

## **Update on UNHCR operations in Asia and the Pacific**

### **A. Situational analysis, including new developments**

The Asia and the Pacific region was home to 15.9 million people who were forcibly displaced, stateless, returnees or others of concern to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At the end of June 2024, this included 7.1 million refugees (and people in refugee-like situations); 393,400 asylum-seekers; 35,500 refugee returnees; 6.6 million internally displaced persons; 367,800 internally displaced returnees; and 2.5 million stateless persons. This marked a 3 per cent increase compared to the end of 2023, driven largely by internal displacement within Myanmar, with some 3.4 million people displaced within the country as of September 2024.

While voluntary refugee returns remained limited in the region, third-country solutions for refugees were expanded in 2023, and efforts continued in the first half of 2024, including through strengthened resettlement programmes for the vulnerable refugees living in Bangladesh, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Pakistan and Thailand. In 2023, complementary pathways also provided solutions to more than 8,500 individuals in the region, with scope to increase in 2024 through expanded partnerships on labour mobility, enhanced cooperation on family reunification and further pathways for education.

Irregular maritime movements continued to put more lives at risk, with nearly 420 individuals reported dead or missing in or around the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal in 2023. This worrisome trend looked set to continue in 2024, with initial reports of some 200 lives lost in the first three quarters, mostly on routes to Indonesia and Malaysia. A significant increase in cross-border boat movements across the Naf River was also observed as people fled violence in Myanmar.

The climate emergency continued to disproportionately affect the region, as evidenced in 2024 with severe flooding in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as in Bangladesh due to Cyclone Remal. UNHCR continued to work with partners to strengthen the resilience of refugees and other displaced persons, and advocate for their inclusion in national adaptation and disaster risk reduction plans.

#### **Afghanistan situation**

Approximately 3.2 million Afghans continued to be internally displaced as a result of conflict. While internally displaced persons have been returning to their places of origin, fewer returned in 2024 compared to the same period in 2023.

UNHCR enhanced its operations in Afghanistan after August 2021 to address the extensive humanitarian needs, providing life-saving assistance, protection and solutions for internally displaced persons and returnees. From January to August 2024, UNHCR assisted some 896,000 people in the country, 54 per cent of whom were women and girls.

By mid-2024, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan continued to host 3.8 million and 1.6 million Afghan refugees respectively, including those in refugee-like situations. In addition, there were nearly 2.2 million Afghans with other statuses in these countries. The situation remained challenging as high levels of inflation and limited employment and livelihood opportunities made it difficult for vulnerable Afghans to afford basic necessities.

In Pakistan, following the operationalization of plans to order undocumented foreigners to leave the country in late 2023, hundreds of thousands of Afghans have returned to Afghanistan, including some who were deported. The Government of Iran (Islamic Republic of) also returned many, mostly undocumented Afghans. UNHCR continues to advise against the involuntary return of Afghans in accordance with its updated guidance note on the international protection needs of people fleeing Afghanistan, which was issued in February 2023.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly important in light of the worsening human rights situation for women and girls in Afghanistan, following the country's adoption of the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in August 2024.

Following the adoption of a multi-stakeholder pledge for resilience and solutions for the Afghanistan situation at the Global Refugee Forum held in 2023, 14 pledges were made by 12 actors, in addition to a broad range of commitments for Afghan refugees made in the context of other pledges. Follow-up on the implementation of pledges and coordination between pledging entities was being conducted through the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees.

### Myanmar situation

The Myanmar situation accounted for 5.2 million people with and for whom UNHCR works, including 1.75 million stateless Rohingya by mid-2024. Conflict escalated and intensified in Myanmar, exacerbating the humanitarian and protection situation, and triggered new and secondary displacement at an alarming rate, bringing the total number of internally displaced persons to an estimated 3.4 million as of September 2024. In addition, some 147,000 refugees were reported to have fled to Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand since the military takeover in February 2021.

Civilians caught in the escalating conflict in the Rakhine State have been killed while attempting to flee the fighting. Others faced grave protection concerns and elevated intercommunal tensions. The 634,000 Rohingya remaining in the Rakhine State, the vast majority of whom are stateless, continue to experience significant restrictions on movement, difficulties in obtaining documentation, and limited access to livelihoods and basic services.

