



Photo: Azad Enayatullah / NRC

# About ADSP

## Introduction

*The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform is a joint initiative of the Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council and Relief International, which aims to contribute to the development of comprehensive solutions for displaced persons across the Afghan and Rohingya displacement axes.*

Welcome to the March 2021 newsletter from the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform. These newsletters are intended to shine a spotlight on some of the issues being tackled by our members, and the programmatic work done by ADSP members to improve outcomes for persons affected by displacement. In addition, the newsletter provides updates on global or regional processes which may otherwise go unexplored.

Each newsletter contains articles from members in ADSP focus countries, exploring interesting programme developments and regional migration trends. As we continue on into 2021, we encourage you to share ideas or information that you would like to see addressed.

The newsletter relies upon content created by member organisations, and everyone is welcome to contribute. If you have an idea for an article, on any subject, please feel free to contact me to discuss. We would love to publish overviews of your activities, interviews with staff, and photos which give an idea of the work being carried out in the field.

These newsletters are intended to improve information-sharing between ADSP member organisations, and to highlight the work of the platform more publicly.

## A message from the ADSP Manager:

### More than ever - collaboration is key

*By Evan Jones, Asia Displacement Solutions Platform Manager*



As we can all appreciate, 2020 was an exceptionally challenging year personally, professionally, and of course particularly for the populations we serve throughout the region. Unfortunately, moving into 2021, we will undoubtedly continue to grapple with many of the same issues. This will require us to work with tenacity and vigour, to ensure that we are able to continue to support each other as we work towards our strategic goals and activities. I encourage each of you to remain connected, and to utilise the ADSP network as a tool to develop synergies, and to enhance current work.

For many of us, the last few months have been hectic with multiple crises and humanitarian emergencies unfolding throughout our countries of operation. From political instability in Myanmar, fires in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, to water shortages and projected drought in Afghanistan – humanitarian needs remain acute. Despite these challenges, ADSP members and the ADSP Secretariat have continued to work together in research, capacity building and advocacy endeavours. Notably, in January 2021, the ADSP published a report entitled [“Reimagining the Drought”](#). This piece of work provided both analysis and reflection regarding the 2018 drought in Afghanistan, and, provided a series of recommendations for policymakers and humanitarian actors to mitigate future displacement resultant from natural climatic events. Several learning events related to this research are in motion, with each looking to guide the discourse around the upcoming drought in Afghanistan, and how responses from humanitarian actors and other stakeholders can be improved from previous years.

2021 has also seen a number of new faces joining the ADSP, each bringing a wealth of experience to the team. I am pleased to welcome Mr. Farid Gardon as ADSP’s Kabul-based Officer, and Mr. Adam Severson as ADSP’s Dhaka-based Specialist. I am extremely excited to welcome both Farid and Adam to the team, and look forward to their rich contributions to the Platform over the year ahead. They can be contacted at [Adam.Severson@adsp.ngo](mailto:Adam.Severson@adsp.ngo) and [Farid.Gardon@adsp.ngo](mailto:Farid.Gardon@adsp.ngo).

Finally, I wish to thank all members for your continued engagement with the ADSP. By working together in a collaborative fashion, we can only strengthen our efforts in our quest to unlock durable solutions for refugees and other displaced populations in our region.

We look forward to working with you in the months ahead.

