

**Presentation to the 56<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee**  
**Ms. Daisy Dell**  
**Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific**  
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Madame Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to address you today for the first time in my new capacity as the Director of the Bureau for Asia and the Pacific. It is with great pleasure that I return to this Bureau, where I had served previously as Deputy Director and, most recently, as Representative in Nepal. I see that significant progress has been made in recent years under the exceptional leadership of my predecessor, Mr. Kasidis Rochanakorn, and it will not be easy for me to match his performance.

Please allow me to elaborate on the challenges that still persist in the region. I will focus my presentation on three key issues in the Asia-Pacific region which are closely interlinked: irregular movements, protracted refugee situations, and urban refugees.

**Irregular movements**

Asia has generously hosted millions of refugees and other displaced persons over the years despite the **absence of a legal and normative framework** governing refugee protection. However, disparities in asylum practices and conditions among countries in the region present challenges, often leading to secondary movements, as asylum-seekers search for countries where they have a better chance of having their protection needs recognized and met.

Moreover, the pervasive presence of criminal smuggling and trafficking rings in the region has exacerbated the situation of **irregular movements** of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. Throughout 2012, mixed movements took place on an unprecedented scale. Hundreds of people are reported to have perished at sea along the main migration routes to Malaysia and Australia after their boats broke down or capsized. The dramatic increase in the number of boat movements and tragic maritime incidents are indications of the extent of human despair and how this is being exploited for illegal profit by transnational criminal networks.

I would like to speak to the **regional dimension** of the irregular movements of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants by sea. Push-backs, denial of disembarkation, and boats adrift for weeks will not solve a problem that clearly needs a better, more coordinated, and more compassionate approach by everyone. Genuine regional cooperation that promotes the sharing of burden and responsibility will offer asylum-seekers and refugees an alternative to dangerous and exploitative boat journeys.

As regards **rescue at sea**, we urge States to agree on protocols for the safe and quick disembarkation of rescued passengers and the provision of urgent humanitarian

assistance. Mechanisms must be in place to assess the needs of and solutions for different groups, and to provide access by UNHCR to those in need of international protection.

We are encouraged that, in recognition of the inherent challenges of dealing with population movements that affect multiple countries in the region, concerned Governments have come together to develop a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to manage irregular migration.

In South-East Asia, the regional cooperation is guided by the **Bali Process** on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime. In September 2012, a Regional Support Office was opened in Bangkok and is managed by the two co-chairs of the Bali Process, Australia and Indonesia, with the support of UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration. In two weeks, in Jakarta, a Regional Roundtable on Irregular Movements by Sea will be co-hosted by the Government of Indonesia and UNHCR in order to develop bilateral and multilateral arrangements among States affected by irregular maritime movements.

We are pleased to see that Governments in Central Asia are likewise working towards a similar regional framework to manage mixed migration flows in the region through the **Almaty Process**. In the follow-up to the Regional Conference held in 2011 on Refugee Protection and International Migration in Central Asia, a Regional Cooperation Framework and Action Plan have been developed to strengthen refugee protection and address mixed migration movements in Central Asia. A second Ministerial Conference on Refugee Protection and International Migration in Central Asia will be held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in June this year. The goals of the Conference are to endorse the Regional Cooperation Framework and Action Plan, as well as to endorse a proposed inter-governmental support mechanism for the Almaty process. The Conference is generously hosted and funded by the Government of Kazakhstan and jointly organized by UNHCR and the IOM.

The Bali and Almaty Processes provide regional platforms for dialogue and cooperation to protect asylum space and address mixed migratory flows. I hope that the respective Regional Cooperation Frameworks will continue paving the way for greater cohesion and predictability of asylum practices and, furthermore, instill a sense of ownership among Governments on refugee protection in keeping with international standards.

