UNHCR REGIONAL BUREAU FOR ASIA AND PACIFIC (RBAP)

CASH-BASED INTERVENTIONS 2023 OVERVIEW

April 2024

USD 70 Million distributed in 2023

Assisting over **1.7 milion** individuals

in **17 countries** of the Asia & the Pacific region

12 countries in the region where e-transfer is used

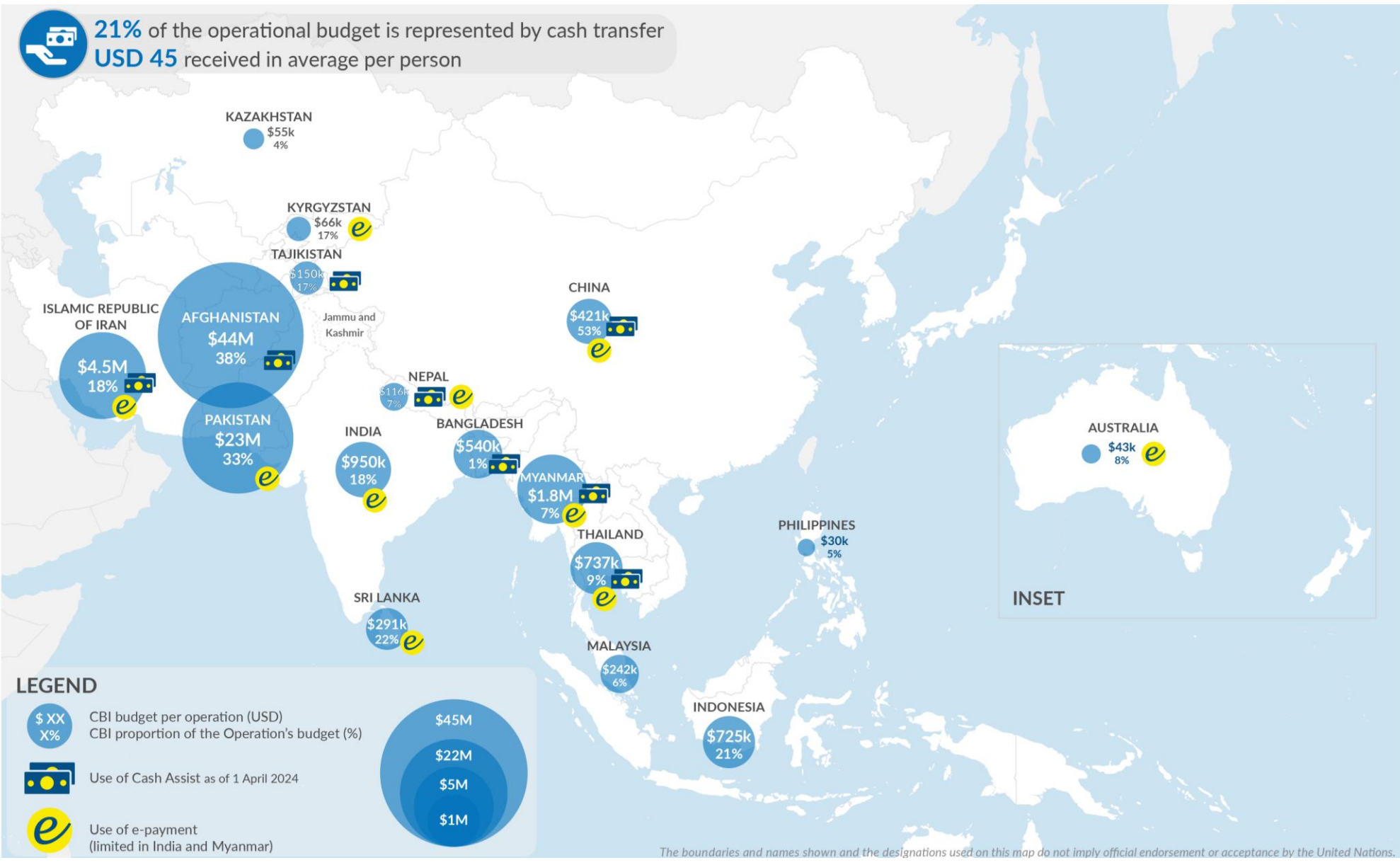
GLOBAL HIGHLIGHTS

- In line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Global Compact on Refugees and UN Common Cash Statement, UNHCR has been working with governments, the private sector, and other UN agencies to expand the use of cash assistance through collaborative tools. Cash transfers play an important role in providing protection and humanitarian assistance while supporting solutions for displaced people, returnees, and host communities. Due to their effectiveness, efficiency, and promotion of self-reliance, cash assistance has increased in popularity to become UNHCR's primary mode of assistance, replacing in-kind distributions. Moreover, UNHCR assumed official accountability for cash coordination in humanitarian refugee settings in 2022.
- In 2023, $760 million in cash assistance was delivered to 7 million people in 100 countries. UNHCR used cash for a wide range of purposes, including basic needs, education, shelter, health, and livelihoods. A significant amount was dedicated to meeting specific protection needs. 95% of cash transfers were disbursed without restrictions and to facilitate secure and rapid transfers 67% of recipients received cash through digital means.

