

Update on UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific

A. Situational context including new developments

The Asia and Pacific region is home to over 9.2 million persons of concern to UNHCR in 45 countries, including 4.4 million refugees and asylum-seekers, 3.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 2.3 million stateless persons, many of whom are also refugees or IDPs. The refugee population is both young and overwhelmingly urban: nearly half are under the age of 18, and 80 per cent live in urban or peri-urban areas, with only one-fifth living in camps. Afghans constitute the largest population of concern in the region (56 per cent), followed by persons of concern from Myanmar (21 per cent). The defining development of 2020 has been the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly affected refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons and IDPs with risks to their health, protection and socio-economic well-being.

Responding in the context of COVID-19

As a global public health crisis, COVID-19 has underscored the importance of universal, non-discriminatory access to prevention, testing and treatment—regardless of nationality or legal status. From the onset, UNHCR has worked with governments, United Nations agencies, community-based organizations and other partners to include persons of concern in national response plans. It has also supported States with material assistance, medical supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE). Many countries indicated that they would offer access to free COVID-19-related services; elsewhere, persons of concern depended upon UNHCR and its partners to facilitate testing and treatment. UNHCR has provided operations in the Asia and Pacific region with \$65.5 million for COVID-19 response efforts.

COVID-19 has both required and enabled UNHCR to pursue new ways of working across every area of operation. Most operations shifted to teleworking as of March—with some beginning a gradual return to the office since June—and applied new tools and technology in the protection response, community engagement and delivery of services. While UNHCR’s work remains rooted in its physical presence, these tools will be built upon as social distancing guidelines evolve.

As States closed borders and imposed quarantine requirements, preserving access to territory for persons in need of international protection was a priority. While not widespread, UNHCR received reports of increased xenophobia and discrimination towards persons of concern in some countries, including hate speech on social media, verbal harassment and discriminatory access to services.

As UNHCR and partners were required to reduce their physical presence, an increase in an array of protection concerns was recorded, including insecurity, extortion, dependence upon informal dispute mechanisms, psychological distress, domestic violence, and child marriage, labour and neglect. COVID-19 has limited children’s access to education around the world; however, the reliance upon the internet and electronic devices for remote learning has disproportionately affected the education of displaced and stateless children.

COVID-19 has also had a substantial impact on the livelihoods of host communities and persons of concern, who often face heightened vulnerability due to the lack of legal employment and their dependence on daily wage labour. The “Build back better” approach of

the United Nations emphasizes greater inclusiveness and reduced inequality for sustained, long-term recovery. In this regard, UNHCR advocated for refugees to benefit from local and national economic recovery measures and is providing financial support to the most vulnerable through programmes mirroring national social protection systems. A number of operations, including those in central Asia, Afghanistan, China, India, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Thailand, initiated or scaled-up cash-based interventions (CBIs) to address additional needs arising from the crisis. Overall, UNHCR's 2020 CBI budget—of which 40 per cent, or \$11.9 million, addresses COVID-19-related needs—increased by 100 per cent in the year to date, as compared to 2019 CBI expenditures.

The realization of durable solutions has also been affected. Facilitated voluntary repatriation programmes from India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and Thailand were largely on hold through mid-year, with the number of refugee returns dropping from over 10,300 in 2019 to 584 in the first half of 2020. Meanwhile, global resettlement was suspended, with exceptional measures taken to resettle 311 emergency and critical cases between April and July of this year.

Operational challenges arising from the crisis included delays with obtaining core relief items and shelter materials due to border closures, supply chain disruptions and reduced manufacturing. UNHCR ensured appropriate preparedness levels for country offices, meeting over 90 per cent of needs for PPE and medical supplies through local procurement, as well as through support from private-sector partners and in-kind donations. The implications of the pandemic on UNHCR personnel were substantial; the region lost two colleagues to the virus. Staff confronted new work demands while unable to make use of the usual rest and recuperation in non-family duty stations. Throughout the region, staff demonstrated their resilience and commitment to “stay and deliver” amidst the considerable challenges. Medical and staff welfare support was deployed to operations, including towards the establishment of treatment facilities for front-line humanitarian workers in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Major situations

Having entered its fifth decade, the Afghan situation remains the largest population of concern in the region, with 2.4 million refugees and asylum-seekers and 2.6 million IDPs—as well as one of the most protracted situations globally. The United Nations Secretary-General acknowledged the extraordinary hospitality of the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan, as hosts of 87 per cent of the refugee population, at the “International Conference on Forty Years of Hosting Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: A New Partnership for Solidarity”. Co-convened by the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR in Islamabad in February 2020, the conference reiterated the imperative of working towards solutions through the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), which was launched by the High Commissioner and the three respective Governments at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019.

