Asia and the Pacific
6 May 2020

9.2 million Persons of concern
4.4 million Refugees and Asylum seekers
2.9 million Internally displaced persons
83,930 Returnees
2.3 million Stateless persons

Overview

After spending weeks at sea, a fishing trawler carrying some 350 people – of whom a portion are Rohingya refugees – was unable to find a place to land. On 1 May, some 40 individuals who were able to pay their way, were taken to the shores of Bangladesh in a smaller fishing boat. 29 of this group have reportedly been moved to Bhasan Char, an Island in the Bay of Bengal, by the authorities in order to complete their quarantine.

Although greatly reduced in number, undocumented Afghans continue to spontaneously return to Afghanistan. The accumulated number of spontaneous returns, which rose to 10,000 per day in March, has now decreased to 1,500-2,500 per day. The decrease can be attributed to a number of factors, including the increase in cases of COVID-19 in Afghanistan, stricter rules imposed on returnees, and restrictions on movement which renders travel to the border more difficult.

In several operations, UNHCR is seeking ways to strengthen protection responses for the most urgent cases, including issues involving sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and child abuse, exploitation, and neglect. For instance, in Nepal, UNHCR and its SGBV partner are strengthening outreach and reporting mechanisms for urban refugee settlements in Kathmandu and increasing the number of female incentive workers for each refugee community to ensure a safe and trusted channel to refer cases from within the refugee community.

In the Pacific Island States, the ability of some countries to respond to the pandemic has been compounded by the effects of the recent tropical cyclones that affected several countries in the Pacific. On an exceptional basis, UNHCR provided three-month cash assistance support to its persons of concern in Fiji and Samoa who have been assessed as vulnerable.

Highlights by country

Afghanistan
- Between 6-15 April, UNHCR Afghanistan interviewed 163 returnees (a mix of undocumented, passport holders and refugees) as they entered Afghanistan from the Islamic Republic of Iran: 43% of respondents stated fear of COVID-19 as their main reason for return, while 44% cited lack of employment opportunities.
- UNHCR in Afghanistan is updating its contingency plan to reflect the possibility of mass return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan to due to lack of work/labour opportunities in Pakistan as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Islamic Republic of Iran
- The 4 March suspension remains in place for the voluntary repatriation (VolRep) programme from Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and other countries to Afghanistan. In the first quarter of 2020, 233 refugees returned to Afghanistan from the Islamic Republic of Iran through the VolRep programme, 36 per cent lower compared to the same period in 2019.
Pakistan
- Five Rubb halls were delivered to UNHCR’s warehouse for replenishment of stocks provided to the Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) for isolation facilities. Current lockdown measures in Pakistan were recently reviewed by the Federal and most provincial governments resulting in the issuance of updated guidelines that allow for more re-opening of some businesses with adherence to COVID-19 operating procedures on prevention. This move is reportedly aimed at supporting the vulnerable low-income populations whose situation has been significantly impacted by the restrictions.

Bangladesh
- A donor briefing and Strategic Executive Group meeting of the Inter-Sector Coordination Group took place on 30 April. UNHCR also held consultations with UNICEF and Save the Children International on possible scale-up plan for the Myanmar curriculum in view of the current circumstances.

Myanmar
- On 28 April, the Government released the economic response plan to COVID-19, “Overcoming as One: COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan”. It has been observed that policymakers may be utilizing the COVID-19 crisis to push forward the reform agenda, including increasing the use of mobile payments and investing in renewable energy. While such activities were already planned, the pandemic has offered an opportunity to push such reforms through more quickly.
- The UN Inter-Agency Country Preparedness and Response Plan (CPRP) was shared with the Government. In addition, a Multi-Sector Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) was set up in Myanmar, co-led by WFP and UNICEF. Several agencies including UNHCR and UNFPA will also take part.

Malaysia
- UNHCR is working closely with partners and refugee women-led initiatives to expand the availability of hotline services, remote psychosocial support and establish community focal point systems. It is also working to support the access to second-line health care especially for child deliveries and emergency cases as many refugees are not able to afford healthcare now.
- A total of 1,798 households (6,540 individuals) received cash support and 1,170 further households are scheduled for a cash assistance assessment.

Thailand
- On 24 April, at a meeting of lead agencies of the COVID-19 Outbreak Response Coordination Group for the nine temporary shelters along the Thai-Myanmar border, UNHCR agreed to urgently procure cloth masks to support the risk communication and community engagement response led by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency. Based on the latest figures, UNHCR will procure 24,000 cloth masks for children and 70,000 for adults. Given the urgency of the matter, the delivery is currently planned for the beginning of May at all nine temporary shelters.

Nepal
- Some 4,660 refugees in refugee settlements received a one-time cash payment. These individuals are not normally targeted for cash assistance but were in need of cash support due to loss of livelihoods.

Sri Lanka
- In Sri Lanka, UNHCR is assisting a small number of refugees who are unable to pay rent and are facing eviction, by providing loans in advance of future monthly cash support. UNHCR will provide the loan and then deduct a fixed amount from monthly cash assistance across the several months to recover the amount.

Philippines
- UNHCR coordinated with the GBV sub-cluster to conduct a rapid gender assessment on protection concerns among persons of concern during the extended lockdown period. UNHCR also coordinated with the Government’s Self-Reliance and Social Welfare cluster to map out available assistance for persons of concern.
Funding needs

The revised Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) will be launched on 7 May. UNHCR operations in the region with Humanitarian Response Plans have finalized their HRP revisions in close coordination with OCHA, and operations with other COVID-related inter-agency appeals/plans have also completed a similar exercise using country-level coordination mechanisms.

UNHCR remains grateful for the robust support from donors on the COVID-19 response including the Governments of the US, Germany, the UK, Japan, Denmark, Canada, Australia, as well as the EU (ECHO and DEVCO) and CERF. We also appreciate the support from private donors who have rallied swiftly to provide a range of in-kind donations for COVID-19 response in the region.

We are also grateful to donors who provide unearmarked contributions to UNHCR, which help support operations in Asia and enable us to respond in a timely and flexible manner. These donors include Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, the UK, Germany, Switzerland, and private donors in Spain and the Republic of Korea.

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.

As part of its COVID-19 response, UNHCR India has launched a campaign where refugee women sewed masks that were then distributed free of charge to vulnerable people in their local communities.

Contacts

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