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COVID-19 Impact Assessment: Urban Refugees and Asylum-seekers in Thailand

**Multi-sector Needs Assessment and
Post-distribution Monitoring of Cash Support**

February 2021

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More broadly, UNHCR has benefited from its engagement with non-governmental and international organizations working with and for urban refugees and asylum-seekers in Thailand. Close coordination amongst humanitarian actors in Thailand has been a crucial component of the COVID-19 response. It has helped strengthen understanding of the protection gaps and challenges faced by the urban refugee and asylum-seeker community and supported identification of the key issues outlined in this report.

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Acronyms

Demographic Sub-groups

Afghan	AFG
Cambodian	CAM
Chinese	CHI
Iranian	IRN
Iraqi	IRQ
Pakistani – Ahmadi	PAK-AHM
Pakistani – Christian	PAK-CHR
Palestinian	PAL
Somali	SOM
Vietnamese – Hmong	SRV-HM
Vietnamese – Kinh	SRV-KH
Vietnamese – Montagnard	SRV-MTN
Syrian	SYR

Other Terms

AGDM	Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming
BRC	Bangkok Refugee Center
CBI	Cash-Based Intervention
COERR	Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
GBV	Gender-based Violence
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSM	National Screening Mechanism
PDM	Post-Distribution Monitoring
RNA	Rapid Needs Assessment
RTG	Royal Thai Government
THABA	Thailand Bangkok
TZC	Tzu Chi Clinic
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Introduction

Since its outbreak in mid-January 2020, COVID-19 has significantly impacted on all sectors of Thai society, including refugees and asylum-seekers. In the urban context, UNHCR has continuously been working with a range of partners to ensure that the protection needs of refugees and asylum-seekers are met and thereby support the Royal Thai Government (RTG) in its ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2020, having observed increased levels of vulnerability relating to restrictions on movement, loss of livelihood opportunities and access to healthcare, these organizations, led by UNHCR, carried out an initial multi-sectoral Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA) to strengthen understanding of the situation of this oftentimes hidden population and provide a stronger evidence base from which to design protection and programme interventions. Additionally, to ensure the effectiveness of UNHCR's multi-purpose cash-based interventions (CBI) framework for urban refugees in Thailand, a Post-distribution Monitoring (PDM) exercise was conducted simultaneously with the RNA to support assessment of the impact of CBI for urban refugees affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key findings of the earlier RNA and PDM exercise included the majority of respondents reporting being unable to approach health facilities for treatment, send their children to school, access employment or meet at least half of their basic needs. Of particular concern was the majority of CBI recipients reporting significant challenges in meeting basic needs despite the assistance received from UNHCR, which prompted UNHCR to undertake a review of the level of cash support provided to beneficiaries, resulting in a 20% increase to the transfer value of CBI support for vulnerable urban refugees.

In order to gauge the longer-term impact of the pandemic on the urban refugee and asylum-seeker population and identify ways of targeting and delivering support more effectively, UNHCR commenced and collected data for this, its second, Needs Assessment and PDM exercise in November 2020. The findings indicate that the majority of protection gaps and needs identified in the earlier RNA/PDM remain. Despite the relaxation of COVID-19

measures by the RTG since the earlier exercise was conducted, including the re-opening of venues, businesses and schools, the pandemic continues to have a significant socio-economic impact on urban refugees and asylum-seekers, exacerbated by their lack of legal status and ongoing lack of informal livelihood opportunities. The current Needs Assessment and PDM evidences a continued inability to meet basic needs and access key services. This is exemplified through a range of findings, including: one third of respondents with school-aged children reporting that their children were still not attending school, primarily due to financial constraints; a high proportion of respondents reporting being unable to approach health facilities for treatment, again largely due to financial reasons; and more than half of respondents unable to afford even half of their basic needs.

These and other findings are outlined in the body of this report. Where relevant, comparison is made to findings from the previous RNA/PDM. Further, observations are made regarding the data received for different groups of urban refugees and asylum-seekers, and for CBI beneficiaries as compared to those not in receipt of CBI support.

These latest findings inform a series of proposed recommendations to strengthen the continued efforts by UNHCR, other UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the RTG to deliver support to refugees and asylum-seekers while the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be felt. At the same time, considerable effort should be made to allow urban refugees and asylum-seekers access to livelihood opportunities to facilitate self-reliance.

Moreover, a spike in new COVID-19 infections in Thailand during December 2020 resulting in the re-introduction of restrictive several measures in many areas of the country, serves to highlight the ongoing likely serious impact on urban refugees and asylum-seekers. Regular monitoring of what is a precarious and evolving situation is required alongside efforts to ensure the well-being of this highly vulnerable population.

Needs Assessment: Key Findings

COVID-19 knowledge and Experience

Awareness of COVID-19 risks continues to be good amongst the urban refugee and asylum-seeker community. It appears that, compared to the previous survey, there is increased knowledge of the RTG's recommendations and measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Of some concern, there continues to be a lack of understanding among the respondents of the availability of COVID-19 testing and treatment, which is available in Thailand free-of-charge for urban refugees and asylum-seekers who meet the RTG criteria. 26% of respondents did not believe that they would be able to access testing and treatment, mostly due to lack of financial resources, while 23% stated that they did not know if access to testing and treatment would be possible.

