

## **Update on UNHCR’s operations in Asia and the Pacific**

### **A. Situational context including new developments**

As of the end of 2018, there were close to 9.5 million persons of concern to UNHCR in the Asia and Pacific region, including 4.2 million refugees, 2.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 2.2 million stateless persons. While 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, the region continues to demonstrate a long-standing tradition of hospitality towards refugees. In this spirit, the upcoming Global Refugee Forum in December will provide an important opportunity for countries and other stakeholders in the region to advance support for the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees. The Forum will also enable these countries and stakeholders to exchange and highlight good practices that will inspire future commitments.

Forty years since the Soviet-Afghan War, Afghans remain the largest refugee population of concern to UNHCR in the region in 2019. Over 2.4 million registered Afghan refugees are generously hosted by the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. In June, the sixth Quadripartite Steering Committee meeting took place in Islamabad, Pakistan. All parties agreed to extend the “Solutions strategy for Afghan refugees to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance to host countries” (SSAR) until 2021, confirming it as an important framework for identifying and implementing solutions for Afghan refugees. All parties also agreed to consider UNHCR’s proposal to establish a support platform for the SSAR to mobilize resources in support of the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees.

Given the continuing complex situation in Afghanistan, the political and financial support of the international community to the Government of Afghanistan remains crucial, including a focus on development assistance to support the reintegration of Afghan returnees and to ensure that returns are sustainable. The volatile security situation in Afghanistan continues to impact civilians, with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documenting over 3,800 casualties in the first half of 2019.

August 2019 marked two years since 745,000 stateless Rohingya refugees from northern Rakhine State, Myanmar, fled to Bangladesh. UNHCR continued to work with the Government of Bangladesh and other partners to support the emergency response in Cox’s Bazar, responding to the needs of some 900,000 Rohingya refugees and seeking sustainable solutions. In February, the UN launched the 2019 “Joint response plan for Rohingya humanitarian crisis”, appealing for \$920 million to meet the needs of refugees and vulnerable members of the host communities.

In March 2019, UNHCR reclassified its internal designation of the emergency in Bangladesh from level-3 to level-2, reflecting the ongoing needs of refugees and host communities. The Office has worked to strengthen the protection environment for Rohingya refugees, including health and education, and to improve living conditions in settlements while bolstering peaceful coexistence with host communities and seeking solutions. The monsoon and cyclone seasons pose significant additional risks to refugee settlements. UNHCR and partners have been working to mitigate the risk of landslides and floods in the settlements by strengthening shelters and infrastructures, and have trained hundreds of refugee volunteers to play an important role in responding to natural disasters.

In August 2019, through the bilateral joint working group on repatriation, the Government of Myanmar conveyed to the Government of Bangladesh the names of Rohingya refugees who have been cleared for return to Rakhine State. UNHCR has assisted the Government of Bangladesh in surveying these refugees and to confirm the voluntariness of any returns to Myanmar. So far, none of those interviewed indicated a willingness to repatriate at this time. UNHCR remains committed to working with the two governments to ensure that any repatriation of refugees is voluntary, safe and dignified, and to supporting the Government of Myanmar to create conditions conducive to sustainable return.

In Myanmar, UNHCR remains strongly committed to the full and effective implementation of the tripartite memorandum of understanding between UNHCR, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Government of Myanmar; however, progress has been slow due to restricted access and ongoing conflict in some areas of Rakhine State. By mid-August 2019, UNHCR and UNDP had conducted four multi-sectoral assessments in 75 villages aimed at understanding the main challenges facing communities, assessing immediate needs and identifying quick-impact projects. Focus group discussions with 1,800 persons have been held and 70 projects were designed, of which 34 were approved by the Government of Myanmar and are underway.

Addressing the root causes of the violence in Myanmar continues to be a priority, including full implementation of the recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission which promote freedom of movement and a clear and voluntary pathway to citizenship for the Rohingya. UNHCR stands ready to contribute to reconstruction and development efforts that would lay the groundwork for voluntary and sustainable returns in safety and dignity, as well as support recovery and resilience-based development for the benefit of all communities living in Rakhine State.

Solutions to this crisis remain elusive, however, and it is essential that concerned stakeholders work together to achieve tangible progress. In this regard, UNHCR is advocating the establishment of a platform for coordinated, multi-partner support to Myanmar in order to improve conditions in Rakhine State and build confidence among refugees. Tangible international responsibility-sharing with Bangladesh and other refugee-hosting countries in line with the Global Compact on Refugees is also needed. The success of these initiatives will depend on robust engagement from a broad range of partners working together to help build a peaceful and dignified life for the people of Rakhine State.

In Sri Lanka, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks on Easter Sunday this year took the lives of 253 people and injured more than 500. While refugees were not directly impacted, more than 1,000 (many of whom originate from Pakistan and Afghanistan) were forced to leave their homes in the immediate aftermath. With the support of government authorities, civil society, the United Nations country team and donors, UNHCR was able to deliver urgent assistance and protection. As of mid-September, 73 refugees had yet to return to private accommodation.