Despite insecurity and access constraints across the country, UNHCR and partners have been working to assess and alleviate some of the most pressing humanitarian and protection needs of the affected communities across almost all of Myanmar. UNHCR and partners also undertook regional preparedness and advocacy with governments of neighbouring countries to grant access to their territories and to continue to provide asylum to those fleeing the fighting in Myanmar. In May 2024, UNHCR issued a guidance note on the international protection needs of people fleeing Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> Despite advocacy, several neighbouring countries maintained or introduced closed border policies, and more than 5,300 refugees are known to have been denied entry or deported to Myanmar from countries in the region.

Bangladesh currently hosts some 994,000 Rohingya in the world's largest refugee settlement in Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal. The security situation in the refugee camps worsened in early 2024, with reports emerging of serious violence, violations against women and children, and forced recruitment. UNHCR continued to bring the camp safety and security concerns of refugees to the attention of the national authorities, and to address it, including through the training of law enforcement officials. Other efforts were also under way to improve the living conditions of refugees. The establishment of a working group consisting of the Government, the United Nations, donors and the World Bank is being discussed to identify additional opportunities for refugees.

In May 2024, the World Bank approved two new projects amounting to \$700 million for Bangladesh. Of this amount, \$585 million has been allocated to provide basic services and

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan (Update I), February 2023, available on the UNHCR Law and Policy Database, Refworld.

<sup>2</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Myanmar, May 2024, available on the UNHCR Law and Policy Database, Refworld.

build disaster and social resilience for host communities and the displaced Rohingya in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char.

In response to an increase in online misinformation, disinformation and hate speech targeting the Rohingya in countries in the region, UNHCR has piloted new approaches to monitor online narratives and to build the capacity of international organizations and civil society organizations to address misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, while establishing and strengthening partnerships with the private sector and civil society.

Following the launch of the multi-stakeholder pledge on expanded resilience and enhanced solutions for Rohingya refugees at the Global Refugee Forum in 2023, UNHCR has been working with the 26 pledging entities to match the needs of the refugees with the 45 commitments made to provide political, financial and technical support. Moreover, opportunities for resettlement for Rohingya refugees were scaled up significantly, with more than 2,500 Rohingya refugees having departed to resettlement countries in the first half of 2024. UNHCR has also been working with partners to expand avenues for Rohingya refugees to access skilled migration pathways, including through education and labour mobility.

## **B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2024 plan for the Asia and Pacific region – by impact area**

### **Attaining favourable protection environments**

Challenges in accessing protection and asylum in the region, including restrictions on movement, border closures and the lack of national asylum systems, have contributed to incidents of refoulement, deportation, arrest and detention. These challenges particularly impacted individuals from Afghanistan and Myanmar, for whom the UNHCR non-return advisories remained in effect. In this context, UNHCR continued to advocate for adherence to the principle of non-refoulement and alternatives to detention, welcoming the commitments made by Australia and Thailand at the Global Refugee Forum regarding the latter.

UNHCR supported countries to develop and improve their asylum systems in line with international standards, leveraging the pledges made by Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Thailand during the Global Refugee Forum in 2023. In Thailand, UNHCR continues to assist the authorities in implementing a national screening mechanism, which Thailand pledged to strengthen, in particular to develop protection and referral frameworks and to confer appropriate legal status to protected persons. The first session to review cases was held in June 2024. In the Philippines, UNHCR provided technical assistance to the Government's Refugees and Stateless Persons Protection Unit to strengthen refugee status determination. In Malaysia, as part of the initiative "Roadmap Toward an Asylum Framework" to improve the situation of refugees in the country, UNHCR trained immigration, police and home affairs officials on international refugee law and the use of registration as a protection and solutions tool.

### **Empowering communities and achieving gender equality**

With a view to addressing gender-based violence, programmes in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Thailand were scaled up to promote behavioural change and facilitate social transformation through community dialogues that included men and boys. UNHCR also supported the initiatives of 10 refugee women-led organizations in Indonesia and Malaysia to advance gender equality and protection from gender-based violence in their communities.

In India, UNHCR invested in the community sensitization and capacity-building of community members and partners on child protection and prevention of child marriage. In July 2024, the Government of Thailand agreed to officially withdraw its reservation under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is an important step to include refugee children in national child protection systems.

### Securing solutions

UNHCR continued to address barriers to voluntary repatriation through integrated programming in areas of return. For example, as part of the United Nations strategy, UNHCR continued to work in priority areas of return in Afghanistan to make returns more sustainable. While UNHCR has sought to scale up its work in other countries of origin, the enabling environment, including but not limited to conflict, has inhibited large-scale voluntary return in the region. That said, UNHCR continues to seize opportunities wherever possible.

