

At the Crossroads of Humanitarian Crisis

UNHCR'S Strategic Response to
Internal Displacement Patterns at
Indo-Pacific Region

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenges UNHCR faces in dealing with internal displacement in the Indo-Pacific region, and how it is responding to the growing humanitarian crisis caused primarily by climate, violence, and conflict. We use human security theory as a theoretical framework, emphasizing the protection imperative for a coordinated humanitarian response to enhance the resilience and stability of displaced and host communities. UNHCR is challenged by limited state capacity, coordination difficulties between global and local actors, and displacement intersection with pre-existing socio-economic vulnerabilities. A qualitative methodology with in-depth case study analysis of specific countries and regions within the Indo-Pacific (such as Myanmar, the Philippines, and Indonesia) is used to understand the unique challenges and dynamics affecting IDPs. This approach helps to capture the specific contexts and operational challenges faced by UNHCR. Although UNHCR has expanded its operational capacity to assist IDPs, significant gaps remain in the protection framework for IDPs. In order to prevent the humanitarian situation in the Indo-Pacific region from getting worse, this study finds that ways to enhance regional cooperation patterns, especially in the area of creating a legal framework for protecting internally displaced people.

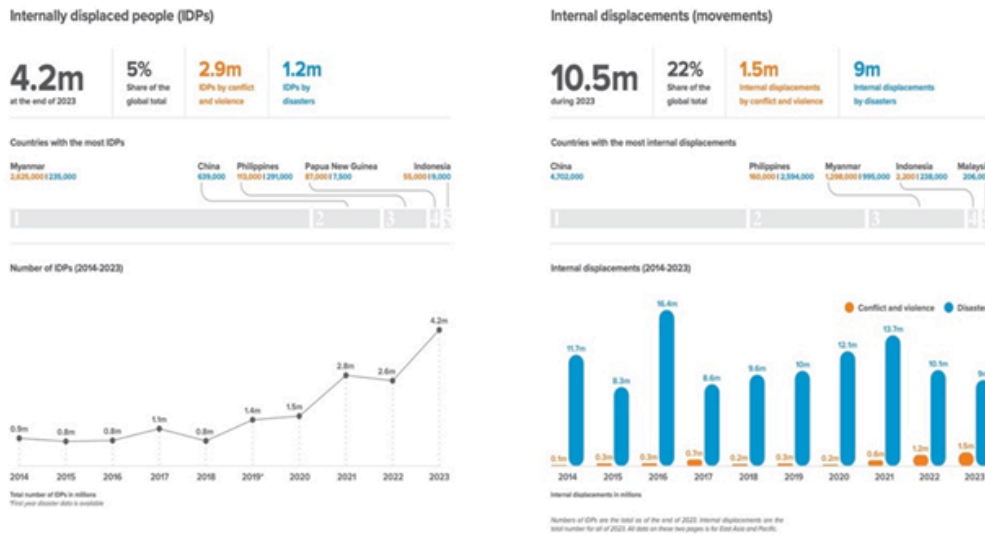
Keywords: Humanitarian Crisis, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Indo-Pacific Regions, UNHCR

Introduction

A humanitarian crisis is characterized by an occasion or series of occasions that seriously endangers the health, safety, or well-being of a significant proportion of the population, usually over a large geographical area (Sevgi, Temizisler, 2022). Numerous factors, such as military conflicts, natural disasters, epidemics, and complex emergencies involving both natural and man-made components, can lead to these crises (Amir et al., 2020). Climate change exacerbates these displacements and affects a range of economic vulnerabilities, which is also a major focus of international relations and geopolitical issues (Grigol, Giorgadze, 2022). The Indo-Pacific region is of great geostrategic importance as it is home to some of the world's fastest-growing economies and connects them to the Atlantic and Asia-Pacific (Mengstie, 2023). Over 60% of the world's population lives in this region, which also boasts major shipping and trade routes, a diverse range of governance systems, cultures and religions, and migrations issues.

In 2020, the Asia-Pacific Region was the most affected region with 21.4 million people internally displaced by natural disasters (Brigid, OI, et al. 2022). Myanmar will be dealing with one of Southeast Asia's greatest displacement crises by 2023. (see Figure 1). Internal displacement in the Indo-Pacific region is a significant humanitarian issue fuelled by several factors including conflict, violence, natural disasters, and development projects by countries. It poses several challenges for Indo-Pacific nations, including social, logistical, political, and financial ones that impede long-term resilience and an effective response (Kelsey, Carter, 2023). An estimated 2.6 million people are internally displaced due to ongoing hostilities, the aftermath of the military coup in 2021, and natural disasters such as Cyclone Mocha, which displaced 3 million people. More than 2.6 million people have been displaced since the military takeover in 2021; the remaining cases of displacement are from previous conflicts, mainly in Rakhine, Kachin, Chin, and Shan states. (Khan, A.I. (2024).

