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

Fifty-third session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 565th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 2 October 2002, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. YIMER (Ethiopia)

CONTENTS

PRESENTATION BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER (continued)

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

PRESENTATION BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER (agenda item 4) (continued)

1. Mr. RODRIGUES (Mozambique) urged the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to redouble its efforts in close cooperation with all concerned parties in order to mitigate the suffering of millions of refugees throughout the world. The problem of refugees in Africa continued to have serious repercussions on all initiatives aimed at strengthening the social and economic development of the continent. Conflicts in Africa continued to generate humanitarian disasters and precious human, financial and natural resources were wasted and destroyed instead of serving the ends of development. However, Governments and the international community at large had started successfully to address the root causes of refugee problems through conflict resolution initiatives and the adoption of confidence-building measures and other internationally agreed mechanisms to remedy the situation.
2. The end of the war in Angola finally promised a bright future not only for Angolans, but also for the people of Africa in general. The immediate task at hand was to help refugee and displaced Angolans return to their homes. In the Great Lakes region, it was necessary to build a platform for peace and mutual trust if the ongoing negotiations were to succeed, particularly those relating to the already agreed mechanisms to end the conflicts in that region of Africa. The end of conflict and the restoration of peace and security in Africa were indispensable if the root causes of the proliferation of refugees in that part of the world were to be eliminated.
3. Refugee problems should be addressed on the basis of international solidarity and burden sharing, thereby enabling the international community, countries of origin and host countries to work in unison and in a spirit of common understanding and mutual trust towards the same end. UNHCR had played a remarkable role in providing international protection and assistance to refugees around the world, but it was disturbing to note the financial constraints affecting an increasing number of refugees in Africa, especially mothers and children.
4. Southern Africa was facing its worst food shortage since 1992. About 13 million people in six countries, including Mozambique, were affected. Drought could displace millions of people within their own countries or force them to cross borders. The region was unfortunately prone to cyclical natural disasters. The floods which had hit Mozambique in 2000 and 2001 had resulted in considerable loss of life and damage to property. Many people had been forced to flee their homeland, having lost all their property. Mozambique wished to commend the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) for the efforts it had made in responding to the humanitarian crisis in Southern Africa. Notwithstanding all the difficulties it was experiencing, Mozambique stood ready to continue to fulfil its international obligations towards refugees in its territory; however, considering its economic situation, it once again called upon UNHCR and the international community to help it in that undertaking by providing the necessary financial assistance. It also urged UNHCR to strengthen partnerships with all concerned Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders to find durable solutions to refugee problems.

5. Ms. KASINGO (Namibia) welcomed the innovative and visionary opening statement by the High Commissioner. Like the High Commissioner, Namibia took the view that a durable solution to refugee problems was not possible without taking account of needs in the areas of reconstruction, repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration. It was therefore imperative, after any voluntary repatriation exercise had been completed, that the country of origin should receive the necessary assistance in order to rehabilitate returnees, install necessary infrastructures and identify income-generating projects for both returnees and the disadvantaged local communities that hosted them.

6. As to the allegations of sexual harassment in West Africa, her delegation believed that emphasis should be placed on prevention. Accordingly, Namibia welcomed the introduction of the relevant Code of Conduct. Vulnerable groups in the refugee population should be made aware of sexual violence through education campaigns, so that they could be informed of their rights and given the opportunity to report instances of harassment to the competent authorities without fear of reprisals.

7. Given that refugee problems were everybody's problem, Namibia welcomed UNHCR's approach of setting up a task force to review its partnerships. Namibia would cooperate fully with efforts undertaken through African regional organizations. Her delegation was aware that the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees was somewhat outdated and hence it fully supported the High Commissioner's new approach, namely, "Convention Plus". Namibia was already a party to the 1951 Convention and was preparing to accede to the 1967 Protocol and the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. Last but not least, her Government welcomed the peace process currently under way in Angola, which had reduced the refugee population in Namibia and neighbouring countries. It would cooperate closely with the Angolan authorities to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Angolan refugees. Donors should be approached to ensure that the repatriation exercise was carried out in as safe and dignified a manner as possible.

8. In accordance with the 1951 Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention, Namibia, Botswana and the UNHCR delegation in Namibia had recently facilitated the voluntary repatriation of 591 Namibians from Botswana. Her delegation requested UNHCR to continue providing assistance until the repatriation had been completed and the Namibian returnees had been reintegrated into local communities.

9. Mr. ABDULALEEM (Sudan) recalled that the Sudan had received its first influx of refugees 40 years previously. Since then, it had drawn lessons from its experiences, welcomed all kinds of refugees fleeing their homelands for different reasons and noted that the international community's interest in refugee programmes and its degree of cooperation with those programmes were variable. In recent years, the Sudan had unilaterally had to shoulder most of the refugee burden in its territory, notwithstanding the declared objective of burden sharing between the international community and host countries.

