

Presentation to the 71<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee  
By Mr. Indrika Ratwatte  
Geneva, 6 March 2018  
Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific

Madam Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to address you today for the first time on behalf of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific.

I am joined on the podium by my two Deputy Directors. Mr. Bernard Doyle, whose coverage extends from Nepal to the Pacific. And Mr. Ayaki Ito, who is responsible for South West and Central Asia.

Madam Chair,

Asia and Pacific is home to more than 60% of the world's population. With some 4.4 billion people, the region is today an engine for global development, characterised by economic growth, considerable living standards, and people on the move seeking new opportunities.

However, in 2018, nearly 8 million forcibly displaced people are not following this upward trajectory. For them, uncertainty abounds. Half are children, more than half are women, and many have no nationality, documentation or a place to call home.

Saida Begum is one of those people.

A mother of two from the northern part of Myanmar's Rakhine State, she fled to Bangladesh, escaping violence and years of exclusion and discrimination at home.

When I met her at an arrival point in Cox's Bazar last month, only one of her two children were in her arms. The other – she told me – had died on the ten-day long journey. Arriving shocked and exhausted, she was grateful to be in a safe, welcoming country.

Ms. Begum is just one victim of violence, persecution and statelessness that disrupt the lives of people across our region. But she is also an example of the resilience of refugees, and the generosity shown by many refugee-receiving countries in Asia.

Building on our regional update, I will shape my presentation around three key areas of our work that impact the lives of people like Saida.

1. Protection and assistance.
2. Solutions.
3. Partnerships.

Madam Chair, I will begin with **protection and assistance**.

UNHCR's first large-scale emergency refugee response in Asia dates back to 1971. In August last year, we found ourselves suddenly responding to the fastest movement of people in nearly 50 years since then. The dramatic outflow of nearly 700,000 stateless refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

As a result, UNHCR ramped up its capacity in support of the remarkable response of the Bangladeshi government. We registered families, mobilized airlifts of humanitarian aid, and found innovative ways to protect refugees. Today, we continue to upscale our response in support of refugees, the government, and the local communities generously hosting them.

It must be remembered that almost one in three people in Cox's Bazar district in south-eastern Bangladesh is now a refugee. The host community in Cox's Bazar must be shown the same solidarity and support they have shown to refugees. UNHCR and partners will therefore focus on improving infrastructure providing support to national systems, and restoring forest land.

Madam Chair,

The monsoon season in Bangladesh will also start later this month. I would be remiss not to highlight the daunting risks that accompany it.

On the rugged topography of Kutapalong, now the largest refugee settlement in the world with 588,000 people, you don't need to be an engineer to see that many shelters will be impacted by oncoming heavy rains.

In total, we estimate that more than 100,000 refugees are living in areas prone to flooding or landslides. Tens of thousands still need to be relocated, their shelters strengthened. The Government, with the support of UNHCR and partners is proactively steering this massive emergency preparedness effort. But lives remain at risk.

Madam Chair,

Protecting refugees is at the core of all we do, as demonstrated by our response in Bangladesh.

In concrete terms, it means supporting governments in registration and documentation, as we do in Pakistan; improving the conditions to which people return, like in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan; and addressing the needs of children and women, those with specific needs, and exploring alternatives to detention.

But, in addition to protection, our work is also about finding **solutions** for people of concern.

In Myanmar, the genuine search for solutions must start. At the heart of it all is the restoration of rights - including the right of refugees to return home – in voluntarily, safe, and dignified conditions.

Preserving the right of return must remain a central priority. As such, we welcome the commitments made between Bangladesh and Myanmar on voluntary repatriation as set out in the Bilateral Arrangement signed in November 2017.

However, current conditions in Rakhine State are not conducive to voluntary repatriation. It must be underscored that the genuine efforts needed to enable sustainable repatriation are yet to start.

The humanitarian access needed to support the Government of Myanmar in the creation of these conditions also remains extremely limited. Allowing access for UNHCR and partners will be essential to; implement programmes that promote co-existence among all communities; to monitor conditions in areas of origin and return; and provide independent information to refugees.

Madam Chair,

Viable solutions must also be found for refugees transferred from Australia to Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

Australia for decades has been a leader in the region for its support to refugee operations and in resettling refugees.

However, the harmful practise of offshore processing is an approach being watched by many across the region. UNHCR will continue to urge the Government of Australia to find solutions for refugees who will not be relocated to the United States, while also monitoring the conditions on the islands. After more than four years spent in limbo, in harsh conditions, they too deserve a chance at a future.

Driven from their homes, but not their country, solutions must also be found for the internally displaced. There are now more than 1.9 million in the region waiting to return home.

An approximate 130,000 IDPS remain in the central townships of Myanmar's Rakhine State, now in their sixth year of confined encampment. As we have in the past, UNHCR stands ready as part of an inter-agency effort to support the Government to secure solutions for this group.

In the Philippines, the devastating conflict in Marawi has resulted in 400,000 internally displaced people. I saw first-hand in December the severe damage caused to the city and the impact on people's lives. UNHCR is therefore committed to supporting the Government in strengthening protection for IDPs and pursuing solutions.

Madam Chair,

Lasting solutions to the protracted Afghan refugee situation remain contingent on developments inside Afghanistan. The sad reality is that over 10,000 innocent civilians either lost their lives or were injured last year. There has been an increase in the number of casualties from suicide and complex attacks, including on humanitarian workers.

As a result of such violence, 1.4 million people in the country are now internally displaced.

