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

Asia and the Pacific has long been a region of migration and forced displacement. Today, it is home to approximately 3.7 million refugees, 2.4 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 1.6 million stateless people. As of February 2017, only 20 of the 45 countries and territories in the region had acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. However, there has been a long-standing tradition of hospitality towards displaced people across the region.

There are growing numbers of displaced populations who have been unable to find solutions for prolonged periods. Many have moved to urban or semi-urban areas to seek access to livelihood opportunities and services. Consequently, UNHCR works with States and other partners to help strengthen protection and assistance for displaced populations living outside of camps.

Among the displaced populations living in protracted situations are refugees from Afghanistan and Myanmar. Over 2.6 million Afghan refugees reside in more than 70 countries around the world. However, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan host approximately 95 per cent of all Afghan refugees today.

In Afghanistan, the steady deterioration of the security situation has caused further internal displacement. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, 2016 saw the highest number of civilian casualties due to conflict-related violence since the monitoring of incidents involving loss of life began in 2009.<sup>1</sup> Findings show that children have been particularly affected by conflict-related incidents.<sup>2</sup> As a result of growing insecurity, levels of internal displacement in Afghanistan increased significantly, with more than 650,000 people newly displaced in 2016. There are now an estimated 1.2 million IDPs in the country.

Many IDPs are vulnerable and settle in areas with little absorption capacity. The lack of solutions contributes to high levels of secondary displacement and onward movement to other countries and regions. Nevertheless, fewer Afghans made the perilous journey to Europe in 2016. UNHCR found that out of approximately 362,000 individuals who risked their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe in 2016, 42,000 were Afghans, accounting for 12 per cent of arrivals. This is a significant decrease when compared to

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<sup>1</sup> Available from [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_in\\_armed\\_conflict\\_annual\\_report\\_2016\\_16\\_feb\\_2017\\_final.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_annual_report_2016_16_feb_2017_final.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan recorded 3,512 child casualties (i.e. 923 deaths and 2,589 injured). This is the highest number of child casualties recorded in a single year.

2015 when Afghans accounted for 21 per cent out of approximately 1 million arrivals. Of those who sought safety and security in Europe, many were young men and unaccompanied children.

With respect to Afghan refugee returnees, there was a sudden surge in return from Pakistan in the second half of 2016. Approximately 370,000 Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan, compared to some 58,000 in 2015, marking a 10-year high. Post-return monitoring shows that among the reasons for return were complex incidents, including harassment and pressure by authorities; economic hardship; the Afghan government's promise of land and shelter upon arrival; the prospect of UNHCR's repatriation grant (i.e. US\$ 400 in the second half of 2016); the introduction of formal border management controls at Torkham; heightened anxiety over Proof of Registration cards' validity; the enhanced implementation of Pakistan's National Action Plan against terrorism affecting both Pakistani and Afghan nationals; and the campaign of the Afghan government in Pakistan calling for Afghans to return home. A further 690,000 undocumented Afghans returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan in the course of 2016. UNHCR's repatriation programme for Afghan refugees was temporarily suspended for the winter period in December 2016.

During a conference held in Brussels in October 2016, the international community recognized that support for development in Afghanistan is key to ensuring that returns are sustainable. Donors pledged US\$ 15.2 billion over the next four years to promote political and economic stability, the building of State capacities and development. In this regard, translating commitments into action will be crucial to support programmes that are led by the Government of Afghanistan and which aim to benefit all Afghans, including displaced populations.

In Myanmar, the deteriorating security situation in some parts of the country has resulted in increasing levels of internal displacement and triggered displacement across the border. As of the end of February 2017, an estimated 69,000 people had fled from northern Rakhine State to Bangladesh following a violent attack on border guard posts in October 2016. While the United Nations has documented widespread human rights violations in northern Rakhine State,<sup>3</sup> humanitarian access is limited. In Bangladesh, the Office is working with the authorities to look at better ways of coordinating the refugee response. Advocacy is ongoing with the Government of Bangladesh for borders to remain open to people seeking safety from violence and in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.

There has also been an escalation in armed conflict in the States of Kachin and northern Shan, which has led to further displacement. Without a ceasefire agreement, the situation of displaced communities remains precarious.

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

### **Safeguarding access to protection and asylum**

In 2017, UNHCR will continue to advocate and support the establishment or improvement of the asylum procedures of States, as well as promote protection-sensitive systems for the management of mixed movements in the region. The Office is committed to working with States and other stakeholders to identify alternatives to detention for asylum-seekers, ensure access to protection and establish mechanisms for achieving solutions for persons of concern to UNHCR, including through regional schemes. This may include labour mobility migration agreements.

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<sup>3</sup> See the "Report of the OHCHR mission to Bangladesh - Interviews with Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016", which is available from <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/MM/FlashReport3Feb2017.pdf>.

In South-East Asia, the Bali Process is an important step forward in addressing the root causes of maritime movements. UNHCR will continue to support this process in 2017. In November 2016, States agreed to set up a task force on planning and preparedness to respond to large movements of migrants and refugees.<sup>4</sup> The task force aims at developing the early warning capabilities of States, as well as their capacity to coordinate action at an operational level in the event of a large influx of irregular migrants. The task force will also promote the exchange of best practices in dealing with large-scale displacements, including with a view to harmonizing measures for detection, search and rescue, disembarkation and shelter management.