The SSAR Support Platform was borne of the Global Compact on Refugees' aspiration for more equitable burden-sharing through predictable and comprehensive responses. It seeks to revitalize the international community's political and financial engagement through coherent humanitarian and development investments in the SSAR, aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and national development priorities. Following the presentation of urgent, prioritized needs at a high-level meeting convened by the High Commissioner on 6 July, Denmark, Germany, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Turkey, the United States, as well as the European Union, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank, have so far confirmed their membership in the Core Group of the SSAR Support Platform.¹ The planned 2020 Afghanistan Conference, co-organized by the Governments of Afghanistan and Finland together with the United Nations, will provide

¹ The Core Group of the SSAR Support Platform will play a leading role in convening a diverse range of stakeholders, galvanizing the necessary political, financial and material support for the operational priorities of the SSAR, and helping raise awareness and visibility of the Afghan refugee situation.

further opportunity to ensure that solutions for displaced Afghans are embedded in long-term development planning.

August 2020 marked three years since the mass influx of Rohingya refugees from Rakhine State in Myanmar to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. There are currently some 1.6 million Rohingya persons of concern in the region, including 1.1 million refugees, mostly in Bangladesh and Malaysia. There are 152,000 other refugees and asylum-seekers from Myanmar, including 93,000 who have been encamped in Thailand for decades. In 2020, UNHCR continued to pursue solutions for all refugees from Myanmar, emphasizing the need to provide a clear pathway to citizenship for the Rohingya and to end discriminatory restrictions on freedom of movement, as recommended by the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State.

In May, UNHCR, UNDP and the Government of Myanmar extended a tripartite memorandum of understanding to improve conditions in Rakhine State. To date, UNHCR and UNDP have conducted needs assessments in 130 locations and are implementing 75 quick-impact projects that aim to enhance livelihoods, education and social cohesion. Some of this work, as well as projects to improve repatriation prospects in Rakhine State planned by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have been delayed as a result of COVID-19 and ongoing armed conflict between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army.

The number of IDPs affected by this conflict has nearly doubled in the year to date, reaching 86,000, along with hundreds of civilian casualties. The violence has complicated COVID-19 response efforts, while fears linked to the pandemic prompted the arrest and imprisonment of several dozen Rohingya who spontaneously returned from Bangladesh. The Rohingya in Rakhine State generally remain subject to discriminatory restrictions on their movement, despite the release in April of 886 Rohingya who had been detained for unauthorized travel within Myanmar.

An emergency appeal allowed UNHCR and its partners to rapidly establish COVID-19 isolation and treatment centres, as well as construct water and sanitation facilities for both refugee and host communities in Bangladesh. COVID-19 restrictions have delayed the implementation of the Myanmar curriculum pilot programme for refugee education that was approved by the Government of Bangladesh in January. Despite this, UNHCR's significant investment in the refugee volunteer programme since 2017 has ensured that critical services continue, including those related to protection, health, water, sanitation and food distribution. An empowered refugee volunteer corps has effectively maintained a front-line protection response during the pandemic, while also preparing communities for the monsoon and cyclone seasons.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

States in Asia and the Pacific made 37 pledges at the Global Refugee Forum towards strengthened asylum systems, social and economic inclusion, child protection, financial support, the humanitarian-development nexus, and solutions through resettlement and complementary pathways. The implementation of these commitments will help realize the core principles underpinning the Global Compact on Refugees. Civil society, academics and the private sector made additional important pledges; for example, a global pledge by law firms and corporate counsel to deliver 127,000 hours of pro bono legal services, with 24 of the 26 pledging entities having offices in Asia and the Pacific. UNHCR is working with States, international financial institutions and other pledging entities to build coalitions and partnerships to drive those pledges into meaningful outcomes for persons of concern in the region and beyond.