Figure 1
Numbers of IDPs 2023 for East Asia and Pacific



Source: <https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/IDMC-GRID-2024-Global-Report-on-Internal-Displacement.pdf#page=32>

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are individuals who have been forcibly or willingly uprooted from their homes but are still inside their nation's borders (David, et al 2020). The global landscape for IDPs has evolved significantly, particularly since the 1990s when the issue gained prominence in humanitarian and human rights discussions. Most research on IDPs often focuses on human rights and protection, as there is a growing emphasis on the need for comprehensive legal frameworks to protect IDPs. Due to a lack of established procedures to address the needs of internally displaced persons, many countries have gaps in safety and support. Natural disasters have been the cause of widespread internal migration, particularly in vulnerable regions (Knyazkova, L., 2023). A major barrier to regional cooperation is the lack of a common framework for addressing internally displaced people. Developing coordinated responses is more challenging because many states have not joined international conventions on internally displaced people and refugees (Adeleye, O.A., & Aremu, J.O., 2023). Since the IDP crisis was first handled in the 1980s, the problems for those affected by this type of forced displacement have only gotten worse (GRID, 2020).

According to data, most IDPs see the community as only a place to "wait" and hope to go back to where they lived before (Voznyak, Halyna et al., 2023). Governments must incorporate humanitarian efforts into their broader development agenda and initiatives in order to address the long-term needs of internally displaced people (Shehu, Muazu & Abba, Adamu 2020). Armed conflict, natural disasters, and environmental change are some of the variables that lead to internal displacement, but climate change and natural disasters are the main causes (Anastasia et al., 2022). Its vulnerability to such crises is demonstrated by the fact that in 2020, 21.4 million of the 30.7 million internal displacements worldwide occurred in the region (Asia-Pacific Region, 2023).

More than 60 million internally displaced people (IDPs) will exist worldwide, according to the Organization for Migration (IOM), with significant numbers in regions including Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia (Leonard et al., 2019). In Asia, Myanmar, where a complicated web of humanitarian crises has resulted in a large number of internal displacements. Indonesia, which has one of the biggest populations of internally displaced people worldwide, this problem is made worse by a lack of appropriate legal frameworks and policies to meet the requirements of IDPs. Conflict and political unrest are two of the many elements that make the situation of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the Indo-Pacific region particularly dire. As the global refugee agency, UNHCR plays a crucial role in addressing the needs of these vulnerable populations (Johnston, M.F., et al., 2020). However, the group has a lot of obstacles to overcome in order to adequately safeguard and aid the IDPs in the area. Despite the urgent problems pertaining to internally displaced people, the Indo-Pacific region currently lacks comprehensive regional frameworks that can adequately address their needs and rights. Though established, initiatives like the Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Consultations on Refugees frequently lack legally binding obligations from participating nations (Voznyak, H.V., et al, 2023). Across the world, internal displacement is still a complicated problem, especially in the Indo-Pacific area. There are still a lot of unanswered questions regarding legal protection regimes and regional cooperation patterns, despite continuous study attempts to better understand and address these issues (Leonard, C., 2019).

Elsewhere, internal displacement in the Indo-Pacific region poses complex challenges that require coordinated efforts by local governments, national and international actors, and international organizations to address root causes and implement effective policies (Shodeinde, J., & Otabor, B. (2018). It has caused overlaps and amplifications that threaten regional stability, human security, and sustainable development. This complex issue requires urgent action because of its growing scale and duration. Another is the social, logistical, political and financial barriers that prevent displaced populations from responding effectively and developing long-term resilience (Nazirullah & Ullah, F., 2023). The region has a history of disasters and displacement, but the scale of displacement is increasing. The impact of disasters is exacerbated by elements such as economic fragility and rapid, sometimes uncontrolled urbanisation, which lead to frequent and protracted relocations.

Many countries lack comprehensive policies to address the needs of IDPs. Coordination between government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations is often inadequate. Due to inadequate legal protection, IDPs in the Indo-Pacific region face serious human rights problems (Cadena-Camargo, Y., 2020). This is particularly true in Southeast Asia and Pacific Island governments, where key human rights treaties are not ratified promptly, leaving many at risk after natural disasters (Bridget, et al, 2016). Humanitarian aid is being provided by a range of organizations, but access, funding, and security challenges are hampering effective responses. For long-term solutions, there is an urgent need for strategies that not only address immediate needs but also support durable solutions such as integration, resettlement, or return (Umar, 2023). International frameworks on internal displacement aim to provide a framework for governments and humanitarian actors to protect the rights of IDPs and ensure their safety and dignity. At the regional level, initiatives such as the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response aim to strengthen regional cooperation in disaster response, which can indirectly benefit displaced populations.

