AFRICA DIALOGUE

Update of Main Voluntary Repatriation Operations in Africa in 2005
March 2004, UNHCR launched its Dialogue on Voluntary Repatriation and Sustainable Reintegration in Africa amidst improved prospects for the return home of millions of long-time refugees. Africa Dialogue called on the international community to seize this unique opportunity for the return of up to two million refugees and several million displaced persons across the continent and stressed the need to invest in long-term development to make returns durable.

Africa Dialogue focused on nine African countries—Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Liberia and Sierra Leone—where progress towards peace paved the way for some of biggest return movements in over a decade. In 2004, there was considerable progress towards this goal, with over 350,000 refugees returning home to these nine countries.

Despite an overall decrease of the number of refugees in Africa, from 2.9 million end 2003 to 2.8 million refugees end 2004, considerable challenges still lie ahead. The Darfur tragedy is far from being resolved and political unrest, social tensions and insecurity continued to prevail in some regions of the continent, such as Togo, Central Africa Republic, Somalia and DRC. Nonetheless, voluntary repatriation remains a key objective for UNHCR in 2005 and refugees continue to return home. The organised repatriation of Somali refugees from Ethiopia to "Somaliland" was completed in May 2005 and prospects are good for UNHCR to begin organising returns to southern Sudan in the coming weeks, while repatriation to Burundi, DRC and Liberia continues. In each case, the focus must remain on reintegraion and rehabilitation, including long-term development assistance, to make returns durable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>2003 returns</th>
<th>2004 returns</th>
<th>2005 returns (September 05) (provisional figures)</th>
<th>Remaining caseload (September 05)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANGOLA</td>
<td>133,000 (inc. spontaneous)</td>
<td>90,000 (inc. spontaneous)</td>
<td>22,500</td>
<td>72,000 (camp based)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BURUNDI</td>
<td>82,000</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>41,000</td>
<td>431,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>30,000 (inc. spontaneous)</td>
<td>22,800 (incl. 5,500 assisted)</td>
<td>433,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERITREA</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>23 (on an individual basis)</td>
<td>95,000 (camp based)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIBERIA</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>74,000 (inc. spontaneous)</td>
<td>39,850 (assisted)</td>
<td>240,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RWANDA</td>
<td>23,000</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>6,700</td>
<td>48,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIERRA LEONE</td>
<td>33,000</td>
<td>27,000</td>
<td>Voluntary repatriation completed</td>
<td>planned local integration of 1,500 in Guinea and 3,500 in Liberia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOMALIA</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>6,900</td>
<td>240,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUDAN</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>291,000</td>
<td>352,000</td>
<td>140,000</td>
<td>2,059,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since the fall of Charles Taylor’s government in 2003, up to 150,000 people have returned to Liberia, mostly from border areas of neighbouring countries. Following the gradual improvement in the security situation and the rehabilitation of basic infrastructure, UNHCR began organising returns to Liberia in October 2004 and has so far repatriated more than 39,000 people under this programme. Returnees are assisted with food provided by WFP and a UNHCR funded Non-Food-Item package (NFIs) as they return to their villages of origin. The UN refugee agency expects the voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration of some 300,000 Liberians between 2004 and 2007.

After fifteen years of civil war the situation is fragile, with little effective reintegration of ex-combatants, and the main challenge lies in the need to restore basic services to sustain the returns. UNHCR is implementing reintegration activities within the framework of the 4Rs transitional approach, to ensure linkages between the processes of Repatriation, Reintegration, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. UNHCR is currently undertaking a review of efforts for consolidation of reintegration, to look inter alia at existing gaps with regard to the sectoral interventions in key areas of return. Effective reintegration of returnees cannot be achieved by UNHCR alone and UNHCR therefore works with the authorities (both at the national and local levels), international organizations, donors, NGOs, civil society and the refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees themselves. More needs to be done in this regard and the success of the Liberian repatriation and reintegration of returnees will depend on the commitment of the international community to the reconstruction and peace-building process of Liberia.

In Sierra Leone, significant progress has been achieved by UNHCR since 2001, representing four years of reintegration efforts, with the overriding goal of contributing to the sustainable return of more than 270,000 returnees since the end of the repatriation operation in 2004. Viable communities were rebuilt within the main areas of return (Kailahun, Kambia, Kono and Pujehun). Local government structures have been re-established and the devolution
structures have been re-established and the devolution process of key line ministries has begun.

