

**Philippines  
2003**

**Country Operations Plan**

**Part I: Executive Committee Summary**

**(a) Context and Beneficiary Population**

**Political Context**

The political situation in the Philippines is expected to remain volatile as the administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo seeks to bring about social, economic and security changes. The presence of US forces in the south of the Philippines to assist Filipino forces combat Abu Sayaf, as part of the US war against terror, appeared to have been relatively successful although not complete. The Philippine Government has expressed support for the US presence and the co-operation received in the US-led war on terrorism. The implementation of new laws by the Malaysian Government in August 2002, led to tens of thousands of Filipino Muslims returning to the southern Philippines from the eastern Malaysian state of Sabah. The global economic downturn and the events of September 11 have also mitigated the achievements of the new administration, including notable improvements in the management of core macro-economic and social variables.

**Security Situation**

The security situation throughout the Philippines remains tense with consistent reports of attacks, kidnappings and murders. Military operations were concentrated in the south of the country and focussed on combatting Abu Sayaf rebels. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front claimed that they were preparing for renewed confrontation with Manila despite on-going peace talks with the Government.

**UNHCR's Role**

UNHCR's main role in the Philippines in 2003 is to promote and monitor the implementation of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The Philippines remains the only country in the region that is a signatory to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol and with an institutionalised refugee protection regime. UNHCR will undertake promotional and diplomatic efforts that will continue to advocate for the enactment, amendment and revision of national legislation and regulations recognising the rights of refugees and implementing the Philippine Government's obligations as a signatory to the 1951 Convention. UNHCR also aims to promote the ratification of the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, which the Philippines has already signed.

UNHCR's agenda will aim for the institutionalisation of provisions in favour of refugees and asylum seekers in immigration law, which will facilitate the naturalisation of refugees, refining the current Refugee Status Determination (RSD) system, ensuring that state legislation, regulations, policies and practices guarantee the enjoyment of the social, economic and cultural rights of refugees. The long-term goal is the development of a working model that can be used to engage other states within the region to accede to the 1951 Convention and to protect refugees in accordance with international standards.

UNHCR will likewise continue to strengthen the capacity of the Philippine Government, particularly the Department of Justice- Refugee Processing Unit and the Bureau of Immigration, through training and support activities so as to ensure that refugees, asylum seekers and other persons of concern to UNHCR enjoy protection and receive the assistance that they are qualified for and entitled to. The more direct involvement by UNHCR in the determination process, as an observer during RSD or in formal advisory capacity in case deliberations will be pursued. Access to the RSD procedure, information and assistance in all ports of entry and by undocumented aliens seeking asylum will likewise be addressed.

UNHCR further aims to develop a wider supportive base that will advocate a refugee protection agenda and support UNHCR's objectives in the Philippines. Members of government, prominent Filipino nationals who were formerly refugees or are supportive of refugee issues, NGO networks addressing issues relating to refugees and uprooted persons,

the Philippine Bar Association and other lawyers organizations, and training and academic institutions influencing government policy and assistance will be engaged to support and complement UNHCR promotional and diplomatic efforts. Promotional activities will be implemented to raise public awareness and clarify UNHCR's as well as the government's role for the protection of refugees and address the lack of knowledge by the greater public and key stakeholders of the basic notions of refugee protection and refugee law.

UNHCR will continue to provide protection and assistance to refugees, asylum seekers and other persons of concern in the Philippines. There is an urban refugee caseload numbering 134 in the Philippines as of 28 February 2002. In 2003, UNHCR will continue to work with local partners to seek durable solutions for the urban refugee caseload primarily through local integration, and in particular through the naturalisation of qualified refugees, as well as the promotion of self-sufficiency for a limited number receiving financial assistance. The needs of newly recognised refugees, vulnerable cases, and women, and children will be incorporated and considered in all aspects of planning and implementation. Asylum seekers and other persons of concern to UNHCR will also continue to be provided technical and legal assistance and, on an exceptional basis, material assistance under the sub-project to be established with the national NGO implementing partner.

