

UNHCR ANNUAL CONSULTATIONS WITH NGOs

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REGIONAL SESSION ASIA & PACIFIC
Thursday 2 July 2015 – 14h30 – 18h30 – Room 4

BACKGROUND PAPER

Solutions: the Afghan Situation and Solutions for Urban Refugees in Asia and the Pacific

As of end 2014, the Asia and the Pacific region – encompassing 45 countries and territories – is hosting some 7.7 million persons of concern to UNHCR, including approximately 3.5 million refugees, 1.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 1.4 million stateless people. The majority of the refugee population originates from Afghanistan and Myanmar. Most countries and territories in the region continue to uphold their long tradition of hospitality to refugees and displaced persons, although only 20 among them have acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol.

UNHCR works with its partners towards safeguarding protection and asylum space in Asia. National and regional partnerships with civil society networks are being pursued and strengthened in order to improve monitoring, access to unsafe areas, provision of legal services, community outreach in urban contexts, livelihood development, and reintegration. One example of this joint approach is the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, with a number of local and international partners, including civil society, taking part in the implementation of the strategy.

This year the regional session will look at operations in the Asia and Pacific through the lens of the overall theme: “*Solutions*”. In line with UNHCR’s strategic priorities in the Asia and Pacific region, we will primarily focus on two main areas: **solutions for the Afghan refugee situation** and secondly, **solutions for the urban refugee populations in the region**. The main objective will be to secure stronger partnerships with the NGO community and grass root level networks that can support ongoing efforts towards durable solutions for the Afghan refugee situation, and with regards to the protection and assistance response for the large urban refugee population in the Asia region.

Part 1: Solutions for Afghan refugees in the Region

As fresh emergencies in the Middle East and the African continent continue to attract global attention, the future of some 2.6 million Afghan refugees who have been living outside their country for the last three decades still hangs in a balance. The **Afghan situation** continues to be the most critical protracted situation in our region. Up to 86 countries worldwide have provided a safe haven for Afghans in need of refuge, but around 96% of the population is concentrated in just two countries: the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan.

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is hosting approximately 1.6 million registered Afghan refugees; 67 per cent live in urban or rural areas, while 33 per cent reside in 76 refugee villages. Furthermore, according to figures provided by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, some 950,000 Afghan refugees are living inside the country, 97 per cent of whom live in urban or semi-urban areas. In addition to the refugee population, there are an estimated two million undocumented Afghans in both countries.

Since 2002, over 5.8 million Afghan refugees have returned home. More than 80 per cent of them were assisted through UNHCR's largest voluntary repatriation programme. However, fewer Afghans have gone back in recent years, and returnee numbers hit an all-time low in 2014. Many cited security and economic concerns as well as limited opportunities for sustainable reintegration inside Afghanistan.

Afghan Displacement: Key Facts and Figures

- One in five refugees worldwide is from Afghanistan
- Afghans constitute the second largest refugee population after Syrians
- Afghans refugees make up 40% of the world's protracted refugee caseload and 70% of the refugee population in Asia and the Pacific
- More than 50% of Afghan refugees are children
- In 2013 asylum-seekers from Afghanistan filed the fourth highest number of asylum claims
- Afghan children are the most numerous of all children seeking asylum worldwide

Developed by the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan with the support of UNHCR, and endorsed by the international community in May 2012 in Geneva, the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSA) seeks to identify and implement comprehensive solutions for Afghan refugees in the region. As a regional multi-year initiative, the Strategy offers a comprehensive framework for joint interventions aimed at facilitating voluntary return, and sustainable reintegration, while providing assistance to host countries.

In 2014, elections were held in Afghanistan which led to the establishment of the National Unity Government. This transition period also impacted returnee figures with Afghans refugees opting to postpone the decision on their return. The new Government has shown commitment to the sustainable return and reintegration of Afghan refugees. 2015 is a pivotal year for Afghanistan, offering an unprecedented opportunity to pursue durable solutions for Afghan refugees in the region. It is critical that the international community steps up to support the Afghan Government, to ensure the necessary conditions for Afghans to return home and restart their lives in safety and dignity. A renewed commitment to the Afghan situation is imperative for the successful implementation of the Solutions Strategy, not only in the spirit of international solidarity and burden-sharing, but also as a joint investment in stability and security.

