



General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/AC.96/SR.609
14 April 2009

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fifty-eighth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 609th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 1 October 2007, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. MTESA (Zambia)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

OPENING OF THE SESSION (item 1 of the provisional agenda)

1. The CHAIRMAN declared open the fifty-eighth session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He extended a special welcome to the representatives of Costa Rica and Estonia, which were participating in their first plenary session as members of the Executive Committee. He informed delegations that a new Vice-Chairman, Mr. Boudewijn van Eenennaam (Netherlands), whom he welcomed, had been elected on 20 September for the remainder of the current annual session; his predecessor, Mr. Wegger Strømme (Norway), had been assigned to other functions by his Government.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (item 2 of the provisional agenda) (A/AC.96/LVIII/L.1)

2. *The agenda was adopted.*

STATEMENTS BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER AND THE GUEST SPEAKER
(agenda item 3)

Statement by the High Commissioner

3. Mr. GUTERRES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) noted that the twenty-first century was a time of human displacement and that UNHCR was totally committed to delivering according to its mandate, which was not only to offer protection, assistance and solutions for refugees but also to reduce statelessness. However, the effectiveness of its actions depended on its ability to understand the broader patterns of human displacements in the world. The complexity of current displacement went well beyond the asylum-migration nexus: more and more people were forced to move because of extreme deprivation, environmental degradation and climate change, and conflict and persecution. Almost every model of the long-term effects of climate change predicted a continued expansion of desertification, to the point of destroying livelihood prospects in many parts of the globe. For each centimetre that the sea level rose, there would be one million more displaced. The international community seemed no more adept at dealing with those new causes than it was at preventing conflict and persecution. It was therefore important to examine the reasons, the scale and the trends of present-day forced displacement. One important factor in that regard was that it was harder to tell displaced persons apart. In Darfur, for example, a Janjaweed attack on an African tribe's village might be motivated by the political crisis; but the results resembled those of another situation – the water shortage which set herders against farmers. During his recent visit to southern Africa, there had been a common understanding with Governments that Zimbabweans seeking asylum should be granted refugee status. But what to do with people who simply said that they were hungry and could not find the means to support their families? One could not knowingly send them back to such deprivation. It was obvious that some form of temporary shelter must be found. While the answer to that

dilemma clearly went beyond the UNHCR mandate, it was also the duty of UNHCR to alert States and help to find answers to those new challenges.

4. At the end of 2006, after several years of steady decline, the number of refugees worldwide had risen to nearly 10 million, despite meaningful return operations, because of the conflicts in Iraq and in the Horn of Africa. Iraqis currently displaced inside and outside their country made up the largest group of displaced persons and the largest and most complex “urban refugee” group that UNHCR had ever dealt with. The need to accommodate so many Iraqis, which was having a dramatic impact on the economy and society of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, placed those States among the generous countries of the developing world – such as Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the United Republic of Tanzania, Kenya, Chad, Guinea, Zambia and Ecuador – which had hosted outsize numbers of refugees. The heavy burden which that placed on those two countries underscored the pressing need for greater international solidarity.

5. The first responsibility of his organization was to direct as much resources and energy as possible to looking after the 32.5 million people under the care of UNHCR, which was committed to devoting a larger share of funds to refugees and displaced persons and, in order to do so, to spending less on the organization itself. For example, in 2007 – for the first time in a decade – an upward trend in global staff costs had been reversed: over the first eight months of 2006, UNHCR had spent \$17 million more on staff than on operations, but over the same period in 2007 it had spent \$36 million more on operations than on staff. Similarly at the beginning of 2006, the number of staff members at headquarters had been 1,047, compared with 911 at the present time. The savings on staff costs in the previous year had made it possible to allocate \$15 million to pressing needs in the areas of malnutrition, malaria, reproductive health and sexual and gender-based violence in several operations. That was a complete reversal of a trend that had been asphyxiating and paralyzing UNHCR at the beginning of 2006.

6. Five key reform initiatives were being pursued to achieve that turnaround. Firstly, services should be relocated where they were most cost-effective and several administrative functions had been outposted to Budapest in the first half of 2008, thereby eliminating 129 posts at headquarters and achieving savings of approximately \$10 million a year to be spent in operations. The second initiative concerned decentralization and regionalization, in order to improve the field-based capacity for situational management and solutions planning and locate support services closer to the point of delivery. Thirdly, the methodology had to be defined for a comprehensive field review to determine which activities could be most efficiently carried out by UNHCR or its partners. Fourthly, resource management must be improved, by adopting a revised resource allocation and management framework in order to delegate increased responsibility and authority to countries and regions and respond to changing operational needs more quickly and efficiently. In that connection, the heavily bureaucratized Operations Review Board had therefore been replaced by a smaller and more focused Budget Committee, chaired by Craig Johnstone, the Deputy High Commissioner. In addition, a new budget structure had been proposed comprising four separate pillars: the first two pillars, encompassing refugee and stateless activities, would be funded on a

programme basis; the two other pillars, covering internal displacement and reintegration, would be financed on a project basis. The intention was to present the entire budget of UNHCR to the Executive Committee, including operations for the internally displaced, which had previously been outside its governance. The fifth and last initiative concerned the area of human resources: although bound by the rules of the United Nations common system, UNHCR was determined to reform several elements of personnel management and to review training strategies and career management, evaluation systems and feedback processes.

