

**Presentation to the 62nd Meeting of the Standing Committee
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Mr. Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to address you again this year, on the occasion of the 62nd Meeting of the Standing Committee. You will have already seen the region's strategic overview where some of the region's key issues and our response strategies are outlined.

Developments in Afghanistan and Myanmar continue to have a major impact on UNHCR's work in the Asia Pacific Region and I will dedicate a large part of my presentation today to these two situations. I will also speak to the issues of irregular movements and give you short updates on a number of other groups of concern in the region.

Afghan situation

Allow me to start off my presentation with a look at the Afghan refugee situation – which remains the largest and most critical of the protracted refugee situations today. There are more than 2.6 million Afghans refugees across the world. The vast majority are in the two countries neighbouring Afghanistan, with some 1.6 million registered Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and 950,000 Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran according to figures provided by the Government.

For decades, the two countries have shown extraordinary generosity towards these millions of refugees, but they are also expressing clear indications of hope, that after an all time-low in 2014, voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan will pick up again during the course of this year. To better understand the pressure that the Governments of the Islamic Republics of Pakistan and Iran are under, it is essential to recall that in addition to 2.6 million refugees, there are an estimated 2 million unregistered Afghans who have established themselves in

the neighbouring countries – this means that up to 16% of Afghanistan’s citizens live outside the country.

Since the end of last year, Afghanistan has entered into a new chapter in its history. The establishment of a new Government of National Unity has created a unique opportunity for stability and hope in Afghanistan, for the people of Afghanistan to work together towards peace, security and development in the country. This new era also paves the way for Afghans around the world to fulfil their legitimate aspirations to return, and contribute towards rebuilding the country. Many Afghans living abroad have been away from their home country for over three decades. Many were born outside and actually never lived there. In Pakistan, almost three quarters of the Afghan refugee population are children and youth under the age of 24, an indication of the significant human capital that these new generations can offer towards future reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.

At the London Conference on Afghanistan, held in December 2014, President Ashraf Ghani welcomed the commitment of the international community to continue to direct significant financial support towards Afghanistan’s social and economic development priorities throughout the “Transformation Decade for Afghanistan”. In the closing Communiqué participants recognised that the issue of Afghan refugees impacts on the economic development of regional countries. It is encouraging that in subsequent meetings with the UN in Kabul, President Ghani has indicated his government’s strong wish to include refugee returnees in development planning and national priority programmes throughout the “Transformation Decade”.

But Afghanistan cannot do this alone. International support – and in particular that of development actors - is more crucial than ever to ensuring sustained stability and development in the country. In this landmark year, we are calling on the international community to step up its engagement and financial commitments towards helping Afghanistan in moving forward. Not only in the spirit of international solidarity and burden-sharing, but also as a joint investment in stability and security within the sub-region and beyond.

In this regard, **the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR)** developed by the three countries with the support of UNHCR, and endorsed in 2012 by member states in Geneva, remains a very valid framework. The Strategy provides a multi-year regional framework for solutions for refugees under three pillars: voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration in Afghanistan and continued support to refugees and host communities in asylum countries.

It is absolutely essential to ensure that repatriation to Afghanistan takes place on a voluntary basis and in a sustainable manner. We are worried by the recent trend that shows that 7,700 registered Afghan refugees have returned over first two months of 2015 - more than half the number of total returnees in 2014 (12,991). Initial interviews indicate that many persons returned because of the pressure they were put under by local authorities and hosting communities – especially in the aftermath of the Peshawar school attack. If refugees return in a panic, without adequate integration measures in place in Afghanistan, there is a risk that they will just add up to the urban poor in Kabul and other cities or travel back to neighbouring countries as illegal immigrants.

UNHCR will continue to engage with Afghanistan and hosting governments in the region through bilateral consultations and tripartite meetings to ensure that return can be organised in safety and dignity and that the two major host countries – Islamic Republics of Pakistan and Iran – will continue with their longstanding tradition of asylum for Afghan refugees to allow for a paced and sustainable return, as security and economic conditions improve in Afghanistan. Meanwhile UNHCR's programmes in the host countries continue to focus on building the capacity of Afghan refugees in preparation for return and reintegration and empowering, in particular, the young people through education and livelihood skills.

We thank donors for their continued support to the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas programme (RAHA). The main objective of RAHA is to promote coexistence and a more positive reception of Afghan refugees by hosting communities in Pakistan. Thanks to the contributions received from the donor community, in 2014 over 1,000 projects were

implemented throughout Pakistan covering the sectors of education, health, environment, social protection, water and sanitation, livelihoods and infrastructure.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, UNHCR together with the Government focused its programmes on health, education and livelihood generation, aimed at empowering refugees to contribute to reconstructing Afghanistan and facilitating their reintegration upon eventual return.