Evan Jones

ADSP Manager

## Shahrak Sabz: Ongoing needs in informal settlements in western Afghanistan



By Tim Calliafas, Programme Support Specialist, DRC Afghanistan



Photo: Tim Calliafas / DRC

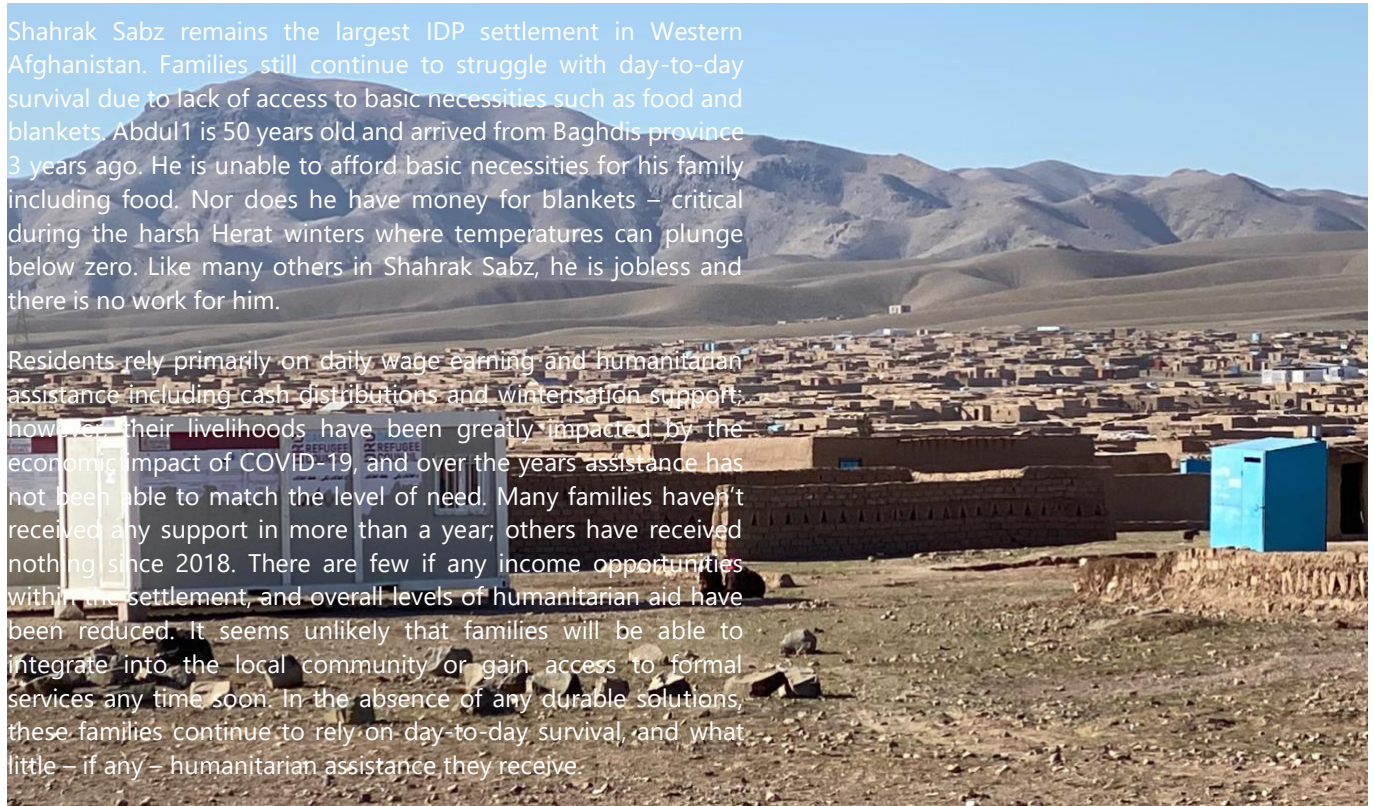
In mid-April 2018, the Government of Afghanistan formally declared a drought in Afghanistan. While the subsequent humanitarian response reached millions, and undoubtedly provided much-needed assistance to tens of thousands of people, the focus was almost exclusively on emergency response – with relatively low levels of early recovery or longer-term livelihoods assistance. A large number of families that were affected by the drought were reliant on subsistence farming, and already had very low levels of resilience due to decades of conflict and poverty. Therefore, many were unable to withstand the shock of crop failure and livestock mortality resulting from the drought. This led to critical levels of food insecurity which in turn led to high levels of displacement. Approximately 170,000 individuals were displaced in western Afghanistan alone in 2018. Large numbers of families from Badghis and Ghor provinces left for Herat and set up in informal settlements on the outskirts of Herat city.

A focus by the humanitarian community on supporting livelihoods in places of origin during the early stages of the drought could have helped families reduce reliance on humanitarian aid, support families to return to their place of origin, or prevent such high levels of displacement in the first place. Now, nearly 3 years later, tens of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) still remain in informal settlements in the west of the country.

Established in November 2018, Shahrak Sabz is one of the largest such settlements located just outside of Herat. With many families unable to return due to effects of drought and ongoing conflict, Shahrak Sabz is now inhabited by more than 12,000 displaced families. Makeshift houses sprawl back from the road up to the bottom of the mountains in the distance and follow the main road for what seems like miles. Even before you reach the settlement, the road out of Herat is lined by families living in tents.

