

Update on UNHCR operations in Asia and the Pacific

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

UNHCR remains committed to pursuing inclusive protection and innovative solutions for the 14.3 million refugees and other forcibly displaced and stateless people in Asia and the Pacific, amid continuing challenges of large-scale displacement, forced returns, restricted humanitarian access and discrimination. By mid-2023, the region was home to 7.2 million refugees (and people in refugee-like situations), 245,000 asylum-seekers and 6,900 refugee returnees; 5.3 million internally displaced persons and 175,000 internally displaced returnees; and 2.5 million stateless people.

More opportunities to achieve durable solutions were available in 2023, notably through resettlement and complementary pathways. UNHCR submitted the cases of over 39,000 of the most vulnerable refugees living in Bangladesh, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Malaysia, Pakistan and Thailand for resettlement consideration, an increase of 86 per cent compared to 2022. In 2023, more than 8,500 individuals are estimated to have accessed complementary pathways in the region, a number projected to increase in 2024 through expanded partnerships.

A dramatic increase in irregular maritime movements put more lives at risk. Between 2021 and 2023, the number grew by 483 per cent, with some 4,500 Rohingya – of whom 66 per cent were women and children – embarking on dangerous sea journeys. Nearly 570 individuals were reported dead or missing in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal last year. In Indonesia, an increase of 290 per cent in boat arrivals placed a strain on local reception capabilities.

Climate change continues to reshape the regional risk landscape, with the Asia and the Pacific region forecast to be most affected, relative to global averages,¹ by heavy precipitation, drought, heatwaves and warming winds. In line with its Focus Area Strategic Plan for Climate Action and the regional Climate Action Plan, UNHCR will contribute to building the climate resilience of refugees and other displaced people, advocating for and supporting their inclusion in national adaptation and disaster risk reduction plans, and advancing innovative programming and partnerships in areas such as clean energy, sustainable livelihoods, waste management, greening, research and analysis.

The growing use of digital channels has both provided opportunities to expand the Office’s ability to reach the most vulnerable and increased risks of online misinformation and disinformation. UNHCR is strengthening its capacity to address information integrity and counter the rise in online harm targeting refugees in the region, while mitigating the impact of misinformation on protection space.

To foster resilience and solutions for refugees and affected communities, the Office will facilitate the implementation of situational pledges for Afghan and Rohingya refugees and some 160 pledges made by States and other stakeholders in Asia and the Pacific at the Global Refugee Forum held in December 2023.

¹ See Asia Pacific Disaster Report 2022 for ESCAP Subregions: Summary for Policymakers, available at: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/Asia%20Pacific%20Disaster%20Report%202022%20for%20ESCAP%20Subregions%20Summary%20for%20Policymakers_Rev.%206-4.pdf.

Afghanistan situation

Some 3.3 million Afghans remained internally displaced due to conflict, with smaller numbers returning to their areas of origin as compared to the immediate aftermath of the armed conflict in 2021. In 2023, over 36,800 Afghan refugees, mainly from Pakistan, returned to Afghanistan under the UNHCR assisted voluntary repatriation programme, a substantial increase from the more than 6,500 Afghan refugees who returned in 2022. Together with partners, UNHCR continued efforts to improve conditions for sustainable return through an area-based approach in priority areas of return and reintegration, while providing individual assistance to returnees.

In view of the mounting humanitarian needs, UNHCR continues its scaled-up operations in Afghanistan, prioritizing life-saving assistance, protection and solutions for internally displaced persons, while also building community resilience in line with the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees and the inter-agency durable solutions working group in Afghanistan. In 2023, UNHCR assisted over 1.5 million people, almost 80 per cent of whom were women and girls, including some 364,000 people who received cash assistance.

UNHCR provided psychosocial support, emergency shelter and legal assistance, including on civil documentation and housing, land and property issues. It also established community centres and schools and increased small business opportunities, especially for women. Efforts were affected by edicts issued by the de facto authorities restricting women and girls' activities and access to education, work and public spaces. In line with the recommendations of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, UNHCR continues to advocate for the uninterrupted and non-discriminatory delivery of humanitarian assistance, as well as for the broader rights of women and girls, especially in the areas of education and work.

