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

Fifty-third session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 562nd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 30 September 2002, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. YIMER (Ethiopia)

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

LAUNCH OF THE NANSEN REFUGEE AWARD BOOK

1. Mr. BIJLEVELD (Director, Division of Communication and Information) said that the Nansen award ceremony, which used to be held during the session of the Executive Committee, had been moved to coincide with World Refugee Day in June. With the aid of a generous grant provided by the Governments of Norway and Switzerland, a book detailing all previous recipients of the award had been published and was being presented to all member States of the Executive Committee. Recipients of the award were presented with a medal and a monetary award of \$100,000 for allocation to the refugee cause of their choice. Governments should start thinking about possible nominees for the 2003 Nansen award.

GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 4) (continued)

2. Mr. ULLERUP-PETERSEN (Denmark), speaking on behalf of the European Union, the associate countries of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia and, in addition, Cyprus, Malta and Turkey, said that the European Union strongly supported the current operations of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Afghanistan and Africa. Unfortunately, UNHCR's ability to perform its functions continued to be constrained by massive and protracted refugee crises and continuing financial deficits. As the High Commissioner had rightly stressed, it was essential to focus on identifying durable solutions to refugee problems. Because voluntary repatriation remained the preferred solution, more needed to be done to make the return and reintegration of refugees to their homes sustainable. At the same time, the local integration of refugees in host communities in developing countries should be strengthened and supported. The root causes of refugee problems had to be addressed more vigorously, and that implied greater emphasis on transitional needs in post-conflict and protracted refugee situations. Nevertheless, the European Union did recognize the utility of resettlement in a limited number of cases.

3. The increased self-reliance of refugees was an important aspect of any approach involving durable solutions. Refugees should be permitted to take greater responsibility for their own destinies and acquire skills that would enable them to contribute as productive and resourceful members of the community, i.e. to become "agents of development". Given that UNHCR's mandate was to seek durable solutions for refugees, a task which it could not fulfil alone, the European Union welcomed the Office's renewed cooperation with the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) designed to pursue a much more integrated approach to the humanitarian and development issues arising out of refugee situations. Physical security was another essential component of a comprehensive protection approach.

4. The Global Consultations process had been successfully concluded and the European Union was committed to following up its outcome - the Agenda for Protection. To make the Agenda as effective as possible, priorities and responsibilities had to be identified. The European Union also endorsed the ideas put forward by the High Commissioner in his recent speech to the European Union Justice and Home Affairs Council and, in particular, the "Convention Plus" concept, which included agreements to supplement the 1951 Convention.

5. The member States of the European Union were making efforts to harmonize their laws and practices with a view to establishing a common European asylum system based on the full application of the 1951 Convention. A Europe-wide Directive on the qualification and status of refugees and on subsidiary protection was currently in preparation. It would establish minimum standards complementary to the 1951 Convention while taking account of the existing obligations of European Union member States. An effective registration system was the key to enhancing protection for refugees and the Global Consultations process and the Agenda for Protection had confirmed the need for the rapid development and implementation of such a system.

6. The current budget submitted by the High Commissioner further developed the previous year's strategic orientations. As already pointed out, a number of important tasks of significance for the well-being of refugees went beyond UNHCR's mandate and surpassed resources. Such issues should therefore be addressed on the basis of strategic partnerships between Governments, humanitarian and development agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Above all, it was essential to establish clear priorities. In particular, there was an ongoing need to expedite efforts to elaborate appropriate indicators of results achieved and minimum standards. The European Union, as the largest contributor to the UNHCR budget, recognized the importance of the High Commissioner's efforts to broaden the donor base and develop more equitable burden sharing. It welcomed UNHCR's drive to attract complementary sources of funding for its budget.

7. Mr. NOGAWA (Japan) said that his Government attached great importance to UNHCR's exploration of durable solutions to refugee issues in partnership with other United Nations agencies, donors, host countries and NGOs. As a counterpoint to the High Commissioner's "Four Rs" (repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction), Japan wished to cite "Four Ss", namely, substance, sociability, solidarity and sincerity, as prerequisites for its cooperation

8. Substance meant deeds rather than words. As a responsible financial donor, Japan had sought to improve the quality of its core funding through early disbursement and broader earmarking. The most immediate challenge was to identify complementary sources of revenue to alleviate the UNHCR's financial shortfall. Japan had also expanded its support for the settlement of officially recognized refugees and the improvement of the living conditions of asylum-seekers. Sociability meant the reinforcement of partnership, especially proactive partnership such as that developed between UNHCR, the World Bank and UNDP. Solidarity meant burden sharing, for example development through local integration along the lines of the Zambia initiative. Refugees must be empowered to become "agents for development". Japan was exploring possible contributions consistent with existing development assistance, focusing on cooperation between UNHCR and its development agency. If bilateral development agencies could be given responsibility for helping refugee-hosting communities, UNHCR would be able to devote more of its resources to refugee protection and assistance. Finally, under the heading of sincerity, it was important to develop mutual trust between UNHCR and members of the Executive Committee.