Efforts to advance solutions for the 90,500 Sri Lankan refugees living in a protracted situation in India have gained momentum with a focus on local inclusion or through the provision of reintegration support for individuals who wish to voluntarily return to Sri Lanka.

While the safe, voluntary and sustainable return of refugees remains the primary objective of UNHCR, opportunities for third-country solutions and the inclusion of refugees in national systems have been sought through collaboration with host governments, partners and other States in the region. In this regard, several host countries and communities demonstrated their generosity by including refugees and providing them with access to livelihood opportunities, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees.

### *Protection and solutions for internally displaced persons*

In first half of 2024, the number of returns of internally displaced persons in the region stood at 367,800. The main countries of return were Myanmar (251,600) and the Philippines (115,000). The number of internally displaced persons returning to their places of origin in Afghanistan so far this year is 18,200. The number of returnees in Myanmar during the first six months of 2024 is close to the 2023 overall returnee figure of 276,600. However, a considerable increase in new displacements was also observed. In the Philippines, a similar trend in the parallel increase of new displacements and returnees was noted.

In Afghanistan, UNHCR continued to work towards achieving solutions to address internal displacement, in line with commitments set out in the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement.

In Myanmar, UNHCR prioritized life-saving assistance and community-based protection activities based on needs and available access, reaching some 477,500 beneficiaries as of 30 June 2024.

In the Philippines, an Internally Displaced Persons Bill was passed by the House of Representatives in August 2023. If passed by the Senate, it will provide a national legal framework for the protection of the rights of internally displaced persons and for durable solutions. In the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, which in September 2024 approved its own sub-national bill on the Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, UNHCR provided technical support to local government units to develop and implement local and regional legislation through joint programming with the International Organization of Migration and the United Nations Development Programme under the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund.

### *Eradication of statelessness*

Significant progress to prevent and eradicate statelessness was made by States in the region, including through sizable reductions of statelessness in Central Asia. In September 2024, Turkmenistan became the second country in the world, after Kyrgyzstan in 2019, to successfully resolve all known cases of statelessness on its territory. It has the distinction of being the first State to have effectively eradicated statelessness within its borders, while also taking the step of acceding to both the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

UNHCR supported civil society organizations who assisted stateless and undocumented persons in applying for nationality and legal identity documentation in several countries, including Nepal and Thailand.

In line with the advocacy by UNHCR, several countries adopted legislation to make their civil registration and vital statistics systems more accessible and inclusive to ensure that every child born on their territory is registered and documented at birth. Cambodia adopted the Law on Civil Registration, Vital Statistics and Identification in 2023, which provides for universal civil registration and corresponding civil status documentation “for all people living in the territory”, without exception. In 2023, India amended its Births and Deaths Registration Act to require the establishment of a comprehensive, permanent electronic database of all registered births and deaths. The law grants all individuals and families the right to query the database for official proof of any registered birth or death, which is particularly beneficial for verifying birth registration records in cases where individuals no longer possess a valid birth certificate. Vietnam enacted a new Law on Identification in 2023 to replace the Law on Citizen Identification of 2014. The new law, which entered into force in July 2024, extends civil registration services to migrants and foreigners and provides for the issuance of identity certificates to non-citizen persons of Vietnamese origin in the country.

This progress notwithstanding, the vast majority of Rohingya refugees in the region and those in Myanmar remained without access to nationality, signaling the need for concerted advocacy to resolve the long-standing statelessness of this population. UNHCR continued to prioritize efforts to assist States in the region to achieve universal birth registration to increase access to legal identity documents for the Rohingya through programming and technical support to States in the region on achieving universal birth registration. UNHCR also emphasized the need to remove barriers to birth registration faced by forcibly displaced and stateless persons, and supported ongoing legislative reforms to prevent statelessness at birth, particularly in relation to removing gender discrimination from nationality laws.

### **C. Financial information**

In October 2023, the Executive Committee approved the 2024 budget of \$993.2 million for the Asia and the Pacific region. The current 2024 budget for the region remains unchanged as of 31 August 2024.

The breakdown of the requirements by impact area is as follows: realizing rights in safe environments (\$422.3 million); attaining favourable protection environments (\$259.1 million); empowering communities and achieving gender equality (\$189.3 million); and securing solutions (\$122.5 million).

As of 31 August 2024, 42 per cent of the financial requirements for the Asia and the Pacific region were funded, taking into account the indicative allocation of flexible funding.