



Philippines

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
Philippines Office Newsletter 2017 - Volume 4

Withyou

Voices of Hope

What's Inside?

- What we were able to do in 2017, thanks to you
- Angelina Jolie seeks support for the Rohingya



Serving on the front lines, with you by our side

As we mark this festive season in earnest and welcome the new year, we thank you wholeheartedly for the generous support you extended to UNHCR and the families it served throughout 2017.

This has been an eventful year with unfortunate conflicts such as the Marawi siege and its ensuing loss of life and property. But it has also been a year where achievements were made on behalf of asylum seekers, refugees, stateless persons and internally displaced persons in the country.

Together with its partners, and in fulfilment of its role as Protection Cluster Lead, UNHCR worked effectively to extend protection to those affected by conflict and violence. We helped them voice their concerns and wishes, and we provided targeted assistance to the most vulnerable among the displaced.

This effort has been a collective one, with the critical help of donors like you. With your committed support, you have played a key role in delivering assistance and in helping give a voice to those affected by conflict in Mindanao.

2017 has also been a year when we also made headway in the protection and solutions for refugees and stateless persons: The year saw the adoption of an agreement among various government agencies to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers residing in the Philippines are able to access state services.

Amidst these successes, I wish to say that a lot more remains to be done to help Marawi families and to assist asylum seekers, refugees, and stateless persons.

The events of this year have placed enormous demands on us, but your generosity and compassion for the families we serve have always inspired us to remain committed protecting them and preparing them for a new life.

I also want to let you know that in January 2018, I will end my role as head of UNHCR Philippines. It has been a real joy serving on the front lines, knowing that we can count on you to stand in solidarity with our persons of concern in their time of greatest need.

On behalf of our team at UNHCR Philippines and the millions who rely on the UN Refugee Agency for assistance, thank you for your generous support. We could not have done it without you.

We at UNHCR Philippines wish you a warm and joyous celebration of the holiday season with your family and loved ones.

Yours sincerely,

Yasser Saad
Head of Office
UNHCR Philippines

Angelina Jolie, UNHCR Special Envoy, seeks support for Rohingya refugees

UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie has lent her voice in support of the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority who fled to Bangladesh to escape persecution in Myanmar. The renewed outbreak of violence against the Rohingya since August 2017 has forced an estimated 626,000 to flee, making it the fastest growing refugee crisis today.

In her appeal, Jolie recounted the various atrocities committed against the Rohingya: "The vast majority are women and children, newborn babies and the elderly. They arrive exhausted, injured, hungry and traumatized. They describe their villages burned down, women and girls raped, small children ripped out of their mothers' arms and killed. And fathers executed in front of their families."

As stateless persons, the Rohingya are denied citizenship, basic services, and opportunities to secure education and employment. Many of them arrived in Bangladesh suffering from illness and injuries, or in severe distress after losing family members and friends to bullets and fire.

With the new influx of arrivals, life-saving assistance in the form of shelter, clean water, food, solar lanterns, as well as medical and psychosocial intervention are urgently needed. However, the durable solution lies in addressing the root cause of the problem, which is recognizing the rights and reintegrating the Rohingya people back into a more peaceful and inclusive society.

"At this defining moment, as they struggle to survive as refugees, their lives depend on our support. They're relying on us not to forget them and not to turn away,"

**- Angelina Jolie,
UNHCR Special Envoy**



In advocating for the protection of the Rohingya's rights and human dignity, Jolie said, "Like all of us, they deserve to belong and to live free from violence and discrimination and persecution."

"At this defining moment, as they struggle to survive as refugees, their lives depend on our support. They're relying on us not to forget them and not to turn away," says Jolie. The call for solidarity within the international community persists as a long and difficult road to recovery awaits the Rohingya people.

Earlier, UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Kristin Davis has visited Bangladesh to express solidarity with the Rohingya. Similarly, UNHCR Philippines Advocate Atom Araullo went to Bangladesh, to produce and create *Silang Kinalimutan*, a documentary about the plight of the Rohingya and Filipino humanitarian worker Alvin Gonzaga of UNHCR.

Government agencies sign deal to protect refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons in PHL

In an unprecedented move, multiple government agencies have agreed to cooperate to provide greater protection to refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons and other persons of concern (POCs) to UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency.

At a signing ceremony last November, the Department of Justice led 15 other state agencies, including those from the judicial branch. The activity culminated a series of planning and talks that began in December 2015 to streamline government services extended to our persons of concern.

In the absence of a national legislation on refugee protection, the inter-agency agreement will serve as a legal instrument institutionalizing government services that POCs can access.