Over the past three years, UNHCR has led efforts at country level to operationalize the SSAR in the form of **multi-partner country projects** (Country Project Portfolios) and of advocating for stronger political and financial support by the international community to host countries and Afghanistan. The development of the country portfolios of projects brought together more than 50 humanitarian and development actors whose plans were endorsed by the National Steering Committees in Iran and Pakistan (and provisionally in Afghanistan by the outgoing government). Priority is given to empowering young people, who constitute the untapped human capital, through education and skills training to enable them to contribute to the overall development of their country of asylum or their home country upon return.

Furthermore, without significant, community-based, development activities inside Afghanistan, sustainable solutions for refugees will not be found, and an increasing number of Afghans may move further afield. Helping Afghans return home and empowering them to rebuild their lives and communities is a core element of the Solutions Strategy and key to stability in both Afghanistan and beyond.

Some of the following questions may spark off the debate:

- How can UNHCR and civil society expand on their cooperation in the implementation of the Solutions Strategy, both in countries of asylum and in Afghanistan?
- How can civil society contribute towards efforts regarding the empowerment of refugees, skills/vocational training and education, to prepare them for their return to Afghanistan and enhance their prospects of sustainable reintegration?

Part 2: Solutions for Urban Refugees in Asia

At the end of 2014, around 79% or 2.77 million persons of the 3.5 million refugees in the Asia-Pacific region live out of camps. Many of these, “urban refugee populations”, are more vulnerable than camp populations and their protection needs are often addressed inadequately. Although not confined to the boundaries of a camp, their freedom of movement is often only theoretical as many of them do not have any documentation and are at risk of arrest, detention and deportation. The lack of status and documentation also prevents them from legally accessing the labor market and hence they often become victims of labor exploitation. Women and adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Inadequate protection, unequal access to education and livelihoods and the lack of solutions often lead to onward irregular movements by sea or by other means.

In 2014, UNHCR’s Bureau for Asia, in co-operation with selected country operations and divisions at HQs embarked on a review of the implementation of the 2009 Urban refugee Policy in the Asia-Pacific Region, in particular to take stock of the achievements in relation to UNHCR’s Urban Refugee Policy objectives¹. In January 2015, a number of operations in Asia with large urban refugee populations were invited to share an update on the achievements and challenges in the implementation of the URP. Using this update, complemented by the findings of the 2013 Global Survey² as well as an earlier Asia specific mapping study in 2012, it was confirmed that the protection and assistance programmes in the region are generally guided by the goals and objectives of the URP, and there are a number of good practice examples, initiatives and projects undertaken in the region for protection and solution of refugees living in urban areas. However, while various initiatives and programmes have been implemented, we have not been able to systematically monitor and sufficiently document the impact of these programmes. Furthermore, donors and other self-funded partners are increasingly showing interest and offer

¹ For more information on the Urban Refugee Policy please access: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=4ab356ab6&query=urban%20refugees>

² This study is based on a detailed survey that was sent to 24 programs with urban refugee programs that numbered more than 5,000. For the report please access: <http://www.unhcr.org/516d658c9.html>

funding to enhance protection and facilitate solutions for urban refugees, such as for the protection of women and children including the prevention of incidents of sexual and gender based violence.

For the period 2015 to 2017, UNHCR has identified four priority objectives from the Urban Refugee Policy to guide the implementation of the Policy in the Asia region in the coming years, namely: Community outreach; Fostering constructive relations with urban refugees; Ensuring access to education, health care and other services; Promoting livelihoods and self-reliance. Solutions in these areas could be achieved through facilitating access to services and the involvement of partners who with local communities as well as exploring new and innovative approaches, additional financial and human resources and exploring new partnership arrangements towards building stronger alliances with the host communities/government and other service providers to maximize the use of services, aimed at improving the life of persons of concern, the urban refugees.

Among the issues that may lead the discussion, are the following;

- How can we improve outreach to refugees in urban settings to determine their needs and identify the most vulnerable amongst them, and to facilitate their access to services;
- What measures can be taken to strengthen partnerships with Government and civil society to ensure the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in national strategies and programmes providing for health, education and other services;
- How can civil society support efforts of urban refugees to become self-reliant, in particular through advocacy designed to remove any legal barriers to self-reliance, and supported by vocational training, skills development and language programmes.

Part 3: General debate on other topics in the Asia Region

The last part of the regional session will be dedicated to an open discussion and Q&A on other outstanding issues in various operations in the Asia and Pacific region, both geographically and thematically. The session will end with concluding remarks by the Director of the Asia Bureau, UNHCR.