The Thai government has adopted a cabinet resolution to establish a national screening mechanism to identify refugees in mixed movements. UNHCR is working with the authorities in implementing the necessary procedures related to this cabinet resolution.

UNHCR continues to work with the Government of Pakistan to address reported cases of unlawful arrests and detention of refugees. The Office welcomes the Federal Cabinet of Pakistan's adoption of a national policy relating to the management of refugees and Afghan nationals. The policy covers four areas: the extension of the tripartite agreement on voluntary repatriation and the validity of the proof of registration cards until 31 December 2017; the implementation of a visa regime for different categories of Afghans; the enactment of a national refugee law; and documentation for unregistered Afghans, including a directive for Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority to issue biometric cards.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, great strides have been made to improve refugee access to health care. In September 2016, the second phase of implementation of the country's universal public health insurance scheme was launched. Access to this scheme helps to address the health care needs of refugees, as well as the financial challenges usually involved in obtaining health care services, including for surgery or hospitalization. In 2017, UNHCR will continue to support the efforts of authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran to ensure that all registered refugees have access to the scheme.

The Iranian government also continued to implement last year's presidential decree allowing undocumented Afghan children to enrol in local schools. As a result, some 48,000 undocumented Afghan children were enrolled in local schools during the previous academic year, with an additional 51,000 enrolling in the upcoming year.

Regarding legal developments in Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, under the auspices of the Almaty Process and with UNHCR's support, developed regional guidelines on how to identify and refer asylum-seekers and refugees at border crossings. These will provide concrete and practical guidance on how to manage mixed migration flows in the Central Asian context.

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

In 2017, UNHCR will continue to engage with relevant governments to implement the activities set out in the "Regional plan on building resilience and solutions for Afghan refugees in South-West Asia".<sup>5</sup> These will be in line with the "Solutions strategy for Afghan refugees to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance

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<sup>4</sup> The Bali Process's Co-Chairs' Statement is available from [http://www.baliprocess.net/UserFiles/baliprocess/File/Bali%20Process%2011th%20AHG%20SOM%20-%20Co-Chairs%27%20Statement\\_16%20Nov%202016%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.baliprocess.net/UserFiles/baliprocess/File/Bali%20Process%2011th%20AHG%20SOM%20-%20Co-Chairs%27%20Statement_16%20Nov%202016%20FINAL.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Available from <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Regional%20Plan%20-%20Building%20resilience%20%26%20solutions%20Afghan%20refugees%20in%20SWA%201JUL16-31DEC17.pdf>.

to host countries”,<sup>6</sup> which was endorsed by the Governments of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. Ahead of the resumption of the repatriation programme in Afghanistan in 2017, consultations with the governments concerned, partners and the international community are being held to design a coherent response to the needs of displaced populations, including IDPs, refugee returnees, undocumented returnees and returnees from Europe, and develop long-term reintegration and development programmes.

Furthermore, the Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan will continue to participate in tripartite as well as quadripartite meetings with UNHCR, to coordinate efforts to achieve solutions for Afghan refugees. A recent tripartite commission meeting, which was hosted by the Government of Pakistan in Islamabad on 14-15 February 2017, addressed issues related to the future of the voluntary repatriation process.

Expectations over possible improvements in Myanmar’s south-eastern region led to increasing interest in return among Myanmar refugees in Thailand. In October 2016, the first pilot voluntary return exercise, which involved 72 Myanmar refugees from Thailand, was carried out with the support of the two governments. Although numbers are modest, these returns may help pave the way towards a process of repatriation that could eventually resolve one of Asia’s most protracted refugee situations. Once development efforts in Myanmar begin to yield sufficient results and more people opt for voluntary return, UNHCR will bolster its support of the process.

In 2016, some 850 Sri Lankan refugees returned from India, nearly twice as many as the previous year. In India, the Office continues to undertake information dissemination, logistical support and return assistance, as well as advocacy in collaboration with the authorities and other partners. UNHCR assists each returnee upon arrival in Sri Lanka and provides cash grants for transportation and reintegration as well as non-food items. Protection monitoring in areas of return following registration, which serves as a tool for advocacy, is also conducted. Moreover, returnees are referred or directed to different services, including legal advice on housing, land and property issues, and documentation. In 2017, UNHCR will continue its work, collaborating closely with the concerned authorities and other stakeholders in India and Sri Lanka.

In Nepal, an important milestone was reached in terms of large-scale resettlement, with over 107,000 refugees from Bhutan resettled out of camps to third countries. UNHCR will continue to work with the relevant governments to seek durable solutions for some 11,000 refugees who remain in camps. In addition, Australia, Japan and the Republic of Korea welcomed a number of refugees, including Myanmar refugees, for resettlement in the course of 2016.