UNHCR's presence in the Philippines will also be influenced by events in Indonesia and Malaysia, particularly with regard to the tens of thousands of Filipino Muslims residing in Sabah state and the thousands who were forced to return in July/August 2002. UNHCR will also closely monitor current and potential population displacements, support contingency planning and support emergency preparedness activities. As part of this support UNHCR moreover will continue to provide the government with technical advice to help it address the needs of internally displaced persons in Southern Mindanao.

In addition, the closure at the end of 2001 of the sub-project executed with the GOP for the assistance to the remaining Vietnamese nationals in the country that have been screened out under the Comprehensive Plan of Action has left this population of nearly 2000 persons without an appropriate durable solution. The possibility of becoming stateless for these persons along with more than 200 others under the Orderly Departure Programme, especially those who are Amerasian children, will be occur if the Vietnamese government continues to refuse approval of their repatriation. Voluntary repatriation remains limited to a small number, while other alternatives – migration or relocation – also remain unattainable for the significant majority. UNHCR will continue its involvement to ensure that solutions will be attained and statelessness is prevented for this caseload, through support for the passage of legislation conferring permanent residency status to the residual caseload and engaging other actors to do the same

### **Capacity and presence of implementing partners and UN agencies**

UNHCR Manila will continue to participate in the meetings organised by the UNDP Resident Representative who is also the Resident Coordinator for Humanitarian Action in the Philippines. In February 2002, UNHCR was elected as chair for the UN Task Force on Disaster Management, through which the UN Country Team will determine its institutional response to disasters and emergencies.

### **Selected Programme Goals and Objectives**

Name of Beneficiary Population/Theme:

UNHCR's primary role in the Philippines in 2003 is to promote and monitor the implementation of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, in order for refugees, asylum seekers and others of concern to enjoy their rights, be ensured protection, and have access to assistance if required. The activities will include promotion and advocacy for the development of national legislation, strengthening the capacity of government to protect refugees and undertake RSD, development of a base of stakeholders supportive of UNHCR's objectives, support for emergency preparedness and contingency planning, implementation of assistance activities leading to the attainment of durable solutions for refugees and addressing the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and other persons of concern to UNHCR.

<p>Main Goals:</p> <p>The Philippine Government adheres to its obligations as a signatory to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees.  Refugees in the Philippines attain a durable solution, are accorded protection by the state, enjoy their rights under the Convention, and have access to the assistance if required.</p>	
<p><b>Principal Objectives</b></p> <p>Refugees and asylum seekers benefit from national legislation conforming to international standards.</p> <p>Stateless persons in the country benefit from the ratification of the 1954 Convention on Statelessness.</p> <p>The capacity of the Department of Justice to undertake RSD in accordance with international standards is strengthened.</p> <p>Recognised refugees are permitted to locally integrate and, subsequently, be naturalised.</p> <p>UNHCR's objectives and activities are supported and complemented by a network of stakeholders (prominent persons, NGOs, academic institutions, etc) who are advocating for a refugee protection agenda.</p> <p>Capacity of the Philippine Government and other actors to respond to a refugee influx and/or extensive internal displacement is strengthened.</p>	<p><b>Related Outputs</b></p> <p>Philippine Immigration law amended to incorporate provisions recognizing rights of refugees and asylum seekers under the 1951 Convention.</p> <p>1954 Convention on Statelessness is ratified by the Philippine Senate.</p> <p>Training for Department of Justice - Refugee Processing Unit provided  RSD process supported by UNHCR in observer or advisory capacity.</p> <p>Entitlement of refugees to work permits, and regularization of immigration status ensured.</p> <p>UNHCR promotional and advocacy objectives are included in the advocacy agenda of various stakeholders.</p> <p>Government contingency plans describing possible scenarios and identifying resources required for response are facilitated by support for Emergency Management and Contingency Planning initiatives.</p>