Shahrak Sabz remains the largest IDP settlement in Western Afghanistan. Families still continue to struggle with day-to-day survival due to lack of access to basic necessities such as food and blankets. Abdul1 is 50 years old and arrived from Baghdis province 3 years ago. He is unable to afford basic necessities for his family including food. Nor does he have money for blankets – critical during the harsh Herat winters where temperatures can plunge below zero. Like many others in Shahrak Sabz, he is jobless and there is no work for him.

Residents rely primarily on daily wage earning and humanitarian assistance including cash distributions and winterisation support; however, their livelihoods have been greatly impacted by the economic impact of COVID-19, and over the years assistance has not been able to match the level of need. Many families haven't received any support in more than a year; others have received nothing since 2018. There are few if any income opportunities within the settlement, and overall levels of humanitarian aid have been reduced. It seems unlikely that families will be able to integrate into the local community or gain access to formal services any time soon. In the absence of any durable solutions, these families continue to rely on day-to-day survival, and what little – if any – humanitarian assistance they receive.



This leads to the community resorting to negative coping mechanisms, including selling personal possessions and taking on large amounts of debt which can take years to pay off. Families even resort to selling their young children – primarily girls. Facilities and services are also limited: not all areas of the settlement are covered by water supply, and some latrines and bath spaces are non-functioning; some families are still living in makeshift tents, and thousands of school-aged children are not covered by educational programmes.

The outlook for the settlement's population therefore looks bleak. Some inhabitants have shown desire to leave the settlement and return to their place of origin. Abdul would like to return home, but there are challenges – like many others, he can't afford the transportation to go back. Others are unsure – ongoing conflict in their home provinces persists. It is estimated that it could take the average returnee from Badghis 16 years to repay their drought debts,<sup>1</sup> meaning that livelihoods support will be critical to ensure they can move towards self-reliance. But if they stay in Shahrak Sabz, conditions are unlikely to improve any time soon.

For those who choose to remain, continued humanitarian assistance is vital since needs are still high. Livelihoods programmes within the settlement and host community may also help support longer-term self-reliance. Finally, it's important to recognise that integration of IDPs into host communities can be challenging since local populations often face their own needs such as lack of access to services or jobs; therefore, implementing organisations should consider the needs of host communities in programming. But for all this, sufficient levels of funding are required.

**“We have no choice but to sell our possessions. People sell their clothes. People sell their daughters”.**

On the other hand, supporting IDP returns can also be complex; if they choose to voluntarily go back to their places of origin, they should be guaranteed a safe and dignified return, ensuring access to basic services and opportunities for income generation. To this end, renewed funding for longer-term livelihoods interventions for returning IDPs in their places of origin could be a useful first step, to improve resilience to future shocks and avoid repeat displacement.

<sup>1</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Afghanistan%20-%202020%20Dec%202019%20%281%29.pdf>



Photo: Farid Gardon / ADSP

## CAPACITY BUILDING

In February 2021, ADSP kicked off a series of capacity building initiatives – with an initial focus on Afghanistan. The first training to take place brought together ADSP members, as well as ADSP and MMC staff. The training, teaching the fundamentals of creating mobile videos, was initiated to improve attendees' abilities to share work and stories with donors, the general public, and policymakers. Further trainings will be held with ADSP members in Afghanistan and Bangladesh in the coming months, and will hopefully provide a niche set of skills to showcase the work of agencies in their local settings.

In addition to the above, ADSP has also embarked on a series of six Durable Solutions trainings across Afghanistan. The trainings are conceptualised to create understanding and discussion around what constitutes durable solutions, and to provoke greater thinking as to how durable solutions should be built into humanitarian responses. The first event kicked off in Kunduz Province with 20 attendees present. Working in partnership with the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development (ACBAR), further trainings will be held in Kabul, Balkh, Nagarhar, Kandahar and Herat in the coming months.

## The pandemic is no excuse to shut the door on refugee resettlement

By Evan Jones, Coordinator at the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform; and

Najeeba Wazefadost, Founder and Executive Director of the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees and co-founder of the Global Refugee-led Network

**Countries should be expanding, not reducing, refugee numbers in 2021.**



Photo credit: Azad Enayatullah / NRC

**COVID-19 is one of the biggest global challenges in modern history, and all nations are grappling with its impacts. But some countries have responded by shutting their doors even further to the world's most vulnerable.**

Many refugees have lost access to their livelihoods and been pushed to the brink of destitution. Some have even been forced to return to the country they fled, through deportation, or due to a lack of options in their host country. By and large, resettlement and other migration pathways have become increasingly limited during the pandemic.