Safeguarding access to protection and asylum

UNHCR continued to express concern regarding refoulement and push-backs at borders, including of refugees stranded at sea. Since the beginning of the year, over 2,300 Rohingya refugees have attempted maritime journeys, mainly from Cox's Bazar to Malaysia. The absence of regional responsibility-sharing mechanisms to address refugee maritime

movements has led some States to engage in interception and push-back to prevent boats from reaching their territories. This has resulted in refugees and migrants being stranded at sea, often for months; confronting risks due to unseaworthy vessels, weather conditions, shortages of food and water, as well as physical and sexual abuse by smugglers; and for some, losing their lives.

In May, as hundreds of Rohingya refugees sought to travel from Bangladesh to Malaysia by boat, Bangladeshi authorities safely disembarked a group of 306 Rohingya refugees found in the country's waters and transferred them to the island of Bhasan Char, where they remain. UNHCR, together with other United Nations agencies, has sought access to them, while continuing to advocate independent protection and technical assessments of the safety and sustainability of life on the island.

Over 2,100 Rohingya have disembarked in the year to date—primarily in Bangladesh and Malaysia, with small groups landing in Indonesia and Thailand—while at least 200 have perished or gone missing. Several States have demonstrated that rescue-at-sea and disembarkation are reconcilable with adequate public health measures; Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia implemented health screening and quarantine for people rescued at sea. UNHCR has advocated with ASEAN and members of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime to strengthen coordinated search and rescue; equitable and predictable disembarkation options; and screening mechanisms to identify refugees and asylum-seekers.

Registration is essential to protect against refoulement and detention, as well as to establish identity for accessing life-saving services. In 2020, registration activities dropped by almost 70 per cent following the onset of COVID-19 due to restrictions on movement. UNHCR shifted to remote registration, conducting secure on-line interviews and issuing temporary electronic documents to applicants. Overall, three-quarters of cases were registered remotely from April through July. UNHCR introduced its new registration and case management system, proGres version 4, in Bangladesh and China, as well as in Nepal where the Government plans to assume responsibility for the registration of Bhutanese refugees. In Kazakhstan, new regulations will enable refugees to obtain machine-readable “Convention travel documents”.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Amayesh XV re-registration exercise for Afghan and Iraqi refugees commenced in July, expanding the eligibility criteria to include those who missed the previous four rounds. This presents a unique opportunity for a large population of previous Amayesh cardholders to regain their status.

Within Pakistan, the “Refugee-affected and hosting areas” (RAHA) programme remained the cornerstone of the SSAR implementation. The programme drives progress towards key objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees and the United Nations sustainable development goals through measures to build community resilience. Integrated humanitarian and development support for education, health, livelihoods, water, renewable energy and community infrastructure benefited more than 250,000 Afghan refugees and their host communities in 2020 to date, bringing the total number of beneficiaries to 12.6 million since RAHA's inception in 2009.

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 region maintains a long-standing tradition of hospitality towards refugees. UNHCR continues to undertake refugee status determination in countries without national asylum systems and is supporting a number of States to develop or strengthen asylum laws and systems. In Thailand, a regulation establishing a screening mechanism to identify persons in need of international protection entered into force in June.

Some countries in the region without asylum laws continue to treat refugees as illegal immigrants. Indefinite detention of refugees pursuant to immigration laws—often in substandard conditions—remains a serious challenge. Reduced access to those in detention due to COVID-19-related restrictions presented a major concern. UNHCR continued to advocate alternatives to detention and secured the release of some individuals.

UNHCR is enhancing community-based protection through innovations such as user-friendly digital platforms and two-way communication mechanisms in Indonesia; strengthened collaboration with women-led community structures in India, Malaysia and Thailand; and outreach to female faith-based leaders in Bangladesh. In Pakistan, youth are taking an active role in their communities through volunteer outreach. As part of its efforts to prioritize the prevention of, and response to, sexual and gender-based violence, UNHCR is enhancing its technical capacity for the integration of gender equality measures in its operations. Country offices in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan and the Philippines are reinforcing the zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse by training staff of UNHCR and its partners.

Seeking solutions for protracted refugee situations

Access to durable solutions was constrained by several factors: a reduction in resettlement spaces, protracted conflict and insecurity in countries of origin, and limited opportunities for local integration. These challenges were compounded by restrictions on movement resulting from COVID-19.

