

## Summary of the Strategic Oral Presentation on UNHCR's Operations in the Americas

### Standing Committee

18<sup>th</sup> meeting

5 – 7 July 2000

1. The Director of the Americas Bureau will present an update on UNHCR objectives and activities in the region for 2000. Main issues are as follows:

#### I. Regional Overview

2. The overall situation in the Americas today constitutes a "mix" of opportunities and challenges for UNHCR. This requires a differentiated approach which is tailored to the specific realities of the different sub-regions. It is encouraging to note that important milestones in advancing UNHCR's goals have been reached in the past year. These include the conclusion of the Guatemalan repatriation operation in June 1999, Mexico's ratification of the international refugee instruments and the 1954 Statelessness Convention, and the creation of *Argentina Con Acnur* (ARCA) to promote public support for the global refugee cause in Argentina. The past year has also witnessed domestic turmoil in certain countries of the Andean region of South America. In addition, there is continuing concern over the humanitarian implications of the Colombian conflict. Throughout the Americas, irregular movements of migrants pose a challenge to the resilience and quality of refugee protection.

3. In response to these trends, the Bureau has worked to bring UNHCR's protection activities under the umbrella of a single comprehensive regional strategy, focussed around three main thematic areas: ensuring an adequate national legal framework; facilitating the establishment of national institutional mechanisms for refugee protection and local integration; and building civil society "protection networks". The protection strategy defines UNHCR's activities in Latin America and the Caribbean, with exception of internally displaced persons in Colombia and final local integration efforts for Guatemalans in Mexico. The regional protection strategy is further reinforced by related policy priorities on gender mainstreaming and the UNHCR/NGO Partnership in Action (PARINAC).

#### II. North America and the Caribbean

4. In Canada and the United States, UNHCR continues to work to enhance the framework for refugee protection, promote opportunities for resettlement and mobilize support for UNHCR's worldwide programmes. An agreement recently concluded with United States immigration authorities provides UNHCR with access to ports of entry to observe the critical stage of the "expedited removal" procedure. Towards the end of 1999, UNHCR's Regional Office in Washington began a new education project to raise awareness and has distributed thousands of teaching kits, videos and posters to schools.

5. Canada has faced a series of challenges linked to the phenomena of mixed migration and migrant trafficking, starting with the arrival of some 600 Chinese nationals by boat in mid-1999. The immigration legislative review process, which has been ongoing since 1997, reached a new stage with the introduction of a new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act in Parliament. UNHCR's Branch Office in Canada is participating in public consultations on the Bill and the accompanying regulations. UNHCR has also worked closely with Canada on its new "Refugee Resettlement Model" and the "Urgent Protection Pilot", which enables Canada to respond quickly to emergency resettlement requests from UNHCR. UNHCR will launch a new public awareness campaign targeted at Canadian audiences and concerns in July 2000.

6. UNHCR's main priority in the Caribbean is to encourage accession to the international refugee and statelessness instruments and their implementation in national law. Countries receiving the highest number of asylum-seekers (the Bahamas, Dominican Republic and Jamaica) have established national refugee status determination procedures with UNHCR support. The Office is working to expand and strengthen the pro bono "protection network" in the Caribbean. Developments in Haiti are being closely monitored, following an upsurge in violence during the recent election period and an apparent increase in boat departures from Haiti.

### **III. Mexico and Central America**

7. The Guatemalan repatriation operation ended in June 1999, bringing the overall number of returnees to 43,700. In February this year, a lessons learned exercise was conducted with UNHCR partners. This resulted in a final report which identified both achievements and constraints affecting sustainable reintegration within the fragile post-conflict environment. In light of the planned closure of the UNHCR Office in Guatemala at end 2000, a protection and assistance network has been created, consisting of over 20 government officials, local NGOs and UNHCR.

8. In April 2000, the Mexican Government ratified the key international refugee instruments and the 1954 Convention on Statelessness. With this ratification, virtually all Latin American countries have ratified either one or both of the international refugee instruments.

