

NGO Consultations 2010 : Asia-Pacific Regional Session

30 June 14:00 – 15:45

Title of the Session: New Challenges and Stronger Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific

Building new and innovative partnerships constitutes an important way forward towards overcoming some of the key challenges that UNHCR continues to face in the provision of protection and assistance to refugees and other persons of concern in the Asia-Pacific region.

- 1) Foremost among these challenges is the shrinking of humanitarian space in general, including the erosion of protection and asylum space.
 - Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to be affected by a volatile security situation constraining access to populations in need. The deliberate targeting of humanitarian workers in Pakistan and Afghanistan has presented the Office with the difficult task of reaching those most in need while at the same time ensuring staff safety. As UNHCR is re-designing its operations to achieve a lighter but responsible footprint, there is an increasing emphasis on working with local partners who are able to reach communities in areas where access is particularly difficult.
 - The Asia-Pacific region has a low level of accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention, while most signatory State parties are not implementing their Convention obligations. Legitimate government concerns related to national security and bilateral considerations between States continue to take precedence over refugee protection. The fragility of protection environments for asylum-seekers in the region constrain UNHCR's operational space, including access to individual cases, and compromise the principle of *non-refoulement*.
 - The shrinking of protection and asylum space also has implications in the way migration and asylum is being perceived. There is a need to look into more effective and creative ways of providing protection to persons of concern in larger migratory contexts.
 - Erosion of protection and asylum space is also apparent in the situation of urban refugees that face particular difficulties as they are subjected to discrimination, lack of livelihoods opportunities and wider protection risks such as detention. Provision of protection and assistance in such environments is a challenge. UNHCR's new policy on protection in urban settings addresses these issues, and its effective application will require UNHCR to reach out to non-traditional partners and communities.
- 2) Asia-Pacific is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. UNHCR's predictable involvement in natural disasters will have implications in terms of the Office's resources and capacity. Success will depend on the quality of UNHCR's partnerships with actors who are already dealing with natural disaster preparedness and response.

All the above challenges require robust partnerships: strengthening existing ones and also going beyond the usual partners. Reaching out to unconventional partners is a key ingredient for success particularly in the new areas of enhanced engagement (urban refugees, natural disasters). Investing in building stronger partnerships with local NGOs and communities is particularly important when delivering humanitarian assistance with a reduced footprint in areas of high security risk. The same applies to safeguarding asylum and protection space. There is a need to engage a wider range of partners to be seen as an independent and honest broker pursuing the humanitarian agenda. The objective of the session is to have a meaningful exchange on the above issues and to draw concrete recommendations.