10. His Government believed that voluntary repatriation could be a durable solution only when a conducive climate and absorption capacities had been established and were being maintained in the country of origin. To that end, the Sudan had cooperated with UNHCR and a number of neighbouring countries, thereby facilitating the voluntary repatriation of thousands of

refugees in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. His Government had continued to cooperate with UNHCR when the High Commissioner had announced the application of the cessation clause with regard to the Ethiopian refugees who had left their country prior to 1991. It was still cooperating after the High Commissioner's decision to apply the same clause to the Eritrean refugees from the end of 2002. In order to put that decision into effect, a tripartite commission had convened several times to work out the modalities for repatriation. In conjunction with UNHCR, the Sudan was endeavouring to ensure that the shortcomings that had become apparent when the cessation clause had been applied to the Ethiopian refugees did not reoccur in the case of the Eritrean refugees. A proactive information campaign was currently under way to inform those refugees of their rights and duties and screening teams would be standing by to determine their future status as soon as national lawyers had been trained up and had joined the teams. The international community should provide adequate resources to repatriate the Eritrean refugees. The Sudan was of the view that all the Eritrean refugees must return home because the reasons that had forced them to leave their homeland in the first place no longer existed. They must return to Eritrea in order to contribute to that country's development as entrepreneurs, technicians and skilled workers, thereby putting to good use the training they had received in the Sudan. Moreover, the Sudan was counting on the understanding and cooperation of the donor community to restore the environment and rehabilitate the infrastructures in the areas where the refugees used to live.

11. His delegation strongly supported the tireless efforts which UNHCR had made over the past year to facilitate voluntary repatriation as a durable solution and counted on donors to boost their financial contribution towards those efforts.

12. The cutbacks in resources allocated under the General Programme had had a very negative effect on the services provided to refugees. The Sudan therefore appealed to the donor community to equip UNHCR financially to care for refugees' basic needs in the areas of health, education and drinking water, pending their voluntary return to their homeland in safety and dignity. The budget of the General Programme for Africa had dwindled with every passing year, threatening the very survival of refugees and making it necessary to allocate sufficient resources to that vital programme.

13. His Government was unwaveringly committed to bringing about durable peace in the Sudan. It had approached peace talks with an open mind. If the rebel movement adopted the same attitude, lasting peace would be possible. It was the wish of the Government that Sudanese refugees should return home. To that end, it had established multilateral contacts with UNHCR and a number of neighbouring States to enable Sudanese representatives to visit the refugee camps, inform the refugees of actual conditions in the Sudan and encourage their voluntary repatriation. The anticipated return of all the Sudanese refugees in the near future would necessitate both national and international efforts to reintegrate them in their areas of origin. The Sudan looked forward to receiving assistance from the international community in order to finance reconstruction projects.

14. Mr. BEKE DASSYS (Côte d'Ivoire) said that his Government subscribed to the High Commissioner's proposed "Four Rs" approach and also to the Agenda for Protection and the action envisaged under the "UNHCR 2004" process. It would also be a good idea to involve

host countries more closely in the process of reflecting on UNHCR's partnership with the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP), the World Bank, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and WFP.

15. His Government thanked UNHCR for maintaining a skeleton staff in the refugee-hosting area but the UNHCR delegation in Danané, the region hosting the largest number of refugees, remained closed. Despite the significant cutbacks in UNHCR staff numbers, his Government had pursued a number of projects, for example, conducting a census of refugees in Ivorian territory, integrating refugee children into the Ivorian education system, launching a rehabilitation programme for the refugee-hosting area in collaboration with UNDP, establishing a process for mobilizing donors around that project with assistance from UNHCR and identifying sites to host approximately 20,000 new Liberian refugees who had arrived recently in Côte d'Ivoire.

16. Faithful to its traditions of welcome and hospitality, Côte d'Ivoire intended to remain committed to helping refugees. Unfortunately, its efforts could be frustrated by the serious crisis that had gripped the country since 19 September 2002, when heavily armed and well-organized Ivorian and foreign troops had attempted to stage a coup d'état with the clear objective of overthrowing the legitimately elected Government recognized by the international community. The demolition of shanty towns next to the gendarmerie barracks at Agban during the initial stage of the rebellion had made large numbers of people homeless and the Government was now seeking to rehouse them. His delegation deplored the fact that the difficult situation had been exploited to give the erroneous impression that refugees and foreigners living in Côte d'Ivoire could have been targets of violence and xenophobia.

17. Ms. RAOUL (Observer for the Congo) said that the current session of the Executive Committee was taking place at a time when, in different areas of the world and especially in Africa, thousands of people were leading very precarious lives and their dignity and well-being were under threat. The international community should demonstrate considerable solidarity in striving for the re-establishment of genuine peace and the improvement of the situation of refugees. The Global Consultations conducted by UNHCR and a significant improvement in its budget should help to achieve those objectives.

18. The Congo, with its population of 3 million, was experiencing a very difficult situation because it was currently hosting nearly 100,000 refugees of different nationalities. It was hard to calculate their precise number because it had been impossible to carry out a census owing to financial constraints. Her delegation appealed once again to the international community and to donors to provide the Congo with the funds to carry out that large-scale operation. It was the fervent wish of her Government that peace should be re-established as soon as possible in the countries of origin of the refugees now in the Congo, thereby facilitating their voluntary repatriation in dignity and safety, because the burden of hosting them was becoming increasingly difficult to shoulder. In fact, the massive influx of refugees was a humanitarian disaster for the refugees themselves and for the host populations.

The meeting rose at 10.55 a.m.