

Foreword by the High Commissioner

In the course of 2006, UNHCR exercised the full range of its responsibilities for the protection of forcibly displaced people. As well as responding to new emergencies and supporting the return and reintegration of refugees, the Office continued to protect the rights of asylum-seekers and stateless persons and to strengthen its operational and strategic partnerships. At the same time, UNHCR assumed important new commitments in relation to the growing number of people displaced within their own countries.

The Office took on increased responsibilities in situations of internal displacement following its engagement in 2005 with the new cluster approach. Expanding beyond the three trial countries, the Office coordinated the efforts of dozens of agencies and partner NGOs, both national and international, in the areas of emergency shelter and protection. Operations also grew significantly in scale. In Uganda, for example, improving security prompted over 300,000 internally displaced people to return home during the year, a process UNHCR supported by advocating for freedom of movement, developing return plans and building roads.

In all, working within the inter-agency framework, UNHCR expanded its activities to 22 countries with a total population of nearly 18 million IDPs.

The year witnessed headway on another complex issue, the growing phenomenon of mixed movements of refugees and migrants. Addressing African and European ministers at a July summit on migration and development, UNHCR presented a ten-point plan of action which provides a framework for such movements to be addressed in a protection-sensitive manner. Through participation and advocacy in similar meetings as well as the Global – formerly Geneva – Migration Group, the Office sought to move refugee protection to the fore of the heated migration debate. In the coming year, the need for a comprehensive response to the issue of mixed migrations will also be examined by states at a revived UNHCR forum on refugee protection.

There were challenges too in more traditional areas of our action. Almost 750,000 refugees went home during the year, including 47,000 to Angola, where UNHCR has ended its repatriation operation after five years and more



UNHCR/E. Karelstein

High Commissioner António Guterres accompanies returning Liberian refugees on the truck from Sierra Leone.

than 400,000 assisted returns. In the first year of repatriation to Southern Sudan, we helped 21,000 refugees come home from five neighbouring countries, building important momentum for the operation and for a region devastated by a two-decade civil war. The size of these figures belies the enormous struggle faced by each returning family. Providing refugees with an environment that offers protection and meets acceptable humanitarian standards is often a challenge in itself. Giving them a legitimate chance to rebuild their lives is quite another. It demands innovative programmes, effective partnerships and the will to tackle root causes, like the crushing poverty that plagues most post-conflict environments.

This pressing reality serves to strengthen our conviction that humanitarian action benefits from collaboration. In February, I joined the Executive Directors of two key partners, WFP and UNICEF, on a mission, the first-ever by the three agency heads, to the Great Lakes region of Africa. The value of concerted and coordinated programmes was obvious as we toured operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Burundi. The consolidation of peace is at a different stage in each country but, in all of them, the task of meeting the basic needs of vulnerable refugee and returnee populations is far from complete.

More evidence of the growing interdependence of the humanitarian system is the advent of common funding mechanisms. In 2006, UNHCR received support from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund for its emergency operations in Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and the influx of Somali refugees in Kenya. Chronically underfunded operations in the Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia and Zambia also benefited from pooled funds, as did our repatriation operations in the DRC and Southern Sudan, and the protection of internally displaced people in Darfur.

The Office's efforts to strengthen partnerships included important strides at the NGO Global Platform to enhance the dialogue between the UN and its NGO partners, and our full participation at the Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

Among the tests in 2006 of the organization's operational capacity, the July conflict in Lebanon was notable for the massive and sudden population displacement it provoked. UNHCR was on hand with shelter and relief items for the refugees, mainly from the south of the country, who sought safety in the

neighbouring Syrian Arab Republic. Protection staff worked throughout the hostilities with the most vulnerable people and, once fighting stopped, monitored the return home of tens of thousands of families.

The situation in Iraq grew steadily worse as the year wore on, bringing observers to acknowledge that the humanitarian consequences of the crisis had been overlooked for too long. At its Executive Committee meeting in October, UNHCR announced its intention to scale up activities on behalf of displaced Iraqis and has since significantly enhanced operations in the two main host countries, Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic.

The news from Darfur also gave reasons for concern, with aid workers struggling in increasingly difficult and insecure conditions to bring relief and protection to a displaced population that climbed to two million.

One of the biggest challenges UNHCR faced in 2006 was its own longer-term financial health and strategic orientation: how to address the long-term trend of rising fixed costs and reduced adaptability? In February, we began a multi-year effort to reform the way the organization works with the aim of making it more flexible, effective and results-oriented. Led by a Director for Structural and Management Change, we are examining our processes, structures and staffing to ensure they are aligned with the responsibilities we face in a changing humanitarian environment.

2006 was a year of renewed financial stability and continued donor confidence. Though UNHCR began the year with no carry-over funds, the effect of financial shortfalls was limited by timely measures which kept uncertainty and budgetary adjustments to a minimum. We implemented a series of austerity measures, cutting back significantly at Headquarters while safeguarding programmes in the Field and, by the end of 2006, UNHCR had regained its financial footing. It is my hope that our donors will maintain or, in light of UNHCR's enlarged responsibilities, increase their support to the Office as we devote a greater share of resources to protection, care and solutions for the people of our concern.

António Guterres