### **Protracted refugee situations**

Madame Chair,

I would now like to move on to the topic of protracted refugee situations. Asia is home to some of the world's largest and most protracted refugee populations. The Afghanistan situation remains the most critical challenge that UNHCR is confronted with in the region. Despite the absence of legal frameworks governing refugee protection, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan continue to generously host some 2.6 million registered **Afghan refugees** for over 3 decades. It is still today the

largest protracted refugee situation in the world. Given the uncertainty of the transition period that faces Afghanistan in the years ahead, it is essential for the international community to step up its engagement with predictable and sustainable support to address the humanitarian dimension and strengthen the search for solutions.

The Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, in collaboration with UNHCR, initiated a quadripartite dialogue in 2011 to develop the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries). The Strategy represents the consensus of the three Governments, UNHCR, and relevant UN Agencies to develop a multi-year roadmap to continue to effectively address the Afghan refugee situation and promote sustainable solutions during the next critical years. The Strategy was endorsed at an international stakeholders' conference in May 2012.

The Solutions Strategy supports continued voluntary repatriation, strengthened reintegration through community-based investments in areas of high return in Afghanistan, and the preservation of asylum space and assistance to host communities in asylum countries. Country work plans have been elaborated and the implementation of the strategy is well under way in the three countries, including strong advocacy and fundraising initiatives. A Quadripartite Steering Committee was established as a platform for coordination, and at its first meeting in Geneva in October 2012, the terms of reference for the Committee and the National Steering Committees were endorsed. The second meeting, hosted by the Government of Afghanistan, took place in Abu Dhabi in January 2013.

The successful implementation of the Solutions Strategy requires the robust engagement of development partners and the mobilization and the alignment of development resources to support the outcome of the Strategy. As a key priority, the three Governments and UNHCR will embark on a joint resource mobilization process to seek the support of the international community. To this end, we appeal for the continued solidarity, engagement and strong support of member states to this Strategy, as we move forward on this together.

Let me now turn to some other major long-standing refugee situations in the region.

In **Nepal**, the camp population of refugees from Bhutan has decreased from an initial figure of 110,000 people registered at the onset of the large-scale resettlement programme in 2007, to some 40,000 people at the end of 2012. This unprecedented burden-sharing on an international scale has helped to find solutions for over 75,000 people who were resettled to third countries. I would like to thank the member states of the Nepal Core Group for their continued support and strong commitment over the years. They played a key role which I very much appreciated during the time I was in Nepal. Should the current pace of resettlement continue, the remaining refugee population is expected to be reduced to less than 15,000 by the end of 2015.

UNHCR continues to engage in constructive dialogue with the Bhutanese Government with regard to voluntary repatriation.

We are also greatly encouraged by the recent political developments in **Myanmar**, as they point to the possibility of a breakthrough in two of Asia's longest-standing refugee camp situations: Thailand and Bangladesh. Other countries hosting large numbers of refugees from Myanmar, such as Malaysia and India, may also be impacted. In Myanmar, peace negotiations with ethnic minority groups in the south-east of the country created prospects for the return of IDPs and refugees. UNHCR, together with governments and partners in the region, is making strides in preparing for the possible voluntary repatriation of refugees at the Thai-Myanmarese border and the wider region. This includes profiling the refugees to determine their return intentions, to ensure the voluntary nature of their return, and to identify reintegration needs in areas of return.

The inter-communal violence that broke out in Rakhine State in June and October last year, however, has led to the internal displacement of some 115,000 people. It has also led to a marked increase in the number of irregular maritime movements of Rohingya from the region. While figures are difficult to confirm due to the nature of these movements, independent observers estimate that over 6,000 people departed from the Bay of Bengal area towards other countries in the region during the month of December. Returning to my earlier point on irregular maritime movements, efforts to address such irregular movement of Rohingya, including inter-State cooperation and burden-sharing mechanisms, are urgently required from the international community to prevent further loss of life.

In 2012, we also saw an escalation of conflict in Kachin State, with an estimated 75,000 persons displaced internally as a result. UNHCR is working with the Government and others to respond to the needs of displaced persons in Rakhine and Kachin States while working to strengthen our operational capacity in south-eastern Myanmar. Together with other UN and NGO partners, we recently were able to access Hpakant area, west of the Kachin state capital, and delivered much-needed assistance. This was the first time that the UN was able to reach IDPs in this area since January last year.

