

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

Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

I am pleased to join you once again to update you on UNHCR's work in Asia and the Pacific, and to highlight the critical impact of your support in the region.

Many of us witnessed last August the dramatic images of Afghan men, women and children running along the Kabul tarmac, clambering on planes, driven by a sense of desperation that the doors to a hopeful future was closing. Seven months on the economy and social services – are at the brink of collapse. Millions of Afghans are starving, hospitals are under-resourced, children are out of school, and heads of households are finding it near impossible to scratch together a living to feed their families. As the Secretary General so viscerally

described in his briefing to the Security Council last month, “Afghanistan is hanging on by a thread”.

UNHCR’s has stayed and delivered in Afghanistan. Our priority has been to provide immediate humanitarian assistance to save lives. Together with partners, we have assisted close to 1 million people with emergency shelter, essential relief items and cash assistance to meet basic needs. We scaled up our field presence, deploying 264 additional staff, bringing UNHCR’s footprint to 337, to respond rapidly to a harsh winter, and support the fragile coping mechanisms of a population impacted by prolonged fighting, drought and the socio-economic repercussions of free falling economy.

On 11 January, humanitarian agencies launched the Humanitarian Response plan (HRP) for 2022, urgently requesting USD 4.4 billion to cover emergency needs and protection for the most vulnerable. In parallel, UNHCR has stepped up our work with development partners, including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank to explore the potential of harnessing humanitarian-development collaboration for protection dividends and building in longer-term solutions into the humanitarian response, right from the start. This approach goes hand in hand with UNHCR’s long standing efforts to build resilient

communities by strengthening essential services and facilities, particularly in priority areas of return and reintegration.

Over the course of 2021, some 127,000 Afghans approached UNHCR for assistance in neighboring countries. However, the number of those who are in need of international protection is likely to be much higher. UNHCR remains concerned that the occurrence of human rights violations against civilians in Afghanistan – in particular women and girls, may drive more Afghans across borders and further afield, in search of safety and a less precarious existence.

Iran and Pakistan, Afghanistan's southern neighbours, continue to host over 2.2 million registered refugees and 4 million other Afghans for over four decades. Despite facing their own socio-economic challenges, compounded by COVID, they have pursued inclusive policies towards refugees, enabling 640,000 children to attend school up and providing all refugee households access to healthcare on par with nationals. Their generosity cannot be taken for granted and support for host countries must be stepped up. In this spirit, in January 2022 UNHCR a regional Refugee Response Plan was launched. UNHCR is requesting 623 million dollars to provide support to host governments Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to meet the needs of 5.7 million

Afghan refugees and vulnerable host community members. We cannot turn our backs on the people of Afghanistan in their hour of need.

Nor can we forget the plight of other refugees, IDPs, stateless persons across the region, who are not afforded the spotlight of front page news coverage. For a while now, the humanitarian situation in Myanmar has been deteriorating. Across the country, more than 3 million people are in need of life-saving humanitarian assistance. Without a peaceful resolution of Myanmar's crisis, this number will only rise.

In 2021, UNHCR's emergency relief assistance reached some 170,000 individuals in nine states and regions in Myanmar. In all locations, UNHCR and partners distributed vital material assistance to displaced adults and children. In Rakhine State, where long-term displacement remains unresolved, some 133,000 Rohingya people are still confined to camps and camp-like settings -- many since their displacement in 2012. For these IDPs quick impact projects are a lifeline. UNHCR and the UNDP continue to implement community infrastructure projects, income-generating projects and projects targeting persons with specific needs, benefitting more 20,000 individuals.

Since the military takeover, 425,000 persons have been forced from their homes, in addition to the 370,000 who been displaced prior to the events of 1 February. A further 39,000 sought safety in India and Thailand. UNHCR have not been able to access these populations to assess their protection needs. This fact reinforces the need to establish national asylum systems, so that persons facing persecution who seek protection from harm are able to do so, without resorting to measures that further risk their safety and liberty.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bangladesh hosts 890,000 Rohingya refugees who are entering their fifth year of displacement, with little headway being made inside Myanmar towards addressing the root causes of their displacement and to improve conditions to enable their return home. Let me pause here to put this timeframe in perspective. [PAUSE] COVID19 has separated many of us from our loved ones, we have missed big life events birthdays, weddings, funerals and those everyday moments with our loves ones that give our lives meaning. We have recently traversed the three year mark of the global pandemic. It's felt like a lifetime.

