

# SOUTH ASIA

Bangladesh,  
India,  
Myanmar,

Nepal,  
Sri Lanka.

## SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL OVERVIEW

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### Recent Developments

The pursuit of solutions for protracted refugee situations in the South Asia region has remained problematic. Bi-lateral talks between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal on the Bhutanese refugees in eastern Nepal have yet to yield concrete results. At a Ministerial level meeting in September 1999, the two governments agreed to begin a joint verification of the refugee population to determine those who can return to Bhutan, but the modalities for this verification are still to be worked out. The repatriation of the remaining 22,500 Muslim refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar is proceeding slowly due to difficulties in the clearance of those scheduled to return. UNHCR has appealed to the two governments to accelerate the repatriation. Discussions are also underway with the Government of Bangladesh on the introduction of some self-sufficiency activities for those refugees who may be unable or unwilling to return to Myanmar in the near future.

At the regional level, the Fifth Regional Consultations on Refugee and Migratory Movements in South Asia were held in Kathmandu in 1998. The eminent persons group from the region considered draft legislation on refugees and asylum-seekers produced by the previous consultations. Since then, UNHCR's offices in the region have organised a number of workshops and seminars to promote public debate on the proposed legislation. A meeting of a core group of participants in the Regional Consultations is expected to take place at the end of 1999 to share experiences regarding these promotional efforts, and discuss the presentation of the draft legislation to governments in the region.

### Strategic Objectives

UNHCR's overriding objectives for the region consist in protecting and assisting refugees and other persons of concern to live as safe and normal as possible a life while pursuing the most appropriate lasting solution to their situation. A key strategy here is firstly to raise awareness of refugee issues among opinion-makers and concerned governmental and non-governmental organisations,

and secondly to promote partnerships with local institutions on refugee issues. The intention is to develop expertise on refugee issues at key centres of learning and forge links between these institutions in the region. This includes continued efforts to disseminate refugee law and promote the adoption of a legal regime for refugees and asylum-seekers in the region. The Chair in Refugee Law endowed by UNHCR at the National Law School of India University, Bangalore, is expected to play a critical role in this process.

Pending an agreement on the future of the Bhutanese refugees, UNHCR will continue to assist 96,600 refugees in camps in Nepal, putting greater emphasis on self-management.

In Myanmar, UNHCR is facilitating the establishment of a five year UN Integrated Development Plan for Northern Rakhine State and plans to hand over assistance activities to development agencies by the end of 2000. The ongoing dialogue will continue with the Myanmar authorities on public policy and governance issues affecting the Muslim population in Northern Rakhine State.

In Bangladesh, UNHCR will continue to protect and assist the remaining refugees in two camps with particular emphasis on vulnerable groups.

UNHCR will ensure international protection and emergency relief to the displaced population in conflict areas in Sri Lanka and provide community-based assistance to facilitate the reintegration of those returning to home areas or settling in new communities.

### Operations

UNHCR conducts assistance programmes in five countries in the region, four of which are described in separate later chapters (i.e. **Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal** and **Sri Lanka**). In addition, UNHCR also has an operational presence in India.

**India** is expected to continue to host the largest urban refugee population in the region. This group consists of some 16,000 people, mainly Afghans.

International protection will continue for this refugee group in order to safeguard their status and strengthen the provision of asylum. UNHCR will emphasise activities leading to self-sufficiency, repatriation and third country resettlement, when possible. Should developments in Sri Lanka per-

mit a resumption of voluntary repatriation for over 70,000 Sri Lankan refugees currently in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, UNHCR will, under an agreement with the Indian authorities, facilitate this process through verification of the voluntary nature of return.

## Muslim Refugees from Myanmar in Bangladesh

In 1991 and 1992 more than 250,000 Muslims fled from Northern Rakhine State in Myanmar into Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh requested UNHCR's help in caring for them in 20 camps located between the border and Cox's Bazar. The vast majority of the refugees have now returned to Myanmar, but some 22,500 still live in two remaining camps and need UNHCR's protection pending a solution.

Repatriation came to a halt in August 1997, when Myanmar declared the operation concluded. The process resumed only in November 1998, after UNHCR's intervention, but on a very limited scale. UNHCR has urged both governments to accelerate repatriation and begun discussions with the Government of Bangladesh concerning possible interim solutions for those unwilling or unable to return.

In 2000, UNHCR will continue to protect and assist the refugees in Bangladesh. The voluntary

nature of return will be ensured through careful monitoring and counselling. Those who decide to return to Myanmar will be helped to reintegrate through a wider assistance programme that also targets returnees of previous years, as well as the local population. Food security and economic self-sufficiency will be the main aims of this programme. A dialogue will also continue with the Myanmar authorities to promote the rights of the Muslim population. UNHCR monitors the situation of the returnees closely to ensure that their basic freedoms are respected and intervenes with local and national authorities on their behalf when necessary.

UNHCR will work with UN development agencies to implement a UN Integrated Development Plan that will permit a phasing-out of UNHCR's assistance by the end of the year. Total financial requirements for 2000 amount to **USD 13,858,600**.

SOUTH ASIA	
BUDGET (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Bangladesh	3,798,775
India	2,534,558
Myanmar	10,647,822
Nepal	5,429,264
Sri Lanka	5,666,663
Sub-total	28,077,082
Bureau at Headquarters	1,180,600
<b>Total</b>	<b>29,257,682</b>