### **Urban refugees**

Madame Chair,

Of the approximately 11 million persons of concern in Asia, including refugees, IDPs, stateless persons and others, less than 1.3 million live in refugee camps. The overwhelming majority are located in urban environments. While urban settings can offer certain advantages compared to camp settings, such as freedom of movement and livelihoods opportunities, they also contain significant risks for vulnerable populations.

While continuing to advocate for legal and institutional frameworks for refugee protection, UNHCR supported measures to increase the protection and self-

sufficiency of refugees living in urban areas. The health insurance scheme for registered refugees living in the Islamic Republic of **Iran** was introduced in 2011 and provides essential health services to the population. Moreover, the issuance of work permits enables this population to take advantage of livelihood opportunities in the country. In addition, in 2011, the Iranian Government initiated an innovative approach in managing the undocumented Afghan population through the Comprehensive Regularization Plan. Up to now, under the Plan, some 1.4 million undocumented Afghans have been registered. Following bilateral consultations with the Government of Afghanistan, around 135,000 families (600,000 to 800,000 individuals) have so far received family passports from the Afghan Embassy and its consulates in the Islamic Republic of Iran. These families also received temporary residence permits issued by the Iranian authorities.

The Government of **India** adopted a policy last year that allows eligible refugees to apply for long-stay visas and work permits. This brought about a marked improvement in the quality of asylum in India, as refugees enjoy access to health, education and livelihood opportunities.

In 2012, we began a mapping exercise of the implementation of the urban refugee policy for selected operations in Asia [If asked, 6 in total: Hong Kong SAR, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia and Thailand]. The exercise revealed a number of innovative practices that could be applied to other operations, as well as common challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that refugees in urban settings benefit from effective protection.

Protection of refugees in urban areas will continue to remain a priority for the region in 2013. We will continue to work with the governments in the region to enhance protection and access to basic services that urban refugees need in the meantime.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my statement, the three key issues in the Asia-Pacific region – irregular movements, protracted refugee situations, and urban refugees – are closely linked with one another. We see that some of the irregular migratory movements originate from protracted refugee situations that are, at present, without an immediate solution in sight. These irregular movements often result in people seeking refuge in urban areas. When their protection assistance and livelihood needs are not met, they move onwards, adding to secondary movement. As such, in addressing secondary movement, we must not only seek to provide protection to refugees in the host countries, including in urban areas, but also look at means to stabilize and seek solutions for these populations. It is critical that we address the root causes of displacement and find solutions taking full account of the multi-faceted and interlinked issues that impact population movements in our region.

Madame Chair,

We are heartened by positive developments in addressing **statelessness** in Asia. Following accession to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons in 2011 on the occasion of the commemoration of the anniversaries,

Turkmenistan acceded to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness last year and provided citizenship to 3,300 stateless persons. This makes Turkmenistan the first country in Central Asia and the third in the Asia-Pacific region to be party to both Statelessness Conventions. The Philippines, which acceded to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness in 2011, adopted a refugee and statelessness determination procedure in October 2012.

We are most encouraged by the communication from the President of Myanmar to the Secretary-General in November last year, signaling the Government's willingness to address the root causes of the recent outbreak of violence in Rakhine state, including the possibility of granting citizenship to displaced populations. In this vein, UNHCR foresees a continuing need to assist some 800,000 people without nationality in Myanmar and stands ready to assist.

In South-East Asia, UNHCR has strengthened its collaboration with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights to address statelessness. Following a joint regional workshop in November 2011, a regional workshop on good practices in birth registration was organized jointly by UNHCR and AICHR in December last year. We will continue to collaborate with this important partner to further promote the prevention and reduction of statelessness in the region.

Madame Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

I would like to conclude my remarks by thanking you all for the support you have extended to UNHCR and our operations in the region. I would like to reiterate in particular our appreciation for the generosity of host countries and their substantial contribution. I count on you for your continued engagement and commitment to provide protection and help bring solutions to refugees, stateless and displaced persons in the Asia-Pacific region.

Thank you.