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**Overview of UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific**

**A. Situational context including new developments**

As of 31 August 2016, the Asia and the Pacific region was host to over 9.5 million persons of concern to UNHCR, including some 3.7 million refugees, 2.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 1.6 million stateless individuals. 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.

Afghans remained one of the largest protracted refugee populations of concern to UNHCR. Over 2.6 million refugees have found asylum in some 70 countries, however up to 95 per cent of them continued to be hosted in the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. Both countries also host large numbers of undocumented Afghans – an estimated 1.5-2 million in the Islamic Republic of Iran and 1 million in Pakistan. For almost four decades, millions of Afghans have benefited from protection, assistance and support in these countries.

Since mid-2015, the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated, and increased levels of violence have led to large-scale internal displacement and diminished humanitarian access. As of August 2016, more than 245,000 Afghans were internally displaced as a result of the recent fighting since the start of this year, bringing the total number of IDPs to 1.2 million. UNHCR continued to work with Afghanistan’s National Unity Government and partners to bring assistance to IDPs, support the reintegration of returning refugees and advocate sustained support from the international community.

Despite the complex environment in Afghanistan, there has been a surge in the return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan since July 2016, bringing to over 117,000 the number of refugees who returned from Pakistan in 2016. UNHCR expects that this trend could continue and reach over 220,000 returnees from Pakistan by the end of the year. As any further increase of returnees is likely to have an impact on the already limited absorption capacity in Afghanistan, UNHCR is working closely with host governments in the region, together with the Government of Afghanistan, to advocate voluntary and dignified returns.

Since 2015, Afghans have constituted the second largest group of new arrivals in Europe, including individuals who reportedly transited or resided in the Islamic Republic of Iran before moving onwards. UNHCR remains concerned about the large number of separated and unaccompanied minors, many of whom were born in exile and unwilling to return to Afghanistan, who decided to undertake dangerous journeys to Europe in search of better educational and economic prospects.

Large numbers of refugees in the region also originated from Myanmar. A number of significant political developments took place in Myanmar over the last several years, most notably, the signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement in late 2015, followed by the installation of a democratically-elected government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) in April 2016. UNHCR has begun working with the new Government to address protection and other issues related to persons of concern from Myanmar,

including addressing the root causes that have led large numbers of people to risk their lives on dangerous boat journeys throughout South-East Asia and further afield.

However, the rate of these maritime movements in the region saw a significant drop in 2016. There have not been any large-scale mixed movements recorded in South-East Asia since May 2015, when over 5,000 refugees and migrants were abandoned by smugglers in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. As the root causes of refugee flows out of Myanmar have not been resolved, the absence of large-scale maritime movements in 2016 could be attributed to intensified crackdown on smugglers by some countries in the region as well as to greater awareness of the risks of undertaking such journeys. Meanwhile, alternative pathways for admission remained virtually non-existent across the region.

With more than two thirds of the refugee population in the region living in urban and semi-urban areas, UNHCR and partners continued to work with States and other actors to strengthen the protection of those living outside camps. The focus remained on four priority objectives: undertaking community outreach, strengthening relations with urban refugees, ensuring access to essential services, such as healthcare and education, and promoting livelihoods and self-reliance.

## **B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities**

### **Safeguarding access to protection and asylum**

The lack of a legal framework to anchor protection and solutions continued to be a challenge in the region. While advocating and supporting the establishment or improvement of asylum procedures by States, UNHCR continued to promote protection-sensitive systems for the management of mixed movements in the region. UNHCR continued to work with States and other stakeholders to identify alternatives to the detention of asylum-seekers; ensure access to protection; and establish mechanisms for achieving solutions for persons of concern, including through regional schemes beyond third-country resettlement such as labour mobility migration agreements.

In recent years, the Islamic Republic of Iran took significant steps to enhance the protection of Afghan refugees on its territory, by providing them the opportunity to sign up for the universal public health insurance scheme. Following a decree by the Supreme Leader in May 2015 declaring that all children shall have access to public education, the Government has continued to register undocumented children, of which some 48,000 have already enrolled in school. In Pakistan, the Government committed to extending the validity of the refugee proof of registration cards until end of March 2017, however their continued stay beyond this date remains uncertain.