IDPs in Pakistan

In 2014, UNHCR also supported IDP programmes in Pakistan through the distribution of tents and basic household items to those affected by military operations in the North Waziristan and Khyber Agencies. Some 690,000 persons were forced to flee, and plans are underway by the Government to facilitate the gradual return of these IDPs.

IDPS in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, UNHCR supported the Government in developing the National Policy on IDPs. We are leading the protection cluster and co-leading the emergency shelter and non-food items cluster for IDPs. A road map for IDP policy implementation has been adopted and action plans are being developed.

Refugee situation in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, in response to the cross-border displacement of some 225,000 refugees from tribal areas to Khost and Paktika in 2014, UNHCR is coordinating the response together with partners to assist the refugees and host communities. Through a community-based approach, UNHCR is working on the establishment of systematic protection monitoring systems, referral and co-ordination mechanisms as well as capacity-building programmes in order to be able to identify and address specific protection risks of individual women, men, girls and boys.

Let me end this part of the presentation on the Afghanistan situation, by once again pointing out the unique window of opportunity that is opening up for a sustainable solution to one of the largest refugee situations in the world.

Mr. Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now turn to the developments in **Myanmar**, which continue to impact large numbers of IDPS and refugees within the south east Asian region. There are currently an estimated 216,000 refugees of different ethnicity originating from Myanmar displaced in neighbouring countries – with Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia hosting the largest numbers, but smaller groups in India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. In Myanmar, there are approximately 240,000 IDPs in Kachin and Rakhine state who were displaced in recent years while long term displacement of an estimated 400,000 IDPs are reportedly located in the entire south east of the country.

2015 is an important year for Myanmar, with elections scheduled to take place during the last quarter. While **peace negotiations** with the ethnic minority groups have been encouraging and ceasefires have been signed with 14 out of 16 ethnic groups, we are currently witnessing with some concern the set back in Kachin and Shan states, with some of the heaviest clashes in recent times leading to new displacement. It is hoped that this will not undermine the government's efforts to reach a nation-wide ceasefire before the elections later this year.

(KACHIN & SHAN):

Since the fighting intensified in early February 2015, particularly in the Kokang autonomous region in northern Shan state, there have been unconfirmed reports of an influx of up to 100,000 persons into China. UNHCR does not have access to these areas. However, we have continued our work in Kachin state, in providing support to some 100,000 IDPS, as well as performing our role as cluster lead in the areas of protection, shelter, NFIs and CCCM within the interagency response under the RC/HC.

(SOUTH EAST)

Thailand currently hosts some hundred and twenty thousand persons in refugee camps along **the Thai-Myanmar border**. UNHCR continues to focus on preparing the ground for eventual return of IDPs and refugees to the South East of Myanmar. In support of this, we have set up a cross- border working group between UNHCR staff in Hpa-An and Mae Sot. We have developed and shared a strategic **roadmap** for voluntary repatriation from the camps in Thailand with all stakeholders, mapping out the different phases from facilitation of return to promotion, when conditions are conducive for returns to take place. The roadmap will continue to serve as a basis for future discussions with the authorities on both sides of the borders as well as other stakeholders on the repatriation process.

We are continuing our cross-border preparedness activities in close consultation with the Thai and Myanmar authorities, UN and NGO partners and refugees. In Thailand, we are currently carrying out a verification exercise in the nine border camps to update the camp population data which should facilitate better planning for durable solutions. In South Eastern Myanmar, important structural changes have taken place with the official establishment of offices in Hpa-An and Dawei. This will enhance our field coverage to better enable UNHCR to establish important relationships with conflict-affected communities and government counterparts, and to monitor the protection environment and engage in consultations with IDPs and host communities in the area.

(RAKHINE STATE)

In Rakhine State some 140,000 IDPs remain displaced following the outbreak of inter-communal violence in 2012. Measures taken by authorities have stabilized the situation but much more needs to be done. The attitude of the local majority community remains deeply hostile and suspicious towards the UN. Displaced persons continue to be segregated from other sections of the population, facing protection concerns and restrictions that seriously impact their wellbeing, livelihood and movement, without any durable solution in sight.

UNHCR, as part of an interagency effort, has been leading the protection sector as well as shelter, NFIs and CCCM clusters since its activation in December 2012. In 2014, we supported the constructions of camp management offices, multi-purpose buildings, warehouses and also established maintenance and repair programmes in 23 priority camps in Sittwe , Pauktaw and Myebon townships.

