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Update on UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific**A. Situational context**

The Asia-Pacific region hosts some 9.5 million persons of concern to UNHCR, including 4.2 million refugees, 2.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 2.2 million stateless persons. While only 20 of the 45 countries and territories in the region have acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the long-standing tradition of hospitality towards refugees in the region remains strong.

UNHCR continues to focus much of its attention on the emergency in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, in response to the largest and most sudden refugee exodus the region has experienced in decades. The Government of Bangladesh, supported by UNHCR and other partners, generously hosts and provides protection and assistance to some 900,000 stateless Rohingya refugees, including more than 730,000 who arrived since the current crisis began in August 2017. In 2018, Rohingya refugees continued flee to Bangladesh, although in significantly smaller numbers; some 15,000 new arrivals were recorded during the year.

During the monsoon and cyclone season, from April to November 2018, up to 200,000 refugees were at risk due to landslides and flooding. UNHCR and its partners, with the assistance of the refugee communities themselves, worked in support of the Government to mitigate the risks and provide life-saving assistance. UNHCR and the Government also rolled out a joint registration exercise, scaled up the distribution of liquified petroleum gas for heating and cooking, strengthened community-based protection mechanisms and increased support to local Bangladeshi communities.

In February 2019, UNHCR is expecting to reclassify its internal designation of the emergency from L3 to L2, reflecting the significant ongoing needs of the refugees and host communities, as well as the necessity to transition to medium-term planning and assistance. The United Nations joint response plan for the Rohingya refugee crisis sets forth requirements of \$920 million for 2019, with a focus on basic assistance, protection and gender mainstreaming, environment and eco-system rehabilitation, social cohesion and natural disaster preparedness.

Meanwhile, UNHCR continues to seek solutions to this refugee situation. In April 2018, UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh signed a memorandum of understanding that serves as a framework for cooperation on the voluntary return of Rohingya refugees, in line with international standards, once the conditions in Myanmar are conducive. Separately, in June 2018, UNHCR, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Government of Myanmar signed a tripartite memorandum of understanding that aims to support Myanmar in creating the conditions conducive to the safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya refugees to their places of origin or of their choosing.

UNHCR continues to underscore the need to improve conditions in the northern part of Myanmar’s Rakhine State and to enable Rohingya refugees to make a free and well-informed decision on whether to return. UNHCR hopes that progress on implementing the tripartite memorandum of understanding with the Government of Myanmar can be increased in 2019.

So far, UNHCR and UNDP have only had access to 60 villages out of a total of approximately 950, and 33 quick impact projects have been approved but not yet implemented due to the lack of access. A bilateral arrangement between Bangladesh and Myanmar to start repatriation in November 2018 did not result in any refugees voluntarily returning to Rakhine State.

A coordinated, multilateral approach, with strong regional participation, is needed to address the root causes of this situation and secure sustainable solutions. In the spirit of the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR continues to advocate for the “solidarity approach” that brings together a broad range of stakeholders in support of resilience, solutions and a decent life for the people of Rakhine State, wherever they may be.

Forty years since the large-scale displacement of Afghans began during the Soviet-Afghan War, the situation in Afghanistan remains complex with a volatile security situation and a challenging political context. In 2018, more than 350,000 individuals were newly displaced, with 31 out of 34 provinces affected by conflict. The severe drought currently affecting Afghanistan has also generated the displacement of over 230,000 persons within the country, according to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Parliamentary elections took place in October 2018, and the presidential election are scheduled to take place in July 2019. Diplomatic efforts aimed at peace talks with militant groups have accelerated in recent months.

The vast majority of all Afghan refugees continue to be generously hosted by the neighbouring Islamic Republics of Pakistan (1.4 million) and Iran (951,150). In Pakistan, the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative has, since 2009, played a major role in fostering social cohesion between refugees and the Pakistani communities that host them. To date, over 4,000 projects have been completed in the sectors of education, health, livelihoods, infrastructure, water, sanitation and social protection, with support from UNHCR.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Government continues to implement its progressive policies towards refugees, who benefit from a range of social services. UNHCR will continue to provide funding for the construction of schools, benefiting both refugees and host communities. Close to 500,000 refugees and undocumented Afghans have had access to education as a result of these efforts.

