UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

PROTECTION BRIEF INDONESIA

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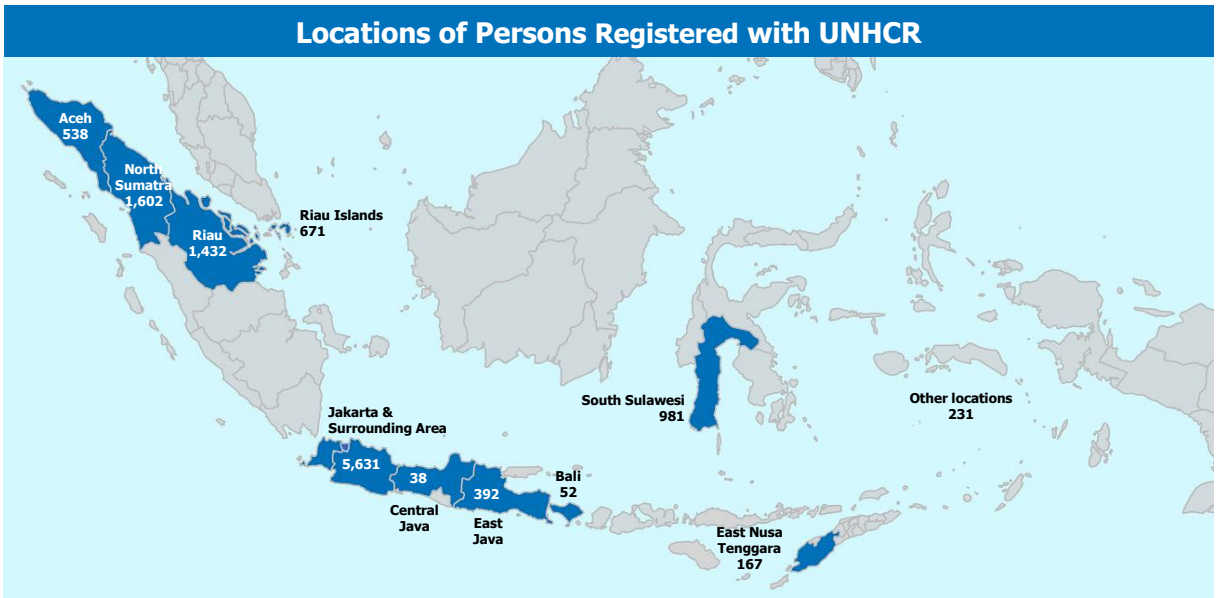
Operational Context

As of September 2024, Indonesia is host to 11,735 refugees and asylum-seekers (6,548 families) residing primarily in urban areas throughout the Indonesian archipelago. Almost half of all refugees and asylum seekers are from Afghanistan, followed by Myanmar, Somalia, and 49 other countries. UNHCR has a country office in Jakarta and field presence in Aceh, Medan, Makassar, Pekanbaru, and Tanjung Pinang.

While Indonesia is not signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, there are provisions for refugee protection embedded within domestic law (including the 1945 Constitution, the 1999 Human Rights Law, and the 2016 Presidential Regulation on the Handling of Refugees) and Indonesia generally respects the right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement. UNHCR continues to work to advance opportunities for refugee inclusion and participation in Indonesia, including by seeking to improve access to self-reliance and to national education, health, civil registration, and social systems.

UNHCR[1] supports the Government of Indonesia by undertaking core refugee protection functions, including registration, refugee status determination, gender-based violence prevention and response, child protection, legal protection, and the pursuit of durable solutions. Approximately 48% of the refugee population in Indonesia is residing in IOM-managed accommodation centers, established as part of the Regional Cooperation Agreement (RCA) between Indonesia, the Government of Australia, and IOM in 2000. 42% of the refugee population – largely those who arrived in Indonesia after 2017 – are living independently and, with the exception of the most vulnerable, do not receive financial support for food, rent, and basic needs. Approximately 10% of the refugee population is comprised of Rohingya refugees who arrived by boat in recent years and who are residing primarily in temporary shelters in Aceh and North Sumatra.

