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Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 5 October 2004, at 9.15 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. ESCUDERO MARTÍNEZ (Ecuador)

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The meeting was called to order at 9.30 a.m.

REPORTS ON THE WORK OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE (agenda item 5)

Report on the High Commissioner's mission to Chad and the Sudan (23-28 September 2004)

1. Mr. LUBBERS (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that upon his arrival in Ndjamena at the start of the mission his attention had been drawn to the plight of the 33,000 refugees from the Central African Republic stranded in southern Chad. Those refugees could only hope that the elections scheduled for January 2005 would provide sufficient stability to allow them to be repatriated. Meanwhile, in eastern Chad some 180,000 of the estimated 200,000 refugees from Darfur were already accommodated in 10 camps, and an eleventh camp had just been opened to accommodate the rest. Prior to the mission, a team from UNHCR had visited the camps to look into, among other things, protection issues, including sexual and gender-based violence, and the need to ensure that the camps were weapon-free. The team had observed a certain amount of tension between the refugees and the local population as a result of the extra demand for water and firewood, as well as a certain amount of envy on the part of the locals, which was a fairly common, if perverse, indicator of the quality of the services provided by UNHCR. To find out how best to address those problems, UNHCR and other organizations of the United Nations system were actively canvassing the views of both the local people and the refugees.

2. In Darfur itself he had found that the Sudanese authorities did not believe that there were 200,000 refugees in the camps in Chad, or that all the people in the camps were from Darfur. Although there was no evidence to support that view, it showed that registration practices in the camps needed to be tightened up. He had also found a divergence of views as to how long it would take to repatriate the refugees: optimists like himself hoped that they could be repatriated within a year, while others thought that it was more likely to take three or four years.

3. From his meetings with local officials, humanitarian workers and internally displaced persons he had obtained the impression that the situation in Darfur was more akin to a ceasefire that was sometimes breached than to a war or a situation of systematic violence. Mobile protection teams from UNHCR were working in the communities, and their mere presence helped make the local population feel more protected and thus more likely to report incidents that might otherwise go unreported, such as rape. Given the absence of any real police force, UNHCR was trying to persuade the Sudanese authorities to set up special teams of female police officers or assistants to work with internally displaced persons and deal with reports of acts such as rape and other forms of sexual violence. UNHCR was also trying to help internally displaced persons establish their own social structures, particularly by empowering women, as it had found that to be one of the most effective ways to improve protection.

4. With regard to cooperation in resolving the situation in Darfur, he highlighted the efforts made under the 90-day plan involving United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and stressed the need for a substantial African Union presence, not only to monitor the ceasefire but also to create a situation in which repatriation was possible. UNHCR was also cooperating particularly closely with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, whose activities it was in a position to complement. He

considered it particularly important to develop good relations with the local authorities, as he had been struck during his visit by the mixed reactions of Sudanese officials to his comments: they could be very defensive if he suggested that the people of Darfur should be given greater autonomy, yet full of praise for the assistance provided by UNHCR and its contribution to improving the security situation. He acknowledged that it was sometimes as difficult for the authorities as it was for UNHCR to determine exactly what was happening on the ground. On one occasion during the mission, a senior government minister had told him that large numbers of internally displaced persons had returned to their homes, a claim that UNHCR was not in a position to verify.

5. In Khartoum he had been reminded that the Sudan still faced serious problems in the eastern part of the country, where many Eritrean refugees were awaiting repatriation and where projects were under way to close camps that were no longer needed. The situation in the south had changed little since his previous visit to the Khartoum almost a year earlier: the return of refugees and a peace agreement were still expected “tomorrow”. If indeed refugees and internally displaced persons were to be able to return to their homes soon, UNHCR would have to coordinate its efforts with the local authorities: in any case, there would be a need for broader protection than that afforded by UNHCR. He did feel there had been some progress, as the authorities in Khartoum and in the south were beginning to look at practical ways to help returnees.

6. The Sudanese Government’s recent agreement to the idea of “safe areas” for internally displaced persons was welcome in that it signalled the Government’s commitment to the peace process, but from an operational viewpoint it was important to remember that for many internally displaced persons such areas were more like prisons than safe areas. Although it was too early to talk of the return of internally displaced persons as anything other than an ultimate objective, he was confident that steady progress could be made towards that objective through the continuing efforts of the international community to engage the local authorities, and that UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) would have a role to play in the outcome.

7. Mr. ALMAGLY (Sudan) said that it was too often overlooked that the Sudan had hosted over 1.5 million refugees from neighbouring countries in the past 40 years and that there were currently over 5,000 Chadian refugees in Darfur itself. Some observers were quick to blame the Sudanese Government, which did indeed have primary responsibility for protecting the population, but slow to condemn intervention by the international community that merely exacerbated the conflict. An article in the Washington Post of 28 September 2004 had argued cogently that one of the reasons why the rebels in Darfur had refused to cease hostilities was that they were convinced that the international community was on their side. The rebels had concluded that the longer they fought, the more likely the international community was to intervene on their behalf. According to the Washington Post, the international community had repeatedly exacerbated conflicts through the “moral hazard of humanitarian intervention”. A similar point had been made by a legal adviser to the NGO Médecins sans frontières, who had argued that the events in Darfur had been classified as genocide even before urgently needed relief was provided, thus putting pressure on the Sudanese authorities. Allegations of genocide had become a powerful diplomatic weapon, and humanitarian organizations should be careful that they were not unwittingly used for others’ political purposes.