9. Mr. BOLANDIAN (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that Iran had hosted millions of Afghan refugees for more than 20 years. It welcomed the gradual return of peace and stability to Afghanistan, which would make it easier for those refugees to return to their homes. The repatriation and reintegration of the refugees would contribute to Afghanistan's subsequent stability and peaceful development. To that end, his Government had formulated a joint programme for voluntary repatriation with UNHCR and the interim government of Afghanistan. Thus far, 212,302 people had returned to their homes with the aid of UNHCR relief packages and services and another 70,353 had returned home spontaneously without help from UNHCR. However, the small number of returnees from Iran in comparison with those from other neighbouring countries should prompt UNHCR to adopt more effective and urgent measures to accelerate the voluntary repatriation process. Repatriation to Afghanistan should take place voluntarily within the framework of the 1951 Convention. It was also important to remember that the repatriation and reconstruction process would last several years and other aspects of the refugee problem should not be neglected in the meantime.

10. While welcoming UNHCR's Global Consultations process aimed at creating a universal system for the protection of refugees, his Government endorsed the view that no new commitments should be imposed on member States. The implementation of the Agenda for Protection should be commensurate with the capacity of host countries and international assistance. It would therefore be necessary to arrange transparent mechanisms for effective international burden sharing and strengthening the capacity of host countries. The majority of developing countries that hosted large numbers of refugees faced economic, demographic and other problems; they were therefore unable to accept local integration as a solution to the refugee problem. Less populated developed countries could offer better conditions for accepting and integrating refugees. Refugees could thus be distributed equitably through the creation of a transparent and realistic burden sharing mechanism which should as a matter of course offer sustainable solutions to refugee problems.

11. His Government was very apprehensive lest the tension in the Middle East should unleash a new wave of refugees, which would be the inevitable consequence of any crisis on Iran's western and southern borders.

12. Mr. RUDDOCK (Australia) said that doomsaying should not be overplayed: in 1995, for instance, there had been some 27 million refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR, whereas, at the end of 2001, the number had declined to 19.7 million. Many major refugee crises had been resolved over the years, for example, in the Balkans, Timor-Leste, parts of Africa and Afghanistan. Such successes could clearly be linked to active and purposeful management and coordination on the part of UNHCR and other international organizations, and also to inter-State cooperation.

13. Australia had continuously maintained an active programme of international refugee resettlement; some 600,000 refugees had been resettled in Australia since 1945. Recently, his Government had had to make some hard choices: unauthorized refugees brought to Australia by people smugglers had been turned back in the face of considerable international criticism.

14. The reason Australia had adopted that approach was that it saved lives - by deterring people from undertaking dangerous journeys from places of protection - and saved space - for the unseen, unheard refugees who could not afford people smugglers. Australia was a compassionate nation, but it needed to retain community support for a resettlement programme that assisted those most in need, i.e. those for whom resettlement was in fact the only option and whom the international community was currently failing. Western countries were now spending more than 10 times UNHCR's budget just to sort the few refugees from the asylum-seekers. Australia's policy allowed it both to meet its protection obligations towards refugee arrivals and to continue to resettle some of those who had no choice.

15. A collective effort was needed to provide greater assistance to countries of first asylum; use aid and development linkages to support protection and create sustainable solutions; build coalitions of source, destination and transit countries in response to specific flows; preserve and expand resettlement; and deal with secondary refugee movements and the impact of the asylum/migration nexus. The international protection system remained under threat; piecemeal efforts were inefficient and unacceptable. People smugglers preyed on refugees while States' resources went to waste.

16. He welcomed the High Commissioner's thoughts on the "Convention Plus" concept and was encouraged by the progress that had been made in the Asia-Pacific region through the Bali ministerial process. Australia also stood ready to work with UNHCR and others in the areas mentioned in the Agenda for Protection. Lastly, he drew attention to a recent publication giving the Australian perspective on interpreting the Convention.

