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Press Release

ISLAMABAD

DATE: 19 September 2013

Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and UNHCR meet to discuss implementation of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees

ISLAMABAD: The Governments of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan and the UN Refugee Agency met in Islamabad on 18 and 19 September 2013 to discuss the implementation of the Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR).

In the third meeting of the regional Quadripartite Steering Committee, hosted by Pakistan, delegates from the three countries and UNHCR discussed ways and means for establishing stronger cooperation and partnership with the international community to resolve the protracted Afghan refugee situation, as well as ways of conducting joint resource mobilization.

Pakistan's Minister for States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON) Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Abdul Qadir Baloch chaired the meeting. Afghan Minister of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) - Dr. Jamaher Anwary, Iran's Director General of the Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrants (BAFIA) - Dr. Aziz Kazemi, the UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General and Resident Coordinator in Afghanistan - Mr. Mark Bowden, the UNHCR Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific - Ms. Daisy Dell, the UNHCR Deputy Director of the Bureau for Asia & the Pacific - Mr. Indrika Ratwatte, and the UNHCR Country Representatives from Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan - Mr. Bo Schack, Mr. Bernard Doyle and Mr. Neill Wright respectively - were among the participants at the meeting.

The delegates from the three countries, their respective National Steering Committees and UNHCR presented updates on progress and challenges in implementing the SSAR, and discussed various approaches on how to jointly mobilise resources for the implementation of the Regional Strategy.

A joint resource mobilisation strategy, led by UNHCR in close collaboration with the three countries, is expected to be agreed in the coming days. It stresses the need for engaging more donors in order to benefit the maximum number of refugees, returnees and host communities.

Endorsed in Geneva at an international conference in May 2012, the overall purpose of

the SSAR is to support the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees, their sustainable reintegration in Afghanistan, and provide assistance to the key host countries of Iran and Pakistan, including increases in third country resettlement.

While it has been agreed that the preferred solution for refugees remains dignified voluntary return, the participants acknowledged that voluntary repatriation of refugees could only be sustainable when conditions inside Afghanistan are conducive for reintegration. The number of returned Afghans since 2001 constitutes nearly a quarter of the entire population.

In the past decade, some 5.7 million Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan in the world's largest repatriation operation. Nevertheless, a 40 percent decrease has been observed in return trends this year. There are still 2.4 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan (1.6 million) and Iran (840,000) – the largest refugee hosting countries globally.

"More funds and rigorous efforts are required to achieve the SSAR goals, which include improving services especially in the areas of education and livelihood, so that more refugees can return and start a new life," the participants agreed.

The SAFRON Minister, Lt. Gen (Retd.) Baloch, reassured participants about Pakistan's lasting commitment to the principle of voluntary and dignified return of Afghan refugees in accordance with international norms. However, the Minister made it clear that the solution to this protracted issue lies in Afghanistan, and all out efforts are required to be undertaken to ensure international assistance for voluntary returns and reintegration in Afghanistan. The Minister also highlighted the importance of the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative which has so far benefited close to four million Pakistanis and Afghans in Pakistan. He urged the international community to invest more in RAHA projects, which have now extended to FATA, as well as all four provinces in Pakistan. He urged the international community to invest more to implement SSAR, in particular making conducive environment.

Minister Anwary of Afghanistan hailed the governments of Iran and Pakistan for their long-term support and hosting of Afghan refugees. He noted that more developmental assistance is required to make a real impact and enable the sustainable reintegration of Afghans. He informed the forum that the Afghan Government administers five National Priority Programmes (National Solidarity Programme; National Area-Base Development Programme; National Rural Access Programme; Rural Water Supply, Sanitation & Irrigation Programme; and the Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Programme), with coverage across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. "In situations where national development programmes cannot cover all the needs of returnees, UN Agencies and other development actors must do more to fill the gaps," he added.

Dr. Aziz Kazemi in his speech stated that the dignified return of Afghan refugees remains the preferred solution. He hoped that challenges "such as the lack of shelter, job opportunities, educational and health facilities in Afghanistan could be addressed through sharing costs and responsibilities for SSAR projects specifically targeting areas of high return. There should be more support from the international community and strong partnership between UN agencies and NGOs for voluntary repatriation and implementation of projects in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

UNHCR Asia Bureau Director Daisy Dell expressed gratitude to the three governments for their commitment to solutions for Afghan refugees and reiterated the United Nations' ongoing willingness to assist governments in the implementation of the strategy. Ms. Dell

stressed that a regional approach remains the best framework to meet the significant challenges faced by the three governments and UNHCR in seeking an end to the world's largest and most protracted refugee situation, especially at a time when other humanitarian crises demand additional donor support.

The delegations thanked the Government of Pakistan for hosting the third Quadripartite Steering Committee meeting and agreed to continue sharing progress reports on country-specific activities through their respective National Steering Committees.

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