7. However, the success of UNHCR depended on its partners in the United Nations family. UNHCR had participated in the humanitarian response review through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and, with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, in planning for integrated missions to ensure that the needs of internally displaced people were fully taken into account. He welcomed the adoption of United Nations Security Council resolution 1778 (2007) establishing a multi-dimensional mission in Chad and the Central African Republic, which represented a strong commitment to improving security for refugees and displaced persons as well as to stabilizing a region at risk. He also paid a tribute to the African Union troops, which had made great sacrifices in the Darfur conflict.

8. Since protection was at the centre of everything done by UNHCR, it had launched, on the basis of the Agenda for Protection and through a field reference group on protection policies, an internal debate on strategies and standards. Since the way ahead must be open to broad reflection, innovative ideas and new tools, the debates should not be exclusively internal; on the contrary, States and NGOs were encouraged to participate and to raise issues of concern.

9. New asylum legislation provided other means to fill emergent gaps. UNHCR supported the work to harmonize the European asylum systems and had provided comments on the European Union's "Green Book", with the aim of course of enhancing rather than diminishing refugee rights. It was essential to build awareness, because greater consciousness and understanding of decades-old dilemmas had contributed to remarkable breakthroughs in the fight against statelessness. In recent months, Nepal had carried out a massive regularization exercise, issuing citizenship certificates to 2.6 million inhabitants; similarly, after nearly forty years in limbo, tens of thousands of Urdu speakers in Bangladesh, the Biharis, would soon be confirmed as full citizens. Those actions demonstrated that, with political will, solutions could be identified for even the most intractable problems.

10. Despite the constant evolution of the operational environment, other imperatives had not changed very much: the need for long-term solutions for refugees. Of the traditional solutions (voluntary repatriation, integration and third-country resettlement), return in safety and dignity, respecting the free will of refugees, remained the preferred solution. However, the concern that he had expressed one year previously regarding the viability of returns was still valid. For UNHCR, the reintegration challenge meant strengthening the tenuous links between relief and development, hope and the likelihood of starting a new life, so that human security became a reality. Those links did not yet exist, but new

initiatives such as the Peacebuilding Commission and the early recovery cluster must help to create them. UNHCR would continue to discuss with all interested parties - Member States, international financial organizations and development agencies – how the international community could and should be most effective in supporting the transition process in post-conflict situations.

11. Solutions should focus on return, but return was not a panacea because some refugees did not or could not return home. In the current year, significant advances had been made on local integration, particularly with the Governments of Mozambique, Namibia and Zambia for the refugee populations in those countries and with the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania in addressing the situation of “1972 Burundians”. In Latin America, microcredit for vocational training and housing had been provided under the Mexico Plan of Action. Lastly, in West Africa, ECOWAS and UNHCR had recently signed an agreement on residual groups of Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees.

12. One of the first priorities in reshaping the Division of International Protection Services had been to strengthen refugee resettlement capacity. The need for third-country resettlement grew with refugee populations and, in particular, with protracted situations such as the Bhutanese in Nepal, Eritreans in eastern Sudan and Myanmar refugees in Thailand. In 2005, UNHCR had submitted over 54,000 individuals of 70 nationalities to 26 resettlement countries. That record would be far surpassed in 2007, since by June protection staff had already made over 42,000 submissions. The biggest resettlement challenge was currently Iraq, where UNHCR had quickly developed the capacity to identify and submit vulnerable cases. Resettlement countries had indeed responded, but more efforts were needed to speed up interviews and departures.

13. As UNHCR actions and strategies evolved, so did its relationship with civil society. In particular, partnerships with NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movements had been strengthened, since UNHCR considered civil society to be a strategic partner as well as an implementing one. In September, UNHCR had held a first meeting with its 21 standby partners in order to exchange information and harmonize emergency deployments and interventions. Five new strategic agreements had also been signed with NGOs in 2007. Starting in January 2008, the same unit at headquarters would liaise with both United Nations agencies and NGOs. He paid a tribute to colleagues from the Jesuit Refugee Service (Sri Lanka) and Intersos (Iraq) who had recently lost their lives while helping others.