Increased support from the international community is crucial for the Government of Afghanistan in its efforts to rebuild the country, and to the Governments of Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran in supporting large numbers of refugees on their territories. The Geneva Conference on Afghanistan held in November 2018, co-hosted by the Government of Afghanistan and the United Nations, provided an opportunity to assess the progress made and reconfirm commitments made since the “transformation decade” (2015-2024) was announced. During the conference, the High Commissioner co-chaired a discussion on “people on the move”, which reaffirmed the importance of a regional approach, as reflected in the “Solutions strategy for Afghan refugees to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance to host countries” (SSAR), and discussed reintegration initiatives.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Safeguarding access to protection and asylum

In a positive development, the Government of Afghanistan decided in July 2018 to roll out the comprehensive refugee response framework (CRRF) as a country of origin. This provides an opportunity to showcase good practices based on the experience gained in implementing the SSAR, especially in relation to the inclusion of returnees in Afghanistan’s national policies and priorities, as well as to garner further support for reintegration.

In line with Pakistan’s “Comprehensive policy on voluntary repatriation and management of Afghan nationals”, approved in 2017, close to 880,000 undocumented Afghans have been registered by the Government and given an “Afghan citizen card”. UNHCR continues to support the Pakistani Government in the implementation of various aspects of the policy. This includes the continued extension of the “proof of registration” (PoR) cards (currently valid until the end of June 2019) and the implementation of a flexible visa regime for PoR cardholders, who would be able to obtain Afghan passports and Pakistani visas in Pakistan. These new policies could effectively change the landscape for refugee protection and migration management in the sub-region in the years to come.

Despite ongoing economic difficulties, the Islamic Republic of Iran is committed to maintaining inclusive policies towards refugees by providing them with access to health care, education and livelihood opportunities, in line with the main objectives of the SSAR for 2018-2019. Health insurance policies have been made available to refugees since 2015, and in 2018 alone the scheme provided assistance to 76,600 vulnerable refugees, including for pre-existing medical cases. Children enjoy unhindered access to Iranian public schools, notwithstanding the infrastructure challenges that need to be addressed. The Government has conducted a headcount exercise and issued slips, which serve as protection against deportation, to 850,000 undocumented Afghans.

UNHCR called on all States in the region to offer protection and access to asylum to stateless Rohingya refugees and asylum-seekers, and to refrain from returning them to Myanmar, where the conditions are not yet conducive for safe, dignified and sustainable return. In this regard, UNHCR expressed concern over two incidents that took place in October 2018 and January 2019 in which Rohingya asylum-seekers, including women and children, were returned from India to Myanmar. A notable increase of Rohingya moving onward from India to Bangladesh has been observed.

Seeking durable solutions for protracted refugee situations

In Afghanistan, just over 15,000 Afghan refugees chose to return home in 2018, mostly from Pakistan, under the UNHCR-facilitated voluntary repatriation programme. The voluntary repatriation process will resume on 1 March 2019, after having been suspended for the winter.

In the context of ongoing insecurity and limited absorption capacity in Afghanistan, UNHCR is not promoting refugee returns but, in accordance with its mandate and within the framework of the SSAR, the Office assists those who voluntarily choose to return.

In support of documentation and reintegration efforts, UNHCR is further strengthening its partnership and cooperation with the World Bank. The two organizations are now developing a report on the living conditions and settlement decisions of recent Afghan returnees in order to better understand the factors that influenced return and to aid in the design of reintegration and livelihood projects.

The Office is also working to support the Government of Afghanistan in translating the Displacement and Return Executive Committee (DiREC) action plan into priority development and humanitarian actions in the 14 agreed upon areas of high return. To this effect, UNHCR is working with the World Bank and other development actors to link UNHCR’s community-based protection measures to longer-term programmes, notably those funded by the World Bank under their allocation for fragile and conflict-affected situations.

UNHCR continues to advocate increased opportunities for resettlement and complementary pathways for admission for vulnerable persons of concern in the Islamic Republic of Iran to third countries.

Renewed efforts are being made to secure solutions to the protracted situation faced by the remaining Bhutanese refugees still residing in south-eastern Nepal. The support of the international community brought a successful conclusion to the large-scale resettlement programme for more than 113,000 Bhutanese refugees. However, a final effort is required

from UNHCR, the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal, and development actors, in order to secure solutions for the 2,400 families which remain and to bring to a close this long-standing situation in the region.

Ensuring protection and solutions for IDPs

In Myanmar, as part of the inter-agency response, and as the lead agency of the protection, shelter and camp coordination and camp management clusters, UNHCR will continue working with partners and the Government to provide protection and assistance to approximately 106,000 IDPs in Kachin and northern Shan States. In central Rakhine State, there are an estimated 130,000 IDPs. At present, however, UNHCR's access is constrained and its activities in Kachin and northern Shan States are mostly carried out by implementing partners.

