

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

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Standing Committee

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I. BACKGROUND

1. The current environment in which UNHCR operates in Africa is characterised less by new refugee situations than by an intensification of existing refugee flows, secondary displacements and poor prospects in some cases for durable solutions.
2. A total of 13.1 million people are displaced in Africa (3.6 million out of 12.1 million refugees world-wide are in Africa and 9.5 million out of the world's estimated 20 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) are in Africa). The main refugee groups continue to originate from Burundi (843,000), Angola (421,200), Sudan (400,000), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (365,000), Somalia (325,000), Eritrea (320,000), Liberia (200,000), and Sierra Leone (196,000). Although some repatriation movements have taken place during 2001 and the beginning of 2002, such as the 35,000 Eritrean refugees from Sudan, the 50,000 Somali refugees from Ethiopia and the 66,000 Sierra Leonean refugees from Guinea who returned home by end of 2001, there are fairly poor prospects in the immediate future, except in a few cases, for voluntary repatriation to take place for the majority of the 3.6 million refugees in Africa.
3. In the *Great Lakes* region for example, the situation in Burundi remains too volatile for major sustained voluntary repatriation to take place. Despite the transitional government now in place, no cease-fire has been agreed upon and confrontations between military and rebel groups continue. There are still some 843,000 Burundian refugees in exile, mainly in the United Republic of Tanzania. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), lack of clear progress in the peace process and continuing political and military problems have again not allowed for voluntary repatriation to take place. A failed coup d'état in the Central African Republic (CAR) in May 2001 resulted in some 27,000 refugees and significant numbers of military personnel fleeing to Equateur province of the DRC. Talks with the CAR government are encouraging, however, and significant voluntary repatriation could take place in 2002. The High Commissioner will visit the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic and Rwanda at the end of February 2002 to see where progress can be made on durable solutions and discuss the refugee programmes with Governments and partners in the region.
4. In *the Horn of Africa*, the Arta Peace Conference initially raised hopes for a political solution in Somalia. The formation of the Transitional National Government and the election of a President, however, have not as yet resulted in consolidated peace. Despite the continuing voluntary repatriation to north-west Somalia, there are still some 220,000 Somali refugees in UNHCR-assisted refugee camps in East Africa and the Horn. In addition, some 292,000 Southern Sudanese refugees remain in camps in the region. Despite several political initiatives, including that of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), prospects to bring about a peaceful end to the conflict and for repatriation in the immediate future are doubtful.
5. In *West Africa*, despite security concerns in the Mano River basin countries (Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia) throughout 2001, some 66,000 Sierra Leonean refugees were able to repatriate from Guinea and Liberia to relative safety inside Sierra Leone. The signing of a communiqué between the Government of Sierra Leone, the Civil Defence, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) has improved prospects to further accelerate voluntary repatriation to Sierra Leone and has enabled some 28,100 returnees to proceed from temporary settlements to their places of origin. Inside Guinea, UNHCR relocated some 58,000 Sierra Leonean refugees from border areas to camps in Albadaria and Dabola districts. More recently, however, the security situation in Liberia, has deteriorated even further resulting in significant displacement and refugee flows.
6. Again in Angola, the Lusaka agreement has not had the results expected and the neighbouring countries of Zambia and Namibia are experiencing continual, albeit small influxes of refugees.

7. UNHCR's budget for the Africa region for 2002 is US\$ 294,683,189. The serious funding shortfall in 2001 resulted in US\$ 21 million (or 11%) being cut from the operations budget which stood at US\$ 190 million. The staffing situation was also affected with 15% out of the 1,962 staff in the Africa region being cut. In addition, seven UNHCR offices were closed in the West Africa region and offices in neighbouring countries will cover the residual programmes in these countries. A number of these office closures are now under review.

II. MAIN OBJECTIVES FOR 2002-2003

UNHCR intends to carry forward the following objectives in 2002 and into 2003:

Reinvigorating Protection

8. The priority areas identified in the Comprehensive Implementation Plan (CIP), which was drawn up at the OAU/UNHCR Meeting held in Conakry in 2000, will continue to provide the basis for UNHCR's protection strategy in Africa. Four priority areas were agreed upon by the OAU/UNHCR follow-up committee. These were: firstly to adopt policy guidelines on the separation of armed elements; secondly to initiate a comprehensive study of accession to international refugee instruments and national refugee legislation and eligibility procedures in Africa; thirdly to undertake public awareness and sensitisation campaigns; and fourthly to strengthen the overall implementation of the 1969 OAU Convention.

