

# Myanmar

## Executive Committee Summary

### (a) Context and Beneficiary Population (s)

As of the end of June 2002, some 232,390 refugees have returned to Myanmar's Northern Rakhine State (NRS). Some 22,000 refugees remain in camps in Bangladesh. In February 2002, UNHCR and the Government of Myanmar reached agreement on procedures for the accelerated repatriation of some additional returnees from Bangladesh during the year. Nevertheless, the rate of return is low. At recent bilateral talks, both governments agreed to end the major phase of repatriation by June 2003.

UNHCR's concerted efforts to accelerate the repatriation process continue. In a series of discussions with the Myanmar authorities, the latter have reaffirmed their commitment to accelerate the repatriation process. Technical difficulties initially preventing the return of a number of households have been overcome and over one hundred persons have been able to return through new procedures. In addition, the Myanmar authorities are expediting the verification of those willing to return.

Logistical support for the repatriation continued to be provided through the Immigration and National Registration Department, under the Ministry of Immigration and Population of the Government of Union of Myanmar. Voluntary repatriation grants for returnees, covering initial transportation, housing and domestic assistance have been substantially revised to adjust for increases in the cost of living. Special attention is being given to extremely vulnerable individuals, on arrival, through the Myanmar Red Cross Society. UNHCR, through WFP, provides six-month food assistance to each returnee. UNHCR receives all returnees on arrival and conducts follow-up visits in their home villages to ensure that initial difficulties are resolved and necessary documentation is issued.

The NRS is a remote border region, geographically isolated from the rest of the country by mountains in the east, the border with Bangladesh in the northwest and the Bay of Bengal in the south. The three townships comprising the area, Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung, are densely populated, with 160 persons per sq. km, against a national average of 74 persons per sq. km. The isolation of the area, the absence of basic infrastructure, adverse weather conditions, high population density and the scarcity of arable land have seriously affected livelihood. A pre-dominantly agricultural economy, the NRS nevertheless suffers from a food deficit, with an estimated shortage of 20,000 to 40,000 Mt annually.

The very precarious existence of the Muslim population, including returnees, is apparent from a broad range of indicators. 90 per cent of returnees are landless with few skills and survive through seasonal labour work. The Muslim population as a whole has a literacy rate of only 16 to 27 per cent. They essentially speak a dialect of Bengali of which there is no written form. Few are literate in the Myanmar language. Communication between the Muslim population and the authorities is therefore very limited. A survey conducted by WFP in 2002 revealed that 61 per cent of children suffer from chronic malnutrition, 31 per cent are severely stunted. A lack of adequate health care has led to an infant mortality rate which is four times the national average.

UNHCR's protection and assistance programmes will be directed at increasing the coping mechanism of the population, in particular, the capacity of the most vulnerable returnees and groups in the host community to deal with difficult environments in the NRS, including issues linked to public policy and governance.

UNHCR maintains an active dialogue with the authorities, at both the central and local levels, on issues affecting the sustainable reintegration of returnees. Incidents of compulsory labour and compulsory contributions reported to UNHCR are systematically quantified and brought to the attention of the authorities, with generally positive results. The incidence of compulsory labour itself continues to decline although the frequency may fluctuate according to areas and seasons.

A comprehensive village survey conducted in 2001 identified 80,000 persons as extremely vulnerable individuals (some 10 per cent of the population). Assistance interventions will therefore focus on this segment of the population, being the most prone to renewed displacement.

Community based assistance activities will be directed at assisting the most vulnerable individuals to achieve self-reliance and becoming more empowered within their environment. Myanmar language training will be provided to selected adult beneficiaries to enable them to understand official communications and deal with procedures relating to travel permissions and the registration of births, marriages, etc. Skills training will be given to vulnerable groups to provide for a supplementary source of income. Community savings and loans associations will be strengthened to promote self-help. Health education will constitute another essential self-help tool. Knowledge of basic hygiene and health principles, emphasising mother and childcare and birth spacing education, will enable women, to gain greater control over their lives.