Another 2.5 million Afghans remain as refugees.

96% of the total Afghan refugee population are still being generously hosted in the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. At a time when protection space for refugees is shrinking in some parts of the world, these countries remain exemplary in their support towards this population.

The Governments of the Islamic Republics of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, together with UNHCR, in November of last year reaffirmed important commitments to finding solutions.

The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees remains the important regional platform for solutions. Since its adoption in 2012, it has paved the way for the voluntary repatriation of over 660,000 Afghan refugees, all facilitated by UNHCR.

In 2017 some 60,000 refugees, mostly from Pakistan, chose to return home. Despite a decrease from the year before, this was still globally the third biggest number of voluntary returns from one country in that period.

On return to Afghanistan, UNHCR monitors the reintegration of refugees and provides them with a cash grant to enable their anchoring. In addition, we support the Government of Afghanistan to implement its policy framework and action plans for return and reintegration.

Though violence impedes large scale returns, ongoing efforts to implement community based programs in high return areas that create conditions for sustainable repatriation need to be scaled up.

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan still need the international community's support. They continue to provide the essentials of life for refugees, and pathways to enhancing their resilience.

Host to nearly 1 million refugees, the Islamic Republic of Iran offers refugees a chance at a decent life. Over 420,000 refugee children are enrolled in government primary and secondary schools. 16,500 Afghans are attending Iranian universities. Some 125,000 are also now registered under the Universal Public Health Insurance scheme, which gives them access to the same level of services as Iranian nationals. These initiatives mean that when refugees return home, they will be empowered with good health, good education, and the ability to generate their own livelihoods.

Pakistan is still providing 1.4 million refugees with protection through proof of registration cards. UNHCR encourages the Government to extend these cards beyond March 2018.

The Government with the support of UNHCR also implements projects to support refugees and host communities under the Refugee Affected and Host Area initiative. Programs focus heavily on youth empowerment and building skills. In 2017, nearly 623,000 Afghan refugees and Pakistanis benefitted from 36 projects in the country.

Pakistan, in coordination with the Government of Afghanistan, and support of IOM and UNHCR also launched a unique programme in July 2017 to register undocumented Afghans on its territory. Some 870,000 Afghans have since been biometrically registered by the Government of Pakistan and are being issued Afghan Citizen Cards. 10% of the population have already received them.

Madam Chair,

Elsewhere in the region, solutions are also being pursued. Over 1500 refugees returned to Sri Lanka in 2017. We met each family upon return and provided them with basic assistance to start rebuilding their lives.

In Nepal, 112,000 refugees from Bhutan were living in seven camps in 2007. Today, just two camps remain with just over 7000 refugees. It has been one of the largest and most successful resettlement programmes of its kind.

We are also exploring alternative pathways to resettlement. They could not be needed more. In Japan, we are supporting scholarship programmes sponsored by the Japanese Government that enable Syrian refugees to enter post-graduate study. In a world where less than 1 in 100 refugees have access to university education, it is innovative schemes like these that we will pursue.

Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Solutions to statelessness remain a significant challenge for UNHCR in the region. An estimated 1.4 million people have no nationality. There are thought to be more stateless people in Asia than anywhere else in the world. The scourge of statelessness disenfranchises people and marginalizes them from our societies.

I am pleased to report modest progress is being made.

More than 25,000 people in the region acquired nationality in 2017, including in Thailand, the Philippines, and across central Asia. UNHCR's campaign to end statelessness by 2024 presents a historic opportunity to End Statelessness once and for all. We will continue work with governments to strengthen our collective efforts to turn this goal into reality.

Finally, I turn to **partnerships**, without which none of our work would be possible.

UNHCR's capacity to help millions of persons of concern in the region is greatly bolstered through strong partnerships and the collaboration of its many partners.

Our concept of partnership starts with persons of concern themselves and embraces Member States, regional bodies, host communities, civil society, the private sector, and development actors.

Strengthening the link between the humanitarian and development spheres through partnerships remains a priority. We are working closely, with the World Bank and others, to ensure access to documentation, to collect data, develop livelihoods, and promote youth and women empowerment. We will continue to do so, exploring new and innovative opportunities at every turn.

More than a year ago, 193 States gathered in New York to reaffirm the fundamental values of solidarity and partnership needed to assist people forced into exile. They agreed that protecting refugees and supporting the countries that shelter them is a **shared** international responsibility that must be borne in a more predictable and equitable way.

As we have an historic opportunity to adopt a Global Compact on Refugees, we will work on all of these elements in 2018 with equal determination. In this context, the recognition of host nations as donors is imperative. They continue to pay the highest price for supporting a global public good.

As Bangladesh, the Islamic Republics of Iran, and Pakistan are three of the largest refugee hosting countries worldwide, they need our continued solidarity.

The bedrock of our work remains with national partners.

Nearly 80 per cent of UNHCR's partnerships in the region are with national organizations. In Bangladesh, we now have 70% more local partners than at the outset of the emergency.

National partners constitute the foundation of humanitarian action: they know the geography, the populations in need of assistance, and are usually the first on the scene. We remain inspired by their tireless work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last but not least, let me conclude by expressing my sincere appreciation to member states for their political and financial support to host governments and UNHCR's work.

As we confront some of the world's greatest challenges together, we will continue to build our partnerships with countries and regional bodies.

I appeal today for your continued robust support and solidarity for refugees, stateless and displaced populations in the Asia Pacific region.

Millions of people, like Saida, rely on us. We must answer their calls together.

Thank you.