In the Philippines, UNHCR has continued to lead humanitarian efforts to assist over 84,000 displaced persons in Mindanao, including some 74,000 people from the city of Marawi, working closely with the host communities and the local authorities. In 2019, UNHCR worked to address various challenges in support of IDPs due to the protracted and recurring displacement, while leading the implementation of the protection strategy for Mindanao as the lead agency for protection in the Humanitarian Country Team. UNHCR will continue to focus on strengthening information management, protection monitoring and profiling, and catalysing the support of development and peacebuilding actors. In 2018, UNHCR trained more than 350 representatives of the local government and key stakeholders to enhance protection responses during displacement across Mindanao.

In Afghanistan, UNHCR continues to assist the most vulnerable IDPs through the provision of cash-based and in-kind assistance. The Office is actively involved in inter-agency humanitarian coordination and, through its leadership of the protection cluster, and the emergency shelter and non-food items clusters, ensures that protection principles are reflected in all activities. UNHCR has also been part of the Humanitarian Country Team response to the severe drought in Afghanistan, providing 15,000 tents for IDPs in western Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, after having supported the Government with the voluntary repatriation of some 1.8 million IDPs since 2015, UNHCR has responsibly disengaged. However, the Office continues to provide technical support to the authorities through the protection cluster.

Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless persons

Since the launch of UNHCR's "#IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024" substantial progress has been witnessed in the region. States continue to take concrete steps to prevent and reduce statelessness. The support of UNHCR and civil society remains crucial in this regard. In 2019, the Office will continue to strengthen its engagement with States and other partners in the region to achieve the goals of the campaign, including carrying out advocacy that is tailored to specific countries, and providing technical support and capacity development.

The five countries of the central Asian sub-region, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, have made significant progress in reducing the number of cases of statelessness on their territories. Since the start of the #IBelong campaign, these five countries have reduced the number of stateless persons in the sub-region by almost 40,000, and they continue to strive towards further reduction and prevention. In 2018, they participated in a regional conference on the right to legal identity and the prevention of statelessness, which was held in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The event laid the groundwork for further progress, and another round of discussions will take place in 2019 ahead of the high-level segment on statelessness to be held during the annual session of UNHCR's Executive Committee in October 2019, marking the midpoint of the #IBelong campaign.

Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam have all granted citizenship to many previously stateless persons. Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam have effected law and policy reforms to prevent and reduce statelessness, including measures to enhance civil status registration.

Towards the end of 2017, the Philippines adopted a national action plan to end statelessness by 2024 and has since been actively working on its implementation with the involvement of 17 government departments and the close engagement of UNHCR. In partnership with UNHCR and the Indonesian authorities, the Philippines identified more than 8,700 stateless persons of Indonesian descent, nearly 6,800 of whom either had their Philippine nationality confirmed or had been granted Indonesian citizenship by the end of 2017. In 2018, further efforts were made towards finding solutions for the remaining group.

In Viet Nam, the Government is reviewing its law and policies with a view to preventing and reducing statelessness. In December 2018, it granted citizenship to nearly 140 previously stateless persons. With support from UNHCR, the Government is also examining its nationality laws, in line with the statelessness conventions.

Thailand hosts one of the largest stateless populations in the world. It has put in place progressive measures to address statelessness, including through registration exercises. Since the start of the #IBelong campaign, Thailand has granted citizenship to over 40,000 previously stateless persons. In 2017, the Malaysian Government adopted the “Malaysian Indian Blueprint”, which acknowledged the presence of statelessness in western Malaysia. UNHCR supports the work of both the Thai and Malaysian governments and non-governmental organizations that provide assistance to stateless persons in their applications for citizenship.

In Cambodia, the Government is reviewing its civil registration law with a view to enhancing the process for all populations in the country. UNHCR is providing technical assistance to the Government to ensure that the changes increase access to legal documents for populations at risk of statelessness.

At the regional level, UNHCR serves as a member of the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (“get everyone in the picture”) project. The Office continues to advocate the inclusion of populations of concern (refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons and others of undetermined nationality) in laws and policies of States, in line with the SDGs. In March 2018, the Technical Advisory Group (under the auspices of the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process) launched a civil registration assessment toolkit to help States assess and enhance civil registration in their countries for persons of concern to UNHCR. Thailand has agreed to pilot the use of the toolkit.

In November 2018, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) organized a regional consultation workshop, during which a zero draft of a research report compiled from contributions from all 10 ASEAN States was presented. The report examines the legal and policy framework on identity and nationality for women and children in the respective ASEAN member States.

C. Financial information

The budget for Asia and the Pacific, approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme during its sixty-ninth session in October 2018, amounted to \$774.6 million for 2019. This remained unchanged by the end of January 2019.

The refugee programme, constituting UNHCR’s core work in the region, amounts to \$614.3 million or 79 per cent of the region’s funding requirements. The South-East Asia sub-region will receive the largest share of the region’s budget, with needs representing nearly 52 per cent.

As of 31 January 2019, the needs for the region were 4 per cent funded after considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.