14. On the eve of an era in which mobility would increase and people would have more and more reasons to move, the mandate of UNHCR would be its guiding compass. If the international community was to be able to face all those new challenges, it was essential for it to have political guidance, which could come only from Member States, since they alone could legitimately formulate strategies and devise the instruments which would best serve the cause of those in need. UNHCR would thus be able to achieve an unprecedented level of protection and assistance for the people for whom it was responsible.

Statement by the guest speaker

15. Mr. HOLMES (Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator) said that there had never before been such great demands on the system of international humanitarian assistance, which also had to deal with new situations. There were new dynamics behind population movements: populations of course still fled conflicts but also, increasingly, natural disasters, environmental degradation and the devastating effects of climate change. At the same time, their vulnerability was increasing because mega-cities, with increasing concentrations of poor people, were growing, particularly in the most exposed locations: six of the world's largest cities were on the coast. As a result, battles were being fought over resources (energy, fertile land and fresh water), as was the case in Darfur.

16. Man-made disasters were also prevalent. The humanitarian consequences of the current major conflicts (Darfur, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Iraq, Gaza, for example) were huge and often long-lasting and the stresses of globalization and ethnic and religious intolerance would not improve the situation. As a result, civilian populations were the main victims of the current internal conflicts and civil wars, while respect for international humanitarian law and for the concept of the responsibility to protect, formulated at the 2005 World Summit (New York), was dwindling. In that context, it was increasingly difficult to maintain access to those in need and the space for humanitarians to act was shrinking, since their own safety was no longer always guaranteed.

17. The internally displaced were another challenge, since the solutions that worked for refugees who were outside their country and therefore usually away from immediate danger could not necessarily be applied wholesale. Consequently, several comments and actions were called for. The identification and mobilization of additional resources should in future depend not only on donors' participation and generosity but also on the formulation of strategic choices and needs assessment methods, the introduction of new mechanisms (such as the Central Emergency Response Fund) and measurement of the impact of what had been done. The reform on which UNHCR had embarked must be fully implemented as rapidly as possible and, reflecting the Global Humanitarian Platform meeting in July, partnerships with Governments and with civil society (NGOs, Red Cross and Red Crescent) should be clarified and strengthened. To that end, the cluster approach recently adopted, designed not only to avoid gaps and duplications but also to strengthen the international community's humanitarian intervention capacity, should enable the various actors to be better partners for Governments.

18. In order to work effectively, the humanitarian system needed a strong UNHCR, whose roles and responsibilities were understood by all. Humanitarian coordinators on the ground must have clear mandates and sufficient resources to do their work. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) would lend all possible support to UNHCR to identify displacement needs, determine targeted strategies to address them and mobilize resources to support them. More than ever, the world needed more concerted and better coordinated international humanitarian missions.

19. Nevertheless, humanitarian action was no substitute for measures of a political nature and development initiatives to promote lasting peace. There was often a need to ensure post-conflict transition by giving returning refugees and displaced persons the means to live in dignity, in order to prevent a recurrence of such emergency situations. In conclusion, he stressed that, even if international humanitarian action could be only a sticking plaster on an open wound, while solutions – often political ones – were sought to the underlying problems, it was nevertheless challenging and worthwhile.

GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 4)

20. Ms. SAUERBREY (United States of America) noted that over the past year various long-standing conflicts had been resolved or alleviated in Africa, in particular in Angola, Burundi, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and southern Sudan. Over the past two years, approximately one million African refugees had returned home, thanks to collective activism and financial assistance. The United States Government stood ready to work with interested Governments and UNHCR to resolve other similar situations. Over 2,500 refugees who would otherwise have been condemned to remain in camps had recently been able to enter the United States and begin their lives anew. In 2008, her country anticipated resettling at least 70,000 refugees worldwide.

21. The situation of internally displaced Iraqis was precarious. Governments had a collective responsibility to help host countries in the region to provide education and health care to that population. The United States had provided \$39 million to date for that purpose and made \$200 million available for assistance programmes for displaced Iraqis.

22. As a Government, the United States was determined to ensure the safety of UNHCR staff and those of its partners. As a donor, it planned to improve the coordination of programmes and avoid duplication, while ensuring that UNHCR had sufficient financial flexibility to carry out its mandate. In that regard, the total United States contribution for 2007 had amounted to \$363 million, of which 53 per cent had been provided as funds earmarked solely at the regional level. For its part, UNHCR must have budget structures and reporting mechanisms that encouraged donors to contribute generously. It was also responsible for maintaining a dialogue with its partners on policy issues and concerns so that it could gain from their experience working directly with the beneficiaries in the field. Lastly, if the new cluster approach was to be successful, its action must be coordinated with that of other agencies of the United Nations system, particularly as regards internal displacement.