17. Mr. HILALE (Morocco) said that the international community's conscience should be moved by the contradiction between the recent food shortages in the Tindouf camps and the display of extremely costly military equipment during the recent military manoeuvres by Western Saharan separatists only a few dozen kilometres from the camps. The value of such equipment exceeded UNHCR's annual budget for the camps and the World Food Programme (WFP) annual food budget for Tindouf.

18. Under the Convention, the host country was responsible for the physical and food security of refugees in its territory, yet Algeria preferred to rely on the international community and directed its own generosity to financing the separatists. Morocco had been encouraged by recent glimmerings of international awareness of Algeria's ambivalent position with regard to stability, peace and regional integration and had made a solemn appeal to Algeria to open the camps and authorize the Moroccan nationals there to return home. Only a voluntary return under the auspices of UNHCR and with all international guarantees would prevent the current food crisis from becoming a humanitarian disaster.

19. Mr. SOUALEM (Algeria), speaking on a point of order, said that the item under discussion was the High Commissioner's statement and he objected to the Moroccan delegation's attack on his country.

20. The CHAIRMAN requested delegations to stick to the agenda item under discussion in their statements.

21. Mr. DORAIS (Canada) said that his delegation endorsed the High Commissioner's statement. The past year had been an eventful one: the Global Consultations had stimulated a search for innovative solutions and it had become clear that sustainable solutions were possible for many Afghan refugees and could be found for other situations such as that in Angola. There must be no let-up in the search for effective sustainable solutions to the problems of international protection.

22. He welcomed the emphasis on resettlement, the promotion of self-reliance and the implementation of all possible sustainable solutions, as well as the approach adopted to situations in Africa.

23. It was vital for UNHCR to perform efficiently if it was to assume a leading position within the multilateral humanitarian system and Canada commended the High Commissioner's efforts in the areas of management reform, accountability and the enhancement of UNHCR's performance through evaluation, gender mainstreaming and results-based budgeting. Canada also supported UNHCR's internal review, a process he hoped would be transparent and accessible, for the success of reforms would depend on engaging States and other partners early on. In that context, he encouraged UNHCR to seek innovative ideas and urged all States to show flexibility and courage in support of the High Commissioner's initiative.

24. Lastly, he called on the Executive Committee to endorse the Agenda for Protection, which represented the successful outcome of the Global Consultations. A follow-up process must now be initiated, including time frames for action and a priority-setting exercise that would report to the Standing Committee.

25. Mr. HEINEMANN (Netherlands), associating his delegation with the statement made by Denmark on behalf of the European Union, reaffirmed his country's full support for UNHCR in dealing with the challenges ahead. UNHCR's success in returning such large numbers of refugees to Afghanistan offered hope for the future. It was vital that returning refugees should be guaranteed economic, social and physical security in order to enable them to contribute to the reconstruction process and to prevent them from becoming dependent on aid or leaving the country once more.

26. Adequate funding for the Afghanistan programme was crucial, but UNHCR continued to face difficulties in mobilizing sufficient financial resources. The Netherlands strongly supported UNHCR's endeavours to broaden its donor base and increase private funding. The discussion of more innovative approaches should be continued with a view to finding a structural solution to the problem. In the meantime, more predictable contributions and the early transfer of committed funds would help UNHCR's timely programme implementation and management.

27. The Netherlands intended to make a non-earmarked contribution for 2003 of at least EUR 40.9 million, to be transferred early in the year. It hoped that many other countries would make their commitments during the current session, followed by an early transfer of funds. In response to the Consolidated Appeals, the Netherlands would determine which earmarked contributions would be made available and communicate the exact amount in early 2003. Funds might also be made available for emergencies arising during the year.

28. The Netherlands commended UNHCR for launching the Global Consultations process, in which a broad range of stakeholders had participated. The resulting Agenda for Protection constituted a highly relevant undertaking. His country also welcomed the proposal for the “Convention Plus” approach and was ready to play an active role in furthering the work thereon. It believed that reception and status determination in the region was of the utmost importance to the search for durable solutions.

29. Greater emphasis on regional reception was vital to preventing secondary movements of asylum-seekers, which undermined the integrity of the asylum system, as did the growing number of asylum-seekers who did not need international protection. Increasing and uncontrolled migration flows should be of concern to all, since they hampered development, increased instability and threatened global security. His Government would intensify efforts to return such asylum-seekers to their countries of origin, working in close cooperation with UNHCR.

