

**Item 3(a) (iv)**  
**Presentation to the 68th Meeting of the Standing Committee**  
**by Ms. Daisy Dell**  
**Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific**

Madam Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to address you once again on behalf of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific – I am joined today at the podium by my two Deputy Directors - Ayaki Ito, who is responsible for South West and Central Asia - and Bernard Doyle whose geographical coverage extends from Nepal to the Pacific.

We have shared with you ahead of this meeting our regional update - which I trust provided you with an overview of the important work we do in the region - together with governments, partners, international actors and other stakeholders. In my presentation today I will give you further updates on our operations, with particular focus on those relating to the refugees from Afghanistan and Myanmar.

But before that, I would like to give a broad overview of how overall developments in 2016 have impacted our work in the Asia Pacific region and are likely to continue doing so for the months to come.

**Global commitments by governments in the Asia Pacific region: Bali Process and New York summits (CRRF)**

Madam Chair,

Major geo-political shifts in the world in 2016 and early 2017 are having far reaching consequences on our work for refugees, stateless populations and displaced persons in Asia and the Pacific. In many countries today, sky rocketing global displacement trends are being countered by increasingly nationalistic policies. Host countries, especially those with large refugee populations feel insufficiently supported by traditional donors and are showing greater impatience to see solutions to refugee producing situation. In view of these perceptions, the need for stronger collaboration and responsibility sharing between States as well as efforts to reach out to new partners and

donors in the private sector and civil society have become ever more important.

I am pleased to highlight that in spite of these worrying trends, 2016 has witnessed several milestones in refugee protection in the Asia Pacific region.

First, I would like to pay tribute to Asian Leaders of 41 countries for having come together under the Bali process in March 2016 and having adopted the **Ministerial Bali Declaration on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime**. This Declaration - which is a largely a result of the regional response to the Bay of Bengal crisis of 2015 - is making the strongest commitments at regional level with regard to predictable disembarkation, reception, temporary protection, local-stay arrangements and legal pathways for asylum-seekers and refugees. It also notes the importance of comprehensive, long-term solutions to address mixed migration flows and highlights responsibility sharing of countries in the region to find solutions. The declaration emphasises the need to engage with partners, including the private sector to combat human trafficking and related exploitation. Overall the Bali process, under Australian and Indonesian leadership, provides a **strong foundation for the coordinated regional action** required to manage and respond to mixed movements in a safe and humane way. It also contributed towards laying the ground-work for the September meetings in New York - as it already encompasses some of the elements of a regional compact on refugees and migration, including the call for strong regional cooperation and increased partnerships.

Second, I wish to acknowledge that the majority of Heads of State from Asia and the Pacific participated at the 19th September UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants and endorsed the **New York Declaration**, including its Annex on the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. Most leaders made further pledges to refugee protection and solutions at the 20th September President Obama Summit on Refugees.

Although less than half of the Asian states are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, countries in the region host over 11 percent of the world's refugees and displaced persons. The Bali and New York declarations are of

major importance as they reflect the ongoing commitment of countries in the Asia Pacific region to protect refugees and work together towards solutions.

These developments are very encouraging, especially in face of dwindling numbers of third country resettlement places and shrinking financial resources for UNHCR's operations in Asia.

### **Shift towards solutions in the region**

**Resettlement** numbers for 2017 look indeed very uncertain, and large numbers of refugees currently in the pipelines for third country resettlement may not be able to realise this solution, or only after long waiting periods.

In the spirit of the Bali and New York Declarations, UNHCR has been offering to support governments in joint approaches to registration, determination of international protection needs and finding solutions. We are working with all actors on a paradigm shift, away from third country resettlement out of the region as a preferred solution towards a compact that finds creative ways to attend to people in need of international protection within the region.

Let me highlight a few examples of recent positive developments:

The Royal Thai Government made commitments during the World Humanitarian Summit and the Obama summit regarding enhanced access to healthcare for persons of concern. Joint screening of asylum-seekers by the Thai authorities and UNHCR will also start this year.

In Malaysia, UNHCR has partnered with the government and a private company to initiate a pilot which will see 300 Rohingya refugees receive work permits.

In India, UNHCR has worked to assist refugees' access a "Long Term Visa (LTV)" which, among other things, permits them to work, attend higher level educational institutions and open bank accounts.

### **New partnerships and donors**

As I already indicated, **funding for 2017** and beyond also looks more uncertain as a number of key donors have been redirecting funds to new crises elsewhere. In several countries, foreign aid budgets have seen reductions in

view of domestic developments. We have already had to undergo a number of very difficult prioritization exercises over the past years. It is unlikely that these trends will reverse and we need to continue finding innovative ways to engage with partners.

Under the leadership of the Division of External Relations, we have made sustained efforts to find new partners and new donors in the Asia Pacific region. In particular, we are seeking to enhance our partnership with countries in the region whose regional or global reach means they can provide important support to the search for solutions to displacement and statelessness. Also we seek to enhance the unique role of faith-based organisations and community groups in the region to address the root causes of conflict.