Chief State Counsel Ricardo V. Paras III of the DOJ's Refugees and Stateless Persons Protection Unit commended the government agencies for their continued cooperation in forging the agreement. For his part, UNHCR Philippines Head of Field Office Michel Huyghe lauded the ongoing efforts of the Philippine government to allow POCs to access services of the State.

Aside from the DOJ, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Department of Education, Department of Labor and Employment, Department of Health, Department of Trade and Industry, Department of Social Welfare and Development, Department of the Interior and Local Government, Commission on Higher Education, Public Attorney's Office, Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office, and Philippine Health Insurance Corporation were also present at the signing ceremony.

A state party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the Philippines has a long history in extending support to refugees and asylum seekers. UNHCR is mandated to work with the state to protect and support refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons.

Saving Lives, Safeguarding Rights, Building Better Futures

These are just some of the things we were able to do, thanks to your support

Marawi: The Road to Rebuild from Ruin

Militants sympathetic to ISIS laid siege to Marawi in May 2017, forcing an estimated 353,000 persons from the city and neighboring municipalities to escape violence. In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, UNHCR was able to respond rapidly to provide immediate assistance to families pouring into government-managed evacuation centers, in community-managed evacuation camps, and even to those who went to stay with their relatives.

UNHCR, as co-lead of the Protection Cluster, continues to advocate for the protection of the rights of the displaced. A survey was conducted among the displaced to amplify their voices; the results were then forwarded to national and local government agencies as they map out rehabilitation plans for Marawi and families forced to flee. With the help of the public and private sector partners, UNHCR has also distributed targeted assistance to the most vulnerable populations like the elderly and persons with special needs.

Fighting between the military and the ISIS-inspired group lasted for five months, and despite the city's liberation, much remains to be done to support displaced families as they get back on their feet. As of December 2017, an

estimated 266,615 people—roughly 75% of the total displaced population—continue to live in displacement. Meanwhile, many of those who were able to return to Marawi were forced to go back to evacuation camps or to their relatives because of lack of basic utilities and services in the city, where a large portion was destroyed.

UNHCR continues to conduct protection monitoring among the displaced and those who have returned. The road to rebuilding from ruin remains unpaved, but with your support, we can commit to stand with them every step of the way so they can recover and get back on their feet.



The Right to Belong: Ending Statelessness

A child is born stateless every 10 minutes. Without the proper documentation and legal identities, stateless people are denied access to basic rights such as education, health services and employment. In the Philippines, foundlings, persons of Indonesian descent and the Sama population are only some of the many persons of concern who are constantly at risk of severe discrimination and injustice.

Groups of people become at risk of statelessness due to their unclear nationality status passed on across generations. Some individuals also lack documents such as a birth certificate as proof of identity. Without a clear country to where they belong, persons at risk of statelessness are relegated to the sidelines. Statelessness can very well lead to restricted mobility within the society, as well as have lasting consequences on the next generations that come after.

There is a persisting urgent call to reintegrate stateless people into a more peaceful and inclusive society, where their rights and dignities are recognized and secured.

This year, we continued to make strides in providing solutions to persons at risk of statelessness who are mostly poor but cannot afford the process of being registered with the government. UNHCR has also supported the government in developing the National Action Plan for Stateless People.



Durable, Lasting Solutions for Refugees

The year 2017 started with UNHCR confronting a persisting, massive challenge: global displacement continues to escalate. When the year started, an estimated 65.6 million people were living in displacement.

In the Philippines, UNHCR works with the Philippine government to support refugees and asylum-seekers, and provide them with a favorable protection environment that will allow them to thrive.

One of the forms of durable solutions available to refugees is local integration with the local community or host country. This 2017, UNHCR assisted two former refugees in their bid to be naturalized as Filipinos. After waiting for years in legal limbo, former Iranian refugee Kamran Karbasi and former Palestinian refugee Maher Mohammed Alraee took their oaths of allegiance to conclude their naturalization process. Both fled their homes to escape violence and persecution.



As lead of the Mindanao Protection Cluster, UNHCR continued to empower internally displaced families and those who have returned to their communities as they chart their path to recovery. With your help, we bolstered our commitment to families under our care. In the provinces of Sulu, Basilan, Maguindanao, and Lanao del Norte, and Lanao del Sur, we completed community empowerment programs and quick impact projects (QIPs). Some initiatives include the installment of solar street lamps and water systems, as well as the provision of tools, materials, and training for livelihood support.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD:

LORETO PALMAERA, UNHCR Programme Officer in Bangladesh and Lebanon

Restoring hope and dignity among communities that fled violence and persecution

I am Loreto Palmaera, a Filipino humanitarian worker who hails from Tulunan, Cotabato. I have been serving with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, since 2014 as Programme Officer for the Cash-based Interventions (CBIs) initiative.