30. Developing host countries should be given adequate support. Cooperation in finding durable solutions, particularly repatriation and local integration, was of paramount importance in that regard. The Netherlands welcomed the establishment of strategic partnerships with other international organizations as the best means of bridging the gap between relief and development and preparing a viable exit strategy for UNHCR.

31. The proposed Forum on International Protection could facilitate work on thematic issues and specific policy issues. Such institutionalization of the Global Consultations process would have to be dovetailed with existing UNHCR governance mechanisms.

32. The Netherlands also welcomed the introduction of the UNHCR Code of Conduct and noted with keen interest the High Commissioner’s proposals concerning a review of UNHCR’s statutes and mandates. It welcomed an early discussion of those issues and hoped that consultations would produce a broad consensus on the measures to be taken to strengthen UNHCR’s effectiveness.

33. Ms. CLARKSON (United Kingdom) said that her delegation endorsed the statement by Denmark on behalf of the European Union and thanked the High Commissioner and his staff for their support and, in particular, for the practical assistance they had provided to Afghan people without protection needs.

34. It was important to ensure the integrity of asylum systems, particularly in the face of abuse by those not in need of protection. Her delegation hoped UNHCR would maintain its commitment to women and children refugees and devote adequate resources to those two important groups. The United Kingdom had taken steps to speed up its own procedures, in line with the High Commissioner’s recent appeal to European Governments.

35. Efforts must continue to be made to address the root causes of population flows, such as poverty, human rights abuses and armed conflict and support must be given to countries of first asylum, particularly those taking in large groups, including people fleeing from natural disasters.

36. UNHCR needed adequate resources if it was to meet the institutional and operational challenges it faced. Encouraging progress had been made: it was important that those gains should not be reversed.

37. Mr. NAZARI (Observer for Afghanistan) said that large numbers of Afghans had returned to the country since the fall of the Taliban regime and the establishment of the Afghan Interim Authority (AIA). Their return was an indication of Afghans' confidence in the future, after 23 years of war, devastation and migration, and he thanked the High Commissioner for his support.

38. The challenge, however, was to enable returnees to reintegrate and continue their lives in their places of origin. The entire infrastructure, in particular public services had been damaged; there were no job opportunities; many who had sold their property in time of war now had no shelter and faced other economic problems.

39. The drought had created 1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), whose maintenance was a challenge to humanitarian assistance organizations. He called on UNHCR to support his Government in implementing a strategic solution.

40. His Government was grateful to those countries that had hosted millions of Afghan migrants for so long, in particular Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The time had come for the refugees to return home, but he asked host countries to be patient: if it was to be sustainable, the return should be properly studied and gradual, taking full account of conditions on the ground. Failure in that regard would lead to renewed migration and those who left would not have the confidence to return again. Similarly, he called on donors to fulfil all the pledges they had made in Tokyo and elsewhere, in order to make full reintegration possible.

41. Ms. JOHNSEN (Norway) said that her delegation welcomed the High Commissioner's "Convention Plus" concept, which ought to be part of the UNHCR 2004 process. Norway was particularly interested in innovative approaches to finding durable solutions to refugee problems, since the international community's record with regard to protracted refugee situations, improving the plight of refugees and burden sharing had often been characterized by failure.

42. Solutions in regions of origin were usually the most cost-effective way of assisting the largest number of refugees. They also helped to reduce secondary flows and the levels of crime and exploitation associated therewith. However, the right to seek asylum should not be compromised and neither should UNHCR's protection mandate. Abuses of the asylum process should be tackled directly in order to preserve the integrity of the institution.

43. Durable solutions in regions of origin required greater emphasis on local integration and the international mobilization of financial resources in order to bridge the gap between humanitarian aid and development assistance. Norway was concerned about the continued existence of gap-related problems and hoped that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) would be included in the cooperation initiated by the "Brookings Process" with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank.

