Key challenges

UNHCR's operational environment is characterized by four main trends. These are:

- a decreasing number of refugees;
- increased internal displacement;
- growing numbers and complexity of irregular and mixed migration movements; and
- a pressing need for reform across the humanitarian response system.

The number of refugees has fallen steadily, and is the lowest in almost a quarter of a century. This is partly due to the fact that there have been fewer refugee-producing crises and several conflicts have come to an end or diminised in intensity, allowing refugees to return home. In 2005, an estimated 1.1 million refugees returned to their countries of origin. Over half returned to Afghanistan; other countries of large returns included Angola, Liberia and Burundi.

On the other hand, internal strife and civil wars have triggered fewer refugee exoduses, but have provoked more displacement. Internal conflicts, and a declining respect for human rights and humanitarian law, have resulted in increased attacks on civilian populations and on those trying to assist and protect them. For example, in Africa, in three countries alone – the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Sudan – conflicts have led to the internal flight of some nine million people. In many areas, security has deteriorated to such an extent that humanitarian work has been impossible and past successes, including repatriation and successful reintegration, are now jeopardized.

Another important trend has been the increase in irregular and mixed migration movements, in particular, but not exclusively, to industrialized countries. In the face of barriers to immigration, some economic migrants have tried to use the asylum door, which has led to many calls for restrictive asylum policies in an effort to curb "bogus" asylum claims, and to the perception that refugees and asylum-seekers are only after a better life. Asylum systems have become discredited, but rather than making procedures more effective, many States have resorted to restricting access to asylum, thereby depriving refugees of the protection to which they are entitled.

Yet, the number of asylum-seekers has been steadily declining in the past years. Some of the causes most commonly attributed to this decline are the increasingly restrictive measures imposed by States in an attempt to curb irregular migration and because of national security concerns; as well as growing xenophobia and intolerance.

At the same time, reform processes within the United Nations, particularly with regard to responses to humanitarian concerns and notably to situations of internal displacement, require UNHCR to adopt new methods of work and new approaches in order to become a more flexible, efficient, reliable and integrated partner within the broader UN system.

This context presents UNHCR with several challenges. Some of the key issues are outlined below.

Preserving the asylum space

The increasingly restrictive asylum policies and measures imposed by governments are essentially a response to concerns of their own citizens for whom the issues of economic migration and asylum have become blurred. Fuelled by some sections of the media and politicians with an anti-foreigner agenda, many citizens, in particular in the industrialized world, have come to believe that most, if not all, asylum-seekers are in fact economic migrants, seeking better opportunities in a richer country, threatening their jobs and eventually their livelihoods. Asylum-seekers, including children, are frequently detained, and many are even prevented from gaining access to territory and returned, often to insecure places.

In 2007, UNHCR will be active on several fronts in order to preserve the asylum space. First and foremost, it will seek to establish respect for international law, providing support to States to ensure that they have the adequate legal frameworks and administrative capacities to ensure compliance with their international protection obligations under the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol and/or related international and regional standards.

Key to preserving the asylum space is the identification of those who are in need of protection. UNHCR will collaborate with States to ensure the provision of protection, especially by building the capacity of law-enforcement officials, border guards and those in charge of identifying and determining who is, or may be, a refugee.

In order to reinforce public awareness and create a climate of tolerance for refugees, UNHCR will also redouble its efforts to advocate for refugees, counter misperceptions and misinformation and offer real solutions to the problems that may arise.

Addressing the protection concerns in mixed population flows

Another key challenge for UNHCR is to ensure refugee protection in migration-focused responses to mixed population movements. Faced with restrictive policies and obstacles to entry into territory, asylum-seekers and refugees have been resorting increasingly to illegal means, often using the same routes and smugglers as those migrating for other reasons. While illegal migration is a legitimate concern for States, policies to combat it should distinguish between those seeking better economic conditions and individuals in need of — and entitled to — international protection. The Office fears that increasing numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees are being treated as if they were illegal migrants, and in the process their right to international protection is violated.

UNHCR aims to create an environment where those in need of international protection can be identified and given protection. The Office is committed to increasing its capacity in relevant countries to provide practical support to States, providing country-of-origin information, building national capacities and using its good offices to foster collaborative partnerships or to obtain resettlement in appropriate cases.

Providing solutions

Recent years have witnessed renewed efforts to reach durable solutions. Still, the majority of today's refugees remain in situations of protracted displacement. The three classic durable solutions are voluntary repatriation, local integration in the country of first asylum and resettlement in a third country. UNHCR will prioritize the use of each solution according to the particular circumstances and needs of refugees in each case. While they all present different challenges, ensuring the sustainability of returns and promoting a more strategic use of resettlement will be very high on UNHCR's agenda in 2007.