Throughout 2016, more than 2.5 million refugees have benefited from the programme across 60 countries.



Prior to joining UNHCR, I have worked in various humanitarian operations in Indonesia, Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Philippines. I joined the UN Refugee Agency three years ago to lead the implementation of the cash assistance programme in Lebanon for refugees from Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and other countries.

When people are forced to flee war, conflict, and violence, they often leave with nothing but the clothes on their back. While living in displacement, they also lose their ability to earn and spend.

As a way of providing protection, UNHCR's cash-based interventions help reduce the risks displaced persons face: Cash assistance makes them less likely to resort to harmful coping strategies, such as survival sex, child labour, family separation and forced marriage.

Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis

I was recently deployed to Bangladesh to support our emergency operations for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees who have fled conflict and persecution since 25 August 2017.

The speed and scale of the influx has resulted in a critical humanitarian emergency. More than 100 days since they were forced to escape to Bangladesh, the Rohingya's humanitarian needs remain acute. Urgent

action is still needed to provide shelter, health and sanitation facilities, food and clean water, medical assistance, and psychosocial support.

The refugees who arrived in Bangladesh since August came with very few possessions. They have used the majority of their savings on transportation and constructing a shelter, often out of no more than bamboo and thin plastic. They are now reliant on humanitarian assistance and other life-saving needs. These are provided through in-kind commodities, although most are available in the local markets.

Serving as Cash-based Intervention Officer, my main role was to gauge the feasibility of using cash as an alternative to in-kind assistance and distribution of core relief items. Part of my job was to work with banks to provide potential payment solutions given the limited infrastructure in the refugee camps.



Restoring hope and dignity among communities that fled violence and persecution

While it is true that the situation is still at the emergency phase, conditions at Kutupalong refugee camps allow key essential requirements for the implementation of cash-based interventions at a small-scale.

It has a dynamic free-market economy, and many of the refugees' basic needs such as food, hygiene items, and shelter materials are available from the local market.

Cash assistance thus directly stirs and benefits the local economy by creating a multiplier effect. This also contributes to peaceful coexistence with host communities or countries, refuting the perception that refugees are burdensome.

More importantly, access to cash empowers refugees and give them the freedom of choice to address their own needs.

Back here in Lebanon, every time I sign the payment request for refugees' accounts, I feel fulfilment and happiness thinking that

tens of thousands of refugees will be able to eat, buy medicine, pay a rent and send their children to school.

Let me tell you a story about Tharwat, one of the 1.8 million refugees in the Middle East.

Tharwat, who fled the war in Syria, has spent six years as a refugee in Lebanon. She has constantly struggled to meet competing needs like putting food on the table and buying medicine for her ill mother.

Through the cash assistance she receives through UNHCR, Tharwat has regained control over her finances and a corresponding boost to her dignity.

"The money I receive has changed my life. I now have the freedom to buy what I need the most, and that's my mother's medication. She would fall very ill without it. For me, food comes second," she shared.

On why Filipinos should care

As Filipinos, we have experienced a lot of hardships in life due to poverty and calamities. The good thing is, Filipinos are resilient. We learned from every mistake,

"Today, we have the opportunity to demonstrate compassion and give help those who are suffering more than we do – those who are killed and persecuted, those who are forced to flee to save their lives."

mistake, we convert threats to opportunities and we were able to 'still give' when we ourselves have outstanding needs. Those are our traits.

We are fortunate that, despite the hardships that we encounter in our day-to-day life in the Philippines, Filipinos still have the freedom to

life in the Philippines, Filipinos still have the freedom to enjoy our lives with our families without fear of persecution. Today, we have the opportunity to demonstrate compassion and give help those who are suffering more than we do – those who are killed and persecuted, those who are forced to flee to save their lives.

Loreto Palmaera is among UNHCR's Filipino humanitarian workers deployed to emergency hotspots across the world. If you or your friends would like to support UNHCR's emergency operations for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, please share the gift of hope by donating at <https://donate.unhcr.ph/rohingya>.



Share
THE GIFT OF
HOPE



Thank you for your committed support this 2017!

With protracted displacement ongoing in the Philippines and in various emergency hotspots across the world, we hope we can continue counting on your generosity and compassion as we welcome the new year.

Together with you, we at UNHCR are able to save lives of families forced to escape war, conflict and violence and safeguard their fundamental rights. With your support, our quick impact projects and community empowerment programs can help them get back on their feet and dream once again of a better future for their families.

Thank you for offering them the gift of hope.