44. Norway lent its support to UNHCR gap-related programmes, which needed to be well coordinated and must target real gap situations so as to ensure that scarce gap resources were not used for underfunded humanitarian relief efforts. The capacity of the development stakeholders to enter gap situations as early as possible should be strengthened in order to allow UNHCR to focus on its core functions.
45. Norway supported further UNHCR efforts to promote the resettlement of large numbers of refugees in their countries of origin and intended to earmark contributions for that purpose. It viewed the regional approach to durable solutions for refugees as an important part of follow-up to the Agenda for Protection and hoped that the Agenda would prove a landmark document, providing benefits to refugees, host countries and the international community in general. Any attempt to weaken the Agenda would be a setback for refugees and for international solidarity.
46. Particular stress should be placed on protecting vulnerable refugee women and girls. All humanitarian organizations should take action to prevent their sexual exploitation and hold the perpetrators to account. UNHCR should also adhere to the principles of management accountability, an issue warranting the attention of the incoming Inspector General. Norway commended the High Commissioner for acknowledging the scale of the problem of sexual abuse by humanitarian personnel and introducing a zero tolerance policy. Since the implementation of the policy was critical, a simple step would be to appoint more female managers and women field workers. Norway would continue to follow the issue very closely, since it was the essence of the humanitarian mission.
47. Mr. HUSSAIN (Pakistan) commended UNHCR on accomplishing the voluntary repatriation of over 2 million Afghan refugees in only six months. The fate of a further 1.6 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan was, however, still a matter of concern. Pakistan viewed voluntary repatriation as the most durable and practical solution to mass refugee situations and fully endorsed the High Commissioner's "Four-Rs" approach.
48. Donor support for Afghanistan was critical to surmounting the formidable challenges facing that country, as was the fulfilment of the pledges made at the Tokyo Donor Conference. For its part, Pakistan had provided US\$ 18 million out of the US\$ 100 million it had pledged, in addition to projects in key economic areas.
49. The Global Consultations process had been a useful exercise, producing an Agenda for Protection that ought to enhance assistance and quality protection for refugees and asylum-seekers everywhere. The six goals set forth in the Agenda should be approached in a holistic manner, while the Forum to review progress in implementation was an institutional necessity. The fact that immigration and asylum policies were being tightened under the guise of security concerns warranted UNHCR's intervention in order to ensure that genuine protection needs were not being jeopardized. Integration problems among refugees from Asia, Africa and the Arab region in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001, should also be mitigated. Government authorities, the media and UNHCR needed to raise public awareness of the implications of restrictive immigration and asylum policies for future international human rights and refugee law.

50. Pakistan remained deeply concerned about UNHCR's financial difficulties and appealed to donor countries to be more generous, predictable and flexible in their support.

51. The goal of burden sharing remained elusive. UNHCR's shrinking budget for protracted refugee situations required urgent support. Countries with larger capacity should open their doors to long-term refugees and the contribution of host developing countries to refugee assistance and protection should be recognized. Those countries continued to need capacity-building assistance. The issue should remain on the Committee's agenda.

52. The effects of protracted refugee situations on environmental and social conditions in host countries could be mitigated only through international financial and technical support, development assistance and specific projects from donors and international development and lending agencies.

53. The search for durable solutions should be predicated on eradicating the root causes of mass displacements. Pakistan would play its part by continuing to work with UNHCR and international actors to achieve that goal.

54. Mr. WITTIG (Germany) expressed satisfaction that the High Commissioner had reacted resolutely to the emerging shortage of resources, taking appropriate and innovative measures to preserve UNHCR's core mandate. In that regard, Germany had followed the High Commissioner's comments on "UNHCR 2004" with great interest and was prepared to enter into a dialogue with the organization and the other parties concerned on the far-reaching proposals contained in the "Convention Plus" initiative.

55. His Government would continue to offer UNHCR its strong support in dealing with the tasks ahead. It had already increased its basic contribution by 16 per cent and was, once again, UNHCR's major international project partner in the field of humanitarian assistance. In 2002 alone, UNHCR had received an additional EUR 14.5 million from the German Government for projects, in addition to the billions of euros which the Government disbursed each year for refugees living in Germany.

56. In Afghanistan, UNHCR had implemented one of the largest and most successful repatriation campaigns in its history. Germany was the third largest donor to that programme, having earmarked approximately EUR 17 million for the operation since 11 September 2001. It was also financing projects with non-governmental organizations aimed at providing refugees and returnees with emergency medical aid, food and accommodation.

57. Despite the events of 11 September 2001, it was important to avoid neglecting refugees in other parts of the world. His delegation welcomed the efforts of UNHCR to raise awareness of the economic potential of refugees and to launch initiatives for durable solutions, return and reintegration in cooperation with host countries and donors. Germany particularly welcomed efforts to coordinate UNHCR's work with that of the World Bank and UNDP and proposed that the establishment of financial instruments for the pooling of resources should be discussed in UNDP and World Bank fora. However, every effort should continue to be made to combat the root causes of displacement. The Governments concerned had a special responsibility to guarantee refugees the right to return in dignity and safety.