Rohingya refugees are finding it difficult hold on to the belief that there will be light at the end of the tunnel. Those who are languishing most are the youth. With little to do, nowhere to go and few opportunities into which to put their energy, skills, and bright ideas, a whole generation of capabilities is being lost. Dire living conditions and the lack of foreseeable solutions have driven nearly 800 Rohingya refugees this past year to board rickety vessels in search of their own solutions. Seventy percent of these were women and children. Twenty nine lives perished on these dangerous journeys. Loss of life need not be their fate. A predictable and equitable regional mechanism for disembarkation is urgently needed. Principled leadership, regional cooperation and responsibility-sharing will save lives.

As is the case for us all, Rohingya refugees need more than the basics to be able to cultivate a sense of purpose and grow their capacities. In Bangladesh, UNHCR and partners have focused on improving living conditions, with attention to environmental sustainability, building skills and creating livelihood opportunities. By the end of 2021, humanitarian services that had been suspended in Cox's Bazar due to COVID-19 measures, have largely been restored. This brought to the fore, the vital role that communities, and particularly, refugee volunteers, play in filling gaps in services, addressing critical

protection issues and being frontline responders attending to deadly fires and the effects of natural disasters in the camps. While formal education was not offered during the height of the pandemic, UNHCR and partners have now been able to initiate the introduction of the pilot Myanmar curriculum. By mid-January 2022, thanks to an inclusive national COVID-19 response, nearly 80 per cent of the 890,000 Rohingya refugees receiving a vaccination.

Chair,

It has been proven, that when we are united in our efforts, we are able to achieve far more than when we stand on our own. Leadership of regional bodies, such as ASEAN, to bring about a peaceful political solution to the situation in Myanmar will be pivotal to achieving lasting outcomes. As well as with ASEAN, UNHCR collaborates closely with the United Nations Secretary-General's new Special Envoy on Myanmar in ongoing efforts to create the conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return, in line with GA resolution A/RES/76/180.

Similarly, the creation of a "Core Group" of like-minded states to coalesce around the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees is already bearing tangible results. Chaired by the European Union, the Core Group

aims to provide predictable and sustained financial, political and technical support towards durable solutions in Afghanistan and host countries, as well as to raise awareness and visibility of the Afghan refugee situation. I appeal to all stakeholders to engage – whether through the “Core Group” of States, development investments complementing humanitarian action, or through private sector engagement to address the pressing protection, livelihood and environmental challenges that refugees and host communities continue to face.

Circling back to the image that I started with - the desperate search of men, women and children for a life free from fear, for a life with opportunity to live in safety and dignity – the search for truly durable solutions – that lies at the heart of the work that we do, the work that you so generously support.

However, access to solutions remain limited for refugees and asylum-seekers. Over the past year, UNHCR has sought to restore resettlement processing and departures to pre-pandemic levels. In 2021, UNHCR submitted resettlement requests for 4,855 individuals, mainly from operations in India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. 2,419 were able to departure to third countries. Though these are much welcome demonstrations of solidarity for the most vulnerable refugees, more resettlement places are needed.

To this end, I encourage states to explore opportunities to further develop complementary pathways, particularly around family reunification, employment and education – harnessing the wealth of skills, talent and energy refugees offer, that will be of mutual benefit to refugees and the countries that would host them.

Of course, solutions are not only found in resettlement countries, but back home in countries of origin. Although the current crises in Afghanistan and Myanmar are hindering prospects for large scale voluntary repatriation, some families are making their way home. UNHCR is committed to support their right to return in safety and dignity, reconnecting returnees to social services and to provide material and cash assistance, so that families are able to rebuild their lives.

The resolution of the existing situation of statelessness also remains a key priority. Uzbekistan has moved closer to eradicating statelessness by resolving over 25,000 cases through recognition of nationality and naturalization. The Philippines, the only country in Southeast Asia to accede to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons have pledged to accede to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and are on course to deposit their

instrument of accession in 2022. Such advancements are wonderful examples of how seemingly impossible targets can be reached – step by step.

Excellency,

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 contributions to host governments and UNHCR's operations in the region.

I appeal for your continued support and solidarity.

Thank you.