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

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

UNHCR continued to promote protection-sensitive systems for the management of mixed movements in the region in 2019. The Office also continued to undertake refugee status determination in countries without national asylum procedures.

In Bangladesh, by 18 September, 622,768 Rohingya refugees had been registered through a joint exercise between the Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR in which registered refugees are provided with new biometric cards. The exercise, which began in June 2018, helps safeguard the rights of Rohingya refugees to voluntarily return home to Myanmar, improves the accuracy of data on refugees in Bangladesh, and facilitates planning and targeted assistance.

The presence of Rohingya refugees goes beyond Bangladesh. In India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Nepal, Rohingya refugees remain displaced many years after they were forced to flee. UNHCR depends on host governments to continue offering protection and to provide more opportunities for all refugees to become self-reliant.

The Government of Pakistan’s decision in early 2019 to allow refugees to open bank accounts was a welcome development as it allows refugees to participate and contribute to the formal economy. In June 2019, the Government approved the extension of proof of registration cards for Afghan refugees until 30 June 2020 and Afghan citizen cards for other Afghans until 31 October 2019. The Government of Pakistan’s joint programme with the Government of Afghanistan to register undocumented Afghans was completed in February 2018. The Afghan citizen card does not confer refugee status but does regularize temporary stay in Pakistan. All categories of Afghans in need of protection continue to have unimpeded access to UNHCR and its partners.

The “Refugee-affected and hosting areas” (RAHA) programme in Pakistan, now ten years on from its initiation, continues to foster social cohesion between refugees and host communities. Over 4,200 projects, worth \$220 million and benefitting 12.41 million people (85 per cent Pakistani nationals and 15 per cent Afghan refugees), have been completed to date. The projects have been implemented in 47 districts country-wide, the majority in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which host the majority of Afghan refugees.

Despite an increasingly difficult economic situation, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran continues to extend protection and assistance to close to 1 million Afghan and Iraqi refugees with the implementation of inclusive policies on education and health. In 2019 alone, over 73,000 vulnerable refugees had enrolled in the Government’s universal public health insurance scheme as of 1 August. Additionally, UNHCR continued to support the Government’s efforts in providing access to formal primary and secondary education, as well as informal education (literacy classes) for refugees.

In Central Asia, UNHCR has continued to support the Almaty Process to address the challenges resulting from complex mixed movements in Central Asia and the wider region. It collaborated with other organizations, border officials and asylum authorities from the five Central Asian countries to strengthen border management and national systems.

### **Seeking solutions for protracted refugee situations**

The Government of Afghanistan continued to apply the comprehensive refugee response framework (CRRF) as a country of origin, based on its experience in implementing the solutions strategy for Afghan refugees. UNHCR is implementing a range of solutions-oriented initiatives in communities across Afghanistan that have received displaced persons and returning refugees. In line with the solutions strategy, and more recently the CRRF, 15 priority areas for return and reintegration were selected in line with the Government of Afghanistan’s priorities. In these locations, UNHCR aims to link its short- to medium-term community-based protection projects to longer-term development programmes. The range of projects include: delivery of cash assistance and in-kind support to vulnerable families; improving access to adequate shelter; expansion of education and skills training; provision of entrepreneurial support; implementation of quick-impact livelihoods initiatives, and; the development of public infrastructure such as schools, healthcare facilities, community centres and roads.

In June 2019, UNHCR hosted the thirtieth tripartite meeting with Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the three parties reaffirmed their commitment to uphold the principle of voluntary repatriation under the tripartite agreement. By mid-August, over 4,200 refugees had voluntarily repatriated to Afghanistan, mostly from the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. According to the Quadripartite Steering Committee conclusions signed in June 2019, the repatriation of Afghan refugees is to be voluntary, gradual and sustainable, in the context of ongoing violence and the challenging absorption capacity in Afghanistan.

As of mid-September 2019, 620 Sri Lankan refugees returned home from India through the voluntary repatriation programme. UNHCR is working closely with the Sri Lankan and Indian authorities to enhance opportunities for return, such as the resumption of ferry services between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. Additionally, refugees in Sri Lanka continued to be resettled to third countries. As of mid-September, a total of 218 individuals had departed Sri Lanka for resettlement to Canada, the Netherlands, and the United States of America in 2019.

In Nepal, following the resettlement of more than 113,000 Bhutanese refugees which concluded in 2018, UNHCR, together with partners, has made great strides to build the self-

reliance of the 6,500 individuals who remain. The Office is working with Nepal and Bhutan to provide an opportunity for the relatively small number of refugees who wish to return.

In 2019, UNHCR continued to advocate increased resettlement opportunities for refugees in the region, while exploring complementary pathways for admission to third countries. As of 31 July 2019, 5,000 refugees in the region were resettled worldwide during the year.

In the Republic of Korea, a three-year pilot resettlement programme was completed in 2017 for Myanmar refugees from Thailand. The Government extended the pilot for another two years and has been offering resettlement to urban refugees identified by UNHCR in Malaysia throughout 2018 and 2019. A total of 112 individuals have been resettled in the Republic of Korea since 2015. In 2019, 68 individuals were submitted for resettlement from Malaysia and the first departures to the Republic of Korea this year will take place in September.