While UNHCR plans to discontinue its reintegration programmes to returnees by end 2005 the UNDP, UNICEF and FAO are increasingly involved in the transition from humanitarian assistance to development. A Comprehensive Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for Sierra Leone was also submitted to the World Bank with a view to sustaining long term development in areas of return.

The country is also preparing for the departure of UNAMSIL peacekeeping forces by end 2005 and the establishment of the United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL) approved through UN Security Council Resolution 1620 (2005). It is hoped that UNIOSIL will further consolidate peace by enhancing political and economic governance, building the national capacity for conflict prevention, and preparing for elections in 2007.

SOUTHERN AFRICA

It is estimated that nearly 330,000 Angolan refugees have returned home since the signing of a peace accord in April 2002, including 220,000 with the assistance of UNHCR and its partners. Total returns are expected to surpass 350,000 before the end of UNHCR’s organised repatriation programme in December 2005.

Attention is increasingly turning to reintegration. Indeed, most refugees are returning to the remote provinces bordering Zambia and the DRC, which were among the most affected by Angola’s nearly 30 year civil war with large scale destruction of transport and social infrastructure and a widespread prevalence of landmines.

Earlier this year, the Government of Angola, with the support of UNHCR, launched the Sustainable Reintegration Initiative in the main areas of return in Maloxo, Uige and Zaire provinces. The main objectives of the initiative include improved basic services, rehabilitation of key transport infrastructure, enhanced self-reliance and increased government and NGO capacities in areas of return.

Detailed profiles, developed with the collaboration of provincial and local authorities, traditional leaders, UN agencies, NGOs, returnee representatives and other key persons, are nearly finalised for the six key return districts targeted under the Sustainable Reintegration Initiative. These profiles high-
light major gaps in social services, transport infrastructure, economic opportunities and local capacity and identify key development priorities, consistent with existing national and provincial development plans, including the Angolan Poverty Reduction Strategy and the respective provincial transition programmes.

UNHCR will then work to ensure that UN agencies, bilateral and multilateral development agencies, NGOs and others support the Government of Angola in designing and implementing development initiatives consistent with these priorities. While UNHCR plans to contribute towards the Sustainable Development Initiative in 2006, its primarily role will be to catalyse the involvement of other actors.

THE GREAT LAKES

Refugee return to several regions in the DRC - including Equateur, South and North Kivu and Katanga - has substantially increased over the past year, despite pockets of insecurity. More than 20,000 have repatriated since October 2004, in a combination of spontaneous and UNHCR-facilitated cross border movements. The facilitated repatriation operation from the Central African Republic since October 2004 and from the Republic of Congo since April 2005 towards Equateur Province in North-western DRC, involve major logistical challenges and the use of boats for return movements due to dense rain forest and rivers in combination with an almost non-existent road infrastructure. Nevertheless, more than 5,400 refugees have been repatriated with the assistance of UNHCR and its partners.

Spontaneous returns to Eastern DRC steadily increased with a peak of an average of 800 returnees per week to South Kivu province in August 2005. Most of the returnees came back from Tanzania (11,770) and Burundi (3,480), and some from Rwanda (407). UNHCR responded by supporting two transit centres and providing in-country transport and return packages to spontaneous returnees. Facilitated return movements from Tanzania will start later this month.

To take into consideration the evolution of the repatriation opportunities and realities, UNHCR launched on 26 September 2005 the revised Supplementary Appeal for the repatriation and reintegration of Congolese refugees covering the period January 2005/December 2006 and laying out a more comprehensive vision for the return of nearly 200,000 refugees and their effective reintegration. Indeed, the suc-
cess of the return will be measured by the sustainability of its returnee reintegration component. In that respect, UNHCR has realised a broad community based initial reintegration programme in Equateur, including the rehabilitation of schools and hospitals, while preparations for a broad community based initial reintegration programme in South Kivu are ongoing.

The UNHCR office in the DRC has embarked on an intensive consultation and joint programming process with development agencies. As a result, these agencies will implement, in close cooperation with local and central Government authorities, complementary longer term assistance programmes in key return areas. In addition, UNHCR and UNDP are jointly chairing the inter-agency working group on reintegration, which is tasked with streamlining the reintegration strategies for different beneficiary groups, including refugee and IDP returnees and ex-combatants.

In Burundi, the implementation of Arusha peace agreement signed in 2000 and the cease fire accord signed in 2003 between the main rebel group CNDD-FDD and the government paved the way for a four-year transition that just ended in August 2005 with the election of a new president and a new government.

