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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE FOR WORLD REFUGEE DAY

20 June 2008

Intolerance, political breakdown and war have long, pernicious histories. Yet the fragility of political systems, the devolution of societies into catastrophic violence have also provoked a humane reply, the protection of those forced to flee their countries in escape from persecution. Granting asylum can be traced back thousands of years and is one of the earliest hallmarks of civilization. Today, the principle is firmly recognized in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which this year marks its 60th anniversary: “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.”

The United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951 defined a refugee as a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence and who has a well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. Since 1951, human displacement has become a far more complex issue. Distinguishing a refugee from a person driven across a border by sheer hunger is often very difficult. Population flows are now driven by interrelated factors and, as barriers to human mobility have fallen, protecting the displaced has become a greater challenge.

Conflict and poverty, the most common reasons people are compelled to leave their homes, are now amplified by the effects of climate change, increasing scarcity of resources and food shortages -- factors which may lead to greater insecurity in the future. Compounding these challenges is the fact that the responsibility of providing asylum currently falls disproportionately on developing nations. Contrary to public perceptions in many industrialized nations, developing countries actually bear the burden of hosting a larger number of refugees, despite their limited resources.

In the past year, the number of refugees has grown to more than 16 million worldwide. I urgently call on the international community to redouble efforts to address both the causes and consequences of forced human displacement. Greater international solidarity is crucial if we are to share the burden of protection more equitably.

I thank the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and UN agencies that have worked together to protect and help repatriate the displaced. We must not lose sight of the individual people who are fleeing persecution, what they face on a daily basis as they try to meet their basic needs.

Our goal must be no less than to ensure that refugees will be free one day to return home, in safety and dignity. But on World Refugee Day, let us first reaffirm that all refugees have the right to asylum, and let us do everything we can to give them the full protection they deserve.