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Update on UNHCR's operations in Asia and the Pacific

A. Situational analysis including new developments

The Asia and Pacific region was host to 3.8 million refugees, 5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 1.5 million persons of concern under UNHCR's statelessness mandate as at mid-2015. Of the 45 countries and territories in the region, only 20 had acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. However, many continued to uphold traditions of hospitality to refugees and persons in refugee-like situations.

The majority of the refugee population in the region were from Afghanistan and Myanmar. Afghan refugees constituted more than one-fifth of the total refugee population of concern to UNHCR and 40 per cent of refugees living in protracted situations. While some 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees were dispersed across 70 countries, the majority, approximately 95 per cent, were hosted by just two countries, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. During the reporting period, an increasing number of Afghans sought asylum in European countries.

After decades of uncertainty, recent developments may prove to be a turning point for the protracted Afghan refugee situation. Since its establishment in 2014, Afghanistan's National Unity Government has strengthened cooperation with the two neighbouring host countries and UNHCR in order to pursue durable solutions. The Governments of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan held a number of ministerial-level bilateral and trilateral meetings in the first eight months of 2015 to discuss solutions for Afghan refugees. UNHCR continued to work with the Government of Afghanistan to ensure that returnees were included in the country's reconstruction and reconciliation process, and that conditions would be more conducive for voluntary return and sustainable reintegration. The Office also supported the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan in their efforts to provide protection to Afghan refugees.

Myanmar has undergone profound political changes since 2011, notably the considerable progress made in the nationwide ceasefire negotiations involving different ethnic groups. It was hoped that the national elections, scheduled to be held in November 2015, would constitute another important milestone towards progress in the country's reform process.

The protection of and provision of assistance to some 2.7 million refugees living in urban and semi-urban areas in Asia and the Pacific (80 per cent of the total refugee population in the region) continued to be a priority for UNHCR. The Office strengthened protection activities for refugees living outside camps, focusing on four areas: conducting community outreach; fostering constructive relations with urban refugees; ensuring access to education, healthcare and other services; and promoting livelihoods and self-reliance. Experience suggests that inadequate protection, uneven access to education and livelihood opportunities, and a lack of available solutions often lead refugees and asylum-seekers to undertake irregular onward movements, by land or by sea. The increasing number of people seeking to move onwards has placed burdens on asylum countries, and also strained UNHCR's capacity to carry out refugee status determination under its mandate in operations receiving large numbers of new arrivals.

The number of people taking to the seas in search of protection in the region saw a significant increase in 2015. During the first six months of 2015 alone, some 31,000 people departed by sea from the Bay of Bengal, marking a 34 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2014. Some 370 persons were believed to have died at sea in the first eight months of 2015. UNHCR was deeply concerned by the discovery by the Thai authorities of numerous graves near abandoned smugglers' camps close to the border with Malaysia. Further, at least 5,000 people were reportedly abandoned by smugglers at sea in May 2015 and eventually disembarked in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand. Another 1,000 people remained unaccounted for, but some may have disembarked in countries in the region without the knowledge of the authorities.

Boat movements temporarily stopped in August 2015 due to monsoon rains, but were expected to resume once the weather improved. UNHCR continued to work with partners to develop an information campaign warning of the risks of dangerous sea journeys organized by smugglers.

In Nepal, major earthquakes in April and May 2015 killed more than 8,700 people, injured more than 22,000, and destroyed more than 500,000 homes. UNHCR provided some 42,000 plastic sheets and 8,000 solar lamps to support the response in the most affected areas. Within two weeks of the first earthquake, refugees from Bhutan had initiated fund-raising efforts among communities in refugee camps and worked with UNHCR and the authorities to deliver food, kitchen sets and hygiene supplies to affected families in Sindhuli district. Skilled refugees also trained affected populations in Ramechhap district to build shelters using locally available materials.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Safeguarding access to protection and asylum

The Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan continued to provide protection to large numbers of Afghan refugees, despite difficult socio-economic conditions in host communities and security concerns. In Pakistan, the Government extended the validity of Proof of Registration (POR) cards until the end of 2015. The process, which started in early 2014, has allowed some 1.5 million refugees to renew their cards. This includes some 290,000 children under the age of 5 who were not yet entitled to their own POR card. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Government also extended the validity of *Amayesh* cards for refugees. Afghanistan continued to host an estimated 291,800 individuals from North Waziristan and Khyber Agencies in Pakistan, and UNHCR supported the Government in carrying out enhanced verification of this population to better target protection and assistance activities, as well as to determine appropriate durable solutions, including voluntary repatriation.