Indonesia's National Refugee Task Force, established in 2019, remains an important Government entity in the management of refugee affairs. Deputy V in POLHUKAM is the head of the National Refugee Task Force and members include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a wide range of security-focused actors. Several local refugee task forces operate in provinces hosting refugees and remain active and important counterparts. UNHCR also works with a range of partners in Indonesia, particularly IOM, YCWS, and YKMI in several areas of protection and assistance. In addition, UNHCR works with non-governmental, civil society and refugee-led organizations, as well as other UN agencies working with and advocating for the rights of the refugee population in Indonesia.

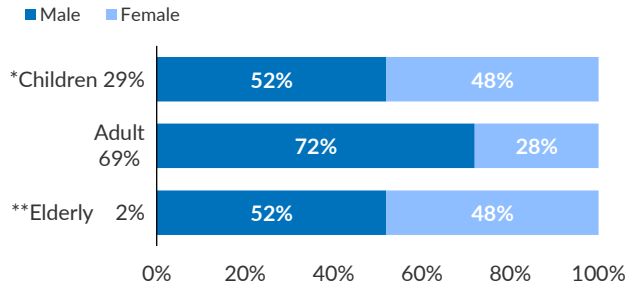


[1] The Government of Indonesia-UNHCR host country agreement has been in place since 1979.

Protection Brief in Graphics

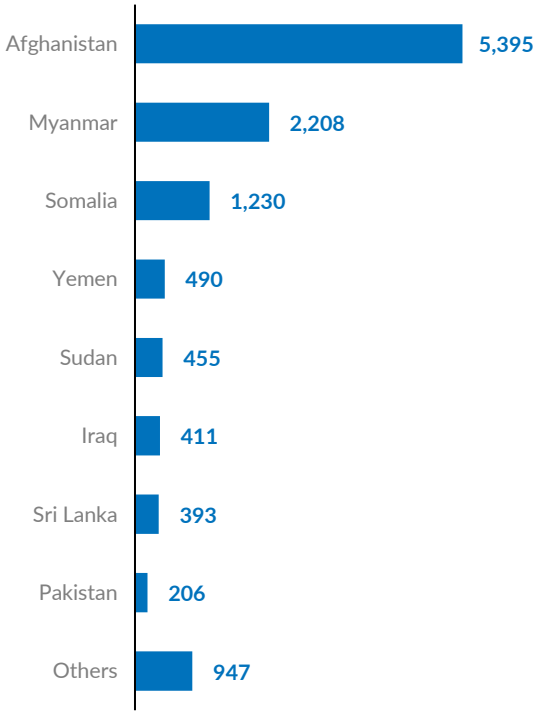
Total Population
11,735 Individuals
(6,548 Cases)