58. The allegations of the sexual abuse of refugee children in West Africa had tarnished UNHCR's broadly positive record in 2002. Germany trusted that the High Commissioner would continue to seek to protect vulnerable persons against such abuse and was grateful for his introduction of a zero tolerance policy.

59. The goal set by UNHCR for the Global Consultations process had been very ambitious. Although the final form of the Agenda for Protection had perhaps not measured up to expectations, the main objective of the Consultations had been achieved. The next task was implementation. Germany looked forward to discussing priorities and stood ready to participate actively in the forum of experts which the High Commissioner had proposed.

60. Mr. CHIARADIA (Argentina) said that Argentina had long been identified with the cause of refugees, displaced persons and all persons who were forced to take refuge in another country. It would continue to lend its support to their cause.

61. The Ministerial Meeting of States Parties which had been held in Geneva in December 2001 and at which the participants had reviewed the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol had marked a turning point in humanitarian law. The High Commissioner's new "Convention Plus" concept was interesting and would repay closer study by experts in various countries with a view to determining the modalities for its implementation. His country stood ready to evaluate all proposals aimed at helping Governments resolve the wide range of existing migratory challenges.

62. Argentina believed that the Convention remained as topical as ever, since it was the only universal instrument for the protection of refugees, as well as the cornerstone of international refugee protection. Argentina continued to support strict compliance with the principle of non-refoulement advocated by the Convention.

63. The Agenda for Protection should prove a useful tool for guiding UNHCR's work, monitoring the fulfilment of its mandate and assisting States in supporting its humanitarian efforts. The protection function entailed daily responsibility for protecting individuals or groups which had crossed national borders and whose fundamental rights were in jeopardy; it also implied responsibility for consolidating and giving effect to the legal framework governing the status and rights of refugees.

64. With regard to the "UNHCR 2004" process, Argentina supported UNHCR's current management structure. It took the view that awareness campaigns among private or corporate donors helped to broaden public contact with UNHCR's work and to promote sensitivity to the situations of other peoples and the importance of international cooperation in creating a better world.

65. An increasing number of displaced persons was in need of UNHCR's protection and the phenomenon showed no signs of abating. Argentina supported the High Commissioner's efforts not only to protect refugees, but also to search for durable solutions.

66. Regional efforts were also being made, including through the holding of the Third South American Conference on Migration which had been held in Quito in August 2002 and had adopted coordinated policies to combat the trafficking of persons and to harmonize legislation.

67. Argentina supported UNHCR's collaboration with other United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations in the search for durable solutions from the onset of a humanitarian crisis. It welcomed the idea of a strategic alliance with IOM, since multilateral participation was becoming more vital than ever. It also believed that international cooperation was one of the main tools for tackling complex refugee problems and solving them for the refugees' benefit.

68. The problem of the sexual abuse of refugees should be given serious attention. Argentina hoped that the new Code of Conduct would serve to improve conditions in refugee camps, particularly in view of the vulnerability of women and child refugees.

69. In the current climate, it was imperative to find imaginative and durable solutions to refugee problems. Argentina stood ready, as always, to participate actively in order to achieve that goal.

70. Mr. CHOWDHURY (Bangladesh) said that his delegation supported the High Commissioner's efforts to strengthen UNHCR so that it would be able to fulfil its mandate more effectively and his proposal to establish a strategic alliance with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). He welcomed the greater emphasis on establishing a comprehensive multilateral regime to deal with refugee issues, as the complex nature of humanitarian and refugee situations made a multilateral response inevitable. The notion of burden sharing was at the heart of durable solutions to refugee crises, although the tendency to view it in terms of cash contributions alone undermined the social, economic and political costs borne by developing countries with refugee populations. Nevertheless, he urged donor countries to be more generous in making unearmarked contributions to UNHCR.

71. The willingness of developing countries, including least developed countries like Bangladesh, to leave their borders open to refugees was in stark contrast to so-called "donor fatigue" and the trend in some countries to adopt more restrictive and discriminatory asylum policies. The impact on a least developed country of hosting large numbers of refugees for an extended period could not be overemphasized: Bangladesh had experienced large influxes of refugees from Myanmar in the past two decades, but now looked forward to an early return home for the remaining 22,000 refugees. He hoped that the international community's support for the repatriation process would not be affected by funding constraints.

72. He suggested that the following points should be taken into account in the ongoing review of the role and mandate of UNHCR: voluntary repatriation remained the preferred long-term solution; local integration was not viable in host developing countries, which must have some assurance that assistance would not be discontinued during prolonged refugee crises; the best way to prevent such crises was to address the root causes of refugee flows and create conditions in the countries of origin that would encourage refugees to return; and more effective measures needed to be taken to protect the most vulnerable refugees, such as women and children.