23. UNHCR had recently extended its activities to deal not only with refugees but also with the stateless, internally displaced and migrants. It must thus identify, assess and address their specific needs and, if necessary, offer refugees the possibility to attend school. In addition, everything possible must be done to strengthen refugees' autonomy. UNHCR programmes should in all cases take the individual refugee situation into account, including the age and gender of each person concerned.

24. Mr. ESTEVES (Portugal), speaking on behalf of the European Union, the candidate countries (Turkey, Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the stabilization and association process candidates) and the potential candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro), as well as Ukraine, said that for the first time in five years the number of refugees in the world was almost 10 million and that, as a result of violence and armed conflicts, the number of internally displaced persons continued to rise, reaching approximately 24 million. The European Union was deeply concerned about the situation of internally displaced persons in Iraq and of Iraqi refugees abroad. In that connection, it acknowledged the solidarity shown by Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic. It also noted the improvement in the situation in the southern region of the Sudan, while regretting that the humanitarian workers serving the population were regularly the target of attacks by armed groups. It urged the international community to ensure access for humanitarian workers to the local population, particularly in Darfur. It welcomed the adoption of United Nations Security Council resolution 1778 (2007) authorizing the deployment of an international presence in eastern Chad and in the north-east of the Central African Republic, intended to create conditions conducive to a voluntary, secure and sustainable return of refugees and displaced persons.

25. As regards international protection, the European Union also welcomed the forthcoming adoption of the Executive Committee's conclusion on children at risk, which took particular account of the special needs of girls, and urged States to observe the provisions concerning the protection of child refugees contained in the relevant international instruments. Children should always be among the first to receive protection and assistance.

26. The European Union looked forward to participating in the forum on protection, to be held in December, and was glad that it would focus on protection in the context of mixed population movements. It understood that the implementation of the Ten-Point Plan of Action in some regions had been flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of situations, thus promoting international protection for individuals who were particularly vulnerable. The European Union fully supported UNHCR in its role as leader of the protection cluster and welcomed the fruitful partnership established with other international organizations in the context of the cluster approach, particularly in the areas of protection, emergency shelter and camp management. It stressed the importance of partnership in all the clusters for which UNHCR was responsible, both with civil society and with agencies such as IOM.

27. While noting that the States concerned bore primary responsibility for issues connected with internally displaced persons, the European Union recognized that some of those States did not always have the capacity to address a humanitarian crisis situation. It therefore welcomed the consultations held regarding situations of internal displacement and the approach to those situations set out by UNHCR.

28. Concerning the ongoing structural reform, the European Union strongly supported the High Commissioner's decision to outpost some administrative functions from Geneva to Budapest. It also strongly supported the structural and management change process

currently under way, which should maximize UNHCR responsiveness to the needs of its beneficiaries, not only by locating staff and services closer to the point of delivery but also by reducing administrative and headquarters costs, so as to channel more resources into operation. The European Union supported the proposal made by UNHCR on the new budget structure and was ready to pursue consultations in order to reach a decision on the creation of a unified budget.

29. The European Union was pleased with the suggestions and proposals made by UNHCR on its Green Paper on the Future Common European Asylum System. The idea behind that common system was to make the European Union a single protection area for refugees, based on the Geneva Convention and on the common humanitarian values shared by all member States. The European Union was committed to achieving that ambitious goal and counted on further constructive input from UNHCR in that process.

30. Mr. LOULICHKI (Morocco), speaking on behalf of the Group of African States, said that the challenges facing UNHCR had recently been exacerbated by rising intolerance fuelled by security concerns and confusion in public opinion between migrants and refugees. In that context, UNHCR should give priority to preserving asylum and rebuilding trust in asylum systems. The Group of African States believed that there was a need for greater cooperation among all stakeholders, particularly between UNHCR, intergovernmental organizations, civil society and the media, in order to promote tolerance. Preserving asylum meant opposing all forms of refoulement. Protection was the main goal of UNHCR activities and the Group of African States therefore endorsed efforts to strengthen protection capacity in both developed and developing countries.

31. Although there was still room for improvement if the cluster approach was to be efficient in situations of population displacement in which UNHCR was required to intervene, the Group of African States welcomed the adoption of that approach in certain pilot countries in Africa, such as Uganda where over 300,000 displaced persons had been able to return home. It also welcomed the work done by the Office of the High Commissioner in the clusters for which it was responsible (protection, emergency shelter, camp coordination and management) in the context of the collective response by the United Nations system and the broader humanitarian community to situations of internal displacement.