The positive response of donor countries to the supplementary programme for the return and reintegration of Burundian refugees from the neighbouring countries launched in 2004 helped UNHCR and its partners to provide assistance to 90,000 refugees repatriated in 2004. Though the pace of return had slowed down between October 2004 and June 2005, the figures of return have significantly increased in July and August 2005, to reach 15,000 returns in August alone, and bringing the total number of returns facilitated by UNHCR to 41,000 persons since the beginning of 2005 and to 261,000 since 2002.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, there are still enormous challenges such as insecurity, economic and social development, and to ensuring the sustainable reintegration of the returnees. To that effect, UNHCR continues to focus on reintegration work within Burundi. The Office works with the Government and development stakeholders and has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNDP and World Bank to provide support to various sectors such as health, income generation and crop production in areas of return.
More than ten years after the mass exodus of over two million people from Rwanda, the vast majority of refugees have returned home. UNHCR is actively promoting the voluntary repatriation of the 50,000 remaining Rwandan refugees and has signed tripartite accords to that effect. Repatriation is continuing to Rwanda at a rate of between 1,000 and 2,000 per month. The main challenge for refugees returning to this densely populated country is the scarcity of land. However, the reluctance to repatriate amongst Rwandan refugees today is often due to lack of information. The refugee agency is running information campaigns and organising “Come and See” visits that give groups of refugees the opportunity to see for themselves developments in their homeland.

EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA

The picture emerging from Sudan is a mixed one. In south Sudan, the signing of a peace accord between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in January paves the way for the eventual return of some four million internally displaced persons and more than half a million refugees. The return of so many uprooted people will be a long process, complicated by the almost total lack of infrastructure in the south.

To lay the groundwork for its operations in the region UNHCR opened offices in Rumbek, Juba, Yei, Kajo Keji, Yambio and Malakal and has deployed an emergency team with expertise in health, education, water, sanitation, infrastructure and income generation. The refugee agency will start the voluntary repatriation to south Sudan in the coming weeks.

In the Darfur region of Sudan, however, the situation remains bleak. The two-year old conflict has uprooted 1.8 million people and sent more than 200,000 fleeing across the border to Chad. UNHCR has set up 12 camps for refugees in Chad and has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Sudanese government to assist the displaced populations in West Darfur.

Somalia remains divided into three distinct zones: “Somaliland” in the north-west, “Puntland” in the north-east, and the southern and central zone. Each area being characterised by different levels of security, stability and governance, UNHCR promotes voluntary repatriation only to areas that are peaceful. Voluntary repatriation for Somali refugees from NW and NE Somalia is ongoing.
with a total of 6,866 people having returned to these areas as at the end of August 2005, mainly from Ethiopia and Djibouti. In May this year, the completion of the repatriation of 240,000 refugees from Ethiopia to “Somaliland” enabled UNHCR to close seven out of the eight camps in Eastern Ethiopia. UNHCR assists the refugees upon their return with community-based projects in Somaliland and Puntland. To ensure sustainability of the returns, emphasis on reintegration and post-conflict recovery is essential.

Despite the formation of the Somali Transitional Federal Government and its relocation to Somalia in June 2005, mass voluntary repatriation to Southern Somalia is not possible for the time being. Thus an estimated 240,000 Somali refugees continue to reside in the countries of the immediate region, i.e. Kenya, Yemen, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Whilst working on improving their prospects for voluntary repatriation, there is a need to improve the standards of assistance and protection, including the possibilities for self-reliance, for this group. This is one of the objectives of the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA), which is currently developed and aims at pursuing durable solutions and improving protection for Somali refugees.

Between 2001 and 2004, some 121,000 Eritrean refugees returned to their homeland, the majority of them from Sudan. The government of Sudan currently estimates that close to 110,900 Eritreans remain in the country. Many have been there since the 1960’s, one of the longest refugee situations UNHCR has ever had to deal with. Last year, over 9,800 refugees returned to Eritrea from Sudan, less than UNHCR had planned for.

According to a tripartite agreement, the organized repatriation to Eritrea ended on 31 December 2004. Those registered refugees who return to Eritrea on an individual basis in 2005 and 2006 receive a returnee package from UNHCR upon arrival in their home country. UNHCR continues its presence in Eritrea with two field locations for reintegration purposes, to ensure sustainable reintegration. However, needs in the areas of return remain high, and beyond UNHCR’s capacity and resources. A concerted effort to advocate for donors and partners to meet the outstanding needs and provide for returnees in longer-term planning remains a priority to allow UNHCR to scale down its involvement. UNHCR is making efforts to come up with joint programmes with other UN agencies in returnee areas during 2006 and 2007.