73. Mr. PRACHONPACHANUK (Thailand) said that the Agenda for Protection was an important programme that would not only enhance protection, but also strengthen the capacity of States to deal with refugee issues. The possible elements of the High Commissioner's "Convention Plus", such as the focus on reintegration and reconstruction, were certainly worthy of consideration. He supported the High Commissioner's efforts to prioritize durable solutions and burden sharing and to highlight the "Four Rs" - repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction - and the need to bridge the gap between relief and development.

74. Thailand had hosted a large refugee population for over three decades, and his Government was firmly committed to maintaining the humanitarian and civilian nature of asylum. That was why it excluded all armed elements from the refugee shelters and allowed non-governmental organizations to provide basic assistance in them. However, sheltering refugees placed a burden on host countries, particularly when they were developing countries, and that burden needed to be shared more equally by all countries. He urged UNHCR to proceed more systematically with the collection of social and economic information in and around the shelters in order to identify the development assistance needs of all the people concerned. The revitalized burden sharing suggested by the High Commissioner must also involve providing enhanced access to resettlement, as developing host countries could not automatically offer the possibility of local integration. In that respect, the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indo-Chinese Refugees set an important precedent for cooperative action. A focus on particular aspects of the problem, such as secondary movements, should not detract from efforts to tackle the problem at source. Durable solutions would not be possible if the role of countries of origin was neglected, as voluntary repatriation continued to be the preferred durable solution. He therefore welcomed the greater priority attached by UNHCR to creating an enabling environment inside countries of origin to help prevent further outflows. UNHCR should build on its strategic partnerships with organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and on its existing policy framework to bring together countries of origin, countries of first asylum and resettlement countries within a common framework in which the specific responsibilities of each were defined.

75. Mr. KESSEDJIAN (France), associating his delegation with the statement made by the representative of Denmark on behalf of the European Union, said that one of the many challenges facing UNHCR was to ensure that refugees were able to return to and remain in countries that were in the process of reconstruction. In that respect, he paid tribute to UNHCR for its work on the voluntary return of Afghan refugees and to the High Commissioner for his help in finding a solution to the problems at the Sangatte refugee centre in northern France, as a result of which the French and Afghan authorities and UNHCR had signed an agreement to encourage Afghans who wished to do so to return to their country in dignity and security.

76. His Government had recently made far-reaching changes to its asylum arrangements in order to cut the time needed to process asylum applications from over two years to two months. Henceforth, applications by refugees would be dealt with by a single office, while some of the services offered by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) would be decentralized to the regions where most of the asylum-seekers were to be found. In addition, refugee status could be granted in future even if the threat of persecution came from non-State actors. It was hoped that the reforms would be fully in force by the

beginning of 2004, once the necessary legislative changes had been made. Meanwhile, together with its European partners, his Government was also examining draft European directives on asylum which were expected to introduce new guarantees for asylum-seekers.

77. Mr. BYSTROV (Russian Federation) said that the Global Consultations process launched in 2000 had laid a firm foundation for implementing the 1951 Convention through the strengthening of international cooperation and the formulation of measures to respond to the complex problems engendered by population movements. A high-level standing committee should be established within the Office of the High Commissioner to conduct a thematic debate on ways to enhance the effectiveness of the protection regime and burden sharing mechanisms. Concerned States, international organizations and NGOs should work together in a spirit of neutrality, impartiality and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign States.

78. The Agenda for Protection was a seminal document for UNHCR and its partners in that it established valuable guidelines for their future work. At the same time, however, it should not be seen as having universal or binding legal force.

79. The Russian Federation held in very high esteem UNHCR's operations to deal with mass influxes of displaced persons. Its well-honed capabilities and trained staff made it the natural "lead agency" to handle crises of that nature. Recently, the idea had been floated at a number of international forums that a special international agency should be set up to focus on the needs and problems of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The Russian Federation believed that IDPs were primarily the responsibility of States themselves, and that international humanitarian organizations should provide assistance only with their consent. Accordingly, his Government opposed the establishment of any such agency and did not favour a review of the UNHCR Charter to facilitate such a development.

80. The "Convention Plus" initiative was commendable insofar as it stressed the need to seek complementary mechanisms to strengthen the international protection regime, including voluntary repatriation, protect refugees in mass exodus situations and encourage resettlement, post-conflict reintegration and reconstruction based on the principles of burden and responsibility-sharing.