9. It is very clear that the protection of refugees in Africa is very often linked to security. There is an alarming politicization of asylum in the African context with refugee populations, and sometimes even humanitarian workers, being accused of lending support to rebel groups. In this regard, more attention will continue to be paid to the strengthening of physical safety and protection of refugees (as well as humanitarian workers) through close cooperation with host governments, where necessary complemented by special measures aimed at maintaining the civilian character of the refugee camps, including strengthening the role of security forces in refugee-hosting areas. More systematic cooperation with the political organs of the United Nations system is also essential. UNHCR's close cooperation with the United Nations Observers Mission in the DRC (MONUC) in the Central African refugee operation in Zongo, the DRC is an example of how an inter-agency coordinated approach can help resolve serious protection and security problems.

10. UNHCR remains conscious that certain groups of refugees are particularly vulnerable. The link between protection and assistance activities has been strengthened through mainstreaming of protection objectives, including the needs of refugee women, children and adolescents, into regular assistance sectors. Nevertheless, concrete implementation of programmes aimed at improving the situation of women, children and other vulnerable groups remains an important part of protection activities in Africa. This includes programmes aimed at reducing the incidence and impact of domestic and gender-based violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, recruitment of child soldiers, substance abuse, reproductive health projects, female genital mutilation, and other harmful practices.

11. In view of the enormity of the HIV/AIDS problem in Africa, prevention and care activities have become an integral part of UNHCR's reproductive health and protection programmes. Funds from some governments and private donors have helped fund projects aimed at curbing HIV/AIDS in the refugee camps.

Maintaining standards in refugee assistance programmes and programme delivery

12. Effective planning and implementation of care and maintenance activities and local integration programmes is essential to maintain basic protection standards. If the environment for the pursuit of durable solutions does not exist in the short term, UNHCR must cater for the needs of refugees to a minimum standard, as a mandated responsibility. Although budgetary constraints have gradually eroded the already low standards of assistance provided to the majority of refugees in Africa, it is essential for

UNHCR to find innovative ways of improving the levels of assistance in Africa and bring them on a par with internationally recognised norms.

13. In the last quarter of 2001, focus was directed towards seeking solutions for protracted refugee situations in Africa. In the wake of the first-ever meeting of States Parties to the 1951 Convention/1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, held on 12-13 December 2001, UNHCR organised informal consultations with African Governments on new approaches and partnerships for protection and solutions for Africa. During the session on protracted refugee situations in Africa, the meeting discussed ways in which UNHCR, governments and other partners could pursue programmes designed to accomplish refugee self-sufficiency pending durable solutions. This would include increased emphasis on education, skills training, self-reliance strategies, income-generation, including refugees in national development plans and other ways in which the cycle of dependence can be broken. The informal consultations held on 14 December 2001 served to highlight some of the constraints in implementing a strategy towards self-reliance including the weak national socio-economic and political infrastructure of many host countries and the ensuing need for increased burden and responsibility sharing. There was, nevertheless, general support for increased emphasis on improving the quality of asylum through self-reliance strategies.

Promoting durable solutions

14. Voluntary repatriation remains the most desirable durable solution and in working towards this goal, UNHCR has had to find flexible approaches to address complex situations. Currently, UNHCR has three major repatriation operations: the voluntary repatriation of Sierra Leoneans from Guinea and more recently from Liberia, the continuing repatriation of Eritrean refugees from Sudan, and the repatriation of Somali refugees, mainly to north-west Somalia.

15. In a number of instances, UNHCR has been called upon to facilitate repatriation in less than ideal circumstances. Since returnees remain of concern to UNHCR, monitoring the consequences of return remains our priority. Repatriation/integration programmes will continue to be designed to ensure an effective interface between post-conflict emergency assistance and longer-term development programmes. Indeed, interagency efforts to address the gap between humanitarian assistance and development must continue to ensure that repatriation is sustainable in the long term.

16. Resettlement remains an important protection tool to ensure durable solutions for certain groups or individual refugees. Strict application of established guidelines and sufficient control and oversight are necessary to maintain and enhance the integrity of the selection process. This includes ensuring adequate staffing levels to deal with the often complex issues and pressures exerted by different parties. Standard operating procedures and safeguards to minimise the risk of fraud and corruption must include modalities to define accountability, referral mechanisms, processing and decision-making. Increased cooperation and consultation with host countries, resettlement governments, IOM and NGOs to discuss policy and strategy issues and coordinate resettlement operations remain essential. Whilst the Office's efforts to ensure reform of the resettlement programme in Nairobi is one example, a more systematic review of all UNHCR's resettlement programmes in Africa will need to be undertaken immediately.