9. UNHCR support for the local integration of 23,000 Guatemalans who have chosen to remain in Mexico after closure of the repatriation programme last year has entered its final stage. This has enabled UNHCR to downsize its presence in Mexico and redeploy resources elsewhere in the region. In Chiapas, naturalization efforts have been extended until 2001 due to reductions in UNHCR's budget. UNHCR's efforts will focus on naturalization in the coming year, as well as completing the majority of refugee settlement infrastructure projects in Chiapas.

10. During 2000 and 2001, UNHCR's main priority will be to strengthen the asylum framework and civil society protection networks throughout the region.

Promoting Cuba's accession to the international refugee instruments remains a key goal, progress towards which was facilitated by the High Commissioner's official visit to Havana in May 2000. UNHCR will also enhance cooperation with member countries and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the framework of the "Puebla Process", an inter-governmental forum on migration policies, to ensure inclusion of refugee protection concerns in its deliberations.

#### IV. South America

11. In northern South America, the implications of the Colombian conflict and domestic tensions affecting the Andean region in recent months remain a primary concern. UNHCR's two-pronged regional approach in favour of Colombians in need of protection covers the strengthening of the asylum framework in neighbouring countries as well as the reinforcement of the institutional framework for protection and solutions of internally displaced persons within Colombia itself.

12. Following demarches with UNHCR, the Panamanian authorities have agreed to the flexible application of temporary humanitarian status provisions included in domestic refugee legislation to recent arrivals of Colombians. The effects of the Colombian conflict have also been felt in the Ecuadorian provinces of Sucumbios, Tulcan and Esmeraldas, owing to worsening violence in Putumayo in southern Colombia. UNHCR is preparing to step up emergency support to host communities in affected areas in both Panama and Ecuador, based on assessments by a UNHCR Emergency Mission to both countries earlier this year.

13. In Venezuela, provisional procedures have been adopted to address refugee issues, including documentation, migratory and work permits, pending the enactment of national legislation on asylum. In light of the evolution of the situation in the sub-region, UNHCR has stepped up its presence in neighbouring countries, under the coverage of the Regional Office in Caracas. A Liaison Office was opened in Quito (Ecuador) at end 1999. A field presence will also be established in San Cristobal, on the Venezuelan border, to help ensure respect for basic protection principles, including *non-refoulement*. A temporary reinforcement of UNHCR presence in Panama is also being implemented. Strengthening the asylum framework, emergency preparedness and promoting access to solutions remain the primary challenges for the Office in the year ahead in the country.

14. In Colombia itself, UNHCR's programme for internally displaced persons was initiated in mid-1999, and covers the provision of expertise in favour of national institutions, in line with the agreement signed between UNHCR and the Government in January 1999. UNHCR has placed initial emphasis on providing support for major policy, legal and institutional changes and/or reforms in favour of internally displaced persons, including in areas such as personal documentation, registration and standards of humanitarian aid. Following the Assistant High Commissioner's official visit to Colombia in February 2000, it was agreed that increased emphasis would be placed on supporting local level

solutions processes, where such opportunities exist. UNHCR will shortly commence with the provision of integral community-based support, particularly in terms of protection and social services, in Uraba and Magdalena Medio, two of the three UNHCR priority regions, as pilot programmes to be replicated in the future, as appropriate, by national counterparts. The essential aim of enhancing the national capacity to provide protection and solutions for internally displaced persons, remains unchanged. By the end of July 2000, all three planned UNHCR Field Offices in Apartado (Uraba), Barrancabermeja (Magdalena Medio) and Puerto Asis (Putumayo) will have been opened. A mid-term external review of the Colombia programme will be undertaken by the end of 2000.

15. In southern South America, UNHCR works to strengthen the asylum framework and to consolidate partnerships with civil society. Civil society covers some 30 per cent of refugee needs in Argentina and Brazil. Resettlement Agreements in favour of refugees from abroad have been concluded with the Governments of both Chile and Brazil, with Argentina expected to follow suit later this year. Efforts to raise the profile of the global refugee cause in the Southern Cone were marked by the establishment of the *Fundacion Argentina con ACNUR* (ARCA) at the end of 1999. Fund-raising events for Kosovo, as well as extensive free press and coverage by national media, have been utilized during the year.