

**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner's Programme**19 February 2015
English
Original: English and French**Standing Committee**
62nd meeting

Overview of UNHCR's operations in Asia and the Pacific**A. Situational context**

The Asia and the Pacific region – encompassing 45 countries and territories – hosts some 7.7 million persons of concern to UNHCR, including some 3.5 million refugees, 1.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), and over 1.4 million stateless people. The majority of refugees are from Afghanistan and Myanmar. Most countries and territories in the region continue to uphold their traditions of hospitality to refugees and displaced persons, although only 20 among them have acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

Around 63 per cent – or 2.3 million – of the refugees in the Asia and Pacific region are living in urban or semi-urban areas. UNHCR continues to strengthen protection activities for these refugees living outside camps, with particular focus on the protection of women and girls. Inadequate protection, uneven access to education and livelihood opportunities and the lack of available solutions often lead refugees and asylum-seekers to undertake onward irregular movements, including by sea. Increasing numbers of people undertaking these dangerous journeys are placing a heavy burden on asylum countries and often overstressing UNHCR's capacity to carry out refugee status determination under its mandate

In South East Asia alone, some 54,000 persons undertook irregular maritime journeys in 2014. The vast majority departed the Bay of Bengal bound for Thailand and Malaysia. Hundreds of others followed routes through the Indian Ocean from South Asia and Indonesia to Australia and across the Strait of Malacca from Malaysia to Indonesia. UNHCR received reports of 540 persons who allegedly died at sea in South East Asia in 2014, due to starvation, dehydration or ill treatment on board the vessels. Those who arrived were malnourished and traumatized. UNHCR continued its initiatives under the auspices of the Bali Process Regional Support Office to engage countries in the region in mapping disembarkation options and developing regional guidelines on rescue at sea, as well as enhancing co-operation for the protection of separated and unaccompanied children.

Central Asia is uniquely situated at the crossroads of population movements between Asia and Europe. Therefore, it is essential to ensure effective management of irregular mixed migration flows and to promote protection-sensitive migration management systems in Central Asian States. The Office will continue its capacity-building activities in order to support the national asylum systems, and to help governments build protection-sensitive migration management systems, in line with the objectives of the Almaty Process.

For 2.6 million Afghan refugees across the world, 2015 is a pivotal year¹. Afghan refugees remain the largest population in protracted displacement under UNHCR's mandate. The

¹ This includes 1.6 million registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The Iranian Government estimates that the number of Afghan refugees in the country has increased to 950,000.

vast majority of Afghan refugees reside in the Islamic Republics of Pakistan and Iran, where they have been generously hosted and provided with protection for decades.

The recent elections and establishment of the National Unity Government in Afghanistan offer greater opportunities to pursue durable solutions for the Afghan refugee population. These developments pave the way for enhanced cooperation regarding the eventual voluntary return of Afghan refugees and their engagement in the reconstruction and reconciliation process in the country. It is imperative that these populations be included in development planning and national priority programmes throughout what is being called Afghanistan's "Transformation Decade." UNHCR is working closely with the concerned governments to ensure conditions are conducive for return and sustainable reintegration of Afghan refugees. Meanwhile, UNHCR will continue to support the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan to provide protection to Afghan refugees until their voluntary return is possible.

In Afghanistan, UNHCR has been leading the refugee response in the areas of Khost and Paktika to help protect and assist people affected by the military operations in Pakistan's North Waziristan Agency since mid-June last year. UNHCR has set up a taskforce in Kabul to lead strategy formulation and coordination of the refugee response in close coordination with the Government of Afghanistan, complementing the larger humanitarian response led by the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator. The shelter, protection and assistance needs of this population will need to be addressed until they are able to return voluntarily to their areas of origin in Pakistan.

Moreover, 2015 will also be a year of major developments in Myanmar. Peace negotiations are continuing, and 14 out of 16 planned ceasefire agreements have been signed. It is hoped that the negotiations with the two remaining ethnic groups will allow a nationwide ceasefire to be concluded before the general elections scheduled for late 2015. Additionally, in 2014, the Government launched a pilot project in Rakhine State on the verification of citizenship of displaced populations in Myebon.

In the Philippines, the Strategic Response Plan for Typhoon Haiyan came to an end in August 2014, following the Government's decision to phase out the humanitarian response coordination structures, mainly the humanitarian clusters, in favour of State-led recovery systems. Most of the humanitarian clusters, including the protection cluster that was co-led by UNHCR, were phased out and merged into the protection working group. The leadership of the working group was then handed over to the authorities.

B. Achieving the global strategic priorities

Safeguarding access to protection and asylum

In 2015, UNHCR will continue to undertake refugee status determination in those countries without national eligibility procedures. While supporting the establishment of eligibility procedures, the Office will continue to promote protection-sensitive migration management systems throughout the region. Priorities include identifying alternatives to detention for asylum-seekers, alternatives to individual status determination and alternatives to third-country resettlement, such as bilateral labour migration agreements.

UNHCR has observed a worrying trend in the policy responses of some States to the increase in irregular maritime movements in the region, leading towards deterrent and punitive measures. Domestically, these policies severely restrict asylum-seekers' access to international protection; internationally, they have resulted in unilateral actions, undermining the principles of cooperation promoted by regional initiatives such as the Bali Process and ASEAN meetings. UNHCR calls on States to respect international law, including the principle of *non-refoulement*.

The seventh annual High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges in December 2014 focused on protection at sea, indicating the organizational prioritization of the issue. At the regional roundtable on disembarkation and temporary protection in the Asia and Pacific region, which took place in the margins of the Dialogue, a number of recommendations were put forward on combating trafficking and smuggling networks; strengthening regional cooperation; ensuring temporary protection aimed at preventing arbitrary deportation and *refoulement*; and the need for better disembarkation and search and rescue processes. In 2015, UNHCR will work with States and other stakeholders to promote the timely implementation of these recommendations and encourage enhanced cooperation among countries, regional organizations and civil society.