### **Ensuring protection and durable solutions for internally displaced persons**

As set out in the “Regional plan on building resilience and solutions for Afghan refugees in South-West Asia”, UNHCR will carry out community-based projects in Afghanistan targeting internally displaced communities as well as returnees, including through the construction and restoration of communal infrastructure to start up community-based livelihood interventions. During the winter period, UNHCR supported some 25,000 households, mainly IDPs, returnees and vulnerable local residents, through cash assistance and the provision of non-food relief items.

Meanwhile, the return of families displaced from North Waziristan Agency in the province of Khost, Afghanistan started early this year. As of 2 February 2017, some

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<sup>6</sup> The solutions strategy is a regional, multi-year initiative, under which governments, along with more than 50 humanitarian and development partners, support the development and implementation of country-specific portfolios of projects. More information on the Solutions Strategy is available from [www.unhcr.org/afghan-solutions-strategy.html](http://www.unhcr.org/afghan-solutions-strategy.html).

4,500 individuals had returned to Pakistan. Inside Pakistan, over 1.3 million IDPs have gone back to their areas of origin since the Government of Pakistan began large-scale return operations in March 2015. The government plans to facilitate the return of the remaining 450,000 IDPs by mid-2017.

As part of its inter-agency response in Myanmar, UNHCR will continue to work with partners and the government to protect and assist IDPs in Kachin and Rakhine States. However, limited and unpredictable access remains an obstacle to providing humanitarian assistance. UNHCR is urging the Government of Myanmar and all parties to ensure regular humanitarian access to all affected populations in the areas of the conflict.

The Sri Lankan government's adoption of the United Nations-supported "National policy on durable solutions for conflict-affected displacement"<sup>7</sup> in August 2016 was a significant achievement in terms of addressing the rights and needs of IDPs, refugee returnees and other persons of concern to UNHCR. In light of these developments, at the end of 2016, UNHCR reoriented its three-decade IDP operation in Sri Lanka. The Office will continue to advocate with the government and development partners to play a greater role in ensuring the sustainable return of Sri Lankan refugees and reintegration of IDPs. Significant support is still required to ensure the provision of other services and assistance, such as shelter, water and sanitation, livelihoods and awareness-raising on documentation.

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

A number of States in the region have made marked progress in preventing and reducing statelessness, often with the support of UNHCR and civil society actors. The Office aims to increase momentum towards ending statelessness in Asia and the Pacific in 2017. Last year, the Government of Thailand endorsed the goal of achieving zero statelessness in the country by 2024 and announced a series of policy measures which will further prevent and reduce statelessness. Since 2012, more than 18,000 stateless people were granted Thai nationality.

In December 2016, the Thai Cabinet also approved guidance and measures to address the problems relating to the legal status of people in the country, particularly for individuals who were born to registered stateless people and those who have graduated from University or equivalent higher education establishments. This new guidance supports previous measures established to expedite and improve processes relating to nationality for communities affected by statelessness. UNHCR, in partnership with other actors, will continue to support these efforts by assisting stateless individuals to apply for nationality.

The Governments of Indonesia and the Philippines, together with UNHCR, continued to assist people of Indonesian descent residing in Mindanao in the southern Philippines. In 2016, 4,112 of the registered population of 8,745 people of Indonesian descent were confirmed as Indonesian, Filipino or dual nationals. In Malaysia, UNHCR also works with partners to register and provide legal assistance for stateless people in order for them to apply for nationality. By the end of January 2017, approximately 1,500 stateless people out of 12,350 registered with UNHCR's partner had acquired Malaysian nationality, and more than 11,000 nationality applications had been submitted to the authorities and were awaiting a decision.

In Central Asia, over 11,000 people acquired a nationality or had their nationality confirmed in the previous year. For example, in December 2016, the President of Uzbekistan signed a decree by which 179 stateless persons became Uzbek nationals, and Turkmenistan granted nationality to over 1,380 stateless persons in a single day. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also made legislative changes with a view to

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<sup>7</sup> Available from <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/final%20policy.pdf>.

preventing and reducing statelessness. UNHCR will continue to provide technical assistance to governments in support of their ongoing efforts in 2017.

## **C Financial information**

In the past several years, UNHCR has scaled back its operations due to financial constraints and the resulting impact on human resources. The 2017 comprehensive needs budget for Asia and the Pacific, which was approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme at its sixty-seventh session, was US\$ 545 million. The financial requirements for South-West Asia, which comprises the operations in the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, represent approximately 66 per cent of the total budget for the Asia and the Pacific region. The remaining 34 per cent of the budget is allocated to small and medium-sized operations, including Myanmar and the countries receiving Myanmar refugees. However, the budget for smaller operations (excluding Myanmar and countries receiving Myanmar refugees) has decreased by 34 per cent since 2012.

In 2016, contributions for the Asia and the Pacific region amounted to US\$ 293 million, or 44 per cent, of the 2016 overall requirements of US\$ 671 million. As of 31 January 2017, contributions totalling US\$ 30 million (6 per cent) towards the region's 2017 financial requirements have been recorded. Furthermore, private donors in the region, including in Australia, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Thailand, made generous contributions amounting to some US\$ 88 million.

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