Operational Response (as of 20 January 2022)

UNHCR Staff meet with refugees who disembarked in Aceh in December 2021 (left); UNHCR Staff conduct a focus group discussion with female refugees from the same group (right).

Background

- In the evening of 29 December 2021, the Indonesian Government decided to allow the disembarkation of 105 Rohingya refugees who had for days been stranded on a boat in the open seas near Aceh, Indonesia. The refugees on board were overwhelmingly women and girls. The boat disembarked at ASEAN port, Kruenggeukuh Aceh Utara, Lhokseumawe on 30 December 2021, with immediate reception by local government authorities, UNHCR and IOM.
- The boat had been at sea in dangerous conditions for more than three weeks. It was first sighted in waters near Bireuen in northern Aceh on 26 December. The boat departed from Bangladesh in the first week of December, but soon suffered a damaged engine. Shortages of food and water were reported by the passengers. There are reports that one 17-year-old girl perished at sea. Some of the men reported that smugglers had tied their hands together and beat them, abandoning them at sea. By the time the boat reached Aceh, it was taking in water through a hole in the hull. The Indonesian Government's decision to allow disembarkation most certainly saved lives.

Demographics

- The group consists of 51 women, 47 children and 7 men. Of the children, 40 are girls and 7 are boys. Twenty-seven are unaccompanied children (28 girls and 1 boy) and 3 are separated children. Unaccompanied and separated children make up nearly 30% of the entire group. The youngest of the group are only 7 years old (two children) whereas the oldest member is 54 years old.

- Nearly all the women (49 of 50) are considered women at risk, including 8 single parents and 2 caregivers. (UNHCR considers a woman at risk if she has protection problems particular to her gender and lacks effective protection normally provided by male family members.)
- Thirty-three people travelled with other family members on the boat whereas the remaining 72 people travelled alone.
- On 19 January, all Rohingya refugees received their UNHCR identification cards, with the exception of eight people who had left the site spontaneously on 18 January. The vast majority of the group already possessed UNHCR documentation issued by UNHCR Bangladesh.

Protection

- UNHCR leads the protection sector at the field and national level, which includes general protection, protection of women and children, and counter-trafficking. Protection and assistance for refugees is being facilitated by a well-established inter-agency structure and is proceeding in accordance with lessons learned from prior disembarkations that occurred in 2020 and 2021.
- UNHCR conducted a child protection mission on 13 - 20 January to gather information on the risks children experienced throughout the journey, identify protection needs and facilitate referral to specialized services. Best interest assessments (BIA), safety assessments, protection monitoring, counselling, and individual case processing have been conducted.
- UNHCR works with the local Red Cross (PMI) to facilitate initial phone calls to the group's family members and will further work with ICRC and PMI on family tracing for unaccompanied children and other individuals separated from their family members.
- UNHCR and IOM have also conducted sensitisation sessions for all refugees on gender-based violence (GBV), awareness of child marriage and on the risks of onward movements.
- Referral pathways for case management, psychosocial support and health assistance for survivors of gender-based violence have been discussed and reviewed through coordination meetings with government and humanitarian agencies working on protection of women and children. Coordination with partners continues to ensure safe, confidential and quality multisectoral services for survivors of GBV.
- **Gaps:** The local government in Lhokseumawe has only agreed to accommodate the group on a temporary basis, pending instructions from the National Refugee Task Force. The uncertainty about where the group will be accommodated has caused difficulties in arranging long-term programming for the group. The ability of some local NGOs to continue delivering assistance after 31 January will depend on whether there is clarity about where the refugees will be hosted long-term.
- In addition, local authorities in Lhokseumawe have requested the site to be a closed site with restricted freedom of movement for the refugees. UNHCR continues to advocate for freedom of movement.

Health, Food Security and Nutrition

- The authorities conducted health screening and COVID-19 antigen tests for the refugees when they were brought to the BLK site in Lhokseumawe. Fortunately, all tested negative for COVID-19 and are in good health. The

refugees remained in quarantine for 10 days during which access was strictly limited for public health reasons. UNHCR, IOM, PMI (Red Cross of Indonesia) and local partners collaborated with the local government to cover all the refugees' basic needs during the quarantine period, which ended on 10 January 2022. After a coordination meeting which was attended by UNHCR and the local refugee task force, the site was opened for all local humanitarian agencies from 11 January, hence marking the resumption of humanitarian programming at the site.