Population based on Age and Gender

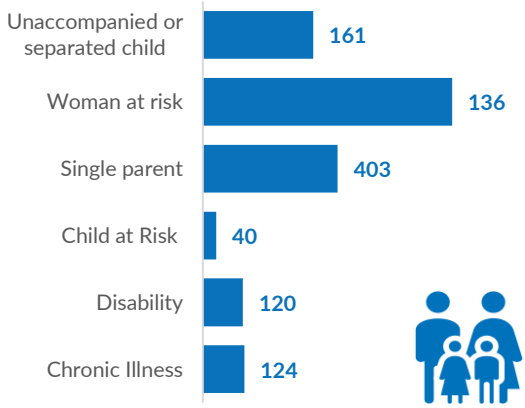


*Between 0-17 years old ** Above 60 years old

Population based on Country of Origin

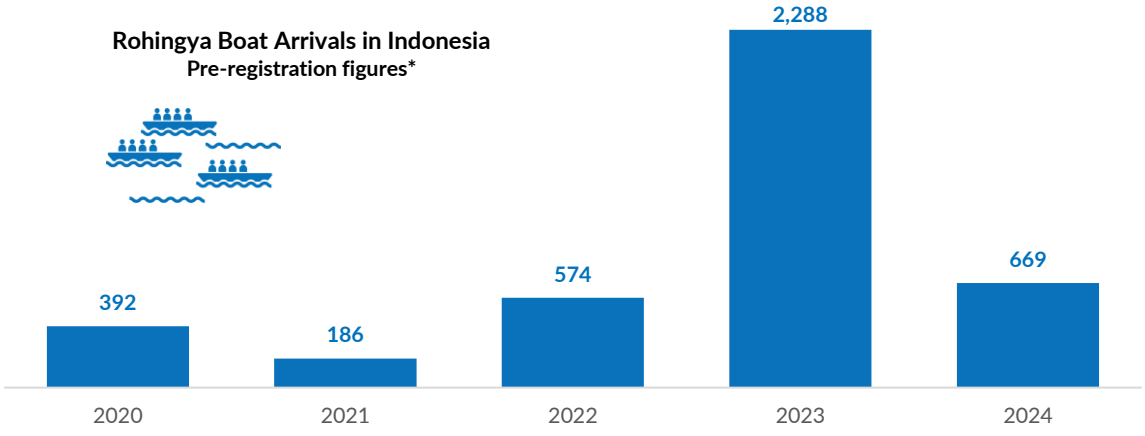


Vulnerabilities*



*One individual may have multiple specific needs

Rohingya Boat Arrivals in Indonesia
Pre-registration figures*



*Pre-registration data refers to a headcount upon arrival or at disembarkation sites. Some individuals departed prior to registration with UNHCR.

Key Protection Work

Registration and Documentation

UNHCR Indonesia undertakes registration of persons seeking asylum in Indonesia on behalf of the Government of Indonesia and issues UNHCR identity documentation. Registration interviews are primarily conducted in-person for verification of biometric data and relevant records. Most registration interviews take place at the Reception Center in Jakarta or during accommodation visits/missions by the respective field team for individuals residing outside the greater Jakarta area. In 2023, 2,547 individuals (1,324 cases) were registered by UNHCR Indonesia, which includes 1,225 Rohingya refugees registered during emergency registration missions following boat disembarkations in Aceh in November and December 2023. UNHCR Indonesia provides continuous registration services to registered refugees and asylum-seekers and maintains updated personal data in our internal database to ensure vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers are identified and assisted with protection interventions and solutions.

Refugee Status Determination

In the absence of comprehensive national refugee laws and national RSD processes, UNHCR undertakes refugee status determination (RSD) in Indonesia. As asylum-seekers have access to the same rights and services as refugees in Indonesia, UNHCR uses RSD strategically for individuals with an immediate third country solution which requires refugee recognition (resettlement and some complementary pathways), cases with heightened protection concerns, and cases presenting with issues that need to be clarified through the RSD process. UNHCR also conducts RSD as part of its emergency response in the context of boat arrivals to identify those in need of international protection.

Child Protection

UNHCR and partners provide case management assistance to support children who are unaccompanied or separated from traditional caregivers or who are suffering from violence, exploitation, and neglect. UNHCR works with partners, including government partners, to assist children with heightened protection needs by providing legal assistance, safety and security, and psychological and health interventions as needed. UNHCR works with YCWS, our implementing partner, to provide assistance to unaccompanied children (UAC) in a Semi-Independent Living Care Arrangement (SILCA) through which UAC are accommodated in a rented room and their basic needs are covered. In response to the emergency situation in Aceh, UNHCR is undertaking Best Interest Assessments (BIA) for the large number of UAC, child spouses, and other children at risk to better understand their needs and determine a protection approach that best addresses those needs.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

UNHCR conducts case management for survivors of gender-based violence and refers them to support services with their consent. Assistance may include medical care, psychosocial support, temporary safe accommodation, assistance to report to police and in any legal process, and interventions to protect impacted children, if required. UNHCR and YCWS run a GBV hotline that can be accessed by survivors of GBV 24 hours/day. Since July 2023, UNHCR has conducted a GBV prevention program that seeks to increase awareness of the root causes of GBV and to build the capacity of the community to prevent and respond to GBV by Engaging Men in Accountable Practices (EMAP).

Legal Support

UNHCR provides support to refugees and asylum seekers experiencing legal protection concerns, including individuals seeking international protection at air and sea borders who are unable to access

Indonesian territory, individuals at risk of deportation/refoulement, individuals who are victims or accused perpetrators of crimes in Indonesia, and those with other legal concerns in the country. The Legal Protection Hotline is available for individuals experiencing an emergency in Indonesia, particularly when they are at risk of refoulement, arrest, and detention.

Financial Assistance

UNHCR assists a small number of extremely vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers with cash support to help meet basic needs. Together with partners, UNHCR conducts a socio-economic assessment of cases that have been identified as requiring financial assistance. Those cases that have heightened needs are presented to a Socio-Economic and Health Panel (comprised of YCWS, JRS, and UNHCR) for a determination of inclusion in the cash program. Those who qualify receive up to six months of cash assistance, following which a re-assessment is required to determine continued needs.