At a time when refugees need solidarity from the international community, countries like Australia and the United States have reduced the number of refugees allowed to resettle during 2021.

Australia cut its resettlement programme by nearly 30 percent; in 2021, the country will allow a maximum of 13,750 refugees to enter. In the United States, the 2021 fiscal year cap has been slashed to just 15,000 people – an all-time low after welcoming more than five times as many as recently as 2016.

In the past, both countries have played a positive role in helping refugees resettle – Australia through generous support and integration programmes, and the US by traditionally welcoming the bulk of the world's resettled refugees, at least by absolute numbers. The pandemic is no excuse to shut the door. Countries with far fewer resources continue to host the vast majority of the world's refugees. Wealthy nations around the globe can do more to help ease the burden.

### A tradition of supporting refugees

In many ways, Australia has set the gold standard when it comes to refugee settlement – apart from its dubious reputation when it comes to immigration detention and offshore processing of asylum seekers who arrive by boat. For decades, Australia has welcomed thousands of refugees each year, offering a safe haven and providing them with the resources to prosper – important support such as free language programmes, and access to healthcare and job services that can help newcomers integrate.

Simultaneously, Australia has undisputedly become a richer nation through refugee resettlement, with a stronger workforce, more diversity, and the creation of links with refugees' countries of origin. Australia has become a better place thanks to contributions from its Afghan, Vietnamese, and Palestinian diaspora communities, for example. But in cutting resettlement numbers, countries like Australia and the United States are taking a blinkered approach to refugee protection. Instead, they have opted to pursue a simplified mantra of putting their own citizens first. By shutting refugees out, however, Australia and the US will miss out on the chance to welcome a new generation of people ready to help rebuild their economies and bounce back from this challenging time.

## Rising needs

Refugee needs are greater than ever. There are an estimated 26 million refugees globally. Many have lived in exile for decades. Refugees spend more than 20 years in displacement, on average – and this number is growing, according to World Bank research.

As a result, significant numbers of people are being born into refugee situations, having known no other life but that of a refugee. Millions of refugees languish in countries like Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey; some have been outside their country for more than 40 years. In Pakistan, for example, there are currently more than 1.4 million registered refugees from Afghanistan, and a further 500,000 unregistered refugees.

It is unrealistic and unfair for countries like Pakistan to shoulder this burden alone. It's also untenable to suggest that refugees should simply return to their homelands, especially when countries like Afghanistan are still mired in turmoil and insecurity.

Resettlement in so-called "third countries" like Australia and the US represents only a fraction of the total refugee needs – it's an option available only to a very narrow group of highly vulnerable people. But resettlement remains a crucial tool that can provide some individuals with access to long-term safety.

## Another way: Canada's approach

Some countries are moving in a positive direction. Canada's immigration plan for the next three years, for example, outlines a modest increase in refugee resettlement, with target numbers rising from 23,500 this year to 25,000 in 2023. Such a commitment is significant: While borders are closing across much of the world, Canada continues to support people in desperate need of protection. This highlights an important fact: Shutting the door to refugees is not the only option available. Instead, nations can choose openness and generosity.

Canada has recognised the important contribution that refugees make to their new countries, rather than excluding them for fear they will be a burden. Refugees are an asset, whether it be as frontline workers, or as contributors to the economic and social fabric of society.

Refugee resettlement will never be the silver bullet to solve displacement, but it does provide a vital lifeline to a small number of refugees. Expanding resettlement programmes will also be a symbol of solidarity to countries hosting millions of refugees. The act of resettling refugees acknowledges and attempts to relieve the strain on resources, infrastructure, and social cohesion.

COVID-19 undoubtedly poses grave risks to public health and economic prosperity. But these challenges should not be used as justification to squeeze resettlement programmes and step back from obligations to share responsibility. Displacement continues despite the pandemic – look at fresh conflicts in Ethiopia, or ongoing turmoil in Afghanistan, for example.

The onus is on countries like Australia and the United States to reverse their current trajectory. Instead of cutting resettlement numbers, they should revert to their positions as global leaders. Health concerns and economic disruption need not result in closed borders and closed minds.