In Asia, internal displacement is severe when it occurs. In Asia's major displacement hotspots, significant numbers of people have been displaced by political violence, ethnic persecution and restricted humanitarian access, both in terms of scale and distribution. As people move to cities in search of safety and opportunity, displacement can have negative economic consequences, such as increased poverty, loss of livelihoods and strain on urban resources. Asia is home to nearly five million internally displaced persons (Francis, M., Deng. (2000). With an estimated 20 to 25 million people affected in more than 40 countries, internal displacement caused by violent conflict, systematic human rights violations, and other tragedies is a true global disaster. Asia is the most densely populated continent with the greatest diversity of ethnic and religious identities - lines along which displacement tends to occur - while having the lowest percentage of IDPs relative to the total population (Lokot, M., et al, 2023). Essential data to accurately capture the scale of displacement in the Indo-Pacific, as it provides concrete evidence of trends and highlights specific areas for intervention. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), the Indo-Pacific region will account for 21.4 million of the global total of 30.7 million people internally displaced by natural disasters in 2020. This figure highlights the region's vulnerability to climate-related displacement and could be compared with annual data to illustrate the upward trend influenced by climate change.

In Myanmar, more than 1.1 million people have been displaced by ethnic conflict, political violence, and military action. This accounts for almost 90% of conflict-related displacement in the Indo-Pacific, making it a significant contributor to the region's IDP population. These data could illustrate the proportional impact of conflict on displacement in different countries within the Indo-Pacific. UNHCR reports that it has only secured around 42% of the \$993.2 million required for its operations across Asia and the Pacific in 2024. This shortfall reflects the financial constraints affecting humanitarian efforts and could be used to illustrate the gap between financial needs and available resources. The IOM estimates that there will be more than 60 million IDPs worldwide in 2023, with a significant proportion in the Indo-Pacific. These figures provide a comparative scale of the Indo-Pacific IDP crisis in relation to global figures, helping to highlight the region's outsized share of global displacement (IOM Annual Report, 2023).

Studies reveal that competition for resources frequently raises poverty levels for both host communities and displaced populations in urban areas that receive high numbers of internally displaced people. For instance, in places with significant IDP inflows, poverty rates often rise, and indicators like employment and availability to affordable housing may decline by as much as 20–30%. In social tensions, the influx of IDPs into host communities can create competition for resources, leading to tension and sometimes conflict. The situation in Myanmar, which accounted for almost 90% of the regional total and where displacement estimates have almost tripled since the military takeover in February 2021, was the main driver of the third consecutive year of increase in conflict-related displacement (GRID 2024).

In 2020, natural disaster-related displacement rates are among the highest in nations like the Philippines like Typhoons cause the displacement of around 5 million people. The frequency and magnitude of displacement brought on by recurrent climate disasters could be demonstrated by regularly updating these numbers. Philippines, are experiencing recurrent displacement due to natural disasters and conflict, Bangladesh is experiencing climate vulnerability and environmental displacement, and conflict in Afghanistan is causing mass internal displacement, with ethnic tensions and political instability contributing to population vulnerability. This is due to the displacement patterns of urban-rural displacement trends, rural-urban displacement, cyclical displacement, and protracted displacement situations.

Scope and Methodology

Using qualitative methods allows research to explore complex factors affecting internal displacement, focusing on depth of analysis rather than numerical data. This methodology is particularly suited to identifying patterns, stakeholder roles, and policy gaps in the Indo-Pacific region. The aim of this descriptive mode is to provide a description, a methodological picture, that is factual and accurate about the facts, characteristics, and linkages between the phenomena under study. This study will carry out a thorough analysis of peer-reviewed books, reports, and articles about humanitarian crises, forced displacement, and the UNHCR's response. We review publications from NGOs, international organizations, and think tanks that focus on humanitarian challenges in the Indo-Pacific area, as well as UNHCR's annual reports, country profiles, and special studies on the region. To comprehend the particular difficulties faced by IDPs, we employ case study analysis, carrying out in-depth case studies of particular Indo-Pacific nations or regions.

