

UNHCR Ministerial Meeting on the occasion of the
60th anniversary of the Refugee Convention and the
50th anniversary of the Convention on the Prevention of Statelessness

Address by President Martti Ahtisaari
Geneva, 8 December 2010

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking UNHCR and High Commissioner António Guterres for the opportunity to address this anniversary meeting commemorating the Refugee Convention. I speak to you today with a very special frame of mind.

I too was a child affected by war. I too became a refugee in my own country. As a result of great power politics, the Soviet Union attacked Finland in November 1939. At the age of two, with my family, I had to flee my native town of Viipuri, together with hundreds of thousands of fellow Karelians. I became internally displaced, an expression not known at the time. Today I see myself as an eternally displaced person as I will never be able to move back home to Viipuri.

This childhood experience that millions of people have gone through has made me a strong believer in the right of every person to live in peace and dignity. In a world filled with conflicts forcing millions of people to flee, my childhood memories have given me a strong motivation to work for the resolution of conflicts.

The Refugee Convention and UNHCR were born in the aftermath of the Second World War. In Europe alone, millions were displaced, facing a bleak future. Borders have been redrawn, as had happened at Finland's eastern border. Large populations had been moved in what would today be called ethnic cleansing. Most of the refugees had no hope of returning to their homes; many, of course, did not want to. They had to be resettled. This was Europe just a good 60 years ago. The late Tony Judt gave a harrowing account of Europe's plight in his masterwork *Postwar*.

It is good for us all, but as Europeans in particular, to use this UNHCR anniversary to pause and think of what happened in this continent, and how long it has taken us to cope with the aftermath. It should make us all impatient and indignant about the persistent refugee situations UNHCR is dealing with today.

Let me express my profound appreciation and admiration of High Commissioner Guterres and his staff for their invaluable work. Since its creation, UNHCR has helped millions of people around the world. Today alone, there are 34 million persons of concern to the agency, nearly half of

them internally displaced. One third are proper refugees, the rest stateless and asylum-seekers.

In the course of more than half a century, the refugee and statelessness conventions have given guidance to governments, international organisations and the civil society to protect the most vulnerable groups of people. The conventions are crucial instruments to safeguard the fundamental rights of refugees and provide standards for their treatment.

There are some 12 million people in the world today without nationality or citizenship. Statelessness is typically the result of protracted conflicts. Stateless people are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses and marginalization.

The full implementation of these Conventions must remain a priority for the international community. UNHCR plays a unique role in monitoring the implementation of the Conventions.

To do this, we must address the root causes of refugee situations. While natural disasters and the extreme weather phenomena created by climate change account for increasing numbers of displacement, refugeeism is a man-made problem. As much as wars and conflicts are not inevitable, so is not displacement. Somewhere behind most refugee situations, economic and political interests play their role. Those in power can end the plight of refugees. It is a question of will.

All conflicts can be settled. There are no excuses for allowing them to be protracted for ever. It is intolerable that violent conflicts defy resolution for decades causing immeasurable human suffering. They prevent economic and social development. They exacerbate the misery of the most vulnerable of all victims, refugees and displaced people.

In war and conflict, the parties always aim at victory. Building peace must involve everybody: the weak the powerful, the victors and the vanquished, men and women, young and old, and those removed from their homes against their will. In particular, we must fully engage women in efforts to solve refugee situations in a sustainable manner.

We must share the shame and blame of refugees languishing in camps for decades. In some situations, sudden refugee flows may be nearly impossible to avert, but they must not be allowed to persist. We must redouble our efforts to find sustainable solutions to protracted refugee situations.

For good reason, UNHCR has won the Nobel Peace Prize twice: in 1954 and in 1981. It was first awarded for its ground-breaking work in helping the post-war refugees of Europe and in 1981 for what had become worldwide assistance to refugees.

Mr. Chairman,

Armed conflict has always been a major cause for displacement of people. The changing nature of armed conflict in the post-Cold War era has had a significant impact on displacement patterns.

Conflicts have increasingly assumed a domestic or intra-state character, and they increasingly affect civilians. Many conflicts are complex emergencies which lead to large-scale displacement. Internally displaced people have long since outnumbered proper refugees, i.e. those who have moved across international borders. Failed states are not effectively controlling their territory, which has given rise to a multitude of non-state actors, breeding violence and persecution. And finally, instability and armed conflict persist and resist efforts to solve them. Two thirds of refugees globally are in situations of prolonged exile.

With the risk of stating the obvious, it is good to remind ourselves that conflicts of all types force people to move, both as refugees across interstate borders and as internally displaced persons. If we want to seriously address refugee situations, we must be serious about solving and preventing conflicts.

The plight of refugees is enough of a reason to end conflicts and prevent new conflicts from breaking into the open. But we should go beyond seeing refugees as passive objects and victims – we should engage them in peacemaking. People who have to flee from zones of open conflict are usually the most knowledgeable about the root causes of the conflict.

Sustainable solutions to conflicts are not thinkable without the cooperation and engagement of the local populations. Refugees, firstly, can actively and in numerous ways contribute to peace processes, if invited to do so. Second, the right of refugees to return to their homes is always a key element of any successful peace process.

And third, refugees can be important players in transitional networks that bring about trust and confidence and enhance stability.

Why not, then, make refugees part of the solution instead of always thinking of them as part of the problem? Refugees and IDPs should not be marginalized and sidelined. On the contrary, they should be empowered to become agents of change for the positive. They should become peacemakers in their own right.

Offering displaced people the possibility of returning to their homes and of reintegrating into their communities gives them hope and encouragement. Returning refugees and internally displaced persons can help addressing the root causes of conflict. They can be recruited to support the peace process in concrete ways. And, last but not least, they can revitalize economic activity.

Refugees can be a positive force in peace-building, provided that they have been trained to assume important skills and self-reliance while in exile. Their skills, if properly planned, can fill specific gaps in basic services in their own countries. This could mean health and social services and education.

Sustainable solutions to refugee situations and conflicts are not possible without empowerment, ownership and gradually enhanced structures of democracy and good governance. Refugees can participate in peace negotiations, electoral processes and peace-building. More complex issues, too, can benefit from a contribution by displaced people. This could include land and property, shelter, basic services, rule of law, and reconciliation.

We know, however, that refugees may also complicate peace-building efforts. Large-scale repatriation of refugees at an early stage in a peace process may put fragile institutions and services under a heavy stress. Occasionally, almost inevitably, there are “spoilers” amongst refugees, people who want deliberately hamper efforts for peace and a return to normalcy.

We also know that among refugees in exile there is potential for politicization and extremism of various kinds.

At a minimum, peace agreements should always contain provisions concerning displaced populations. These provisions should enumerate the specific rights and obligations of refugees, on the one hand, and of IDPs, on the other. Resettlement is a crucial element in this regard.

Mr. Chairman,

Almost all refugee situations are caused by humans. They can and must be solved by humans – by us, by our leaders, by the international community. We should not accept any excuses from those in power. Especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring the responsibility of the international community to solve the refugee situation should be expanded. We have simply no other choice. The neighbouring countries cannot bear the responsibility alone.

Let us recommit ourselves to seeking lasting solutions to conflicts. Let us see refugees as part of the solution, not part of the problem. Let us involve refugees in peace processes. Peace is always possible, as is the restoration of human dignity to those who have been robbed of it. This is a question of will. When we work together, we will find solutions.

Thank you.