*The full article can also be viewed on The New Humanitarian website [here](#).*

## The Shadow Pandemic: GBV Trends Among Rohingya Refugees in Cox's Bazar: COVID-19 Update



*By Shabira Nupur, Head of Advocacy and Communication, International Rescue Committee, Bangladesh*

It has been more than three and a half years since nearly 730,000 Rohingya refugees fled their homes in Myanmar and relocated to makeshift camps across the border in Cox's Bazar, where they joined 35,000 other Rohingya who had escaped to Bangladesh during previous decades. [According to UNHCR](#), as of 28 February 2021, 877,710 Rohingya refugees were registered in Bangladesh—52 per cent of them women and girls.

Bangladesh is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the Convention's 1967 Protocol, and restricts Rohingya refugees' movement and access to employment, education and public services. Owing to government restrictions and community norms, Rohingya women and girls have been disproportionately impacted by displacement, many relegated to remaining in camps with limited social interaction beyond their families and neighbours. A 2015 gender assessment by UNHCR and UN Women found that, among 3,000 Rohingya women surveyed in Cox's Bazar: 45 per cent reported that they were married as children, 94 per cent explained that they did not make decisions within their marriages and 53 per cent believed that women should not leave the house.

Building on the 2015 gender assessment and subsequent studies, in June 2020, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) released [The Shadow Pandemic](#), a report documenting GBV among Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. The report drew on data collected from 21,517 Rohingya women and girls screened at IRC women's centres and health programme sites in 19 camps between July and December 2019. The report revealed that 27 per cent of screened women and girls reported experiencing GBV in the form of physical or sexual assault, rape, psychological abuse or denial of resources, opportunities or services. Intimate partners perpetrated 81 per cent of reported GBV incidents. As a result of social and practical barriers, the number of incidents reported was likely far below the number of actual incidents.

*Shadow Pandemic* also outlined how COVID-19 has compounded protection risks to Rohingya women and girls. Pandemic-linked restrictions have perpetuated and exacerbated gender inequality by adding hurdles to reporting GBV and seeking related services and by further impeding the movement of women and girls, compelling many to remain in their homes at greater risk of violence from abusive partners or family members. At the same time, the government categorised many protection activities as 'non-essential', including structured GBV prevention programming.

In late January 2021, IRC published an [update](#) to *Shadow Pandemic* based on data collected from January to October 2020. Because screening at IRC health centres was suspended or scaled back in response to COVID-19, the update offers a snapshot of GBV trends rather than a representative sampling. Notwithstanding this limitation, the update includes two critical findings. First, of 60 key informants interviewed in July 2020, 90 per cent reported an increase in intimate partner violence (IPV) since the beginning of the pandemic, and 60 per cent reported increased violence and harassment when accessing services. These results are consistent with global trends. Second, reports of GBV spiked in April following a two-week lockdown in Cox's Bazar and again in September after select GBV prevention services were allowed to resume. The pattern suggests a link between the availability of GBV services and the ability of women and girls to report GBV incidents.



As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, it is essential that the Government of Bangladesh, UN agencies, international organisations, civil society groups and private actors unite to address worsening GBV in Cox's Bazar. The update offers four concrete recommendations:

- UN agencies leading the protection working group, and GBV sub-working group, as well as the Strategic Executive Group in Dhaka should use all opportunities to advocate to the Government of Bangladesh to ensure centre-based GBV prevention and response services are designated as 'essential' (with necessary social distancing) to enable survivors of GBV to access services and heal and recover. In addition, all UN sector leads should ensure appropriate protection and GBV mainstreaming to mitigate the risks women and girls face in accessing essential services.
- The GBV sub-sector should offer sensitisation sessions, training, and technical support on GBV programming and standards to the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner's (RRRC) office, including the Camp-in-Charge, to establish a more consistent and informed approach towards GBV programming.
- Donors should ensure funding for the GBV response is prioritised in donor strategies and that funding levels are increased for the 2021 Joint Response Plan (JRP) to ensure the expansion of life saving GBV programming.
- International donors should work with the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, as well as UN agencies and local and national women's rights organisations, to agree a strategy for the localisation of the Rohingya GBV response.