Ladies and gentlemen, overall financial contributions from the Asia and Pacific region towards UNHCR's global programmes – through donations by states or private sector fundraising – have seen a significant increase. States in the region have contributed USD 293 million towards global programmes in 2016. A number of countries in the region are also among the top performers in private sectors fundraising. Private donors in Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia and China have contributed a total USD 79 million. UNHCR has now embarked on similar fundraising efforts in a number of middle-income countries in the region.

Let me now turn to our operations in the Myanmar and Afghanistan situations.

### **Myanmar situation**

Ladies and Gentlemen - last year when I addressed you – I spoke with a sense of hope and optimism regarding Myanmar's reform process and about the future for solutions for some 340,000 people displaced inside Myanmar and another 100,000 Myanmar refugees within the region. But developments in the second half of last year have dimmed that sense of optimism. **Attacks on a border guard post** in Northern Rakhine State in October spurred a string of military operations which has led to further displacement – some 24,000 have been internally displaced and an estimated 74,000 people fled into neighbouring Bangladesh.

As you many of you may have seen, there are troubling reports of **widespread abuse** of the Rohingya community including killings, rape, disappearances, and arson. These reports are echoed through accounts given by new arrivals interviewed by our colleagues in Bangladesh. In Myanmar, humanitarian workers were initially not afforded access to areas affected in Maungdaw and beyond. UNHCR has been able to carry out some distribution of urgent relief items through our national staff and those attached to our partner agencies.

We understand that the military operations have now come to an end. We are hopeful that the Myanmar government will lift humanitarian restrictions in northern Rakhine so that we and our partners can reach those with urgent needs, including access to medical care, shelter, water and sanitation.

Of the 74,000 Rohingya who fled into Bangladesh, many are from Maungdaw. Some arrived in the camps already housing some 32,000 Rohingya refugees where UNHCR has access, while others are living in makeshift camps or have been absorbed into the urban refugee community.

New refugee arrivals in Bangladesh have faced a variety of protection concerns inside the country. Basic shelter and nutrition are lacking, and outbreaks of measles and water borne diseases have been reported in settlements where new refugee arrivals have taken shelter. UNHCR has offered its help to the government to assist newly arrived persons and wherever possible, has included them into its existing programmes.

Countries in South East Asia, in particular Thailand and Malaysia continue to host hundreds of thousands of refugees from Myanmar – many of them for decades.

Voluntary repatriation to Myanmar's south east is becoming a distinct possibility as the situation in their home areas stabilises. UNHCR together with the Governments from Myanmar and Thailand facilitated the voluntary return of 71 Myanmar refugees. We understand that 150 others have expressed their interest to return. We are encouraged by these first steps and hope to continue our collaboration with the two Governments on the voluntary return process in 2017. We also welcome measures of temporary protection through access to labour in Malaysia and will continue to work with the authorities towards documentation of all asylum-seekers and refugees.

The High Commissioner will be travelling to the region at the end of the month – he will look at how regional and international support can be increased to help Myanmar arrive at solutions by addressing root causes of displacement and sharing good practice on regularizing stateless populations, peaceful coexistence, and inclusive development.

## **Afghan Situation**

I would now like to turn to the Afghan refugee situation - one among the most protracted and challenging operations that UNHCR is facing today. Overall, the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) remains the overarching framework for the region with its three pillars of voluntary return, sustainable reintegration and support to hosting countries

However, solutions to the Afghan refugee situation hinge on developments inside Afghanistan and the reality is that in the past year – the situation inside has deteriorated, with **unprecedented levels of violence against civilians** and increased human suffering. 2016 marked the highest number of security incidents recorded in a single year ever by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Child casualties have increased by 24 % last year.

2017 has witnessed further deterioration, with a number of **horrific attacks** right in the heart of Kabul, blindly targeting armed forces and civilians, including judges, innocent by-passers, hospital workers, doctors and their patients. Over 21 persons died in the attack on the Supreme Court and more than 30 in last weeks' attack on the military hospital in Kabul.

Women and children make up the majority of more than 1.2 million internally **displaced persons** in Afghanistan today. Some 650,000 people were newly displaced in 2016 –and around half of that number was displaced in the last quarter of 2016. Many have lost their homes and properties, their livelihoods, and no longer have access to education, health and other essential services.

UNHCR - within the UN inter agency structure - together with other international organizations is doing whatever possible to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to these displaced people in need. Operationally, limited humanitarian **access** remains a serious obstacle to our interventions in

Afghanistan and we are unable to reach out to a significant portion of the population.

Aid workers in Afghanistan take extraordinary risks every day to help those in need. The **safety of humanitarian workers** remains a grave concern – national staff are particularly at risk of being targeted by armed elements. We were all shaken last month when six Afghan national staff of ICRC were gunned down while they were en route to distribute aid to those affected by the harsh winter conditions in Jowzjan Province – two others remain missing.