- On 11 January, the Lhokseumawe Health Office with the support of IOM administered COVID-19 vaccinations to the refugees. All refugees aged 12 years and above (94 people) have received the first dose of Sinovac vaccine.
- IOM is the lead for the health sector and provides all medical services, including referral to hospitals and ambulance units, with support on ambulance provision from PMI.
- Psychosocial support will be provided through the city's Women Empowerment and Child Protection Office and Centre of Integrated Social Welfare for Children, albeit with limited capacity due to their shortage of clinical psychologists.
- Food and additional nutrition was provided by IOM during the quarantine period, by Jesuit Refugee Services from 11 to 19 January, and by local NGO ACT from 19 to 31 January.
- **Gaps:** Psychosocial support is being provided with limited capacity due to the shortage of clinical psychologists at relevant government agencies in Lhokseumawe.

Shelter, NFIs & WASH

- The BLK site has been generously provided to host the refugees by the local authorities, albeit with an initial limited time period of 10 days which is currently being extended until further recommendation from the national government. The cost of electricity and site maintenance is covered by IOM. The BLK site has been previously used to accommodate refugees who arrived in Aceh in June 2021 as well as following disembarkations in June and September 2020. UNHCR and local implementing partner YKMI expanded and refurbished the site in 2020 and 2021.
- Drinking water is provided by the NGO Human Initiative, while clean water is obtained through boreholes that were established by YKMI in 2020. Hygiene promotion initiatives are being conducted regularly by IOM and YKMI.

Education, Skills Training & Support to the Host Community

- Informal English classes for children and adults are being conducted by IOM and Getanyoe Foundation as of 13 January 2022. In addition, YKMI and IOM have started organizing recreational activities for the refugees such as sports, henna and makeup classes, and have created a child-friendly space for children.
- **Gaps:** Planning on support and improvements to the local host community remains on hold until there is clarity as to where the refugees will be hosted long-term. Similarly, arranging access to public schools for children also depends on the refugees' long-term location.

Security Situation at the Site

- Post-quarantine period, UNHCR is supporting a security team of four guards per shift to provide security for the refugees at the site. The government has requested the site to be a closed site with restricted freedom of movement due to smuggling and trafficking concerns. Several spontaneous departures of refugees from the site have since occurred and as of 2 February 2022, the number of refugees at the site is now 72. This has spurred calls from local authorities to accelerate the transfer of the group and to increase the security of the site. UNHCR, IOM, partners and local authorities have counselled on the risks of onward movements.

Coordination

- As per the government of Indonesia's request, UNHCR acts as the national and local-level coordinator of the Rohingya response. UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies have created an interagency response team and drafted an interagency response plan to be applied from January to June 2022. The draft inter-agency response plan has been shared with the national government. At the field level, under UNHCR's coordination, several sectors have been established and are fully functional:
  - Protection (which includes gender-based violence, child protection, and counter-trafficking), led by UNHCR;
  - Health and nutrition, led by IOM;
  - Food, led by ACT;
  - Mental health and psychosocial programmes, led by IOM;
  - Education, led by Getanyoe Foundation;
  - Shelter and WASH, led by IOM.

  A logistics/NFI sector has been proposed and is pending appointment of leadership.

- In its coordinating role, UNHCR leads advocacy and coordination with the national and local government and leads coordination with other agencies, including through weekly national interagency meetings and weekly field interagency meetings. UNHCR also acts as camp manager and is a point of contact for access control to the site for NGOs who are not part of the interagency structure, as well as the media.
- Due to the temporary nature of the group's accommodation in Lhokseumawe, the local interagency structure has only planned for activities and programmes until 31 January 2022. UNHCR is leading discussions on programming and planning to ensure that assistance and protection activities continue at the site.

Working with Partners

- A range of actors on the ground in Aceh are involved in the emergency response, including: ACT, Dompet Dhuafa, Geutanyoe Foundation, Human Initiative, IOM, JRS, KontraS, LBH Banda Aceh, PKSAI, P2TP2A/DP3A, PMI, UNHCR and YKMI. These actors are part of the local interagency structure which meets weekly in Aceh. Other agencies such as ICRC, IFRC, and UNICEF are not part of the local interagency structure but are part of the national interagency structure and are regularly updated with developments and gaps at the site.
- **For further information,** please contact Mitra Suryono, Associate External Relations/Public Information Officer, at: suryono@unhcr.org