Economic Empowerment

Refugees are not legally permitted to work in Indonesia. UNHCR advocates for refugees to be given access to livelihoods opportunities and works with partners to create community empowerment and self-reliance programs that benefit Indonesians and refugees. These programs include vocational trainings and entrepreneurships that also promote economic development in Indonesia. At the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019, the Indonesian Government pledged support to refugee productivity and empowerment activities. This commitment was confirmed in the second Global Refugee Forum in December 2023. In September 2023, the Ministry of Manpower issued a Circular Note allowing refugee participation in skills training programs at government training centers. The Circular and GRF commitment serve as pivotal entry points to advance economic empowerment.

Education

The Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology issued a Circular Note in 2019, with amendments in 2022, allowing refugees and asylum seekers to access primary and secondary formal and informal education in the national education system. Enrollment in local schools requires a valid UNHCR document and competency in Indonesian language. UNHCR and our partners provide preparation classes, covering Indonesian language and basic skills (reading, writing, and math), as well as additional support (tuition fees, transport allowance and school supplies) to assist children to access local schools. IOM similarly supports refugee children living in IOM accommodations. Challenges to increase enrolment rates among refugee children include limited interest on the part of refugee children to learn Indonesian, financial barriers, resettlement expectations, the inability to obtain official documentation certifying completion of school (due to the lack of an Indonesian identification number), and inadequate physical space within classrooms to accommodate non-Indonesian children. As a result of these and other challenges, as of September 2024, only 769 refugee children (of approximately 3,000 school age children) are enrolled in accredited national schools.

Health

UNHCR is committed to ensuring that refugees and asylum seekers have access to lifesaving and life-sustaining health services. To achieve this, UNHCR continues to advocate with the Ministry of Health for the inclusion of refugees in the national health system, including enabling access to national health insurance, working towards the achievement of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). All registered asylum seekers and refugees have access to low-cost primary health care at the local Community Health Centers (PUSKESMAS), managed by the Government of Indonesia. Individuals requiring emergency or advanced health treatment may be financially supported by UNHCR through our health partner YCWS, within the parameters of established guidelines and budgetary restrictions. UNHCR coverage is limited to critical interventions, mental health services, immunization, natal care, and

pediatric care. From January to August 2024, a total of 2,684 healthcare requests were made by refugees, including outpatient, inpatient, psychiatric, counseling, and antiretroviral therapy (ART) needs. Out of these, 1364 cases referrals were granted assistance, leaving a gap of 1320 unmet requests.

Solutions - Resettlement

UNHCR Indonesia continues to identify and submit refugees for resettlement consideration. In 2024, 950 resettlement spaces have been made available for refugees in Indonesia. UNHCR seeks to ensure the most vulnerable refugees are prioritized for resettlement consideration, assessing heightened specific needs and protection concerns, as well as length of stay in the country, when identifying cases for submission.

Solutions - Complementary Pathways

UNHCR Indonesia is working to expand access to complementary pathways for refugees in the country and provides information and guidance to refugees who may be eligible for these programs. Solutions through complementary pathways have increased in recent years, from no individual departures on pathways in 2020 to over 300 departures in 2023. UNHCR recognizes and amplifies the link between access to education, skills building, and empowerment activities in Indonesia with improved access to education and labour mobility pathways in third countries. In this way, continued success with these pathways also serves to reinforce and enhance advocacy with Indonesian authorities on the importance of access to opportunities while in Indonesia. Since mid-2021, UNHCR has collaborated with Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB) on a project that matches refugee candidates in Indonesia with employers in Australia and Canada to offer employment and a pathway to residency through labour mobility. In 2023, 328 individuals departed on a sponsorship pathway, eight refugees departed to a third country on family reunification, and seven refugees departed to Canada and Australia on labour mobility programs.

Solutions - Voluntary Repatriation

UNHCR facilitates voluntary repatriation for refugees and asylum seekers who request to return to their countries of origin, with arrangements often made in close cooperation with IOM through its Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) program. During the course of 2023, 95 refugees voluntarily repatriated from Indonesia, primarily to Sri Lanka and Iraq. Voluntary repatriation is impacted by ongoing conflicts and human rights violations in countries of origin, which renders many unable to safely return home and limits interest in repatriation.