In spite of these developments, 2016 saw the return of substantial numbers of **Afghan refugees from Pakistan** – over 370,000 persons –most of whom returned during the second half of the year. As outlined in the background paper, a number of different reasons account for this massive increase of returns from Pakistan. Only a small number – approximately 2,000 Afghan refugees – returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Each refugee returnee received a cash grant from UNHCR to cover transportation and other costs related to the initial stages of return.

In addition to the Afghan refugee returns, some 690,000 **undocumented Afghans** (248,000 from Pakistan and 444,000 from Iran) have returned from both Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover Afghanistan is also receiving significant numbers of returnees from Europe.

UNHCR monitoring shows that returnees face many issues in the **reintegration** process. While returnees we met with upon their arrival at the encashment centers were initially apprehensive about the return to Afghanistan - often after having lived many years in exile - some 75 per cent of those interviewed three months later told us that they had made the right decision to return. However major issues still persist. Almost half of those interviewed by UNHCR say the lack of shelter, land, livelihood opportunities or insecurity in their home areas influenced their decision to live in an area outside their province of origin. The overall pace of these returns places a great strain on the essential services in the country.

In response to these challenges and in an effort to ensure that returns are sustainable, the Afghan Government has established an inter-ministerial coordination body - the Displaced and Returnee Executive Committee (**DiREC**).

Under the joint chairmanship of the Minister for Repatriation and Reintegration, the Deputy Minister of Finance and the UN RC/HC reintegration plans have been elaborated, aiming to enhance essential services for displaced and returning populations. The Afghan Cabinet endorsed the plan in early February. UNHCR contributed proactively to the elaboration of the plan and has committed to support its implementation, especially in the area of protection activities. We also appeal to UN agencies and partners and donors to ensure that the Government has the required support and resources to assist its populations. In this regard, it is crucial that the 15.2 billion in pledges made by the international community at the October 2016 Afghan Development Conference in Brussels are realised to help Afghanistan on its path to political and economic stability .

After the traditional winter pause, UNHCR's voluntary repatriation programme is expected to resume on 1 April. Meanwhile, UNHCR has been in discussions with the Governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, partners, international and national organizations and donor counterparts to plan the different elements of the process including the future of the **cash grant**. Taking into account those consultations and the extremely challenging funding environment in the coming year, UNHCR has to adjust the level of the cash grant to USD 200 per person. On 15 February the 28<sup>th</sup> tripartite meeting was held between the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan and UNHCR, where among others, the principles of voluntary, safe and gradual returns were reaffirmed.

A large portion of the Afghan refugee population are not yet opting for voluntary return and providing financial support for their protection in **host countries** is imperative. I would like to acknowledge the great strides taken by the Islamic Republics of Pakistan and Iran towards the protection of the Afghan refugees on their territory, particularly in the areas of access to health and education.

In **Iran**, the government's Universal Health Insurance Scheme in the Islamic Republic is now in its second phase. UNHCR continues to contribute to the scheme, which enables in particular very vulnerable Afghans to get access to health care with protection dividends for them and their families. The third phase will begin in April. Iran also continues to implement its commitment to give access to education to all Afghan children. In 2016, 52,000 undocumented



children have benefited from this policy in addition to over 250,000 refugee children.

Furthermore, in **Pakistan** the Federal Cabinet has endorsed a national policy on the management of refugees and Afghan nationals, which includes plans for documentation and a visa regime for Afghans. UNHCR is continuing to support its Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) programme in Pakistan.

Both Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran have been hosting large numbers of Afghans for almost four decades and in the spirit international solidarity, it is crucial that the political and financial support to programmes in these two countries continue.

### **Looking ahead**

Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen, despite these many challenges– we are opting to look to the future with hope and set out our longer-term priorities in the Asia and the Pacific, in line with the core directions set out by the High Commissioner in his five year strategy.

The overarching priority for UNHCR in the Asia and Pacific region will be to work with governments and partners to **ensure the protection of the populations of concern wherever they are** and until such time that a durable solution can be found for them. We will ensure that – first and foremost – all men, women, girls and boys have their identity recognised and their existence protected. In the coming year UNHCR will continue to actively work with states to encourage registration and documentation of asylum-seekers, refugees, displaced and stateless populations on their territories. The objective is to enhance the protection of persons of concern, through documentation which will recognise their basic rights, while also addressing security concerns of hosting states.

In parallel, the search for solutions remains a top priority for refugees in the Asia Pacific region, with voluntary return remaining the preferred option. We are appealing to states to support political solutions in countries in conflict and help address the root causes of displacement. This cannot be done without strong support of the international community.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Madam Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by thanking host countries for their generosity towards refugees allowing them to have access to basic services, develop self-sufficiency, and thus lead a dignified existence until solutions are found. I would also like to express our appreciation to member states for their political and financial support to these host governments and UNHCR's work in the region - and appeal for your continued support towards the protection and solutions for refugees, stateless and displaced populations in the Asia Pacific region.