Last year, UNHCR and the Government of Indonesia co-chaired a workshop to follow up on the implementation of the 2013 *Jakarta Declaration on addressing irregular movement of persons*. It was attended by 14 States, representing countries of origin, transit and destination, as well as the International Organization for Migration (IOM). States reiterated their commitment to the principle of burden-sharing, and a range of coordinated practical measures were recommended.

Seeking solutions for protracted refugee situations

Despite a number of other global humanitarian crises, the protracted Afghan refugee situation remains among UNHCR’s top concerns. Throughout Afghanistan’s “Transformation Decade,” UNHCR will remain highly engaged with government partners, UN agencies and NGOs to continue providing humanitarian assistance, while pursuing durable solutions for the millions of Afghan refugees across the world. The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries (SSAR), developed by the Governments of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan with the support of UNHCR, provides an important multi-year regional framework for solutions. Reinvigorated long-term support of the international community is essential to the success of the SSAR. Supporting the Afghan people and their host communities, at this critical juncture, is both a demonstration of international solidarity and burden-sharing, as well as an investment in stability and security in the region.

The Asia Pacific region is also home to other long-staying groups, such as refugees from Myanmar in Bangladesh, Thailand and India. UNHCR has shared with the Myanmar and Thai authorities and other stakeholders an initial roadmap for preparations for the voluntary return of Myanmar refugees from the camps in Thailand.

In Nepal, the third-country resettlement programme for refugees from Bhutan is ongoing, with more than 8,000 individuals resettled in 2014 alone. Since the programme began in late 2007, close to 94,500 Bhutanese refugees have been resettled in third countries. In 2014, UNHCR conducted a “last call” exercise for expression of interest in group resettlement. Some 2,000 refugees opted to not declare interest in resettlement. It is estimated that an additional 10,000 to 12,000 refugees may be resettled in the coming two years, leaving a residual caseload of 10,000 to 15,000 refugees. In close cooperation with concerned governments, UNHCR is seeking alternative durable solutions for the remaining refugee population.

In 2015, UNHCR will continue to work with the concerned governments to facilitate the voluntary return of Sri Lankan refugees, notably from India. The Office, together with partners, will assist the refugee returnees with reintegration in Sri Lanka.

Ensuring protection and durable solutions for internally displaced persons

Over 400,000 people remain displaced within Myanmar, many of whom were forced to flee in 2012 following violent clashes in Rakhine State, and some 100,000 persons who were displaced in Kachin and northern Shan States following renewed fighting last year.

UNHCR is leading the combined cluster for shelter, camp coordination and management, and non-food items, while continuing the search for durable solutions within the UN inter-agency framework. In recent years, UNHCR's operations in south-east Myanmar have been redirected toward supporting durable solutions for IDPs and preparing for a voluntary return operation when conditions are conducive.

UNHCR will continue to work with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to help protect and assist more than 1.3 million IDPs. This includes more than 690,000 persons who were affected by military operations in the North Waziristan and Khyber Agencies last year. Together with other partners, UNHCR distributed tents and basic household items among those affected. Authorities are planning to facilitate the return of up to 100,000 displaced families in early 2015.

In Afghanistan, following the endorsement of the national IDP policy in 2013 and its launch in 2014, UNHCR is working with the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation on an implementation strategy. A road map for the implementation has been developed, and in some parts of the country, advocacy and training have begun.

In 2015, UNHCR will work with the Government of Sri Lanka to find durable solutions for a small group of people who remain internally displaced, as well as advocate for the sustainable reintegration of returnees. UNHCR will implement community-based livelihoods initiatives aimed at improving self-reliance and reintegration of returnees in the country's north.

Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless people

In 2014, UNHCR marked the 60th anniversary of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, with the launch of a ten-year global campaign to end statelessness. This is especially pertinent for the Asia-Pacific region, where more than 1.4 million people remain stateless or are at risk of statelessness. In Myanmar's Rakhine State, an estimated 1 million persons lack citizenship. UNHCR provides advice and capacity-building to the Government to address challenges related to citizenship. At the same time, UNHCR advocates for the respect of the fundamental rights of those people who are stateless.

In June 2014, the International Conference on Migration and Statelessness in Ashgabat, co-organized by the Government of Turkmenistan, IOM and UNHCR, convened over 40 delegations and identified best practices for addressing statelessness and improving the management of migration. A number of governments in Central Asia, including Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, have taken positive steps towards addressing statelessness in their respective countries. In South East Asia, UNHCR is implementing projects aimed at reducing statelessness in the Philippines and Malaysia under the Seeds for Solutions initiative². Moreover, a number of meetings and conferences aimed at improving civil registration, including birth registration and vital statistics, together with partners such as ASEAN, will be continued in 2015.

C Financial information

The 2015 comprehensive needs assessment budget for Asia and the Pacific, approved by the Executive Committee at its 65th 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

² More information on UNHCR's Seeds for Solutions initiative can be found in EC/65/SC/CRP.15 available at <http://www.unhcr.org/53aa914f9.pdf>

revised budget rose by some US\$ 15.5 million (net). The financial requirements for South West Asia, comprising operations in the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, represent some 62 per cent of the total US\$ 580.7 million. Financial requirements for the Myanmar operation represent some 12 per cent, and the remaining 26 per cent is shared by 18 small and medium-sized operations. A shortage of funding for the Afghan situation would hamper the search for solutions in this critical year and would have a severe impact on the delivery of key protection activities throughout the region.
