

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=86224>

• \$2.8 million to Indonesia (IOM and UNHCR –

PUNCAK, 21 September 2009 (IRIN) - Indonesia has been struggling to cope with a surge of Afghan asylum-seekers since the beginning of 2009, officials say.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said that between 1 January and 31 August it had registered 1,371 Afghan asylum-seekers, and that in the first six months of 2009 there had been a 925 percent increase in the number of asylum-seekers on the figure for the whole of 2008. It has also officially recognized 142 as refugees.

However, Indonesian immigration officials say their actual numbers probably run into the thousands, as many slip into the country unrecorded.

"We started noticing an increase in August 2008. It's not consistent every month, but in general it's going up most months in increasing numbers," Robert Ashe, UNHCR's regional representative in Jakarta, told IRIN.

Afghans accounted for over 60 percent of the 2,414 asylum-seekers and refugees currently registered by the UNHCR in Indonesia.

Most claim to come from Afghanistan's central province of Ghazni, and 80 percent are from the ethnic Hazara group (mainly Shia and making up about 9 percent of the population).

Destination Australia

Most of the Afghans seen by the UNHCR have made it to Indonesia using agents, including people smugglers and traffickers, and their main destination is Australia.

Most have also transited through Pakistan or Iran, and are fleeing from generalized violence, rather than individual persecution.

"The main reason [for the increase] is the push factor - the situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating," said the UNHCR's Ashe.

"It's possible we are getting Afghan refugees from Pakistan as well. As the situation in Pakistan has deteriorated... they feel they have to move to safer places," he said.

Giant risks

Afghan migrants travelling by boat to Indonesia take giant risks: the seas around Indonesia are among the most treacherous in the world, and barely seaworthy boats filled beyond capacity often drift or sink.

In May, nine Afghan refugees drowned when their vessel capsized near the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

Ali Reza Noori, a UNHCR-recognized refugee, was among thousands of unregistered Afghans who have tried, unsuccessfully, to reach Australia several times by boat. The last "horrible" attempt almost cost him his life, he said.

"The boat pump broke after a few days. There were 140 people on board. Everybody panicked and prayed. We had to drink water from the sea," he told IRIN at a house provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Puncak, near Jakarta.

The leaking craft was spotted by the Indonesian authorities after being adrift for 14 days, shortly after supplies had run out.

Struggling to cope

The cash-strapped Indonesian government has been taken by surprise by the sudden increase in Afghans entering the country in search of a better life.

"For Indonesia, the problem is they have limited capacity in their detention centres, and this large influx - as they start to pick people up - has stretched their capacity," said Ashe.

Indonesia is not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, nor does it have a refugee status determination system, so asylum-seekers do not receive official status.

The country also lacks a law against people-smuggling, which means offenders are prosecuted under other legislation, such as immigration laws, and only locked up for limited periods of time, said Ashe.

"It's not enough to stop people smugglers from operating," he said.

Detention centres overflowing

Another refugee, Ali Ahadi, left behind his wife and four children and paid US\$4,000 to people smugglers - a [huge amount](#), given Afghanistan's per capita income of US\$300 - for the journey to Australia via the Indonesian island of Flores, near Bali.

The boat that was supposed to pick him up never came, and Ahadi ended up in a detention centre called Kalideres, near Jakarta.

"It looks like a jail. They put six people in a room that is supposed to fit two, and then they lock the door," he told IRIN from the city of Medan, where he is living in an IOM house as a recognized refugee.

Maroloan Barimbing, a spokesman for the Indonesian immigration service, admitted the detention centres were crowded.

"Indonesia has 13 detention centres, but they are not designed to have that many refugees. The largest can accommodate around 50 people, but most are only for 30 people," he said.

New centres have been built to shelter an additional 600 refugees of all nationalities, but that is not nearly enough.

"We cannot handle it ourselves. We have to get the international community to understand that this should not be Indonesia's problem (alone)," said Barimbing.

ej/ey/cb

Themes: (IRIN) [Governance](#), (IRIN) [Human Rights](#), (IRIN) [Migration](#), (IRIN) [Refugees/IDPs](#)