32. The Group of African States supported UNHCR efforts to enhance the protection of refugees and noted with satisfaction that the number of cases of refoulement of asylum seekers and refugees had declined. Thanks to the ongoing assistance of the Office of the High Commissioner, the number of States which had procedures in place for border monitoring and measures to assist border guards to distinguish asylum seekers from migrants had increased, as had the number of UNHCR operations with standing operating procedures to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence. The Group of African States therefore noted with satisfaction that the Office of the High Commissioner had had focused its strategy for 2008-2009 on the strengthening of refugee protection in the context of broader migration movements, protecting internally displaced persons when it mandated to do so, maintaining the civilian character of settlement of refugees and displaced persons and assisting stateless individuals and groups to exercise their

rights. In that connection, the Group of African States reiterated its support for the cluster approach in the interest of displaced persons, particularly in Africa.

33. The Group of African States welcomed the reform under way in the UNHCR secretariat, which should be conducted transparently and in conformity with the principles governing international relations. That reform should provide UNHCR with a swifter and more flexible response capacity. Overlaps with other key players in the humanitarian sphere must be avoided. Needs should be assessed at the regional office level, and headquarters expenditure should be rationalized to reflect the real needs of the Office of the High Commissioner. The Group of African States endorsed the decision to authorize UNHCR to increase the 2007 appropriation reserve for new or additional activities to \$75 million and to approve appropriations in the same amount for 2008, on the understanding that the level of appropriation would be reviewed in 2009.

34. UNHCR had enough evaluation indicators to plan its activities and quantify host country contributions and needs, so as to be able to devise solid action plans to help refugees and vulnerable persons. Appropriate resources must be mobilized to help certain regions of the world, particularly Africa. The post-conflict reinsertion of repatriated refugees required investments to rehabilitate administrative and legal structures and to consolidate assistance and long-term development programmes in order to sustain the pace of return.

35. In conclusion, the Group of African States reiterated its unreserved support for UNHCR activities and its endorsement of the draft Conclusion on Children at Risk.

36. Mr. KHAN (Pakistan) said that the year 2007 had been eventful in the region of Pakistan, where insecurity, terrorism and drug trafficking had erected hurdles in the way of repatriation, reinsertion, reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts in Afghanistan. However, all stakeholders had remained committed and had moved ahead in 2007. In February, the Government of Pakistan in coordination with UNHCR had completed the first ever registration of Afghans in Pakistan: over 2.1 million had been registered, and all Afghans above five years of age had received documents recognizing them as Afghan citizens temporarily living in Pakistan. New return modalities had been put in place for the repatriation process with appropriate enhanced reintegration assistance of \$100 for each registered returnee. A three-year repatriation strategy (2007-2009) had been devised by the Government of Pakistan for the repatriation of Afghans living in Pakistan, based on voluntary, gradual and dignified returns. The tripartite agreement on repatriation of Afghan refugees concluded between the Government of Pakistan, the Government of Afghanistan and UNHCR had been extended to 31 December 2009. Kacha Garhi, which was one of the oldest and biggest Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, had been successfully closed and vacated in July after 27 years of existence. Another old and large camp, Jalozai, would be closed and vacated by spring 2008 following a written agreement with the camp inhabitants, who had requested voluntary repatriation by March/April 2008. During 2007, almost 400,000 Afghan refugees had been voluntarily repatriated to their homeland, of whom about 350,000 had received UNHCR assistance. While Pakistan continued to adhere to the principle of voluntary and gradual repatriation of the Afghan refugees, returns had to be sustainable and reintegration in Afghanistan

must be ensured. While security was an important consideration, it was essential to create a pull factor for the voluntary return of refugees. One way to do so would be to design individual or family return packages for utilization of skilled as well as unskilled refugees in targeted construction projects in Afghanistan. Pakistan had committed reconstruction assistance of more than \$200 million and hoped that the countries which had pledged assistance would honour their commitments soon.

37. The protracted refugee presence in any country deeply impacted its social fabric and environment, and in that connection Pakistan hoped that UNHCR and the international community would give it the necessary assistance for recovery activities in parallel to the repatriation process. A needs assessment for regions impacted by refugees was currently being made by UNDP, and a consultant hired by UNHCR had made a needs assessment for host community development.

38. Mr. GHAEMI (Islamic Republic of Iran) recalled that, almost 30 years previously, immediately after the internal crisis in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran had been required to manage a huge influx of asylum seekers whom, in a desire to prevent a humanitarian disaster and on the understanding that the situation was to be temporary, it had accepted as “prima-facie asylum seekers”, granting them “provisional protection” and hoping to tackle their plight with the help of the international community. Currently almost one million Afghans and 50,000 Iraqi nationals, registered and residing in Iran, were entitled to free medical care and health services on the same footing as Iranian citizens, and a number of them also enjoyed medical insurance. Unfortunately UNHCR had decided four years previously to drastically reduce its operational budget for registered refugees. Thus any further reduction or diversion of that budget that upset the existing balance would be unacceptable and damaging to both the host country and the refugees.