UNHCR has continued to work on enabling an environment conducive to return, such as advocating for Myanmar to undertake more inclusive verification of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. For other refugees from Myanmar in Thailand, efforts towards a multi-solutions strategy progressed; in February, senior officials from both Governments conducted the first joint visit to refugee camps in Thailand.

In Afghanistan, the Government, UNHCR and its partners focused on humanitarian, development and peace investments in priority areas of return and reintegration (PARRs), creating conditions for sustainable return. This area-based approach targets the most urgent needs—education, health, livelihoods, shelter and renewable energy—of the entire community, including returnees and IDPs. Projects in the PARRs have benefited nearly 560,000 people since the programme was initiated in 2018. As of July, UNHCR facilitated the voluntary repatriation of 377 Afghan refugees, with the partial resumption of movements after their suspension due to COVID-19, and a modest increase in the cash grant to accommodate increased travel costs.

In collaboration with the Government of Nepal, UNHCR is working towards local solutions for 6,370 Bhutanese refugees through inclusion in public services, opportunities for self-reliance and engagement with the host community. To this end, UNHCR initiated the transfer of infrastructure and materials, such as classrooms, health equipment and agricultural supplies, to municipal authorities in Damak.

UNHCR has identified over 100,000 individuals with resettlement needs in the region, while fewer than 3,000 spaces are available. Welcoming pledges made by Japan, the Philippines and Thailand at the Global Refugee Forum, UNHCR is seeking an expansion of complementary pathway opportunities including education, labour mobility and family reunification.

Ensuring protection and solutions for internally displaced persons

The 3.3 million IDPs in the region reflect a 16 per cent increase over the past five years. Violence in Afghanistan and Myanmar continues to drive new displacement, while a lack of progress on addressing root causes hinders the possibility of return for IDPs and refugees alike. Afghanistan is now the sixth largest situation of internal displacement globally, although the nearly 94,000 new displacements in 2020 are at the lowest level since 2014. UNHCR continued to lead and coordinate the work of protection and shelter clusters in Afghanistan, Myanmar and the Philippines.

In Myanmar, internal displacement has risen due to the Arakan Army conflict, which is responsible for one quarter of the 342,000 IDPs across the country, mostly in Rakhine and Kachin States. As the Government of Myanmar begins to implement its 2019 national strategy on camp closures and returns, UNHCR and its partners, under the leadership of the Resident Coordinator, are working to address challenges faced by IDPs in returning to their places of origin. Some 142,000 Rohingya displaced in 2012 remain confined in IDP camps in central

Rakhine State. Authorities permitted several hundred Rohingya IDPs, displaced since 2017, to return to their places of origin in February, but they have faced difficulties accessing housing, land and property. Durable solutions also remain elusive for over 100,000 IDPs in Kachin and Shan States, where humanitarian access has been constrained.

In the Philippines, and in line with internal policy, UNHCR has begun the planned process of responsible disengagement from the IDP situation in Mindanao, with the aim of supporting the capacity of local authorities and handing over UNHCR activities to key Ministries by 2022.

Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless persons

The estimated 2.3 million stateless persons in the region include 1.58 million Rohingya—some 68 per cent of the total—most of whom are also either refugees or internally displaced in Myanmar. In 2020, UNHCR supported seven States in the region on 29 pledges related to statelessness made during the high-level segment of the Executive Committee in 2019. The Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan amended laws to resolve existing cases or to prevent childhood statelessness. In the six years since the start of the #IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024, some 83,000 stateless persons in central Asia have acquired or confirmed nationality, as well as nearly 60,000 in Thailand.

In 2020, UNHCR worked on civil registration and legal identity to promote universal birth registration and civil documentation. This work was conducted together with regional organizations, such as the Bali Process and ASEAN’s Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children, and United Nations agencies.

C. Financial information

The 2020 budget in the Asia and Pacific region approved by the Executive Committee in October 2019 was \$777.1 million. The current budget is \$808.2 million, including COVID-19 related needs of \$98.3 million. The refugee programme constitutes 77 per cent of overall requirements. As of end-August, the budget was 50 per cent funded, taking into account the indicative allocation of unearmarked and earmarked contributions.