UNHCR continued to undertake refugee status determination in countries without national asylum procedures. The Office also continued to promote protection-sensitive migration management systems throughout the region. UNHCR was concerned by worrying trends in the policy responses of some States to the increase in mixed movements by sea in the region, including reports of boats being pushed back and other deterrent and punitive measures. UNHCR reiterated its call for States to respect international refugee and human rights law, including the principle of non-refoulement.

In response to the dramatic rise in mixed movements by sea in South East Asia, a meeting on irregular migration in the Indian Ocean was held in May 2015, organized by the Government of Thailand and attended by countries in the region, UNHCR, the International Organization (IOM), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and donor States. Issues discussed included: protection of people stranded at sea; comprehensive prevention of irregular migration and smuggling and trafficking of persons; and addressing root causes and improving livelihoods of at-risk communities.

As a follow-up to the meeting, UNHCR advocated temporary protection status for persons leaving northern Rakhine state in Myanmar. UNHCR also launched an appeal for US\$ 13 million to address the needs of new arrivals by sea in South East Asia. The appeal reflected elements of a 10-point plan of action proposed by UNHCR, IOM and UNODC,

outlining steps that governments in the region could take to respond to the challenges confronting them in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, including with respect to disembarkation, reception, regional responsibility sharing and root causes. In Central Asia, livelihood initiatives have further enhanced the self-reliance of refugees, the majority of whom have been in their countries of asylum for many years. Through the Almaty Process, a platform for regional cooperation to address mixed movements, the Office has established closer collaboration with border management authorities in each country to establish protection-sensitive entry mechanisms, including standard operating procedures for the referral of asylum-seekers from border areas.

Seeking solutions for protracted refugee and statelessness situations

Comprehensive regional strategies remained essential to generating impetus for solutions to protracted situations. The “Solutions strategy for Afghan refugees to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance to host countries” (SSAR), involving the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, remained an important multi-year regional policy framework in support of solutions. The design of country portfolios of projects has brought together more than 50 humanitarian and development actors. UNHCR has undertaken high-level advocacy to encourage stronger financial support to cover the needs highlighted in the country-specific portfolios.

More broadly, reinvigorated support by the international community is required to implement durable solutions for Afghan refugees. In recent tripartite and quadripartite meetings, UNHCR and the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan have agreed to jointly develop mutually reinforcing national strategies on voluntary return and reintegration, as well for the management of the Afghan refugee situation beyond 2015, within the framework of the SSAR.

In Nepal, the resettlement programme for refugees from Bhutan that began in late 2007 was ongoing, with almost 3,400 resettlement departures between January and July 2015. Since the programme began in late 2007, more than 98,000 refugees from Bhutan have been resettled. In 2014, UNHCR conducted a “last call” exercise for expressions of interest in group resettlement.

In the south east of Myanmar, UNHCR continued to prepare for the return of some 110,000 refugees living in nine camps along the Myanmar-Thailand border. The Office has worked closely with all stakeholders in terms of planning and preparedness, and has developed a roadmap for returns, together with the refugee community, the Governments of Myanmar and Thailand, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors and other stakeholders. UNHCR liaised with the Governments of Myanmar and Thailand to ensure that the returns would take place voluntarily, in safety and dignity, and in line with international standards. Until such time, the Office continued to provide protection and assistance in refugee camps, focusing on vulnerable individuals and groups. A joint verification exercise by the Government of Thailand and UNHCR of both registered and unregistered refugees was completed in April 2015. The exercise has supported the identification of ongoing protection and assistance needs, while also preparing the groundwork for durable solutions for the population.