Qatar continued in its role as the Chair of the Core Group of the Support Platform of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, with the Netherlands (Kingdom of) as the Vice-Chair. The Core Group has helped generate some \$777 million in contributions to UNHCR and other significant investments in the region since first convening in 2020. Approximately \$500 million was also pledged for the Afghanistan situation at the Global Refugee Forum.

As of November 2023, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan hosted 3.4 million and 1.9 million Afghan refugees, including individuals in refugee-like situations, respectively, in addition to over 2.4 million Afghans of other statuses. Iran (Islamic Republic of) continued to include Afghans in the country to expand its health and education policies, working in partnership with UNHCR to further extend secondary health care to the most vulnerable refugees. In Pakistan, in 2023, the authorities deported undocumented and other Afghans in line with its "Illegal foreigners' repatriation plan". To date, over 500,000 Afghans have returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan since 15 September 2023, including some 30,000 deportees. UNHCR and other partners continue to advocate for a screening mechanism to identify individuals in need of international protection. The Government of Iran (Islamic Republic of) also deported over 690,000 undocumented Afghans in 2023. UNHCR continues to advise against the involuntary returns of Afghans in accordance with its global non-return advisory.

The arrival of over 1.6 million Afghans in neighbouring countries since 2021 has considerably strained the resources of host countries, which now host nearly 8 million Afghans. The 2024 Refugee Response Plan for the Afghanistan Situation will aim to assist 7.3 million people, including 4.8 million Afghans and 2.5 million host community members. It aims to ensure that basic needs are met, while advancing solutions through coordinated humanitarian-development-peace nexus programming that reinforces local and national systems in host countries. In 2024, the Refugee Response Plan becomes a two-year plan that provides a more predictable response and opportunities for mid- to long-term solutions, focusing on the two major Afghan refugee-hosting countries – Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan – where 90 per cent of Afghan refugees worldwide reside.

Myanmar situation

The Myanmar situation accounted for 4.5 million people of concern to UNHCR, including 1.7 million stateless Rohingya. Conflict escalated across the country in late 2023, triggering over 700,000 new internal displacements in a two-month period and bringing the total number of internally displaced persons to an estimated 2.6 million people as of January 2024. Some 117,000 refugees also fled to India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Of those, an estimated 46,100 people reached Thailand, although some subsequently returned to Myanmar. Compounding the humanitarian and protection crisis, the consequences of Cyclone Mocha continued to be felt by affected communities in Myanmar.

Despite insecurity and access constraints, UNHCR maintained its field presence in multiple locations and worked with partners to assess protection needs and alleviate some of the most pressing basic needs of affected communities. Core relief items and small-scale cash assistance were distributed, including in the hardest-to-reach areas.

A comprehensive regional approach seeks to expand solutions for Rohingya refugees and sustain support for host countries, with a focus on safeguarding the right to return. As affirmed by United Nations General Assembly and Security Council resolutions in 2023 and 2022 respectively, creating conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable repatriation will be prioritized. UNHCR has engaged in bilateral and multilateral efforts to mobilize resources and advance solutions for Rohingya refugees, while advocating for predictable access to continue to implement community-led projects together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Rakhine State, including programmes to create conditions conducive to voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration.

The High-Level Meeting on Rohingya Refugees in October 2023 affirmed the support of Member States and partners for this approach and mobilized a “whole-of-society” effort to pledge support at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023, where 25 entities recorded 42 commitments as part of the Rohingya multi-stakeholder pledge. As the Chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Indonesia helped draw further attention to the plight of the Rohingya, and in 2023, ASEAN reiterated its readiness to support a voluntary repatriation process.

In October 2023, Bangladesh and Myanmar organized a second “come and tell” visit during which Myanmar authorities travelled to Bangladesh to meet refugees. Heightened insecurity in late 2023 displaced a further 100,000 individuals from different communities in Rakhine, while the 630,000 Rohingya remaining in Rakhine State continued to face restrictions on movement, difficulties in obtaining documentation, and limited access to livelihoods and basic services.