In South-East Asia, UNHCR continued to work with States to address concerns related to mixed movements by sea and to help address the root causes of such movements. The Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime provided a key framework for these efforts. The Bali Declaration on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, adopted in March this year, resulted in a number of important recommendations. This included a proposal to explore temporary protection and local-stay arrangements for asylum-seekers and refugees. The Declaration notes the importance of comprehensive, long-term solutions to address mixed flows and highlights the collective responsibility of countries in the region to find such solutions. The Bali Process reunited many of the governments that took part in the 2015 special meeting on irregular migration in the Indian Ocean in Bangkok. Together, the advancements made in Bangkok and Bali provide a strong foundation for the coordinated regional action required to manage mixed movements in a humane way and protect refugees at sea.

### Seeking durable solutions for protracted refugee situations

The “Solutions strategy for Afghan refugees to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance to host countries” (SSAR) continues to be the regional platform to seek solutions for the Afghan refugees living in a protracted situation.<sup>1</sup> UNHCR continues to encourage the international community to strengthen its support in finding solutions to the Afghan refugee situation, as highlighted during the high-level segment of the sixty-sixth session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme in October 2015.

The evolving situation inside Afghanistan in 2016, however, hampered the attainment of durable solutions. In response to these developments within the framework of SSAR, UNHCR presented a regional plan outlining a set of activities to be implemented throughout South-West Asia over the next 18 months.<sup>2</sup> The plan presents concrete measures which will contribute to building resilience among Afghan refugees, IDPs, returnees and host communities, and which will help find innovative solutions to their problems. In addition to safeguarding ongoing protection space for Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees, the regional plan contains measures to ensure that they have access to basic services, as well as to enhance social cohesion and peaceful co-existence within the host communities. These measures are articulated in five key areas of intervention: access to protection (legal and policy framework); access to basic services; youth empowerment through education, skills training and livelihoods support; durable solutions and advocacy; and coordination and partnership. Inside Afghanistan, the plan focuses on targeted assistance to the most vulnerable persons of concern and local communities.

UNHCR and partners continued to work with the authorities in Afghanistan and in Pakistan to seek durable solutions for a large number of people who have been displaced from North Waziristan in Pakistan since 2014 and who have remained in Afghanistan. In Nepal, the efforts to resettle Bhutanese refugees continued. At present, an estimated 10,000 refugees remain in two camps. UNHCR will continue to work closely with the concerned governments to find lasting solutions for those remaining, with the support of the diplomatic community and other partners.

In light of the positive developments in Myanmar, plans for the voluntary repatriation of refugees from the camps in Thailand and other neighbouring countries are under discussion. The strategic roadmap and operational plans have been designed, and UNHCR will work with the newly-elected Government to enable the return of refugees from Myanmar under safe and dignified conditions.

UNHCR has noted a slight increase in the number of Sri Lankan refugees returning from camps in India. So far, the Office has facilitated the return of over 500 individuals this year. Returnees were provided with repatriation and transportation grants, non-food items and access to legal advice on housing, land and property issues. However, challenges remain in the reintegration process, including ensuring access to livelihood opportunities, land and documentation.

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<sup>1</sup> The Solutions Strategy is a regional, multi-year initiative, under which governments, along with more than 50 humanitarian and development partners, support the development and implementation of country-specific portfolios of projects. More information on the Solutions Strategy is available from <http://www.unhcr.org/afghan-solutions-strategy.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Available from <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/14017>.

### **Ensuring protection and durable solutions for internally displaced persons**

With over 1.2 million persons internally displaced in Afghanistan and return to their areas of origin unlikely, many have considered local settlement in their areas of displacement a more viable solution. Some provincial governments are in the process of exploring local settlement initiatives, including land allocation and/or relocation within the municipal or district boundaries, and are looking to the international community for support in areas such as infrastructure, shelter and livelihoods. IDPs are increasingly choosing to move to urban or semi-urban areas, often settling in slum-like conditions. Meanwhile, UNHCR's targeted assistance for the most vulnerable IDPs, returnees and local communities includes cash and in-kind assistance, referral to service providers, cash-for-work programmes and quick impact projects.