These community based assistance activities will also provide a basis for UNHCR's protection role. They will provide a critical framework for daily inter-action with vulnerable groups and an exchange of information on protection concerns with the beneficiaries and the local authorities, in an effective and acceptable manner. Partner agencies and non-funded actors will closely co-ordinate with UNHCR on protection issues.

In 2003, UNHCR will enter into implementing arrangements with two national NGOs, the Myanmar Red Cross Society and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association. The Department of Immigration and National Registration will facilitate the repatriation of refugees and provide logistic support for the operation. The Japanese NGO, Bridge Asia Japan (BAJ), will assist in the maintenance of equipment, vehicles and boats. The Philippine NGO Community and Family Services International (CFSI) and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) will second one international expert each for literacy training and income generation activities respectively to the UNHCR operation. The World Food Programme will continue to provide food rations to returnees.

The major operational emphasis in 2003 will thus be effective protection monitoring of vulnerable returnees. The systematic collection of data on protection concerns, the verification of reports from various sources, and the compilation and analysis of protection issues will provide a basis for interventions with the authorities at several levels. An active dialogue on protection concerns will be maintained and developed in

the NRS. Interventions on protection developments and trends at a senior level in Yangon will serve to reinforce the dialogue in the field and result in tangible improvements. Proactive linkages with other actors currently engaging the Government of Myanmar, such as the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary General, the Special Rapporteur on Myanmar of the UN Human Rights Commission and the International Labour Organisation, will also contribute to creating a wider network for engagement of the authorities on protection-related issues.

UNHCR maintains regular contact with the authorities to gain access to areas of origin of the 110,000 refugees in camps in Thailand. These areas cover four States and one administrative division of Myanmar. However, conditions in these areas are presently not conducive to return. Large parts of Karen State and Thanyinthari Division continue to witness active fighting in particular between the Karen National Liberation Army and the government forces. Despite requests from the Royal Thai Government, the Government of Myanmar remains unwilling to accept the return of refugees, until a cease-fire agreement is reached with these militant groups in areas of potential return.

In 2002, UNHCR presented a proposal to the Government of Myanmar for needs assessment survey to be conducted among 15,000 returnees in Mon State. This proposed survey is to be carried out by the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA), a major local NGO, also operating in the NRS and familiar with UNHCR goals and principles. MMCWA is also active in Mon State. The result of the survey could lead to a limited UNHCR assistance programme for these returnees and the establishment of a field monitoring presence in the area.

**(b) Selected Programme Goals and Objectives:**

**Caseload/theme #1**

<b>Number of Beneficiary Population/Theme:</b> (1) 17,000 refugees in Bangladesh (2) 80,000 extremely vulnerable returnees in Myanmar and related groups in the host community
<b>Main Goal(s):</b> (1) Promoting durable solutions through voluntary repatriation (2) the sustainable reintegration of vulnerable returnees to prevent renewed flight.

<b>Principal Objectives</b>	<b>Related Outputs</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion of major phase of voluntary repatriation by June 2003.</li> <li>• Building on progress achieved on protection issues, to reach a situation by end 2003 in which the most vulnerable can deal with their environment, in a dignified manner.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3,000 to 5000 returnees are assisted to repatriate voluntarily under conditions set forth by the international community.</li> <li>• The number of abusive practices is considerably reduced between Jan. 02 and Dec. 03, and their impact mitigated.</li> <li>• The most vulnerable segments of the population achieve basic self-reliance and no refugee flight occurs in 2003.</li> </ul>

**Caseload/theme # 2**

Name of Beneficiary Population: Myanmar returnees from Thailand	
Main Goal(s): Establish a UNHCR presence on the Eastern border of Myanmar to assist returnees and ultimately facilitate the repatriation of refugees in Thailand.	
<b>Principal Objectives</b>	<b>Related Outputs</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Secure access to returnees in Mon State.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Access, protection monitoring and limited assistance to returnees in Mon State is permitted by the Government.</li></ul>