have filed applications for Indian citizenship with the help of legal experts. Afghans of Indian origin, who have legally entered and stayed in India for over ten years are expected to qualify for Indian nationality under relevant laws. Resettlement is also an important durable solution. To reduce refugees' dependency on subsistence allowances and help them prepare for eventual durable solutions, UNHCR continues to promote self-reliance activities.

In view of developments in Sri Lanka, an increasing number of Tamil refugees in the southern State of Tamil Nadu have expressed an interest to return. UNHCR facilitates the return of a small number of refugees on a priority basis in view of their vulnerability and strong wish to return. UNHCR has begun discussions with the authorities concerning its future role in large-scale organised return of refugees if and when the situation in Sri Lanka becomes conducive to their return. Currently, India

hosts some 64,000 Sri Lankan refugees in 116 refugee camps. It is estimated that another 20,000 refugees reside outside these camps.

In **Myanmar**, UNHCR is pursuing a number of initiatives to seek the long-term involvement of other agencies in providing assistance in Northern Rakhine State. Their involvement will also enable UNHCR to phase down its activities in 2003. In this regard, UNHCR has been successful in encouraging independent funding for some agencies that have been its traditional implementing partners in Myanmar. As a result, UNHCR assistance will concentrate on some essential activities such as initial support for new returnees from Bangladesh, literacy training, income generation, gender awareness and empowerment. UNHCR's protection, assistance and capacity building programmes will be directed at strengthening the coping mechanisms of the returnee population, especially the most vulnerable. This is expected to increase their chances of sustainable reintegration in Northern Rakhine State.

Budget (USD)

Country	Annual Programme	Supplementary Programme	Total
Bangladesh	2,340,969	0	2,340,969
India	3,108,342	0	3,108,342
Myanmar	3,637,851	0	3,637,851
Nepal	5,352,879	0	5,352,879
Sri Lanka	6,970,726	7,997,214	14,967,940
Regional Activities ¹	10,000	0	10,000
Total	21,420,767	7,997,214	29,417,981

¹ Includes dissemination of refugee law in South Asia.