UNHCR Challenge and Strategy

Structural international pressures capture region-specific dynamics such as the U.S.–China rivalry, the logic of ASEAN-centered regionalism, and security dilemmas in East Asia. *Structural economic factors* denote trade interdependence, resource dependency, and exposure to global supply chain shifts. These are treated as external conditions that set the broad context within which South Korea's foreign policy is formulated.

A global agency, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) works to safeguard internally displaced people (IDPs), refugees, and asylum seekers. Notwithstanding its tremendous efforts, UNHCR still has a lot of obstacles to overcome in its quest to offer long-term solutions and humanitarian aid. Of the \$993.2 million required to operate across Asia and the Pacific in 2024, UNHCR has only collected roughly 42% of that total. The agency is unable to offer enough support because of this deficiency. In nations like Myanmar that have experienced turmoil, humanitarian access is still unstable. UNHCR is trying to promote more consistent access to critical aid and support community-based protection efforts. During emergencies, women and girls are particularly susceptible to exploitation and abuse. UNHCR programs provide gender-sensitive strategies top priority in order to effectively address these issues. Disasters brought on by climate change are worsening displacement and having a greater impact on the area. Incorporating displaced people into national climate adaption plans is something that UNHCR promotes. One of the main humanitarian problems in the Indo-Pacific area is the presence of internally displaced people (IDPs), which are brought on by continuous conflicts, natural catastrophes, and unstable economies. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which prioritizes security, aid, and long-term solutions, plays a crucial role in meeting these communities' needs.

Its partners also promote protection activities and assistance programs to meet the livelihood needs of refugees while they await long-term solutions (UNCHR, 2023). According to the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to escape the effects of armed conflict, situations of widespread violence, human rights violations, or natural or man-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border". However, as IDPs retain all the rights and guarantees of citizenship and lawful residence while inside their country, this is merely a descriptive definition that does not confer any particular legal status. Therefore, the primary responsibility for protecting IDPs and preventing forced displacement rests with national authorities. (UNHCR, 2020).

UNHCR's engagement with IDPs will be further consolidated, supported, and promoted in a targeted and demonstrable manner through nine target operations, covering the spectrum from emergency preparedness and response to solutions, to complement the agency's efforts in its refugee operations. Target countries will be selected on the basis of their internal situation, which varies from region to region. The IDP Initiative's primary goals are to: provide guidance for the continued operationalization of IDP policy by offering examples of best practices, facilitating targeted operational support to nine operational targets on specific issues, both strategic and operational; educating and advocating for the impact of internal displacement on impacted populations; and informing resource mobilization strategies and equitable resource allocation.

UNHCR co-chaired the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on the Centrality of Protection, working to ensure that protection is given the highest priority and that leadership responsibilities are strengthened in humanitarian responses. In 18 countries, the UNHCR-led Global Protection Cluster produced 21 protection analysis updates, which were distributed to affected States, UN Resident Coordinators and country teams, and IDPs. IDP participation and accountability to affected populations (AAP) remained a global priority. For example, UNHCR facilitated the participation of IDPs and returnees in South Sudan's permanent constitution and electoral process, as well as the involvement of young IDPs from nine countries, together with refugees and stateless persons, in the establishment of the Regional Youth in Mobility Network in the Americas. With ongoing conflicts and climate-related disasters expected to result in some 63 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) by 2024, UNHCR has developed a comprehensive strategy to address this growing global problem. UNHCR has identified the following key initiatives and strategies: access to basic needs (shelter, food, water, health care), protection issues (security, human rights violations), and economic challenges (loss of livelihoods). UNHCR's increased commitment to internal displacement is supported and reflected in the nine operational objectives related to the key elements articulated in the Internal Displacement Policy. As in all refugee operations, UNHCR will advise and support the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator and the UN/Humanitarian Country Team in the development of comprehensive protection strategies and solutions, based on evidence-based protection and needs assessments developed in collaboration with stakeholders before and after cluster activation.

UNHCR will expand its duties in accordance with IASC pledges and accountability once clusters are formed. IASC Obligations and Commitments. UNHCR will use information management and specialized cluster coordinators to improve readiness, response, and resolution efforts. Emergency Preparedness: UNHCR is completing the Preparedness Package for IDP events (PPIE) to guarantee improved readiness for internal displacement events in both its operational function and as the lead agency of the three clusters.

Operational Response: In keeping with its leadership and coordination duties in the areas of protection, shelter and camp coordination, and camp management, UNHCR is dedicated to bolstering its operational response in internal displacement situations and making sure it plays a role as a last resort provider. Due to the growing impact of statelessness, internal displacement, and overlapping refugee movements in several countries, UNHCR is ideally positioned to provide a strategic and integrated strategy to forced displacement. UNHCR will continue to give priority to initiatives that help create an environment that is favorable to safe, respectable, and all-encompassing solutions.

