Overview

UNHCR is accommodating the group of Rohingya refugees rescued at sea on 15 April in repatriation and transit centres in Bangladesh (in Kutupalong and Teknaf) that have been repurposed for quarantine. While urging for greater coordination and responsibility-sharing by states at the central/regional level, UNHCR operations in Asia-Pacific are advocating with their government counterparts for rescue and disembarkation of the remaining vessels still reported to be at sea, highlighting the grave immediate risk this poses to the men, women and children on board.

While the supply chain situation continues to pose challenges, in the past week, UNHCR delivered 820,000 surgical masks to Bangladesh and 275,000 bars of soap to Indonesia. At the same time, we have secured an additional donation of soap for India, bringing the total donation to 600,000 bars of soap. A consignment of 110,000 N95 masks and 3,500 medical gowns for Iran are being delivered this week.

Highlights by country

Afghanistan
- The President convened a meeting with the UN agencies including UNHCR, where a plan was tabled covering the Government’s priorities on COVID-19 responses. The President called on the UN to assist the government’s plan, and to re-programme existing resources accordingly.
- The Central Bank has agreed to ease some requirements to open mobile money accounts, increase the threshold per transaction for beneficiaries, and grant permissions to money service providers to work for humanitarian purposes during lockdown measures. In light of this development, UNHCR and partners in the cash working group are developing plans for cash support in the COVID-19 context.
- The Ministry of Education has released a distance-learning TV schedule to avoid the disruption of education due to school closures. This will improve access to education for children who have access to TV and electricity, while alternatives are still being explored for children who do not.

Islamic Republic of Iran
- To help address the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on its persons of concern, UNHCR has implemented simplified targeting to assist them with cash assistance. The Office will provide up to three months of cash assistance via bank transfers for up to 1,000 refugee households. Eligible categories include those with a family member who has contracted COVID-19, vulnerable individuals (elderly, those with underlying conditions, individuals with SGBV-related concerns, disabled, etc.) living alone and whose regular support systems are unable to provide for their basic needs due to COVID-19, and those with immediate income loss combined with specific protection vulnerabilities.
- To help meet the critical and urgent need for hygiene materials, UNHCR – in close coordination with the Government – distributed items such as soap and disposable paper towels to some 7,500 refugee households living in refugee settlements across the country. These, along with infra-red no-contact thermometers, were provided to UNHCR partners.

Pakistan
- In Pakistan, significant efforts are under way to launch cash assistance distributions to vulnerable refugees impacted by COVID-19 mitigation measures, in coordination with the Chief Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees (CAR) and provincial CARs. This will include the application of assessments based on vulnerability criteria, standard operating procedures and risk management measures. The payments will be “one-off” and cover a 4-month period.
Bangladesh

- UNHCR and partners continue to assist the group of refugees rescued at sea, the majority of whom were children and youth. Many were severely malnourished, dehydrated and traumatized. The group was placed in quarantine, in line with Government guidelines. UNHCR is providing medical care, food assistance, clothes, core life items, mental healthcare and psychosocial support and family tracing assistance.
- The Health and Protection sectors are working together on the potential introduction of shielding measures for older persons (60+) by establishing camp zones accommodating this age group and their caregivers, with limited exposure to the rest of the population. Community consultations have been held with the elderly, caretakers, community leaders, youth and adolescents in camps, and UNHCR plans to pilot this approach with a small group of refugees to further inform the decision-making and design for the project.
- Construction of Severe Acute Respiratory Infection Isolation and Treatment Centres in refugee camps in Cox’s Bazaar is progressing well. With regards to the Sadar district hospital in Cox’s Bazar, where UNHCR is supporting the setup of a 10-bed intensive care unit with an additional 8 high-dependency beds, an agreement has been reached that UNICEF will also support the establishment of an oxygen facility to connect the new ICU and have walled oxygen. The estimated completion date is 20 May.

Myanmar

- Following a presidential order for the release of 25,000 prisoners to mark the Myanmar New Year, the Government freed 886 Rohingya detainees apprehended for traveling without required documents. A Navy vessel transported the group from Yangon to Rakhine State, where some will be subject to quarantine before being allowed to proceed to their final destinations. UNHCR, ICRC and UNICEF are supporting the Government-led process.
- Finalisation of the COVID-19 Addendum to 2020 Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) is underway. The Addendum is designed for an initial period of three months (April–June) with a target of over 900,000 people (over 850,000 included in the 2020 HRP and an additional 50,000 returning migrant workers), and will be reflected in the revised Global HRP scheduled for release in early May.

Indonesia

- To ensure continuity of education, UNHCR learning centres and most refugee-community-led learning centres in Indonesia have moved to distance learning modalities using instant messaging and videoconferencing applications such as WhatsApp, Zoom and YouTube.
- The Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection issued a new protocol recognizing that refugee children are among the groups who are particularly vulnerable in the emergency, stressing the principles of ‘do no harm’ and ‘the best interest of the child,’ and confirming that temporary shelters would be made available to impacted children, including refugee children.

Malaysia

- Community-based organizations and refugee focal points continue to work closely with UNHCR and partners to support food distribution and to identify pockets of the population where assistance is required across the Peninsula, particularly in identifying extremely vulnerable individuals in need of support. This mirrors the situation in many countries across the region where UNHCR and partners are receiving increased calls and requests for financial support to meet food and accommodation needs as individuals are unable to access work and savings have been depleted.
- A One-UN plan of Multisectoral Support to COVID-19 Preparedness, response and Recovery is being developed and UNHCR provided its inputs. Also, in coordination with NGOs and the UN Gender Results Group, UNHCR is advocating for the inclusion of persons of concern into existing national Child Protection and SGBV prevention/response initiatives.

Thailand

- Cash disbursements were made to some 600 urban refugees. The majority of this group was affected by loss of income due to COVID-19.
- The COVID-19 sub-working group in Thailand plans to undertake a rapid needs assessment for the urban asylum-seeker and refugee population to inform protection programming.
Nepal

- UNHCR is finalizing a support package to provide basic assistance to long-stayer refugee settlements. This includes additional food assistance as well as specific medical and hygiene equipment such as disinfecting materials, sanitizers, personal protective equipment, thermometers for COVID-19 isolation facilities, as well as awareness raising within Tibetan settlements on COVID-19.

Funding needs

The Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) revision is ongoing with the revised appeal scheduled to be launched on 7 May. Pakistan will be included in the next iteration of the GHRP and steps have been taken to establish a Humanitarian Response Plan for Pakistan and to re-activate the pooled funding mechanism. UNHCR has ensured the inclusion of refugees in all sectors will lead the Protection Sector.

UNHCR remains grateful for the swift support from donors on the COVID-19 response including the Governments of Japan, Australia and the US, the EU (ECHO and DEVCO) and CERF. We are also grateful to private donors who have rallied quickly to support with in-kind donations (hygiene items, masks, medical gowns) for COVID-19 response.

Unearmarked/broadly earmarked funding from donors such as the US, the EU, Denmark, Japan, Germany, the Republic of Korea, and private donors around the world enables UNHCR to respond in a timely and flexible manner. UNHCR continues to appeal to donors not to deprioritize funding for the regular programmes in Asia-Pacific as our ongoing activities are critical to support the over 9.2 million persons of concern in the region.

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At the Gamkol refugee village in Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, UNHCR field staff are sensitizing partners staff on precautionary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.