In Sri Lanka, UNHCR worked with concerned governments to facilitate the voluntary return of a small number of Sri Lankan refugees in 2015, notably from India. The Office, together with partners, continued to assist returnees in terms of reintegration in Sri Lanka.

Ensuring protection and durable solutions for internally displaced persons

In Myanmar, the Government has begun implementation of a “phased approach” to end displacement in Rakhine state. Some 140,000 persons remained internally displaced in Rakhine state as at mid-2015. Of the 25,300 persons who were slated to return under phase one, some 1,300 households (approximately 10,000 individuals) had returned to their original plots of land by mid-2015, receiving shelter assistance from the authorities. UNHCR carried out protection monitoring in areas of return. While these returns were a positive development, UNHCR continued to advocate joint monitoring and engagement by government authorities and humanitarian actors. In Kachin state, where some 100,000 people remained displaced, the situation was more uncertain. No IDP returns were

expected to take place in the short term, pending progress in the negotiations for a nationwide ceasefire agreement.

In South West Asia, UNHCR continued to work with the Government of Pakistan to protect and assist some 1.3 million IDPs, including more than 690,000 persons displaced in North Waziristan and Khyber Agencies in 2014. In Afghanistan, UNHCR worked with the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation to implement the national IDP policy. UNHCR was concerned by a rise in the number of persons who were newly internally displaced in Afghanistan in 2015.

UNHCR continued to support the Government of Sri Lanka to find durable solutions for the remaining IDPs, as well as to advocate the sustainable reintegration of IDPs returning to their areas of origin. UNHCR implemented community-based livelihood initiatives aimed at improving self-reliance and reintegration of former IDPs in the country's north, and carried out capacity building for the authorities in terms of resolving housing, land and property issues.

Reducing and preventing statelessness

Over 43 per cent of the persons of concern to UNHCR under its statelessness mandate were concentrated in the Asia and the Pacific region. UNHCR has developed regional guidance for country operations on implementing the “Global action plan to end statelessness 2014-2024”. UNHCR supported the Governments of Indonesia and the Philippines to register and find solutions for over 6,000 persons of Indonesian descent residing in the southern Philippines who were at risk of statelessness. UNHCR also worked with the Government of Thailand to increase the rate of acquisition of nationality by populations of concern under UNHCR's statelessness mandate. The Office has continued to provide technical assistance to a NGO in Malaysia for the mapping, registration and provision of legal assistance to persons who lack nationality documentation, primarily of Tamil descent residing in western Malaysia.

In Myanmar, where some 1 million people are without citizenship, the Government has taken some positive steps towards solutions. A citizenship verification exercise, which was initially limited to the town of Myebon, was expected to be carried out across Rakhine state in 2015. In Central Asia, “seeds for solutions” projects in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan supported efforts to inform people about and facilitate access to administrative processes to address statelessness. Thousands of persons have had their nationalities confirmed following identification and registration, providing a basis for States in Central Asia to finalize legal and administrative reforms to further reduce and prevent statelessness.

C. Financial information

The 2015 comprehensive needs assessment budget for Asia and the Pacific, approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (ExCom) at its sixty-fifth session, was US\$ 565.2 million. By late January 2015, with the establishment of supplementary budgets in response to humanitarian needs in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as other budgetary adjustments in the region, the overall revised budget rose by some US\$ 15.5 million (net) to US\$ 580.7 million. The financial requirements for South West Asia, comprising operations in the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, represented some 62 per cent of the total. Financial requirements for the Myanmar operation represented some 12 per cent, and the remaining 26 per cent was shared among 18 other small and medium-sized operations. UNHCR was concerned that a shortage of funding for the Afghan situation would hamper the search for solutions in this critical year, and have a severe impact on the delivery of key protection activities throughout the region. In June 2015, a supplementary budget of US\$ 13 million was approved to respond to mixed movements by sea in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. As of 31 August 2015, the comprehensive budget for the region was US\$ 595.9 million.