In accordance with the 2030 Agenda and the "leaving no one behind" principle, UNHCR will collaborate with partners to guarantee that refugees continue to be included in social safety nets, national services, and local and national development initiatives.

In order to effectively assume operational implementation, coordination, and monitoring of protection and solutions for internally displaced people and refugees, UNHCR will assist local and national actors in their post-conflict transition. UNHCR will provide prompt, impact-oriented aid and protection for displaced and impacted communities by having specialized information management capabilities for each cluster it oversees and for its own operational response. In response to these issues, UNHCR has launched a number of strategic initiatives to promote local integration and resettlement options for those unable to return home, as well as voluntary repatriation where safe conditions exist. Through livelihood support, education, and psychosocial services, the organization is working to build the resilience of both host communities and displaced populations and to scale up assistance and ensure that it reaches those most in need. In line with the 2030 Agenda, UNHCR will support the post-conflict transition for local and national actors to meaningfully take on operational implementation, coordination, and monitoring of protection and solutions for refugees. Data, information management, and analysis, with dedicated information management capacity for each cluster it leads and for its own operational response - UNHCR will ensure timely, impact-oriented assistance and protection for displaced and affected people.

As outlined by Clive Archer (2001), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has a multifaceted role in the Indo-Pacific region. This role can be examined from three main perspectives: as an instrument of international policy, as an arena for multilateral negotiations, and as an independent actor in regional refugee governance. Meanwhile, international organizations often have three functions: as a means of defending state interests, as a venue for diplomacy, and as an autonomous actor that enforces rules (Archer, 2001). UNHCR's 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol implementation is a complicated process that needs ongoing dedication, multilateral collaboration, and contextual adaptation. Implementation success hinges on striking a balance between upholding national capacities and implementing international commitments, bolstered by creative thinking and increased regional cooperation. In order to help Member States respond to refugee crises, UNHCR creates frameworks and policies. This entails persuading States to carry out their duties under international law and advocating for the adoption of international standards for refugee protection.

The organization offers governments and local organizations training and technical assistance to improve their ability to properly handle refugee crises. Organizing material and financial resources to support regional refugee programs and initiatives is a critical function of UNHCR. Countries dealing with comparable displacement issues might engage in multilateral cooperation and dialogue through UNHCR in the Indo-Pacific. UNHCR helps states coordinate responses and exchange best practices by facilitating partnerships and dialogues. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and civil society are among the stakeholders that the agency works with to encourage a cooperative approach to refugee aid and protection. With a focus on the importance of humane treatment and integration into host communities, UNHCR promotes the rights of refugees and internally displaced people.

The UNHCR is an actor that actively participates in giving refugees and displaced people direct aid, such as food, shelter, medical care, and legal support. In order to meet the unique requirements of vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and the elderly, the organization undertakes protection programs. In order to provide information and reports that guide policy choices and humanitarian responses, UNHCR keeps an eye on the region's refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) situation. In the Indo-Pacific, UNHCR serves as a vital tool for mobilizing resources and policies, a platform for regional collaboration and advocacy, and a proactive provider of direct aid and protection to refugees. In this vibrant and diversified region, its multifarious function is crucial to tackling the intricate problems of forced relocation. In order to address the pressing needs of internally displaced people and other vulnerable groups, the report emphasizes UNHCR's protection initiatives and advocacy work in the Indo-Pacific area. Using Archer's paradigm, the study makes the case that UNHCR's efficacy in the Indo-Pacific area rests on its capacity to strike a balance between these responsibilities in the face of resource scarcity, political unrest, and a variety of socioeconomic circumstances. This strategy shows how important it is for UNHCR to be present in the Indo-Pacific region as an operational agency and facilitator in order to handle the complexity of internal displacement.

Conclusion

More effective methods of mobilizing resources and better collaboration with other stakeholders were also suggested by the study. A greater understanding of and reaction to the difficulties experienced by IDPs in the Indo-Pacific area is shown in these projects. Even though there has been progress, developing comprehensive plans that successfully meet the needs of IDPs requires ongoing collaboration between state, non-state, and sub actors. In the Indo-Pacific area, effective solutions for internally displaced individuals are hampered by legal, financial, political, logistical, and social obstacles. Overcoming these challenges and offering meaningful, long-term solutions to displaced populations requires a coordinated approach that strengthens legal frameworks, ensures sustainable funding, and promotes agency cooperation.

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