



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

Statement on International Protection
UNHCR Executive Committee Meeting

Mr Peter Hughes
Deputy Secretary
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

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Mr Chairman, whilst the numbers of displaced worldwide have remained relatively stable over the past year, the situation in the Asia-Pacific region is of concern.

The Asia-Pacific region accounts for one-third of the total number of people in refugee-like situations worldwide.

When stateless persons and internally displaced are added to this, we see that a problem of massive proportions continues to confront us.

With over one million Afghan refugees, Pakistan remains host to the largest refugee population living in a protracted situation.

UNHCR is to be commended for its efforts in the region in brokering solutions to some intractable problems in recent years, in particular the situation of Bhutanese in Nepal and the mass resettlement of Burmese from Thailand.

Regrettably, instability in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and other locations has caused an upsurge of displacement throughout the region and beyond. People smugglers are once again preying on the vulnerable, exploiting them and putting lives at risk.

In a region where few States are parties to the Refugees Convention, governments need to renew their cooperative efforts and to work with UNHCR to develop better frameworks for protection in order to ensure that protection is given to those who need it, solutions are achieved and the evil trade in people smuggling is curtailed.

The renewal of the Bali Process and its work in bringing together “most affected countries” to develop common approaches to particular caseloads is an important step forward.

In the long term, we need an enduring protection framework that is able to respond quickly to new situations as they arise.

Australia remains active in the region as we seek to achieve this with governments and international organisations.

We will continue to assist with financial aid to alleviate the situation of the displaced and load carried by first asylum countries, diplomatic efforts to help bring an end to displacement and the provision of resettlement places.

UNHCR's 10 Point Plan provides a valuable tool kit for States as we work together to achieve better protection frameworks.

Mr Chairman, Australia believes that resettlement is a valuable tool which can be used strategically to help resolve protracted situations.

We offer places every year in our Humanitarian Program for those refugees identified by UNHCR to be in need of resettlement, particularly from Africa, the Middle East and Asia. We continue to allocate settlement places for groups in protracted situations.

We have adopted a four-year planning framework, which will allow UNHCR to plan more effectively and for Australia to make longer term commitments.

We welcome new resettlement countries such as Germany and, from next year, Japan, and encourage other countries to consider sharing the benefits of refugee resettlement.

We remain committed to share our expertise with any new resettlement country through a twinning process.

We commend the Government of Romania for its initiative in setting up the emergency transit centre, which will make an important humanitarian contribution.

Mr Chairman, Australia recognises the changing trends in refugee populations around the world, away from camp-based populations to the current situation where perhaps one-half of all refugees live in urban areas.

We commend UNHCR for its efforts to update its thinking in this area and welcome the release of its policy on urban refugees.

We urge UNHCR to realistically prioritise its implementation within available resources.

We look forward to further exploring this important policy issue through the High Commissioner's dialogue on protection challenges later this year.

Mr Chairman, I would like to acknowledge UNHCR's ongoing contribution to the international discussion on new types of forced displacement, including displacement caused by climate change.

There are many displacement scenarios that could emerge and the solutions are likely to vary according to circumstances.

UNHCR has an important contribution to make to the debate on the protection dimensions of climate change displacement.

Finally, Mr Chairman, I would also like to acknowledge the important role that civil society plays in working with governments to improve protection worldwide.

The Australian Government has worked in close partnership with non-government organisations (NGOs) in the development of our protection policies and services to refugees. We welcome the value added by their expertise.

We also note the contribution that has been made by refugees working within Australian NGOs.

I would like to highlight the contribution of a staff member from the Adult Multicultural Education Services in Australia, originally from Eritrea, who, in addition to her work with resettled refugee communities in Australia, was able to contribute her expertise in a recent UNHCR mission to Es Showak in Eastern Sudan.

Thank you Mr Chairman.