81. The Russian Federation endorsed UNHCR's plan for the large-scale organized repatriation of Afghan refugees from the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and other countries. The implementation of the plan would definitely help to stabilize the political situation in Afghanistan and throughout the region. In that connection, his Government wished to remind UNHCR that the Russian Federation had considerable experience in carrying out humanitarian projects, including in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, his Government was disappointed at the slow rate of return of IDPs to Kosovo from other areas of Yugoslavia. All humanitarian agencies, including UNHCR, should take steps to encourage the large-scale return to Kosovo of the Serbs, Roma and representatives of other ethnic groups who used to live there. The precarious security situation in Kosovo was probably at the root of the problem.

82. His Government welcomed the fact that the participants at the fifth meeting of the Steering Group on follow-up to the 1996 Geneva Conference on the Problems of Refugees, Displaced Persons, Migration and Asylum Issues had decided to continue their work, thereby

guaranteeing stability and security both inside the Commonwealth of Independent States and beyond. Despite that welcome news, however, it should be borne in mind that the objectives outlined in Geneva in 1996 had yet to be fulfilled. The full potential of multilateral cooperation between countries in the region, donor countries, UNHCR and other international agencies had been insufficiently tapped. The Russian Federation was counting on UNHCR to make up lost ground and to galvanize donors.

83. Mr. PINOARGOTE CEVALLOS (Ecuador) said that the humanitarian crisis created by the conflict in Colombia had direct social and economic repercussions on all the countries in the region, particularly those such as Ecuador that shared borders with Colombia. His Government had gone to great lengths to respond effectively to the crisis, but needed international support to maintain and step up its efforts. If donor countries provided a more realistic budget, more effective preventive measures could be taken and the host communities would be better able to deal with the social and economic impact of refugee arrivals. It would be particularly helpful if the principle of dealing with refugees in the context of development could be put into practice. The number of asylum-seekers was growing at an alarming rate and his country's ability to absorb them was nearing its limits. Although his Government was prepared to continue training officials in how to comply fully and effectively with Ecuador's international commitments, it was in urgent need of help from donor countries, which must recognize that the refugee situation was not the same in Ecuador as in other parts of the world and thus required a different kind of response.

84. Mr. REYES RODRÍGUEZ (Colombia) said that one of the most important principles in the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees was the prohibition of expulsion or return, but States were finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish between persons with justified fears of persecution and those with economic or other motives for moving to another country. The same measures that made it difficult for illegal immigrants to enter the labour market in their "promised land" made it difficult for potential refugees to enter a country. While it was up to the international community to take steps to implement the right to development, UNHCR should continue to focus on implementing the Convention and the defence of the concept of asylum should be the prime objective of its international protection strategy. Indeed, the protection of refugees in the wider context of the complex challenges posed by migration was central to the institutional development of UNHCR. He therefore supported Goal 2 in the Agenda for Protection, "Protecting refugees within broader migration movements", particularly with regard to cooperation with IOM, which would help ensure that better use was made of scarce financial and human resources. In his own country, UNHCR had already shown its ability to cooperate with IOM and other international organizations and national institutions, and also to assist thousands of displaced persons or refugees while avoiding politicization and controversy.

85. Mr. LEVY (Israel), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, refuted the interpretation by the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States of the refugee problem that had arisen following the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1947. Whereas Israel had absorbed the massive flow of Jewish refugees from Arab countries, the members of the League of Arab States had chosen to perpetuate the Palestinian refugee problem for political ends. It was a matter of record that the Palestinian Authority had rejected the Israeli proposals at peace negotiations in Camp David in 2000, at which the Palestinian refugee issue had been high on the agenda, as well as the bridging proposals presented later by the former President of the United States, Bill Clinton,

thereby making a conscious choice to embark upon a path of violence rather than to conclude negotiations. When the Israeli army had been compelled to enter refugee camps, its intention had not been to target innocent refugees, but to dismantle bases of terror established by militant groups abusing the protective humanitarian shield around the camps. The refugee problem would be resolved only by negotiations, which could restart once the violence had ceased.

86. For the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, the “right of return” was a euphemistic reference not only to the return of Palestinian refugees to an eventual Palestinian State, but also to a neighbouring State. Was it reasonable to expect that many hundreds of thousands of such refugees would be allowed to return within the borders of the State of Israel?

The meeting rose at 17.50 p.m.