With no durable solutions in sight for IDPs, many shelters are quickly deteriorating and are even at the risk of collapse, posing dangers to inhabitants. In 2015, the main challenges in relation to shelter are expected to be from natural wear and tear that these shelters have sustained since 2013.

The root cause for many of these problems remains the lack of citizenship for approximately one million persons in Rakhine state. While UNHCR in the longer term would very much encourage the review and revision of current laws, we are also supporting the pragmatic approach taken by the government to verify citizenship of those eligible under the currently applicable citizenship law of 1982.

In September 2014, the Government launched a pilot project of **citizenship verification** in the Myebon IDP camp. This exercise led to the issuance of some 315 citizenship certificates - and this in spite of strong opposition from the local majority population. Although the exercise has been criticised by many - as applicants were unable to identify themselves as “Rohingyas” in the application process - this is a major shift in government policy as it is the first time that authorities have clearly demonstrated an attempt to address the issue of statelessness in Rakhine state. Persons granted citizenship are protected and would no longer be considered as illegal immigrants, but there must also be a tangible improvement in the basic rights that people enjoy in their daily lives.

Since 1 January 2015, the Myanmar government has been making efforts to roll out Citizenship verification exercise across Rakhine State. We very much welcome these developments, but we also emphasize that any participation in citizenship verification exercise should be voluntary and consultative; it should be an inclusive exercise to confirm status.

Irregular maritime movements

Mr. Chair,

I would now like to address the issue of **irregular movements of persons in the region, which continues to be a global priority for UNHCR**. As you will remember, it was also focus of the High Commissioner's Dialogue last year.

In 2014, we set up a UNHCR Maritime Monitoring Unit in Bangkok which is responsible for compiling periodical statistics related to the irregular maritime departures, to look numbers and trends of these movements. In South East Asia, we estimate that approximately 63,000 people have taken to the seas during the course of last year, a vast majority of them from Bangladesh and Myanmar bound for Thailand and Malaysia. Hundreds of others followed routes through the Indian Ocean from South Asia and Indonesia to Australia, and across the Strait of Malacca from Malaysia to Indonesia. At least some 750 people have lost their lives at sea, while trying to make that journey to safety, mostly due to starvation, dehydration and beatings by smugglers, but the true figure is likely to be much higher.

We commend ongoing efforts by states to combat trafficking and smuggling networks, but this should not be at the expense of people in need of international protection. UNHCR has engaged with states on steps to be taken towards strengthening temporary protection, preventing arbitrary deportation and refoulement, and in providing for solutions in countries of transit and destination, including granting work rights or labour migration opportunities.

In a series of raids in Southern Thailand, some 2,000 asylum seekers were discovered in smuggler camps in the jungle. Many were injured or ill from living in squalid conditions. UNHCR 's demarches with the authorities have seen increased determination to tackle the issue of people smuggling more decisively. UNHCR is also holding in-depth discussions with authorities on alternatives to detention.

The largest number of refugees from Myanmar is currently hosted by Malaysia. Of a total of 150,000 registered refugees, 92% are from Myanmar. Another 12,000 asylum-seekers are awaiting registration. In Indonesia, up to 11,000 persons are awaiting solutions due to continued irregular arrivals and the implementation of strict border control measures by Australia.

The high numbers of persons of concern and the absence of government involvement in individual status determination has led to serious challenges for UNHCR and overstretched its capacity, in particular in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Current financial challenges and anticipated reductions in staff in these offices will further increase backlogs of people awaiting decisions regarding their status and affect their protection situation while awaiting solutions.

Solutions of the past may indeed to be revisited and adapted to the realities of today. Rescue at sea and resettlement of the Indochinese refugees from South East Asian countries to Australia and other Western countries saved many lives in the 1980s. However, the expectations, that third country resettlement is the only way of solving refugee problems in the region, is no longer realistic. Even if most South Asian and South East Asian countries are not signatories to the 1951 Convention, most have been abiding by the non-refoulement principle.

Throughout 2014, UNHCR has engaged in discussions with countries in the region on the need to step up to their responsibilities to provide protection to refugees and look for solutions for these refugee populations in their own territories, either through providing legal status or temporary protection, where that is appropriate, or other forms of protection, for instance through labor migration schemes.

The High Commissioners' Dialogue last year provided an important platform to reiterate the need for enhanced cooperation among countries, regional organizations and civil society. Interventions during the conference also highlighted the fact that irregular movements and arrival without proper documentation should not prevent an asylum-seeker from having access to due process in the country of asylum. People fleeing violence and persecution are

often not in a position to obtain passports and visas before leaving their countries. UNHCR has been following with great concerns developments in some countries in the region, who have privileged protection of borders over the protection of people. We are in particular concerned by the denial of access to procedures of a number of recently arrived asylum-seekers in some states in the region, who are signatory to the Convention.