39. The Islamic Republic of Iran had displayed unfailing support for the refugees and displaced persons from Afghanistan and Iraq and for the new Governments of those countries. It had accepted over 3 million refugees during the war years and organized the gradual, secure and respectful implementation of a voluntary repatriation plan, supported the return of the elites, granted over 3,000 university scholarships to Afghan students, allocated aid amounting to \$500 million at the Tokyo Conference and a credit line of \$100 million at the London Conference, supported reconstruction and infrastructure projects and strengthened commercial ties with Afghanistan and Iraq, to quote only a few examples.

40. The joint voluntary repatriation programme for refugees and displaced persons from Afghanistan, signed in 2002 by the Islamic Republic of Iran with the Afghan Government and UNHCR for a period of one year had since been renewed five times. At the same time, the Islamic Republic of Iran had announced that it would make arrangements to allow one member of each family who returned to Afghanistan to obtain a work permit to come back and work in Iran. That example illustrated the humanitarian stance of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards refugees and displaced persons, which was not sufficiently recognized by the international community.

41. Nevertheless, the sharp decline in the number of returnees in 2006 and 2007 had been particularly disappointing, and made it essential to conduct an in-depth policy review so that the programme could continue. In that context, although voluntary repatriation was always considered to be the preferred durable solution to the refugee problem, resettlement in third countries was becoming more relevant than ever. The responsibility of receiving refugees was not limited to one State and the Islamic Republic of Iran should not be expected single-handedly to receive one tenth of the world refugee population, while other countries were reluctant to assume their share of the expenses connected with that humanitarian problem. Unless something was done, the Islamic Republic of Iran, faced with growing internal pressures, would have no choice but to reconsider the legal status of refugees and displaced persons, on the basis of the principles set forth in the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

42. Mr. PONCE VIVANCO (Peru), speaking on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, said that the Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action adopted by 20 Latin American countries on 16 November 2004 provided a common strategic and operational framework for the region in order to provide an integrated response to the complex humanitarian situations which resulted from forced displacements in Latin America. By adopting that Plan of Action, the region had not only shown once again its support and solidarity towards refugees and displaced persons, but had also reaffirmed its long-standing commitment in favour of international refugee law, while demonstrating its ability to find its own solutions reflecting the reality of the phenomenon in Latin America. The Mexico Plan of Action identified the challenges at the regional level and laid down guidelines for promoting protection, including national institution-building, through legislation responsive to the needs of displaced persons and refugees, and through the creation of national commissions responsible for those persons. It also encouraged the creation and strengthening of national and regional protection network and the dissemination of the international standards on refugees. Geared to the search for lasting solutions, the Mexico Plan of Action had set up three programmes: “cities of solidarity”, aimed at the social and economic reinsertion of refugees in their host cities; “borders of solidarity”, which encouraged the development of border areas in order to create opportunities and meet the basic needs of refugees and displaced persons; and “resettlement in solidarity”, aimed at promoting resettlement policies. The Plan of Action had achieved important successes. Many countries had amended their legislation on refugees and displaced persons in order to provide greater protection to those persons. Many had also strengthened their national commissions and coordination between those commissions, other government bodies and civil society.

43. With regard to the search for lasting solutions, the “borders of solidarity” programme had made it possible, with UNHCR participation, to implement more than one thousand local projects in 350 border communities where 30 per cent of the population in need of protection resided. In the Andean countries, refugee offices or special funds had been created to facilitate access by refugees and displaced persons to public services. Under the “cities of solidarity” programme, a network of 25 cities of solidarity in seven countries of the region had been created. The “resettlement in solidarity” programme, with extensive participation by nongovernmental organizations, had increased the number of countries hosting refugees and displaced persons.

44. However, those efforts were limited in view of the scope of the phenomenon; the countries in the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States reiterated their commitment to the Mexico Plan of Action and promised to continue their joint efforts in solidarity to find appropriate responses. International cooperation programmes focused on the search for lasting and effective solutions were essential to that joint effort. In particular, UNHCR must continue to support the implementation of the Mexico Plan of Action and intensify its resource mobilization efforts.

45. Mr. GNESA (Switzerland) said that his country was following the decentralization process with interest and intended to provide staff to contribute to the regionalization of UNHCR, particularly in technical areas. On the question of protection, he noted that the number of asylum seekers arriving in western countries had been stable in recent years. The number would probably be higher for 2007, since UNHCR estimated that the increase could be as much as 10 percent, despite the relative stability of recent years. Issues related to integration, mixed migratory movements, safeguarding of the principle of non-refoulement and security aspects still remained major challenges. In that context, the Swiss Government wished to congratulate UNHCR on all its initiatives designed to provide specific responses to those challenges. It particularly hoped that the ten-point plan of action for the protection of refugees and mixed migratory movements would be supported by the key stakeholders: Governments, competent regional and international organizations (particularly UNHCR, OHCHR and IOM) and NGOs. That was, however, a particularly delicate substantive question for UNHCR, which must not become a migration agency, as had been noted on many occasions.

