

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Dialogue on Voluntary Repatriation and Sustainable Reintegration in Africa

Chairman's Summing up and Conclusions

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Dialogue on Voluntary Repatriation and Sustainable Reintegration in Africa has provided a unique forum for discussions with high level delegations from African States, other interested governments, UN agencies, international organizations and NGOs. The meeting has indeed lived up to our expectations, with very substantive discussions on a wide range of issues.

Delegations agreed that the positive context relating to conflict resolution in Africa needed full international support to secure durable peace and sustainable voluntary repatriation of refugees and other displaced persons.

It is difficult to reflect the richness of our debate today in a set of conclusions. I shall nevertheless try to summarize our discussions by pointing out the main themes and areas of overall agreement that have emerged.

Peace-building and addressing the root causes of conflict

There was wide recognition that conflict prevention, early warning and resolution require a multi-disciplinary and regional approach firmly led by the African countries themselves, but bolstered by expertise and multilateral support afforded by the African Union, sub-regional organizations and the United Nations. A number of positive examples of multilateral peacekeeping and peace-building initiatives currently underway in Africa were cited and applauded. The need for political and financial support to these important initiatives was stressed by many delegations.

At the same time, specific security concerns such as addressing the destabilizing effects of the proliferation of small arms and landmines, and the importance of effectively dealing with the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation (DDRR) of ex-combatants were considered a high priority to avoid countries re-lapsing into violence. Specifically on DDRR, there was a call for lessons to be drawn from previous experiences and to strike the balance between ensuring reintegration of former combatants and at the same time taking care that they are not perceived as being "rewarded" for their role in the conflict. Assuring assistance for civilians who have suffered the consequences of war was also considered of crucial importance to effective reconciliation. In this respect, the need to hold accountable those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity was also noted.

Participants in the meeting agreed that besides political and military efforts to halt war, there was a need to address the root causes of conflict. This included respecting human rights, establishing the rule of law and good governance, resolving the underlying causes of communal discord and mistrust through effective reconciliation, and very importantly addressing the economic and social development needs of communities.

Many governments expressed their strong commitment to helping Africa achieve its objectives of peace and development.

Voluntary repatriation of refugees, IDPs and other displaced populations

Participants in the meeting stressed the pivotal link between peace building and post-conflict recovery. The social and economic reintegration of populations was cited as the most delicate period in any peace process. International solidarity to secure the peace dividend was considered particularly crucial, because any return to conflict would have disastrous consequences for the people concerned.

Delegations acknowledged that the establishment of overall peace and security in areas of return was a pre-condition for voluntary repatriation to become a reality. The voluntary nature of repatriation and the need for adequate protection measures to be put in place were reconfirmed as the fundamental principles upon which repatriation operations should be organized. At the same time, there was wide acknowledgement that refugees may not wait for UNHCR to organize their repatriation and that spontaneous returnees should also be assisted. In this regard, it was important to understand the motivations of refugees to return or to delay return, and to involve all sectors of refugee communities in decisions about voluntary repatriation. Many delegations stressed the risk of continued economic and social deprivation inciting some refugees to look to developed countries for alternative solutions.

Reintegration of refugees, IDPs and displaced populations in their communities

In discussing the reintegration of displaced populations into their homes, the importance of ownership by the countries concerned was highlighted. Indeed, the positive correlation between local ownership and sustainability was considered a particularly positive aspect of the current political context in Africa. Governments must take the lead in planning their reintegration and recovery process. Poverty Reduction Strategies and other national planning tools are important, and humanitarian as well as developmental agencies must support these processes.

The centrality of civil society (people, families and individuals) cannot be overlooked in the planning process, and in many ways highlights the urgency of acting in a coordinated and effective manner. Participants in the Dialogue agreed on the importance of addressing the needs of all sectors of society, including women and young people in particular. The seriousness of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on the continent was also mentioned. The importance of the need to de-label the various categories of people such as refugees, returnees, IDPs, demobilized soldiers and receiving communities was particularly stressed in order to approach reintegration and rehabilitation in a more holistic and integrated manner, rooted in community-based programming.