COVID-19 behaviour and social norms

97% of respondents were aware of COVID-19 preventive measures, such as the use of masks, social distancing and washing hands. 98% reported that they and their family members were following the precautionary measures identified above.

Several months following the outbreak of the pandemic, a high proportion of respondents (81%) reported still feeling anxious about the COVID-19 situation. The main reason cited for this concern was possible contraction of COVID-19 (57%), followed by loss of employment (18%).

10% of the sample population stated that they had experienced violence or abuse against them or members of their household, mainly at home. The survey showed that gaps in awareness remain high with 25% of respondents not knowing how to report violence and other forms of abuse.

Health

22% of respondents reported not being able to approach health facilities for treatment since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand in March 2020, mainly due to lack of financial resources (48%) and fear of becoming infected with COVID-19 (26%). This represents a significant decrease compared to the results of the previous survey (52%), possibly due to the RTG easing lock down measures in May 2020 coupled with the Tzu Chi clinic (TZC) – an NGO providing free medical services - partially resuming its operation in August 2020.

Education

Despite the reopening of schools in July 2020, 31% of respondents with school-aged children (6-17 years old) reported that their children did not normally attend school mainly due to inability to cover transportation costs (32%), followed by lack of financial resources to cover other school expenses (29%) and fear of being infected by COVID-19 (23%). 78% of respondents with school-aged children were receiving financial support to encourage their children to attend school.

65% of children normally not attending school were being home schooled using self-prepared materials (75%) and online educational materials (40%). 46% of respondents were unable to access and utilize home-schooling methods for their children during the period of school closures, mainly due to inability to afford learning materials (62%), inability to support home-schooling due to other responsibilities (46%), lack of electronic devices for learning (31%) and lack of understanding of the E-Learning materials prepared by school due to language barriers (31%).

Employment

Despite the relaxation of COVID-19 control measures by the RTG, 77% of respondents across different communities reported not working at the time of the survey. This represents a slight decrease compared to the results of the previous survey (82%).

Of those not working, the majority (57%) most recently worked before March 2020, when the COVID-19 situation became more serious. The majority of unemployed respondents (55%) were not looking for work at the time of interview, with lack of availability of work cited as the primary reason.

Markets, prices, coping strategies and expenditure

Similar to the results of the previous survey, more than half of surveyed households (52%) reported being able to meet none or less than half of their basic needs.

The proportion of respondents receiving UNHCR CBI support who reported being able to meet none or less than half of their basic needs was higher than for non-CBI recipients (57% vs 45%). This indicates that vulnerable refugees in receipt of CBI support continue to face challenges meeting basic needs and could suggest that the funding level for cash support may need to be recalibrated.

Coping strategies continued to be widely employed across the population interviewed and include a reduction of expenditure to meet food needs (67%), taking out loans (57%), and skipping rent payment (55%).

Non-UNHCR assistance

The RNA showed most respondents (56%) relied on non-UNHCR assistance for support during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the majority relying on NGOs providing material assistance (78%). A greater proportion of those receiving UNHCR cash support relied on non-UNHCR assistance (64%), compared with those who did not receive CBI support (52%).



Needs Assessment: Recommendations

COVID-19 knowledge and experience

Continue to raise awareness of the availability of testing and treatment, which is available in Thailand free-of-charge for urban refugees and asylum-seekers who meet the RTG criteria to help ensure that they participate fully in the national COVID-19 response. Ensure that individual hospitals are aware of the provision of free COVID-19 testing and treatment and that this is communicated in a consistent manner to urban refugees and asylum-seekers. Continue to advocate for the RTG to maintain protection space for refugees and asylum-seekers, particularly those seeking health care.

COVID-19 behaviour and social norms

Continue to tailor communication with communities using appropriate channels, such as social media, to ensure that all urban refugees and asylum-seekers are well informed with respect to COVID-related developments and any information gaps are addressed.

To help address high levels of anxiety amongst refugees and asylum-seekers, continue to engage with psychosocial service providers to continue to monitor this area of service provision to ensure that it appropriately addresses the needs of urban refugees and asylum-seekers.

UNHCR and partners to redouble efforts to raise awareness of domestic violence preventive measures amongst persons of concern, as well as promote community understanding on GBV issues through training, awareness raising and reporting mechanisms.

Continue advocacy for the inclusion of urban refugees and asylum-seekers in the COVID-19 vaccine allocation and distribution framework to facilitate free access to the vaccine.

Education

Continue to expand support for remote learning and explore means of improving access to learning devices and the internet, including through collaboration with the private sector.

Engage with the Ministry of Education to strengthen access to effective home schooling where required.

Reinforce advocacy for urban refugees and asylum-seekers to be able to access livelihood opportunities to help them respond to education-related needs.

Employment, assistance and access to basic necessities

Owing to identified gaps in livelihood opportunities, the high proportion of respondents reporting not being able to meet basic needs, and the continued high and unsustainable rate of dependency on UNHCR and NGO forms of support, reinforce advocacy efforts with the RTG to make social protection measures available to urban refugees and asylum-seekers who are unable to provide for themselves. The RTG could consider applying emergency social protection responses, such as those provided to informal sectors and Thai nationals affected by COVID-19, or expanding existing and longer-term social security schemes, including under the Social Security Fund.

Reinforce advocacy with the RTG to gradually improve access to livelihood opportunities for urban refugees

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