Only a coordinated, holistic strategy is likely to lessen GBV in the camps in Cox's Bazaar. IRC will continue to document GBV and report on its prevalence, while working with partners—not least Rohingya refugees themselves—to advocate for the above recommendations and ensure Rohingya women and girls receive the protection and support they deserve. The problem is immense but not insurmountable.

## Twelve months on: Responding to displacement-affected populations during a pandemic



By Dan Tyler, Regional Head of Advocacy – Asia, Europe and Latin America Regional Office

The Covid-19 pandemic has tested the international humanitarian response system in ways that could not have been foreseen. Response preparedness has been exposed as lacking, humanitarian resource mobilisation lackluster and the knock-on political and socio-economic effects of the ongoing global economic crash are still playing out – making it hard to fully understand and appreciate the challenges ahead still faced.

What is clear though is that the needs of displacement-affected populations have grown significantly – their needs exacerbated and brought into sharp focus when, for example, Covid-19 movement-restrictions have reduced their access to assistance and protection. We also know that the resilience of those living in protracted displacement has been greatly weakened over the past year – by some estimates, 60% of displacement-affected communities are more likely to be working in sectors most likely to be negatively affected by Covid-related restrictions<sup>2</sup>.

Overcrowded living conditions, underlying health conditions and poor hygiene and sanitation in the areas where IDPs and/or refugees often live are some of the factors that we know increase the risk of transmission. And while the pool of evidence remains limited to date, we are starting to learn more about the heightened risk to Covid-19 that displacement-affected communities are placed at - when compared, for instance, against the non-displaced populations. We are also starting to understand more about the devastating community-level effect of the pandemic on people affected by displacement.

Firstly, Covid-19 has tipped displaced populations into hunger and homelessness. Three quarters of displaced and conflict-affected people have lost income since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to an NRC survey last year<sup>3</sup>. More recently, FAO and WFP have raised the alarm on the dramatic increase of people now in acute food insecurity – noting that the compounding impact of the pandemic is likely to push upwards of 270 million people to famine or famine-like conditions without urgent action from the humanitarian response community<sup>4</sup>.

Secondly, the health consequences of the pandemic are generally overlooked when it comes to displacement-affected communities. A lack of access to health services or a fear of seeking them out characterises the experience of the pandemic for many displaced people. Overwhelmed or inadequate health systems have not been able to afford refugees and IDPs reliable access to health services in many contexts and little data has been published on transmission rates within IDP and refugee camps and informal camp settings<sup>5</sup>. And while most refugee-hosting states have adopted vaccination strategies that include displacement-affected populations, actual immunization is still lacking owing to the lagging implementation of the global COVAX scheme. Most sadly perhaps, many displacement-affected people we speak with tell us that they fear the economic consequences much more than the disease itself, as they have had to cut back on meals and medical expenses.

Thirdly, humanitarian actors have seen their ability to provide humanitarian assistance greatly constrained. Operations are hindered by logistical challenges, disrupted supply chains and Covid-related movement restrictions. Significant impediments for humanitarian actors responding to displacement crises now exist that are, in turn, reducing access of displacement-affected communities to critical services, protection and humanitarian assistance.

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<sup>2</sup> Locked down and Left Behind: The impact of Covid-19 on Refugees' economic Inclusion, CGD, RI and IRC, July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Downward Spiral: the economic impact of Covid-19 on refugees and displaced people, NRC, October 2020

<sup>4</sup> Call for Action to avert famine in 2021, FAO and WFP, April 2021

<sup>5</sup> Apart Together survey, WHO, December 2020

As we reflect on this past year, NRC is now seeking to explore further the specific vulnerabilities faced by displacement-affected populations due to the pandemic so that we can better adapt our responses and profile these changing needs. We want to understand how the protection environment for refugees and migrants, as well as IDPs, has been impacted by Covid-19 – especially around their access to asylum and protection space. Drawing attention to the exceptional socio-economic, health and protection impacts of the pandemic on forcibly displaced people will be critical if we want to call for appropriate response strategies to be developed in the coming months.

## REGIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

### A perfect storm: Malaysia's forced deportation of refugees and migrants from Myanmar amid the military coup

Hanh Nguyen, Researcher, Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) Asia



The following op-ed was originally compiled for [the Bangkok Post](#) and has been reproduced here for wider access through ADSP's readership.