International solidarity in post-conflict reconstruction

Many participants in the Dialogue, including many countries of origin, voiced their commitment to the repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction (4Rs) approach to sustainable reintegration of displaced populations. At the same time, there was a recognition that this meant that more development assistance was required to achieve these objectives. The relevance of the Cotonou Agreement between the European Union and the ACP countries and TICAD III were cited in this regard. Timely provision of funds for rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts will be vital. The setting up of transitional budget lines by a number of donor governments is a good initiative to overcome some of the problems associated with the gap between humanitarian and development support.

The essential need for early and sustained partnership between all actors at local, national, regional and international levels was repeatedly stressed during the Dialogue. The role of national and international NGOs was specifically mentioned in this regard. Joint needs assessments and integrated planning were examples of how to work towards complementarity. The coordinating role of the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) and UNHCR's recent membership in this group were seen as positive developments.

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) was cited by many delegations as the solid foundation that will lead to political stability, economic growth, sustainable development and accelerated regional integration on the continent, led by the AU. The G8 Africa Action Plan exemplifies the support of key governments to NEPAD. The United Nations and other concerned actors will also play a supporting role.

The importance of adequate resources to support voluntary repatriation and reintegration operations in Africa was highlighted. People must be sure that what they are going home to will be better than what they have in their countries of asylum.

At the same time, the need for capacity building in post-conflict situations was underlined and there was a suggestion that a team of African experts from national administrations could be formed and would be on stand-by to assist governments in post-conflict situations.

Other durable solutions

Delegations re-confirmed voluntary repatriation as the most desirable durable solution but acknowledged that all three durable solutions have a role to play. Resettlement will continue to provide a viable durable solution for a certain number of refugees, and resettlement countries committed themselves to continuing to provide access to this solution. At the same time, self-reliance and possibly local integration could also provide a suitable durable solution for some groups of refugees, whilst clearly also benefiting host communities. The Zambia Initiative and Uganda Self Reliance Strategy were cited as good examples to follow by a number of delegations.

The continuing need for asylum and protection in Africa

Participants acknowledged the enormous contribution, hospitality and generosity of governments in Africa that have hosted refugees for protracted periods of time, often with very limited resources and institutional capacities. The needs of refugee-hosting communities were also stressed, including countering the environmental degradation that can affect areas hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees. At the same time, the existence of new emergencies had to be taken into consideration.

With regard to countries of asylum, the fundamental importance of protection in its widest sense was stressed by a number of delegations. This included registration and documentation, to ensure better legal and physical protection of refugees; physical security in refugee settings; as well as paying particular attention to the protection needs of refugee women and children. The continuing relevance and importance of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol as well as the 1969 OAU Convention were re-confirmed.

The link with Convention Plus

Many delegations expressed interest in the Convention Plus initiatives that could benefit protection and durable solutions in Africa. The strand on targeted development aid and burden sharing was specifically cited.

Follow up to the Dialogue on Voluntary Repatriation and Sustainable Reintegration in Africa

Many delegations agreed that the setting up of an informal, working group would be useful in taking up the conclusions of the Dialogue. This included trying to develop a more comprehensive approach to achieving sustainable reintegration of refugees and IDPs in Africa. Indeed, there was a call for a tight timeframe and concrete plans and implementation strategies to ensure results on the ground. At the same time, there was a need to coordinate and share information on the ground, and to limit duplication of structures and processes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think we can all be satisfied that this dialogue has offered an important opportunity for delegations to engage in substantive discussions on voluntary repatriation and sustainable integration in the context of a very hopeful new chapter on the African continent.

Delegations have used this opportunity not only to express their optimism and solidarity in light of positive developments in conflict resolution in Africa, but they have also expressed their concerns at the complexity of the challenges ahead. The meeting also discussed the broad outlines of a strategy to address such problems. Despite the magnitude of these issues, this augurs well for the future. Now is the time to translate words into action to make a positive difference in the lives of African refugees and other displaced populations in the years to come.

Geneva, 8 March 2004