17. Local integration, whilst difficult in situations of massive population displacements, could provide a long-term, if not permanent solution for some groups or individual refugees. The challenge of locally integrating urban refugees remains one that also deserves additional attention.

Ensuring emergency preparedness and response capacity

18. Rapidly evolving situations in Africa require a strong institutional capacity to deal with sudden large-scale population movements. Recent examples include the influx of Central African refugees into the DRC and the rapidly deteriorating situation in Liberia which is resulting in both outflows of refugees and precipitated repatriation of Sierra Leonean refugees from the camps in Liberia. At the same time, volatile situations such as those in Angola, Sudan, Burundi and the DRC require the constant monitoring and management of small but constant flows of refugees.

Increased engagement in peace processes, conflict prevention and resolution

19. Repatriation in post-conflict situations cannot usually take place in safety and in dignity unless it is planned for as part of the process of conflict management and resolution. Indeed, repatriation and reintegration needs to be carried out with the sustainability of the peace process in mind. UNHCR's active input in peace negotiations is therefore crucial to highlight the refugee/returnee dimension and ensure that the often complex issues related to repatriation and reintegration of refugees are adequately addressed.

20. At the same time, UNHCR has a legitimate interest in preventing or mitigating situations of persecution, violence and armed conflict, as major root causes of refugee movements and other forms of forced displacement. Effective conflict prevention, management and resolution are the key strategies for the prevention of refugee flows, for creating a secure environment for voluntary repatriation and for sustainable reintegration.

III. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Partnerships and integrated planning

21. The governance of refugee problems in Africa should be global and multidimensional. The importance of creating strategic partnerships with governments, donors, other agencies, and the political bodies of the United Nations, the OAU, sub-regional organisations, international and national NGOs and other sectors of civil society, including the refugees themselves, is essential in all aspects of UNHCR's work. From contingency planning to emergency interventions, care and maintenance activities, local integration and repatriation as well as the potential closure/reduction of protracted refugee programmes, early cooperation with other actors is essential in obtaining durable and sustainable solutions to the problems of refugees.

Advocacy

22. Advocacy and public information are important tools that can help improve the protection and welfare of refugees in Africa. Although African countries have generally maintained generous asylum policies, in recent times socio-economic problems in some countries of asylum have fed perceptions that refugees are to blame for economic hardship and social problems. Xenophobic behaviour and other extremist attitudes against refugees and asylum-seekers are in certain cases on the rise and must be addressed in a comprehensive way. One important way of countering this trend is to adopt a dynamic external relations approach to refugee protection. The "roll back xenophobia" campaign launched in South Africa is an example of such an innovative approach.

Management

23. Despite financial constraints, protection staff in the Africa region will need to be increased to deal with the complex and often labour intensive protection problems encountered in many UNHCR programmes. In addition to internal deployment of staff, stand-by arrangements, secondments and other capacity-building initiatives are additional ways in which UNHCR is seeking to address the protection and assistance needs of the refugees.

24. Training and sensitisation of staff in specific areas, including protection, resettlement, administration and financial management will continue to be important in ensuring that staff have the required tools to fulfil their functions and improve programme delivery and accountability.

25. Staff safety and security remains an issue high on UNHCR's agenda. The recent creation of additional field-based Staff Safety Advisors and two Staff Welfare Officers in Africa is an important step in

responding to the needs of colleagues working in remote and insecure areas. At the same time, necessary logistical and communication support remain essential elements of a comprehensive staff safety and security package.

26. The High Commissioner's decision to re-centralise programme and protection management and oversight roles in the Africa Bureau, whilst appointing Regional Co-ordinators for the Great Lakes operations and for the Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugee situations, confirms the importance that senior management attaches to the issue of co-ordination of UNHCR activities in the field. Whilst Country Representatives will continue to be responsible and accountable for programme implementation in the countries to which they are accredited, the Co-ordinators will ensure common policy and implementation in situations where the refugee caseload spreads over many countries and UNHCR's programmes need to be attuned with regional activities.

27. The importance of improving the quality of protection, programme delivery, project control and general management remains a key aspect of ensuring that funds available are used with maximum effectiveness and efficiency.