**On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military overthrew its newly elected government, halting the country's democratic transition and sparking nationwide protests. Shortly after, amid mounting concerns over the increasing use of violence against civilians in Myanmar, on 24 February, Malaysia deported 1,086 Myanmar nationals into the depths of chaos. Malaysia's actions are the latest blow to the multiple crises facing the people of Myanmar, adding new burden to the fragile state grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, unresolved ethnic armed conflicts, and an increasingly violent coup. It raises alarms about the increasing insecurity faced by refugees and migrants from Myanmar in other countries in the region, including Bangladesh and Malaysia.**

The global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities faced by hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants in Malaysia, causing widespread job losses, resulting in destitution, and homelessness. Data from the 4Mi survey of [the Mixed Migration Center](#) (MMC) shows that **60%** of Bangladeshis and Rohingya interviewed in Malaysia have lost their income due to COVID-19 restrictions, leading to the inability to afford basic goods or send remittance, as well as a loss of housing. 4Mi data also finds that nearly 90% are in need of basic items, including food, water, and shelter, as well as medical support.

During the pandemic, refugees and migrants in Malaysia more than ever need assistance from their host government. Instead, they have faced nationwide immigration crackdowns targeting undocumented people leading to more **than 8,000** being arrested and held in Malaysian detention centers. Throughout this time many have been forcibly deported. In July last year, in the middle of the pandemic, **over 19,000 undocumented migrants** were sent back to their home countries, the majority of whom were Indonesians, followed by Bangladeshi and Myanmar nationals.

The recent deportation of more than 1,000 Myanmar nationals from Malaysia highlights the continuation of the country's concerning policy towards refugees and undocumented migrants. With UNHCR [denied access](#) to Malaysian detention centres since August 2019, those deported include **at least 9 people** seeking asylum in need of international protection, as well as migrants in vulnerable situations, including unaccompanied and separated minors. Furthermore, deporting migrants and refugees amid ongoing political turmoil and violence in Myanmar will only exacerbate their vulnerabilities and protection needs.

### **Malaysia – a safe haven no more**

Malaysia has a long history of hosting refugees and migrants starting as early as the **British colonial period**. Later on, with Malaysia's industrialization process heavily dependent on export-oriented labor-intensive industries, the recruitment of foreign labor became an important developmental strategy. Today, the strong demand for low-skilled foreign workers continues which, together with open visa policies, make Malaysia an attractive destination for labor migrants from the region. This includes migrants coming to Malaysia through regular pathways with work permits, as well as migrants in irregular situations with no legal right to work.

Simultaneously, Malaysia has historically been tolerant toward **refugees fleeing persecution** in the region. In the 1970s, Vietnamese refugees fled the Vietnam War and were housed by Malaysia before being repatriated. Also during the same period, Filipino refugees from Mindanao came to Malaysia and were granted residence permits. Similarly, ethnic Chams fleeing Cambodia in the 1970s and Bosnians coming to Malaysia in the 1990s were provided the option of residence. In 2005, Acehese fleeing ethnic violence in Indonesia were also provided temporary residence. More recently Muslim-majority Malaysia has been a primary protection destination for refugees with Islamic backgrounds fleeing persecution from countries such as **Myanmar, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Palestine**.

As of the end of January 2021, there are some **178,710 refugees and asylum seekers** registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, the majority of whom are from Myanmar, comprised of more than 100,000 Rohingya together with other persecuted ethnic minorities. The country also hosts around 2 million documented foreign workers, along with an estimated 2-4 million without documentation.

However, COVID-19 has hardened the Malaysian government's stance on refugees and migrants. Border restrictions in response to COVID-19 have led to pushbacks of boats carrying hundreds of Rohingya refugees in need of protection. Within the country, government rhetoric has increasingly portrayed refugees and migrants as a source of virus transmission, fuelling **discrimination and hate speech**, as well as shrinking protection spaces for refugees and people seeking asylum. Since May 2020, a series of police raids, arrests, detention, and deportations carried out by Malaysian authorities have created widespread fear and have affected thousands of undocumented migrants and refugees all over the country. These actions further undermine their significant contribution to the country's economy, particularly in labour-intensive sectors.