Protection Challenges

Access to Territory

In 2023 and 2024, boats carrying nearly 3,000 Rohingya refugees (the majority of whom are women and children) have landed in Aceh and North Sumatra, Indonesia. According to information provided to UNHCR by the new arrivals, the increase in the number of individuals undertaking the sea journey has been driven by a number of factors, including increasing insecurity in the camps in Bangladesh; a decrease in the cost of the sea journey; continued instability in Myanmar; and a lack of progress in creating conditions that would enable return to Myanmar, including addressing the root causes of Rohingya displacement.

While many Indonesians remain supportive of and sympathetic to the challenges facing Rohingya refugees, the most recent boat arrivals have met unprecedented resistance in Indonesia. Some boats were initially prevented from disembarking, many refugees were forced to relocate several times due rejection from local communities, and many of those who have disembarked have yet to be allocated an adequate shelter by Indonesian authorities. As a result, hundreds of refugees who have disembarked in recent months are currently living in extremely perilous, overcrowded, and substandard conditions in which the protection and assistance response remained a challenge.

With partners, UNHCR continues to advocate with the Indonesian government at all levels and works to strengthen collaboration with coastal communities to ensure boats in distress at sea are rescued and able to disembark in Indonesia with adequate sites designated to host those who arrive by sea. In addition to arrivals by sea, UNHCR continues to advocate with competent authorities when contacted by individuals arriving by air if their right to seek asylum was denied at the airport.

Resettlement Expectations

Refugees and authorities consider Indonesia to be a “transit country” prior to the realization of a solution in a third country. The refugee assistance models established by the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees and the Regional Cooperation Agreement, as well as disproportionately high resettlement opportunities from Indonesia when compared to opportunities from many other host countries, have perpetuated this narrative. The pervasive and persistent misconception regarding the extent to which refugees are entitled to resettlement and the belief that, with time, resettlement will be accessible for all refugees in the country has a negative impact on the refugee population and the protection space in Indonesia.

While there have been some important advancements in refugee inclusion in Indonesia, the characterization of the refugee experience in Indonesia as a transient one creates little impetus for policy makers to develop comprehensive and inclusive protection policies. For refugees, resettlement expectations have discouraged engagement in constructive experiences in Indonesia, including education, training, skills building, and self-empowerment opportunities; fostered a sense of unfairness, anxiety, and frustration; led to a deterioration in mental health; and eroded trust in UNHCR and partners. UNHCR’s efforts to work with and for the refugee community are also undermined by the unique focus on resettlement in the country, impacting outreach and communication efforts, the prioritization of human and financial resources, staff security, and programming.

Lack of Access to Opportunities for Economic Empowerment

Refugees are unable to work legally in Indonesia, creating economic vulnerabilities and compounding protection risks for the refugee population. In addition to economic insecurity, lack of access to work impacts refugees in a number of ways: informal work experiences may render refugees vulnerable to

exploitation and abuse by employers; refugees are more prone to engage in income-generating activities that are harmful to them; the stress and pressure of economic insecurity within the family may lead to a deterioration of mental health and resulting protection incidents within the home, including physical and sexual abuse and neglect; children are kept from school due to difficulties paying for incidental school expenses; refugees have limited opportunities to productively engage in Indonesia by developing and utilizing skills and capacities in an employment setting, impacting both the quality of their experience in the host country and opportunities to access a third country solution through labor mobility; barriers to accessing the workplace limit opportunities to meaningfully interact with Indonesians, impacting social cohesion between refugees and their hosts; refugees are unable to make positive contributions to the Indonesian economy while residing in the country; etc.

Smuggling and Trafficking

Refugees access Indonesia through the air and sea. Many refugees in Indonesia, particularly Rohingya traveling by boats, are facilitated in their travel and arrive in the country with the assistance of agents. In previous years, many Rohingya who arrived in Indonesia by sea – approximately 80% - departed soon after arrival to Malaysia, where a large Rohingya community resides and more robust employment opportunities, albeit informal opportunities, exist. UNHCR is extremely concerned about credible reports that refugees in Indonesia – particularly Rohingya in Aceh and North Sumatra – are being victimized by traffickers during their journey to Indonesia or during onward movement after arrival in the country. Refugees have reported numerous protection incidents that took place during their movement to, through, and from Indonesia, including gender-based violence, physical abuse, exploitation, harassment, intimidation, forced movement, and extortion. UNHCR monitors the movement of refugees to assess trends and identify protection risks, to engage with Indonesian authorities to respond to reports of trafficking, and to counsel on the risks of onward movement.