Throughout the year, we have made a number of high level interventions with specific governments in the region, either bilaterally, or with the support of other member states of the Executive Committee, and ultimately in the media, to request states to live up to their international obligations, in particular as regards to the respect of the principle of non-refoulement and allow asylum-seekers access to a fair hearing, either in government processes or by UNHCR.

Urban refugees

Mr. Chair,

Let me now say a few words about the issue of urban refugees which is another high priority for us in Asia – as close to 80% of all persons of concern to UNHCR in Asia live outside camps, in **urban or semi-urban environments**.

Many of these 2.7 million persons are more vulnerable than camp populations and their protection needs are often addressed inadequately. Although not confined to the boundaries of a camp, many lack documentation and are at risk of arrest, detention and deportation.

The lack of status and documentation also prevents them from legally accessing the labor market and hence they often become victims of labor exploitation. Women and adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Inadequate protection, unequal access to education and livelihoods and the lack of solutions often lead to onward irregular movements by sea or by other means.

In late 2014 and early 2015, we have undertaken an internal review of the achievements and challenges of the implementation of the 2009 Urban Refugee Policy. While this revealed a number of good practices, in particular in Iran, India and Malaysia, it also showed some major gaps, mainly due to the lack of documentation and lack of recognised legal status of persons of concern. While continuing to work with governments on these aspects, through promoting legal frameworks and capacity building for status determination, the country teams will also enhance their activities to reach out to urban refugee communities directly and through partners. Consultations are foreseen over the course of 2015 with UNHCR and partners to develop country specific plans on enhancing protection for urban populations of concerns to UNHCR.

Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me conclude this presentation by highlighting briefly some other positive developments in the region.

In **Nepal**, the end of 2014 marked the departure for resettlement of over 94,000 refugees from Bhutan. We thank both the Government of Nepal for their generosity in hosting these refugees for over two decades, and the resettlement countries in making resettlement opportunities available. We hope that the unprecedented success of resettlement as a durable solution will continue to pave the way for other solutions for the remaining refugees, and we count on both the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal to continue their bilateral dialogue.

In **Sri Lanka**, UNHCR is in its final stage of assistance programmes for IDPs and UNHCR will continue to work with the Government. We hope that this support also benefits Sri Lankan refugee returnees.

In the **Philippines**, UNHCR's humanitarian response towards those displaced by the devastating Typhoon Haiyan successfully ended last year. UNHCR co-led the protection cluster until August last year, when the Government decided to phase out the humanitarian coordination structures in favour of state-recovery systems. In line with the Government's

decision, the humanitarian clusters were discontinued and merged into the regular coordination mechanism in place, with the authorities at the helm.

On the **Central Asia** side, our priority remained to strengthen asylum systems in the region and decrease statelessness. We provided support to the Almaty Process aimed at addressing the issues related to irregular mixed migration flows and promoted protection sensitive migration management systems among states.

I am also very pleased to report that the Central Asia region has been making important strides in the area of reducing statelessness. I commend Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan for taking positive steps towards addressing statelessness in their respective countries. An International Conference on Migration and Statelessness jointly organized by the Government of Turkmenistan, IOM and UNHCR took place in June in Ashgabat. (Over 40 delegations from governments, international organizations and civil society participated in the conference. Participants reaffirmed that the identification of stateless persons, law reform, accession to the statelessness conventions and international cooperation are all key to preventing or resolving statelessness situations.

Closing remarks

Mr Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by thanking member states, and in particular governments in Asia and the Pacific for their strong support to the work of our office. In spite of financial challenges, I am very grateful for the strong donor support that a number of our operations continue to enjoy.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Governments in the Asia and the Pacific region for their continued financial support to our work globally and in the region. We are especially grateful to Government of Japan for their increased percentage of non-earmarked contribution from 43.1% to 53.7%.

I would also like to highlight the exceptional effort by the Government and people of Korea. The government contribution, (USD 15,870,460) has more than doubled from the past years including multi-year contributions for Afghanistan and Iran. And the same outstanding results have been reached by our private sector fundraising colleagues in Korea, who have succeeded in increasing funds raised from 5 to 10 million within just the last year.

Closing remarks

Mr. Chair, Distinguished delegates and colleagues

As you can see the challenges facing the Asia and the Pacific region are vast and vary in nature. But 2015 is also proving to be a year of opportunities; the opportunity for positive political will to implement solutions, the opportunity for stronger regional cooperation to provide protection to persons of concern, and the opportunity for continued support to UNHCR's mandate to protect and assist those who are in need of our help.

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