Bangladesh continues to offer sanctuary to some 969,000 Rohingya. At the end of 2023, the Joint Response Plan amounting to \$876 million was 49 per cent funded. Food rations were reduced by 33 per cent in 2023 and increased again by 25 per cent only – effective January 2024 – to the current amount of \$10 per person per month. Some 295,000 refugee students have gained access to primary and secondary education, with many Rohingya students following the Myanmar curriculum. UNHCR, the United Nations Children’s Fund and the World Food Programme, along with other humanitarian partners, provided support to the national authorities and partners in addressing the humanitarian needs of some 32,000 refugees relocated to Bhasan Char. Promoting sustainable government investment in the island is also a key priority. In the camps, refugee families have had to contend with a spike in criminality and killings. The year 2023 saw a 180 percent increase in serious security incidents when compared to 2022. The Government of Bangladesh has intensified law enforcement efforts and coordination, and UNHCR has provided technical support to ensure protection-sensitive and community-responsive policing.

UNHCR continues to urge governments in the region to continue to provide asylum to the Rohingya and other newly arriving refugees forced to flee the surge in fighting. Reduced funding, insecurity and the conflict in Myanmar have contributed to an increase in dangerous onward movements. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR launched a \$5.4 million emergency appeal to scale up the response in Indonesia where 11 boats arrived within a six-week period at the end of 2023. In addition to stepping up

regional coordination through a route-based approach and enhancing cooperation to enable safe and predictable disembarkation – including through the activation of the Consultative Mechanism of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime – robust support of the 2024 Joint Response Plan is critical to build refugee and host community resilience and improve the protection environment.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2023 plan and updated plans for 2024

Access to protection and strengthening asylum capacities

Challenges to accessing protection and asylum in the region, including restrictions on movement, border closures and the lack of national asylum systems, have contributed to large-scale as well as isolated incidents of refoulement, deportation, pushbacks at sea, arrest and detention. This included individuals who fled Afghanistan and Myanmar, for whom UNHCR has advised against involuntary returns. In this context, UNHCR continued to advocate for alternatives to detention and for adherence to the principle of non-refoulement, while also advancing multi-stakeholder discussions on protection at sea and counter-trafficking.

UNHCR supported countries in the region with developing and improving asylum systems in line with international standards, through technical advice, amicus curiae briefs to courts and collaboration with national authorities to strengthen refugee status determination procedures and protection systems. The Office also engaged with United Nations partners and regional and national human rights institutions to advocate for enhanced protection space and access to rights for forcibly displaced and stateless people.

Increased efforts were taken to protect children and prevent and mitigate the risks of gender-based violence through the roll-out of the “Engaging men in accountable practices” programme in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Thailand. UNHCR supported 10 refugee women-led organizations in partnership with the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network to address the risks that those affected by gender-based violence face and their needs. Case management was strengthened through training of UNHCR and partner staff in 11 country operations², in collaboration with the International Rescue Committee and Plan International.

A new system to improve the management of feedback from refugees to UNHCR was rolled out in Afghanistan and Iran (the Islamic Republic of) and is being tailored to improve follow-up to such feedback in other operations, including Bangladesh. UNHCR is enhancing the various channels through which refugees can engage with the organization and is testing a self-service solution and the use of mobile messaging applications in the region.

Expanding solutions for protracted situations

UNHCR continues to address barriers to voluntary repatriation through integrated programming in areas of return. Ongoing instability in Afghanistan and Myanmar has hindered large-scale voluntary return, though UNHCR ensures that the reintegration needs of Afghan refugees voluntarily returning are adequately supported. In India, the data of 92,000 Sri Lankan refugees has been digitalized to enable disaggregated analysis which will facilitate solutions, including possible naturalization for those who are eligible.

