

Closing Statement by Mr. Ruud Lubbers
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
to the Ministerial Meeting of States Parties to the 1951 Convention
and/or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees

(Geneva, 13 December 2001)

I would like to begin by saying a few words about the Global Consultations on International Protection. I would also like to once again thank the Swiss Government for co-hosting the Ministerial Meeting. This meeting is part of a process which was started by Erika Feller, the Director of the UNHCR Department of International Protection. She took quite a risk embarking upon the Global Consultations. Many people were sceptical at the beginning. But I think we can say that it has turned out to be a success. It has been a valuable process and this meeting is not the end of it. It is as if we are now at the top of the mountain. Nothing can go wrong from here. I thank you, Mrs. Metzler, and all of you, for that.

This was the first-ever meeting of States Parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Over 70 Ministers and Secretaries of State have gathered here in Geneva. It is remarkable, not only in terms of the number of people, but even more because it proved to be possible to adopt a very powerful document: the Declaration of the States Parties. The key point of this declaration is that the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Protocol remain fully relevant and valid.

Some people may think that this is obvious. But I would like to recall that, when I assumed my functions, a number of politicians and other were making speeches that were understood to be an attack on the Convention. It was being said that the Convention was outdated, that it was time to change things, that we could not live with this Convention any more.

From that perspective, we have come a long way. Delegations at this Ministerial Meeting have unanimously declared that the Convention and its Protocol are key for the protection of refugees, and they have reaffirmed their desire to continue with it.

Second, you even affirmed that the Convention framework should be widened further. We welcomed new States Parties – Belarus and the Republic of Moldova – and heard announcements of the lifting of the

geographical reservation by Malta and intentions to accede by St. Kitts and Nevis and other States.

You also highlighted the importance of understanding the spirit of the Convention. The efforts of some to use the Convention in a more restrictive manner are counter-balanced by others who use it in a flexible way. The example was given of gender-based persecution, which was not considered by the drafters, but which can easily be brought into the whole spirit and application of the Convention. And there is the possibility of an optional protocol for other matters. We can work on that together. For the time being I want to stress that, from listening to you, I believe there are possibilities not only to broaden the geographical scope of the Convention framework, but also its meaning and context. There are real possibilities to modernize it.

One word about the suggestion made to re-establish a Sub-Committee on International Protection within UNHCR's Executive Committee. I consider this to be an excellent idea. I understand that the Swiss Government has been lobbying for this for some time. Others suggested the possibility for me to work from time to time with outside advice, to make it possible to exercise my mandate more effectively. When it is appropriate, I certainly will do that. I also want to stress the need you have recognized to revitalize resettlement. We will certainly do so.

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I do not want to say too much now about the fact that the bulk of UNHCR's financial resources should not come from only eight main donors. This is somehow a ridiculous situation. At a time when we are speaking about the need to globalize the mission of protecting refugees, a limited number of wealthy countries in fact carry the financial burden. Broadening UNHCR's donor base is all the more necessary because the principal host countries, which in fact host 90 per cent of the refugees, are in the developing world. So the problem is not in the wealthy countries, but certainly we have to find the solutions together.

You have also spoken about mixed flows of refugees and other migrants seeking a better life. You have encouraged us to continue working with the International Organization for Migration on an initiative to find new ways and means to address these mixed flows. We will do that, while stressing the need to focus on our Convention and our work for refugees.

This brings me to the end of my remarks. Above all, I would like to thank all of you. It was indeed necessary for us to come together. I found, as I think most of us did, the most impressive moment of this Ministerial Meeting was at the very beginning, when President Vike-Freiberga of Latvia described her personal experience as a refugee. She made it clear that we should not think simply in terms of declarations, rules and

systems, but should be attentive to the people involved. It is all about people. She gave her personal story. It was very moving. We have also heard testimonies from others and we need to hear them time and time and again.

Every time I hear such testimonies it becomes clear to me that the theme of UNHCR's public awareness campaign – Respect for Refugees – is not something abstract. We must respect all refugees. We have seen former refugees here on a this podium. We see them in many functions. We have see them functioning in societies. When I think of them, I think to myself, "We have to do better." This is the key.

It is also a strange moment for me to be commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Refugee Convention. As you know, the very first High Commissioner for Refugees – Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart – was Dutch. I am Dutch too. I believe I know what would happen if he could see me. He would ask me, "What about my Convention, is it still alive?" And I would have to say that it is still very much alive. It has been globalized. I would tell him about the 1967 Protocol, which was added, about the new accessions, about the fact that the Convention is understood today as being part of human rights in the whole world. So he would say to me, "So everything is going fine?" And then I would have to add, "Not at all." We have just concluded a meeting in which we agreed on the need for an "Agenda for Protection", because we have to constantly examine new ways of living up to this aspiration to protect refugees. "And in my world," I would have to say to him, "it's perhaps even more difficult than it was 50 years ago. But we will continue to do the job that you started five decades ago."

We go from here revitalized with the broad elements of an "Agenda for Protection". I count on your support to implement it. Thank you very much.