Ensuring Protection with Resource Limitations

Indonesia is host to a relatively small number of refugees and asylum seekers, but they reside over a wide geographical area in a country of over 17,000 islands. While approximately half of the refugee population lives in Jakarta and the surrounding areas, the other half is spread throughout the archipelago. The UNHCR operation in Indonesia is a small one, both in terms of staffing and resources, and the distribution of refugees across this large territory, coupled with complex protection concerns and emergency boat arrivals, creates unique operational challenges. UNHCR continually strives to prioritize efforts and resources to be as impactful as possible in supporting refugees who are most in need and in advancing a sustainable protection environment in the country.

Opportunities

Improved Protection Environment

While it is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention, Indonesia generally respects international and domestic refugee law, particularly the principle of non-refoulement, and has demonstrated critical humanitarian leadership in the region by consistently stepping forward to disembark boats carrying Rohingya refugees. 2024 and 2025 present important opportunities to further advance the protection environment in the country, including the planned revision of a key domestic refugee law and the new policies and priorities of recently elected national leaders.

The National Refugee Taskforce has initiated inter-ministry discussions on the revision of Presidential Regulation 125 of 2016. This Regulation provides the foundation for ensuring access to asylum and assigns UNHCR a key role in the management of asylum claims and solutions. UNHCR's recommendations for consideration in the revision have focused on the need for clarifying and expanding the decree's scope to ensure a strong refugee protection framework in Indonesia, including protection safeguards that ensure entry to safe territory through channels other than the sea; increasing joint activities with the Government, particularly in registration and documentation; and advancing inclusion efforts in the country.

Indonesia's new president and vice president were inaugurated in October 2024. This new government offers an opportunity to renew and expand Indonesia's humanitarian leadership on refugee issues. The country is a regional and global power – the fourth largest country by population in the world, the largest majority Muslim country in the world, the largest economy in southeast Asia, and recent leadership roles as the President of the G20 and the Chair of ASEAN. Advocacy efforts will seek to ensure Indonesia does not solely embrace political, economic, and military leadership, but that the country also showcases independent humanitarian leadership – particularly on refugee issues.

UN Common Pledge

The UN Common Pledge offers new opportunities to strengthen the protection environment in Indonesia. At the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, several agencies in the UN Country Team (UNHCR, IOM, UNFPA, WHO, UNDP, ILO, UNICEF, FAO, and UNESCO) pledged to provide guidance, technical support, and advocacy to enable refugee inclusion in Indonesia in four key areas: education, health, self-reliance, and birth registration. UNHCR will work closely with these agencies in 2024 and beyond to secure inclusive policies and an enabling protection environment in the country.

Enhancing Engagement with Refugees

UNHCR will continue to expand the ways in which we engage with refugees in 2024 and 2025. A cornerstone of these activities is the rollout of the Digital Gateway, a corporate self-service tool being piloted in Indonesia that will address many of the concerns of the refugee community, as well as the geographic challenges in Indonesia, by providing a platform through which refugees can remotely communicate with UNHCR, view their bio-data, update contact information, book appointments for services, and obtain updates on case processing status.

In addition to the Digital Gateway, UNHCR is strengthening tools of engagement and communication with the refugee community following several years of more limited contact resulting from COVID restrictions and security challenges in the field. These initiatives include re-instituting walk-in counseling at the UNHCR reception center; revitalizing the UNHCR HELP website; expanding refugee Town Halls to respond to queries and share information; undertaking regular outreach missions to

meet refugees where they are living; and engaging refugee Outreach Volunteers to identify and refer protection concerns and serve as conduits of information to and from the refugee community.

Verification Exercise

UNHCR is undertaking a country-wide verification exercise in 2024. The project enables UNHCR staff to systematically connect with and update registration data for every refugee and asylum seeker in Indonesia. UNHCR protection/registration teams are updating family composition and recording information on specific needs and vulnerabilities, skills, work experience, education levels, and family connections outside Indonesia. The information collected will provide a clean and accurate set of data that will enable UNHCR to better develop and target programming for the refugee population and will assist in identifying individuals who may qualify for solutions outside Indonesia.

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