In Myanmar, as part of the inter-agency response to displacement in the country, UNHCR work with partners and the Government to protect and assist approximately 100,000 IDPs in Kachin and northern Shan States, and approximately 120,000 IDPs in Rakhine State. UNHCR continued to lead the cluster for shelter and for camp coordination and camp management, as well as the protection sector.

In Pakistan, more than 1 million persons displaced as a result of military action in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have returned home, including some 384,000 persons this year alone. Around 765,000 people remain displaced. UNHCR continued to support the Government of Pakistan in its return efforts through the provision of tents and basic household items for returning IDPs.

### **Reducing and preventing statelessness and protecting stateless people**

In Central Asia, the situation of over 4,300 persons at risk of statelessness, stateless persons and persons of undetermined nationality was resolved between January and June 2016. Representatives of 10 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which work in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, signed in June 2016 a memorandum of understanding establishing the Central Asia Civil Society Network on Statelessness. In September, Turkmenistan hosted a two-day Central Asia regional conference on the statelessness conventions, to exchange experiences and ideas in the region and beyond, and to promote accession to the two stateless international instruments. The conference included participants from countries that had already acceded to the conventions (Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, in addition to Turkmenistan) and those that had yet to do so (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan).

In August 2016, a roundtable was organized by UNHCR in Dushanbe, Tajikistan on the benefits of acceding to the 1954 and 1961 statelessness conventions. The event also aimed to address the concerns of the Government over the possible financial, legislative and administrative implications related to accession, while contemplating practical steps for the preparatory work.

In Malaysia, UNHCR organized a series of trainings and lectures at University College Sedaya International in May and June 2016 to engage young scholars motivated to help end childhood statelessness. In cooperation with UNHCR and the community-based NGO, Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (DHRRA), the students launched an education campaign to promote children's right to a nationality, targeting primary school teachers and students. Also, in Malaysia, birth registration to prevent statelessness was the focus of an initiative by the NGO, Voice of the Children, which launched the "Bring to light" stateless children campaign.

Since November 2015, more than 5,000 stateless persons in Thailand acquired Thai nationality, bringing the total registered stateless population in the region down to under 438,900. In Malaysia, UNHCR, working closely with DHRRA, continued to provide legal assistance services to stateless persons. By the end of June 2016, 700 persons out of more

than 12,300 stateless persons registered with DHRRA had acquired nationality. Over 7,900 nationality applications had been submitted to the Malaysian authorities, while at least 3,700 applications remained at the pre-submission stage.

Progress has also been made in efforts to prevent and reduce statelessness, as well as to protect stateless persons while they await the acquisition of a nationality. In May 2016, the Office of the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Interior of Thailand issued “Guiding procedures on the determination of nationality law and solutions for resolving the issue of individual legal status”. Subsequently, in August 2016, the Ministry of the Interior promulgated a special regulation of the Immigration Act to allow freedom of movement for registered stateless persons within the provinces in which they reside, rather than only the districts. This provision came into force in September 2016.

In June, the Municipal Council of Glan, in Southern Mindanao, the Philippines, passed a resolution exempting persons of Indonesian descent residing in the municipality from civil registration fees and fees for the correction of entries in the civil registry. This will facilitate the provision of civil documentation and help resolve the nationality status of these individuals, who were registered by the Governments of the Philippines and Indonesia, with support from UNHCR.

## **C Financial information**

The 2016 comprehensive needs assessment budget for the Asia and Pacific region approved by the Executive Committee in October 2015 was \$534.3 million. The financial requirements for South-West Asia, comprising operations in the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, represented some 63 per cent of the total budget. Financial requirements for the Myanmar operation represented approximately 10 per cent of the budget, while the remaining 27 per cent was shared among 3 regional and 17 country operations relatively smaller in size. UNHCR operations in the region continued to be confronted by funding shortages, resulting in constraints in the delivery of key protection and solutions activities, and requiring operations to constantly re-prioritize. As of 31 August 2016, the comprehensive budget for the region was \$539.6 million with contributions received amounting to \$204.8 million. Due to the rapid increase in the number of refugee returns from Pakistan to Afghanistan witnessed in mid-2016, UNHCR has established a supplementary budget to support safe and dignified repatriation, including through the provision of cash assistance to meet immediate needs upon return, as well as to enhance protection and operational capacity in Pakistan.