

# South Asia

## Recent Developments

The pursuit of durable solutions for refugees in the South Asia region remained difficult. To help solve the long-standing Bhutanese refugee problem in Nepal, the High Commissioner visited both Bhutan and Nepal in April/May 2000. Although agreement was reached on various issues, contention still beset the definition of the 'family unit', which would serve as the basis for the refugee verification process in anticipation of repatriation. Pending durable solutions, UNHCR continues to provide protection and assistance to the Bhutanese refugees in all camps.

Intensified conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since late 1999 has led to the displacement of some 200,000 people in the north of the country, and impeded UNHCR's efforts to facilitate the reintegration of displaced persons in the Jaffna Peninsula. However, the arena of active hostilities shifted, and consequently yielded new opportunities for displaced populations in other regions. In Vanni region and Trincomalee, some 18,000 people have been able to return to their homes.

## Strategic Objectives

UNHCR will continue to actively promote lasting solutions for refugees in the region. Pending such solutions, UNHCR's primary objective is to provide protection and assistance to refugees and others of concern, with particular attention to the needs of vulnerable groups. Refugee groups, especially women, will be encouraged to participate in the management of assistance activities and the principle of self-help will underpin projects whenever possible.

An improvement in the quality of asylum remains an important regional objective. UNHCR will undertake a number of country-specific activities to raise awareness of refugee issues among opinion-makers, and concerned governmental and non-governmental organisations. Special efforts will be made to promote the teaching of refugee law at academic institutions, and partnerships will be sought with relevant institutions. The National Law School of India University at Bangalore, where UNHCR has endowed a Chair in Refugee Law, is expected to play an important role in this effort.



Bangladesh  
India  
Myanmar  
Nepal  
Sri Lanka



UNHCR's efforts to improve the quality of asylum will be supported by the activities of the Regional Consultations on Refugee and Migratory Movements in South Asia. The Eminent Persons Group, which conducts these consultations, has drafted a model law on refugees and asylum-seekers and is urging public debate on the adoption of this law by States in the region.

## Operations

UNHCR conducts operations in five countries in the region, two of which are described in separate country chapters (Nepal and Sri Lanka). In addition, UNHCR is operating in Bangladesh, India and Myanmar.





The repatriation of Muslim refugees from **Bangladesh** to Myanmar has been slow due to the lengthy clearance process required of those scheduled to return. Only 1,115 refugees returned to Myanmar during the first nine months of 2000. UNHCR has urged the two Governments to simplify procedures relating to repatriation. However, of the 21,000 refugees remaining in Bangladesh, more than 14,000 are unwilling or unable to return to Myanmar in the near future. UNHCR has initiated discussions with the Bangladesh authorities to seek interim solutions for this group. Some productive activities, such as vegetable gardening, tree-planting and poultry-rearing, have been introduced in the two refugee camps. UNHCR hopes to expand such activities to foster self-esteem and boost the self-reliance of refugees. UNHCR will continue to encourage NGOs to seek their own funding and it will assist their fund-raising efforts.

**India** continues to host the largest urban refugee population in the region, comprising 15,000 people, mainly from Afghanistan. Pending large-scale voluntary repatriation, third country resettlement will be pursued as a durable solution for selected groups. UNHCR provides assistance in the form of subsistence support to vulnerable people. Health care support will be given to the seriously and chronically ill, and educational assistance will be provided for refugee children in need. Efforts will continue to promote self-sufficiency among refugees through vocational training and financial support for productive activities in the informal sector. UNHCR will also continue discussions with the Indian authorities to secure residence permits for all refugees to safeguard their legal status in the country. Developments in Sri Lanka caused some 1,600 refugees to arrive in the southern Indian State of Tamil Nadu during the first nine months of 2000. These refugees have been assisted by the Indian authorities. The 131 existing refugee camps already host over 67,000 Sri Lankan refugees. Should developments in Sri Lanka permit a resumption of voluntary repatriation from India, UNHCR will facilitate this process in co-ordination with the two Governments.

By the end of September 2000, a total of 231,000 Muslim refugees had returned from Bangladesh to Northern Rakhine State in **Myanmar**. They account for the vast majority of the 250,000 persons who had fled Myanmar. UNHCR assists in the reintegration of the returnees in order to stabilise the Muslim population and reduce the like-

BUDGET (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Bangladesh	2,928,029
India	2,532,789
Myanmar	4,306,747
Nepal	5,434,790
Sri Lanka	6,800,386
Regional projects <sup>1</sup>	100,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>22,102,741</b>

<sup>1</sup> Covers dissemination of refugee law in South Asia.

likelihood of renewed population movement. UNHCR has been actively facilitating the involvement of development agencies in Northern Rakhine State to ensure that reintegration efforts are sustained, allowing UNHCR to gradually withdraw from assistance activities. In this regard, the UN Integrated Development Plan was originally to have been launched on 1 January 2001. It has now been decided that UNDP will lead a multi-sectoral integrated development plan for the area, which will begin in mid-2001. UNHCR is thus constrained to fill the gap created by the delay in the commencement of assistance activities led by UN agencies in Northern Rakhine State. This will be the subject of a separate funding appeal. UNHCR will continue its dialogue with the Myanmar authorities on public policy and governance affecting the Muslim population of Northern Rakhine State.