The number of resettlement submissions of refugees from Myanmar grew significantly in 2023, with more than 27,000 submissions, including the cases of 20,000 Rohingya refugees, and over 6,700 departures, including 3,200 Rohingya refugees. The resettlement of Afghan refugees was also scaled up, with more than 9,600 cases submitted for resettlement in 2023, and the departure of more than 3,300 Afghan refugees despite obstacles in obtaining exit permits. In 2024, UNHCR will continue to advocate that refugees be exempt from payment of overstay fees when accessing third-country solutions. With the support of Member States

² Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Thailand.

to address the substantial needs in the region, UNHCR expects that resettlement can become an option for more refugees.

Harnessing diverse partnerships remains a priority. Bringing together the expertise and comparative advantages of both organizations, UNHCR and the World Bank established the Strategic Analysis Hub for the Afghanistan situation to develop joint analysis that informs operational responses. A joint study examining displacement dynamics in Afghanistan using massive mobile data also provided further opportunities for evidence-based interventions. Regional consultations with 161 non-governmental and refugee-led organizations, organized in collaboration with the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees, the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, identified opportunities for joint action to advance inclusion and solutions for refugees, internally displaced persons and the stateless.

Additional emphasis has been placed on joint advocacy, skills-building and employment with private sector partners to facilitate access to livelihood opportunities and economic inclusion. With growing openings in remote working or digital employment, UNHCR is investing in digital literacy, enhancing the use of online platforms and testing ways in which refugees can safely engage in the digital economy and explore labour mobility options. A digital literacy training pilot project in Indonesia, which is implemented in collaboration with five refugee-led organizations, will be complemented by another pilot initiative supporting internships and skills-building with technology companies to help make future employment more viable.

Protection and solutions for internally displaced persons

The pace of return among internally displaced persons slowed within the region in 2023. In Afghanistan, 1.5 million returns have been recorded since 2021, while in Myanmar, internal displacement grew from 370,000 at the start of 2021 to over 2.6 million people by the end of 2023.

In Afghanistan, UNHCR works towards solutions to internal displacement, in line with the commitments set out in the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement. Standardized, coordinated and common data collection and indicator development remain a goal to advance an integrated, solutions-oriented approach. In Myanmar, UNHCR will continue to prioritize life-saving assistance and community-based protection activities, providing shelter, livelihoods and support for solutions, wherever possible. UNHCR advocates for access to safety for internally displaced persons and promotes protection standards in the context of premature returns and relocation due to camp closures, while building capacity in addressing legal rights, including citizenship, and housing, land and property.

In the Philippines, a joint IOM, UNDP and UNHCR project funded by the United Nations Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund aims to operationalize the humanitarian-development-peace nexus to seek sustainable solutions for internally displaced persons through legal and policy frameworks. In this context, particular emphasis will be placed on fostering community-level policies that complement national and sub-national legal frameworks.

Addressing statelessness

In the region, UNHCR conducted policy advocacy and capacity-building activities with partners to identify, reduce and prevent statelessness. In 2023, some countries successfully resolved individual instances of statelessness, particularly in Central Asia, while in the Philippines, authorities continued their progress in addressing birth registration gaps.

As part of the regional steering group on civil registration and vital statistics of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, UNHCR continues to advocate for the inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless people in national civil registration systems and universal birth registration. Together with the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process, UNHCR developed a toolkit for inclusive civil registration and guidance note on birth registration for civil registrars, which show pathways towards universal birth registration, addressing an important risk factor for statelessness in the region.

In August 2023, the Government of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the United Nations Population Fund and UNHCR conducted a joint workshop to promote the implementation of the International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics in the upcoming national census. The Government of Viet Nam and UNHCR also co-hosted a roundtable on civil registration, legal identity documentation and the prevention of statelessness in Hanoi in October 2023 to encourage the exchange of good practices among Southeast Asian senior officials and help generate momentum to address statelessness.

C. Financial information

The Executive Committee has approved the 2024 budget of \$993.2 million for the Asia and the Pacific region. The breakdown of requirements by impact area for 2024 is as follows: realizing basic rights in safe environments (\$398.8 million); attaining favourable protection environments (\$263.5 million); empowering communities and achieving gender equality (\$192.4 million); and securing solutions (\$138.4 million). As of 31 January 2024, some 18 per cent of the Asia and the Pacific region’s 2024 financial requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.