By the end of July 2019, UNHCR submitted over 3,336 refugees from around the world for resettlement to Australia (3,031), New Zealand (259), and the Republic of Korea (46). During the same period, 1,340 refugees departed to Australia, 571 to New Zealand, and 11 to the Republic of Korea.

In June 2019, the Government of Japan announced the expansion of the quota and criteria for its resettlement programme, starting from 2020 admissions. This includes increasing the quota from 30 to 60 individuals per year, expanding the selection criteria from refugees originating from Myanmar to any refugees, and expanding the current hosting countries from Malaysia to the Asia region.

In Japan, the Office continues to support scholarship programmes sponsored by the Japanese Government that enable Syrian refugees to begin post-graduate studies. The Japanese initiative for the future of Syrian refugees implemented by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), in collaboration with UNHCR, commenced in 2017 and aims to provide scholarships to 100 Syrian refugees from Jordan and Lebanon over a five-year period. The initiative builds on the Ministry of Education's existing scholarship programme that will accept 50 Syrians. Under the initiative, a total of 93 Syrians (including family members) were admitted in 2017, 2018 and 2019. Of the 19 students admitted in 2017, 9 are graduating this year. Some of these students have already found employment in Japan. UNHCR provides policy and technical advice to JICA to support this initiative.

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

UNHCR continued to provide protection and assistance for IDPs in the region and to seek solutions to displacement.

By mid-2019, there were an estimated 2 million IDPs in Afghanistan, over 206,000 of whom were newly displaced in the first seven months of the year. UNHCR and partners continue to assist IDPs across the country with emergency assistance and community-based protection activities.

In Myanmar, the Office worked with partners and the Government to protect and assist approximately 107,000 IDPs in Kachin and northern Shan States. In central Rakhine State, where there are an estimated 128,000 IDPs, UNHCR advocated that the Government's plan for the closure of the IDP camps is implemented in line with international human rights standards. In Southeast Myanmar, UNHCR supported durable solutions for 131,000 IDPs.

In the Philippines, where there are currently over 191,600 IDPs in Mindanao, violence and insecurity continue to drive displacement. The displacement is often short-term, with over 294,000 individuals displaced in 2019. UNHCR has supported the Government with the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of displaced families, and with finding alternative solutions for those from the most affected areas who are unable to return.

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

With over 2 million stateless persons in the region, addressing statelessness has remained a key strategic priority in 2019. This year marks the halfway point of the #IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024. Following substantial progress that has been made in the region in the past few years, States have continued to take concrete steps to prevent and reduce statelessness in 2019. In 2019, UNHCR continued to strengthen its engagement with States

and other partners in the region to achieve the goals of the campaign and provide technical support and capacity development.

In Central Asia, significant progress has been made in reducing the number of cases of statelessness in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Since the start of the #IBelong campaign, the number of stateless persons in the sub-region decreased by more than 68,000, and countries continue to strive towards further reduction and prevention. In July 2019, Kyrgyzstan became the first country to end statelessness on its territory by granting nationality to the last group of the 13,700 stateless persons identified countrywide. A round of national consultations on statelessness took place in 2019 in the five Central Asian countries to review the remaining gaps and identify solutions. In September 2019, ahead of the high-level segment on statelessness to be held during UNHCR's Executive Committee annual session in October 2019, the Central Asian States participated in the second regional conference on the right to legal identity and the prevention of statelessness, held in Kazakhstan. The regional conference laid the groundwork for further progress on ensuring universal birth registration and enacting safeguards against childhood statelessness.

In Southeast Asia, progress in preventing and reducing statelessness continues across the region. In May 2019, a preparatory meeting for the high-level segment on statelessness took place in Bangkok, Thailand. The meeting brought together 16 States from South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, with the aim of reviewing progress made in addressing statelessness, sharing good practices and identifying concrete commitments. Key achievements in the region, which were highlighted at the meeting, include: (i) the commitment by States to take measures to achieve universal birth registration; (ii) ongoing solutions and the reduction of statelessness in countries where identification has been completed; (iii) the reformation of laws, especially with respect to issues that relate to childhood statelessness; (iv) positive and progressive engagement by regional actors; (v) the enactment of measures to protect stateless persons and to allow them to access fundamental social services in most countries; (vi) bilateral cross-border collaboration to address the situation of undocumented or stateless communities to confirm citizenship, and; (vii) mapping studies and other research undertaken in an effort to identify stateless persons and improve overall data. In India, UNHCR continues to closely follow the updating of the National Register of Citizens in Assam state, in line with the mandate to prevent and reduce statelessness. In that regard, UNHCR has offered to support measures that could help ensure that people are not inadvertently left at risk of becoming stateless.

### **C. Financial information**

The revised budget approved by the Executive Committee in October 2018 for the Asia and Pacific region for 2019 was \$774.6 million. Given funding challenges, UNHCR has undertaken a number of prioritization exercises and will continue to focus on innovative ways to engage with States and other partners to deliver protection and assistance to persons of concern. As of 10 September 2019, the needs for Asia and the Pacific of \$777.1 million were 45 per cent funded after considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions. This leaves an indicative funding gap of \$430.3 million.