46. The Executive Committee's conclusions on protection were a valuable tool providing a clear identification and intervention framework for the special situation of certain groups at risk. In that connection, it was essential for the standards of protection contained in those texts to be enhanced or at least maintained. In order further to improve the consultation process leading to the adoption of conclusions, the Swiss delegation proposed, firstly, that UNHCR should, in close collaboration with States, prepare a precise and comprehensive evaluation of the use made of those conclusions and, secondly, conduct informal consultations on the process of definition, formulation and finalization of those conclusions. It looked forward to participating in the High Commissioner's dialogue on the challenges of protection and hoped that it would generate new ideas in the search for lasting and specific solutions for refugees.

47. His country was concerned about the situation in Iraq. Realizing the huge burden borne by the neighbouring countries, Switzerland had initially responded favourably to the appeal of April 2007 by supporting two projects in the Syrian Arab Republic. It had just completed a visit to the region, which would be supplemented by participation in the next mission of UNHCR donors in the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan. Switzerland's commitment towards that region would undoubtedly remain one of its humanitarian priorities for 2008.

48. Ms. MOSCHER (Canada) noted with concern the increase in the number of refugees in the world in 2007, but welcomed the constructive work initiated in the search for global solutions for those refugees in a situation of prolonged exile. The Executive

Committee had devoted five years to the formulation of a framework of action for the adoption of durable solutions. Over the past year, the efforts to resolve the situation of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal had achieved progress and the question of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan and in Iran was the subject of an ongoing dialogue with a view to finding a comprehensive solution. Canada, for its part, was working to find ways of dealing with those protracted situations and urged UNHCR to continue in 2008 to formulate a plan of action for ending the long-standing situations and extending its strategic thinking to that area.

49. Canada welcomed the progress made by UNHCR in the past year in the formulation of guidelines and a plan of action for its fulfilment of its cluster coordination responsibility concerning the situation of persons displaced as the result of a conflict. Constructive efforts had been made to develop a clear policy framework and to play a coordinating role under the cluster approach. In addition, Canada congratulated the High Commissioner on his achievements in the context of the reform of UNHCR management mechanisms, welcomed the progress made in the staff realignment and strongly supported the proposed budgetary architecture. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that management reform and the regionalization of administrative functions did not adversely affect UNHCR policy capacities or the performance of its core mandate.

50. Mr. VAN EENENNAAM (Netherlands) noted that the number of refugees and displaced persons had increased considerably in the world over the past year. In Iraq, two million people had left the country and a similar number had been internally displaced. There were millions of internally displaced persons in the Sudan, and 700,000 people had fled the country. In Chad, the mass influx of refugees from Darfur had led to unrest. However, there were also some positive trends: there was currently a real prospect of return for the Bhutanese who had found refuge in Nepal very many years previously. The Netherlands welcomed the cooperation of the Nepalese Government and the action of UNHCR in that regard, and encouraged Bhutan to work for a lasting solution to that problem.

51. For many years, only a small number of donor countries had been supporting UNHCR efforts. The Netherlands therefore invited other countries and organizations to contribute more generously to UNHCR. It also invited all countries to grant full access to humanitarian operations in their territory.

52. The Netherlands had begun to study an amendment to its asylum legislation that would accelerate procedures and make them more focused. It supported the creation, within the European Union, of a more balanced common system of asylum and was endeavouring to meet the resettlement quotas that it had adopted, attaching great importance to the protection of refugees in mixed migratory flows.

53. The Netherlands, which contributed 800 million euros annually to the United Nations system, welcomed the reforms undertaken by UNHCR to make its action more cost-effective. There was a need to balance the resources allocated to UNHCR field operations and staff and administrative costs; the Netherlands therefore supported the

proposal made by UNHCR that its budgetary structure should be changed along those lines.

54. Lastly, assistance to fragile States was one of the priorities of the foreign policy of the Netherlands, which currently attached greater importance to reconstruction work and emergency relief. The Netherlands Government was therefore prepared to enter into a dialogue with UNHCR on that type of operation and on the formulation of a new approach for exit strategies.

55. Mr. FUJISAKI (Japan) stressed that the gap between humanitarian assistance and development aid was a long-standing issue and therefore welcomed the holding during the current session of a side event entitled “Reintegration policy framework”. Japan had urged UNHCR to work with other development partners to fill that gap, but the Executive Committee must also send a clear message to that effect to the heads of the agencies concerned.

