



South Asia

Recent developments

The stalled bilateral talks between the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal on durable solutions for the Bhutanese camp population in Nepal resumed in February 2003. The outcome was a joint Bhutan-Nepal categorisation exercise covering 12,000 residents in one of the seven camps in eastern Nepal. In June 2003, the published results indicated that only a small number of camp residents (2.4 per cent) were categorised as *bona fide* Bhutanese citizens. As a result, most camp residents filed appeals. The results of the appeals and the modalities for repatriation of those eligible to return are to be announced at the next bilateral meeting in Thimphu in October 2003. During 2003, UNHCR advocated an early resolution of the situation by proposing the adoption of a comprehensive approach to solutions to both Governments. The Office also sought a presence in Bhutan to assist with returnee integration. However, these proposals were not retained by either Government. Meanwhile, the security situation in Nepal has again become a major concern for UNHCR with the resumption of hostilities between Maoist rebels and government forces.

Bangladesh
India
Myanmar
Nepal
Sri Lanka



Political developments in Sri Lanka continued to show promise during the first quarter of 2003. This was reflected in the return of yet more IDPs to former conflict zones. However, the sudden withdrawal of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from the peace talks in April 2003 caused public confidence in the peace process to decline. While the international donor conference in Tokyo in June 2003 pledged considerable support for Sri Lanka, donors are reluctant to release funds until the peace talks resume.

The voluntary repatriation from Bangladesh of Myanmar Muslim refugees picked up during the first half of 2003. This was due to the deadline set by both Governments to end the major phase of repatriation in June 2003, and Myanmar's decision to lift the remaining preconditions for return which had prevented the repatriation of most refugees still in the camps. In view of the latter decision, the deadline for repatriation was removed pending further review of the situation at the end of 2003. However, this growth in repatriation movements has led to concerns over the voluntary nature of return. UNHCR has raised the issue with the Government of Bangladesh and increased the number of staff in the camps to strengthen protection monitoring activities and ensure the voluntary nature of return.

Strategic objectives

UNHCR's priority remains the active promotion of lasting solutions for refugees and persons of concern in the region. While the voluntary repatriation of refugees will be the main focus of UNHCR's efforts, other durable solutions will also be sought with the concerned governments. Meeting the needs of refugee women and children remains a central objective for all country programmes.

The Office will continue to review its regional operations in an effort to help to resolve protracted refugee situations. This process of review will include careful examination of the need for and feasibility of prolonged assistance activities. For refugees, dependence on external assistance for more than a decade has already left social and psychological scars. In this context, UNHCR will pursue possible self-reliance activities for refugees pending the identification of durable solutions for them.

The improved situation in Sri Lanka since the signing of the peace agreement in 2002 gives a genuine hope for durable solutions, both for the remaining 500,000 IDPs and for some 64,000 Sri Lankan refugees in India. UNHCR will continue to provide protection and basic assistance to returning IDPs and refugees, while working

with the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure that returnees' rights are respected, and assistance programmes are designed in line with national development priorities.

Operations

UNHCR's operations in **Nepal** and **Sri Lanka** are covered in separate country chapters.

Since 1992, UNHCR has provided relief and essential services to refugees in **Bangladesh** to meet their basic needs and facilitate voluntary repatriation to Myanmar. As of September 2003, 95 per cent of the 250,000 refugees who had initially sought asylum in Bangladesh had repatriated. With the recent decision of the Myanmar Government to lift the preconditions for return, it is expected that refugees willing to return will be able to repatriate. However, a certain number may not wish to return or may prefer to postpone their return pending improvement of the situation in Myanmar. UNHCR recognises that the continuation of assistance activities is no longer a viable option for this group, which has lived in camps for the past decade. The Office has therefore approached the Government of Bangladesh with a proposal for a self-reliance programme for these refugees. The programme would help those refugees who have not yet reached a decision about repatriation to become less dependent on external assistance. The programme foresees increased opportunities for education, vocational training and income generation, benefiting both refugees and local communities.

In **India**, UNHCR focuses on providing protection and assistance to some 11,750 urban refugees, most of them from Afghanistan. The Office will continue to pursue durable solutions for these persons, focusing on voluntary repatriation and resettlement. In addition, Afghan refugees of Indian origin who entered legally and have stayed in India for more than ten years qualify for naturalisation as Indian citizens. Some 1,974 Afghan refugees have already expressed their wish to be naturalised; 126 cases are currently under consideration by the Government. While seeking durable solutions for the refugees, the Office continues to promote activities designed to strengthen their coping mechanisms and thereby reduce their dependence on UNHCR's assistance.

Despite the stalled peace talks in Sri Lanka, an increasing number of Sri Lankan refugees in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu have expressed an interest in returning. UNHCR plans to continue assisting refugees to repatriate to Sri Lanka on a priority basis in 2004, but the scale of the return will depend on progress with the peace talks.

In **Myanmar**, the Office will reinforce field monitoring activities in Northern Rakhine State for particularly vulnerable groups among recent returnees and the host population. The constructive dialogue established with the Government of Myanmar on issues related to the sustainable reintegration of returnees will be strengthened through continued discussions. To ensure the effective planning and delivery of programmes, UNHCR will review its efforts to measure interventions against quantitative and qualitative indicators. Capacity-building initiatives launched in 2003, such as workshops on human rights and refugee law for government officials, will be expanded in 2004.

Assistance interventions will focus on Burmese language training for returnees, registration, income generation programmes and initiatives to empower women and girls. The objective of operational activities will be to develop the self-help capacity of particularly vulnerable individuals and to promote basic social and economic rights. Community-based activities will aim to increase communication and interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, on which sustainable returnee reintegration will depend. UNHCR will continue to facilitate the involvement of new agencies in returnee assistance, and will support independent funding of their activities so as to maintain the momentum of progress already achieved. This will also permit a continued reduction in UNHCR's funding needs.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Bangladesh	3,276,601
India	3,135,577
Myanmar	3,746,390
Nepal	6,108,029
Sri Lanka	8,342,335
Total	24,608,932



Sri Lanka: Internally displaced returnees ready to start a new life. UNHCR / R. Wilkinson