### **Protracted and new crises in Myanmar**

For decades, conflicts have simmered in multiple parts of Myanmar, but the mounting humanitarian and human rights concerns are now higher than ever. Since June 2020, after a 17-year ceasefire, conflict resumed in Kachin state which previously displaced more than **100,000 people**. In Rakhine State, the protracted conflict against the Muslim minority Rohingya has posed threats to the safety **of around 600,000 Rohingya**, including 120,000 people who are effectively confined to camps. Meanwhile the nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees who fled to Bangladesh have faced worsening conditions and increasing instability with recent **relocations** to the isolated island of Bhasan Char.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further proved that Myanmar does not have the capacity to protect people within its border, even before the military coup. In 2020, the spontaneous return of more than **160,000 migrants** from Thailand amid the pandemic put a strain on the economy. Widespread unemployment and destitution, together with the closing of land borders, have further worsened the situation of poor and displaced people in Myanmar.

With no durable solutions in sight for the protracted conflicts, growing economic difficulties, and political instability, Myanmar nationals will likely continue seeking refuge abroad or embark on risky irregular journeys to other countries, mainly Thailand and Malaysia, both for safety and better livelihood opportunities. Forced deportations, like those carried out by Malaysia, will further take away their rights to international protection and increase their vulnerabilities.

### **Human rights-centered regional response framework is the way forward**

The lack of a comprehensive regional framework on irregular migration and refugee issues has led to ad hoc responses as well as the reluctance of many states in the region to uphold the rights of migrants. As a result, **hundreds of lives** of refugees and irregular migrants were lost at sea in 2020, while arrests and forced deportations have affected thousands of others. This highlights an important fact: A regional framework facilitating responsibility sharing between states and ensuring adherence to non-refoulement principles is an urgent need.

Since its inception in 2002, **the Bali Process** on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime has raised regional awareness of the consequences of people smuggling, trafficking in persons, and related transnational crime. However, its scope needs to be expanded to cover the matter of irregular migrants and refugees from a human rights-centered approach. Adherence to objectives and commitments under existing global and regional initiatives, including the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees, will be crucial in holding countries' accountable for their actions.

While refugee resettlement continues to be largely on hold as a result of COVID-19, integration of refugees and migrants into the host community will be a critical solution. The deportations of undocumented people, including people seeking international protection, as well as migrants in vulnerable situations, in Malaysia must be immediately stopped. Instead, Malaysia should provide protection to migrants and refugees in need, including those from Myanmar, who would face great risks and uncertainty if they were deported back to Myanmar amid the current political turmoil in the country.

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# RESEARCH UPDATES

In early 2021, ADSP published a report entitled "[Re-imagining the drought response](#)". The study was aimed at answering the following question: *What would the drought response have looked like if its key long-term objective had been to prevent a protracted displacement scenario?* Through a desk review of relevant documents and a series of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), this study returned to the chain (or indeed gaps) in the decision-making process that led to a crisis with such protracted displacements. It also presents a set of recommendations, primarily addressed to the humanitarian community and the Afghan government.

The 2018-19 Humanitarian Drought Response in the western region was effective in addressing basic and immediate needs of displaced households. However, the response was not structured in a way that could enable communities both displaced and in their location of origin to quickly recover, resume livelihoods and, most importantly, remove or diminish dependency on humanitarian aid. This convergence of challenges was caused by short-sightedness in planning from both government and humanitarian actors. **Emergency responses were directed at troubleshooting issues in IDP settlements, rather than offering more dynamic solutions by way of returning displaced families**, and resolving complex challenges such as decimated livelihoods and development gains within drought-affected communities. Whilst an early recovery intervention may have been more effective at resolving challenges as they arose, calls for a comprehensive drought response went unanswered during the acute stages of displacement.

## **Re-imagining the drought response: increasing awareness, improving decision-making processes and linking development and humanitarian action**

While around 3.5 million people were provided with life-saving emergency assistance in 2018-2019, displaced households did not benefit from durable solutions. To avoid displacement, more efforts to inform stakeholders of the multiple of risks associated with drought should have been undertaken. Further, certain key factors should have been considered to prevent such protracted displacement, including:

- Improved engagement with government, national and international actors committed to **addressing climate change issues in the region**. The drought was primarily caused by climate change, which should have been prioritised in the region years ago, especially considering the vulnerability of the area to drought conditions;
- An **earlier appeal for funds** in early 2018 may have prevented large-scale displacement, if fund allocations had been prioritised to address life-saving support in drought-affected communities; and
- Sufficient humanitarian and recovery efforts in communities affected by the drought may have **facilitated a return** for families forced to flee their home.