56. An effective way of promoting voluntary repatriation was to offer refugees vocational training in order to empower them. Vocational training made refugees self-sufficient, reduced tension connected with land issues because it offered returnees work possibilities other than farming, and facilitated camp management because it gave refugees an occupation and protected adolescents from abuse and exploitation. Yet there had over the past six years been a huge decrease in UNHCR spending on education and training. In 2007, therefore, Japan had decided to make a contribution of \$3 million to UNHCR to be used for vocational training programmes, and he urged other countries to follow suit.

57. The reform process was necessary to make UNHCR more accountable, more flexible and more strategic. Japan welcomed the mitigation measures being taken for outposted staff. It requested that close consultations should be held between UNHCR and the Executive Committee concerning the ongoing regionalization process. Lastly, it supported the proposed new budget structure, which would strengthen the Executive Committee’s governance and oversight roles over the budget, while promoting greater flexibility of action in the field.

58. Mr. GUTERRES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), responding to the various statements, stressed the importance of the United States commitment concerning the 70,000 openings that it would offer in 2008 for the resettlement of refugees in that country. He agreed about the need to stress UNHCR accountability towards the beneficiaries of its action and the situation of each refugee from a human viewpoint. He also agreed that it was important to emphasize that UNHCR was not the agency responsible for internally displaced persons, since its work in that area was conducted within the framework of cooperation with the competent agencies. Referring to the statement made on behalf of the European Union, he recalled the role that the European Union had played recently in the creation in Chad of a force to protect the humanitarian space in eastern Chad and in the Central African Republic. With regard to the debate on the Common European Asylum System, he hoped that the System would result in a strengthening of the Union’s capacities and not in the adoption of the lowest

common denominator. He welcomed the statement made on behalf of the African Union by the representative of Morocco, who had highlighted the importance of tolerance in the context of UNHCR action and the need to distinguish clearly between the issues of asylum, immigration and terrorism. He also agreed that UNHCR reform should be conducted in an environment of complete transparency. He noted the importance of the statement by the representative of Pakistan, which was the country that had hosted the largest number of refugees in the world and which had adopted in that context a strong humanitarian approach. He welcomed the statement made by the representative of Iran, which had received a number of refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan, despite the lack of support from the international community. UNHCR would try to remedy that lack of support and had recently raised the question with the Iranian Interior Minister in Geneva.

59. He also thanked the Mexican Government for its programme of assistance to refugees. He welcomed the dialogue with Switzerland concerning the implementation of asylum policy in that country, and stressed the importance of the cooperation in asylum matters initiated by Switzerland with the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan. Reacting to the statement by the Canadian representative, he explained that the question of protracted refugee situations was of considerable importance to UNHCR, which was currently trying to identify the protracted situations for which its action could play a decisive role. He also agreed that UNHCR reform should not affect its strategic capabilities. He noted that the Netherlands had embarked on a review of its asylum policy, which would be decisive in the current difficult context, since it would improve the legislation and procedures in place. With regard to the transition from emergency relief to development assistance, mentioned by the representative of Japan, he explained that the concept of human security was essential to UNHCR action. In addition, he acknowledged that education and training had not received sufficient attention in recent years, but announced that UNHCR had recently launched the “ninemillion.org” initiative. UNHCR was about to launch the Education (Plus) initiative in that area, so that Japan’s support for vocational training activities would indeed be most useful in that context.

60. Mr. HUGHES (Australia) noted that according to the analysis made by UNHCR refugees, displaced persons and stateless persons currently numbered 33 million, which was an increase of 60 percent over the previous year. The most disturbing element was the increase in the number of refugees from Iraq and of internally displaced persons in that country. In that context of increased responsibility, Australia believed that it was important for UNHCR to articulate its priorities for action over the coming years. It urged UNHCR to focus on finding practical and durable solutions to humanitarian crises. In that regard, emergency relief was particularly important and the organization by UNHCR of the recent International Conference on Iraq was most welcome.

61. For over ten years, the Australian Government had been devoting a significant part of its 13,000-place humanitarian aid programme to the resettlement in Australia of Iraqi refugees from Middle East countries (11,000 Iraqis had benefited from that programme since 2001). It planned to increase the Middle East component of its humanitarian programme to 35 percent in 2007-2008, continuing to focus on Iraqi refugees. Australia hoped that UNHCR would continue to give priority to creative innovative solutions to protracted refugee situations, particularly in the Asia and Pacific region, as had recently

been the case for the Bhutanese and Burmese refugees. It urged UNHCR to establish strong and effective ties and partnerships with the other humanitarian agencies across the full range of its responsibilities. Lastly, it encouraged UNHCR to ensure that its resources were deployed in a way that delivered the most direct benefits to its client groups and therefore welcomed the management reform process, particularly as regards the outposting of some administrative functions to Budapest, as well as the decentralization and regionalization of operations.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.