This update gives an overview of UNHCR's progress in expanding the systematic use of cash assistance in the Asia and the Pacific region. It highlights success stories from several operations, progress in areas such as risk management and compliance, and outlines the priorities ahead.

REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

- In 2023, UNHCR delivered $70 million to 1.7 million people in 17 countries of the **Asia and Pacific region**. Cash assistance played a critical role in mainstreaming protection and solutions principles, bolstering social and economic initiatives, and promoting dignified living conditions as well as a sense of normality and independence for displaced people, returnees and host communities.
- UNHCR continues to deliver in kind assistance where necessary, particularly in instances where specific political, legal or infrastructure and service-related constraints hinder the use of cash transfers. Nevertheless, cash transfers remain the primary and most appropriate modality of assistance, even in emergency situations. In Pakistan, UNHCR launched a one-off cash grant in 2023, reaching more than 1.2 million registered Afghan refugees impacted by the challenging economic situation in the aftermath of the devastating floods of 2022. In Afghanistan, UNHCR significantly expanded cash assistance to support large-scale emergency returns from Pakistan. In Myanmar, UNHCR increased cash assistance to conflict-affected populations to support the rapid response to onset emergencies, reaching 47,613 people. Cash-based interventions (CBIs) have proven to be a crucial tool to efficiently deliver assistance that addresses emerging needs.
- UNHCR has been promoting the use of electronic financial services to transfer cash. However, access to such services remains limited in many countries due to legal and regulatory barriers, lack of accepted documentation and regular processes from financial service providers that do not account for the situation of refugees. This issue has been highlighted by UNHCR's research across multiple countries.



The figures provided are reliable but not official; they are estimates at the time of reporting. For further information, please contact rbapprog@unhcr.org

FOCUS

Purpose: UNHCR primarily employs cash transfers to address peoples' basic needs although CBIs have also been developed to achieve specific protection, shelter, livelihoods, education or health outcomes. CBIs are systematically embedded in UNHCR protection and solutions strategies and often complementary to other interventions such as legal assistance, counselling, resettlement or access to services. Regardless of their characteristics and denomination, CBIs seek to increase protection outcomes and protection space, mitigate protection risks and/or respond to protection harm/incidents. UNHCR has identified the following ways through which cash assistance can contribute to protection outcomes (UNHCR's definition and approach to cash and protection):

- Mainstreaming protection-related considerations as a pre-requisite in all CBIs
- Integrating cash and protection (e.g., basic needs assistance to reduce protection risks)
- Dedicated protection programming and case management (e.g., improving child protection)

Compliance: In recent years, UNHCR has developed robust measures to mitigate risks, promote compliance, and ensure accountability to cash assistance recipients and donors. These include systematically embedding standard operating procedures, risk assessments and analyses, feasibility studies, audits (e.g., in Afghanistan, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Pakistan), along with other tools such as payment systems (CashAssist) and database and identity management processes to ensure cash assistance reaches the intended recipients.

74% saw cash as preferred modality of assistance in 2023 while **4%** prefer in-kind

11% reported facing problem(s) receiving, keeping & spending the cash assistance

36% indicated that at least more than half of their needs were covered

Expenditures & use of cash

- **83%** Food
- **54%** Health
- **33%** Rent
- **26%** Debt payment

UNHCR Cash Based Intervention are systematically monitored, through various approach (Survey, Phone call, field visits, interviews, case management, Protection activities, hotlines, etc.), in accordance with UNHCR standard on accountability to the populations.

To support the return of refugees in **Afghanistan**, UNHCR has developed several KOBO-based tools to verify eligibility, promote dignified and equitable assistance distribution, and enhance accountability to cash recipients. These tools deploy Biometric Identity Management Systems (BIMS) at arrival points to verify and enrol people thereby minimizing the risk of duplicate payments. In 2023, UNHCR delivered some $13.8 million in cash assistance to 36,791 refugee returnees via the Forcibly Returned Afghans Enrolment programme, which provides cash assistance to eligible Afghan returnees from Pakistan.

In Myanmar, UNHCR expanded cash transfers to provide basic needs support to internally displaced people via multi-purpose cash grants. These grants – which were calculated based on the recommendations of the Cash Working Group – have been particularly critical in conflict-affected areas where humanitarian actors face obstacles delivering in-kind assistance due to movement restrictions and insecurity. UNHCR also continues to provide in-kind assistance in situations where cash is not feasible because of market and access constraints and limited capacities for cash transfers.