Ensuring the sustainability of returns

In any operation, the promotion of return comes only after minimum conditions are met and UNHCR is able to verify that people will be safe following their repatriation. But this is just the beginning. The hope and enthusiasm that returning refugees bring back home has to be matched by adequate conditions for them to create livelihoods and sustain their families. Many refugees go back to countries which have been devastated by war, without adequate infrastructure or services. Reconstruction and development assistance are thus crucial. Acknowledging this need, some years ago, UNHCR launched an integrated approach combining repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction in countries of origin. As a member of the UN Development Group, the Office has engaged in fruitful cooperation with UNDP, ILO and other development-oriented agencies. The establishment of the UN Peacebuilding Commission presents further opportunities, and UNHCR has already seconded staff to the Commission and become involved in pilot programmes.

But much more needs to be done to address transition problems after conflicts end, and to ensure that well-designed activities begin early on and are sustained. Garnering strong international support – both politically and financially – for reconstruction to be initiated and be followed by larger development programmes is a challenge that will demand much of UNHCR's attention, not only in 2007 but in the years to come.

In addition, UNHCR will continue to seek to identify situations in which self-reliance and local settlement and integration are the most appropriate solutions for refugees.

Promoting the use of resettlement

Resettlement is a vital instrument of international solidarity and responsibility-sharing, and UNHCR will continue to promote it. In this respect, the adoption of the Multilateral Framework of Understandings on Resettlement by a range of resettlement and host states is helpful as it codifies standard principles and practices. In Latin America, the implementation of the "Resettlement in Solidarity" component of the Mexico Plan of Action is opening the resettlement door, particularly for Colombian refugees.

In addition to traditional resettlement countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States, new countries – Argentina, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Chile, Iceland and Ireland – are agreeing to annual resettlement quotas, however small. Nonetheless, resettlement in some occasions has been hampered by a very restrictive implementation of anti-terrorist legislation.

Becoming a more predictable and fully-engaged partner in the new approach to situations of internal displacement

A persistent weakness in UN humanitarian activities has been the response to the plight of internally displaced people forced to abandon their homes as a result of human rights violations or armed conflict, but who,

unlike refugees, remain within the borders of their country. A humanitarian response review, led by OCHA in late 2004, proposed a number of measures to improve the collective humanitarian response in emergencies, to which UNHCR fully subscribed. The Office assumed leading responsibility for the Protection, Emergency Shelter and Camp Coordination and Management clusters, and participated in all of the operations where the new "cluster leadership approach" was launched.

This has involved and will certainly continue to involve changes in the way UNHCR works, not only internally but also within a broader inter-agency framework. Ensuring that the approach is flexible and adapted to the reality on the ground, that its framework is light and non-bureaucratic and that all humanitarian actors are effectively engaged as full strategic partners, is a challenge not only for UNHCR but for all those providing assistance and protection to those uprooted within their own country.

Improving the security of refugees and humanitarian workers

Threats to the physical security of refugees and others of concern have grown in recent years. They emanate from armed criminals, state and non-state armed actors, local populations and even elements within the refugee community itself. At the same time, the "humanitarian space" for aid workers has also been shrinking, and staff of humanitarian agencies have increasingly become the target of violent attack.

To counter violence against refugees and others of concern, UNHCR usually establishes refugee camps at a significant distance from volatile borders, and has on occasion requested the assistance of UN peacekeepers and national police and armed forces to separate combatants from civilian elements. The Office also constantly strives to provide safe access to food, water and firewood and to train local police and refugee leaders on security issues. Some of these measures call for assistance from UN peacekeepers and collaboration with other agencies. UNHCR has also undertaken a review of its own security policies, and sought to implement measures to enhance staff security. Interaction with the UN Department of Safety and Security will remain vital to ensure that security arrangements for UNHCR staff and partners are in place.

Still, measures taken by humanitarian agencies alone will not be sufficient to ensure the physical security of those affected by conflict as well as the humanitarian staff protecting and assisting them. Effective responses only come about when there is the political will backed up by sufficient resources. Sometimes, sadly, this happens too late – or not at all.

The internal reform challenge

Last but not least, one of the biggest challenges for UNHCR as an organization is how to become more flexible, effective and results-oriented.

In 2006, UNHCR embarked on a change process, under which all structures, systems, processes and staffing arrangements are being reviewed to make sure that they are fully aligned with the challenges outlined above.

UNHCR's emergency response capacity is being strengthened to ensure the quick and efficient deployment of expert staff and relief material to respond to an exodus of up to 500,000 people within 72 hours.

The introduction of results-based management has made some progress and the next step is the testing and application of specially-designed software.

These challenges, and UNHCR's plans to address them in the next year, are described in more detail elsewhere in this Global Appeal. UNHCR's ability to meet them will have important implications for the protection and welfare of the 21 million people the Office works for.