UNHCR also strengthened its assistance delivery tools to mitigate risks. The data management system has been reviewed, including identity management; new payment systems have been introduced (CashAssist, procurement of financial services); and partners have also been trained. CBIs are also systematically coordinated with stakeholders through the Cash Working Group to ensure proper design and coverage.

Thanks to the cash assistance, a displaced family from Phyu (Myoma) were able to provide medical care for their son who has special needs. @UNHCR/ Naw Christina

In India, cash transfers represent the main modality of assistance, accounting for over 18% of UNHCR's operating budget. However, refugees and asylum-seekers' limited access to bank accounts, along with the challenging financial regulatory environment for NGO partners, has impacted UNHCR's capacity to expand cash transfers, necessitating the limited use of in-kind distributions.

Cash grants are disbursed through bearer cheques and pre-paid/gift cards while bank transfers are used for a small number of people. UNHCR will continue to advocate for the inclusion of refugees, particularly in accessing recognized documentation and financial services while strengthening its own systems for delivering assistance, including CashAssist and biometrics for identity management.

Identity & Risk Management

Beneficiary Identity Management: To reduce avenues for identity fraud and other misrepresentations associated with CBI delivery, UNHCR uses several biometric tools, including ProGres, BIMS and the Global Distribution Tool (GDT), to identify and reach eligible CBI recipients. In Iran and Kyrgyzstan, UNHCR used GDT to provide beneficiary lists and biometrically verify eligible recipients for in-kind, cash or gift card assistance. In Pakistan, UNHCR collaborated with the authorities and a bank to biometrically identity and verify government-registered refugees to facilitate timely and easily accessible CBIs. UNHCR also integrated BIMS verification for Afghan returnees from Pakistan to identify people approaching UNHCR to ensure they received their cash assistance entitlements.

Payment Systems: To increase efficiency and reduce risks linked to payments, 11 UNHCR offices in the region launched or initiated the roll out of CashAssist – a transparent cloud-based platform that creates and sends secured payment instructions to financial service providers, with an end-to-end process flow embedded in UNHCR financial systems. This platform allows users to validate and reconcile payments, ensuring that financial controls and reporting are accurately carried out. UNHCR seeks to deploy CashAssist across all operations in the region in 2024. In 2023, UNHCR also worked on improving payment mechanisms with the procurement of new financial services in Myanmar, Thailand, China and Indonesia.

Looking forward

In view of the rising humanitarian needs in the Asia and the Pacific region, UNHCR will continue to advance a "why not cash" approach, including in emergencies, to support inclusion, solutions, and protection outcomes. In line with the outcomes of the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, it will explore opportunities to leverage cash assistance as a vehicle for empowerment and inclusion, linking people to financial inclusion and social protection. UNHCR will promote innovative approaches to deliver quality cash assistance and strengthen partnerships with the relevant stakeholders. However, as unaddressed needs remain high, more funding is needed to expand the provision of cash assistance to better support those in need, with efficiency, effectiveness, and dignity.

@UNHCR/Caroline Gluck

"Within 24 hours, our lives changed. When you move from one place to another, you face challenges. You start from zero."

Abdul, 30, is a new father, who received UNHCR support on arrival from Pakistan and now faces the difficult task of rebuilding his life in Afghanistan – a country he has never set foot in before.

In the 80 Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs) across Afghanistan, UNHCR, along with partners, is preparing communities to receive newcomers from Pakistan. This includes facilitating access to basic services, such as schools and clinics, and providing livelihoods training. These efforts support sustainable reintegration, build community resilience and mitigate the risk of further displacement.

UNHCR is grateful to the donors who have supported UNHCR programmes in Asia-Pacific in 2023 with earmarked and softly earmarked contributions: Australia | Austria | Canada | Denmark| European Union | Finland | France | Germany | Ireland | Japan | Netherlands | Norway | Private donors from France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Spain, Thailand, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and the United States of America | Rep. of Korea | Saudi Arabia | Sweden | Switzerland | United Kingdom | United States of America | Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan | Country-based Pooled Funds | UN CERF | UN Joint Programmes

UNHCR is also grateful for the critical support provided by donors who have contributed to UNHCR programmes with unearmarked funds which allow us to respond in an agile manner where the needs are greatest: Belgium | Denmark | France | Germany | Ireland | Japan | Netherlands | Norway | Sweden | Switzerland | United Kingdom | Private donors Italy | Private donors Republic of Korea | Espana con ACNUR | Japan for UNHCR | Sweden for UNHCR | USA for UNHCR

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