8. The Sudanese Government had given NGOs from all over the world, including NGOs that were not registered in the Sudan or had been banned there in the past, unimpeded access to the country, and yet there were still members of the international community who claimed that the Sudan was not serious about allowing the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Despite its meagre resources, the Sudan had deployed over 6,000 police officers in trouble spots and was fully committed to complying with Security Council resolution 1564 (2004). It had accepted the deployment of African Union monitors and had even requested that their numbers should be increased from the proposed 4,000. It was looking forward to seeing how the international community, including UNHCR, delivered on its promises of assistance.

9. It was the rebels in the Sudan who were hindering relief delivery and peace efforts: for that reason, the international community must be careful not to encourage them by sending the wrong signals, as when the United States Secretary of State had effectively scuppered a peace deal between the Government and the rebels by declaring at a crucial moment in the negotiations that genocide was taking place. Refugee displacement was a by-product of conflict: once the conflict was ended, their suffering would be over, too.

10. Mr. ALAGHBASH (Sudan), while expressing appreciation for UNHCR efforts to resolve the situation in Darfur, said that the programme in eastern Sudan had been overlooked. Notwithstanding the conclusions of the Tripartite Commission meeting held in April 2004 that the refugee status determination (RSD) process and reorganized repatriation should be completed by October and December 2004 respectively, the Sudan had had a zero budget since July 2004. As a result it had been unable to fulfil any of its commitments in the area of truth and reconciliation. He had hoped to bring the matter to the attention of the High Commissioner but would discuss it in detail with the Assistant High Commissioner in due course.

11. Ms. REPETTI (Argentina), referring to the High Commissioner's comment on the need to complement work being done by UNHCR, asked whether he had in mind some formal coordination mechanism or ad hoc solutions.

12. Mr. DEWEY (United States of America) said that the mission to Darfur and Chad, in which he had participated, had been particularly useful for the donors who were providing more than 50 per cent of the resources for the humanitarian effort under way, as it had allowed them to assess the needs of victims and understand the suffering that had prompted their flight to Chad. As lead agency in Chad, UNHCR could provide a more effective response to the emergency situation, although the courageous efforts of the very small team that had initially moved refugees to safety were indeed praiseworthy. The problem now was that as many as 100,000 more refugees were contemplating going to Chad. He had never witnessed such total disgust with a Government as he had seen during the mission, which was why action must be taken not only by UNHCR, but also by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the African Union monitors, whose role should be strengthened.

13. The representative of the Sudan had said that the Sudan's positive role in hosting so many refugees was being overshadowed by the situation in Darfur. When he had visited the Sudan more than 20 years previously it had served as a model for other nations and had been a haven for hundreds of thousands of refugees. However, it had become a different country and had seriously tarnished its image. That situation must be remedied, and the international community must support the victims in Darfur.

14. Mr. WOLDEGIORGIS (Ethiopia) said that for a number of reasons there had been serious delays in the programme for the voluntary repatriation of Eritrean refugees from eastern Sudan. His Government was committed to that programme and hoped to see it completed before the end of December 2004, as scheduled, so that efforts for the reintegration of those refugees could get under way. He therefore appealed to the Executive Committee to seek ways and means of facilitating the implementation of the programme.

15. Mr. LUBBERS (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that it would not be an easy task to conclude the voluntary repatriation of Eritrean refugees on schedule. As not all the refugees wanted to return to their homeland, there was even an outflow of refugees from the country. The first challenge, then, was for the Eritrean authorities to create conditions that would make the refugees more eager to return.

16. On the Sudanese side, there were several more considerations. If the repatriation process was completed, a number of camps would need to be closed. UNHCR hoped to make headway with the rehabilitation programme, the specific details of which would have to be discussed with the Sudanese authorities. Lastly, more emphasis should be placed on local integration, given the generally positive view of the Sudanese authorities towards the Eritrean refugees.

17. His appeal for observation of the ceasefire was addressed to the rebels as well as to the Sudanese authorities. While priority was being accorded to the victims, it was clear that the rebels shared responsibility for bringing the situation to an end. He endorsed the comments that had been made about the important role played by the Sudan as a host country for refugees.

18. In response to the Argentine representative's query regarding coordination, he said that initially there had been no coordination to speak of, merely an urgent appeal for humanitarian assistance. Other organizations had been active in Chad long before UNHCR, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), many NGOs, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. UNHCR had endeavoured to fulfil its mandate as a coordinating agency, but had been thwarted by conditions on the ground.

19. At present the person responsible for coordinating efforts to protect internally displaced persons in situ was the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sudan. During the recent mission and the briefing held that morning such matters had been discussed, and the need for a mutually agreed, systematic approach was now recognized. However, UNHCR could not sit back and wait until such an approach was developed. At the request of the Humanitarian Coordinator, his Office was already finding ways of participating, particularly in West Darfur, where the 100,000 refugees mentioned by the United States representative were to be found. Until something more formal could be agreed upon, the current arrangement involving the Humanitarian Coordinator would seem to be satisfactory.

20. Mr. FAKHOURI (Director of Operations for the Sudan Situation) said that documentation was available in the meeting room on the rehabilitation programme for refugees in eastern Sudan. The inter-agency programme had been launched in Khartoum at the end of September, and support for its financing was being sought.

STATEMENT BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER, GUEST SPEAKER AND GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 4) (continued)

21. Mr. HOSSEINI (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that the significant political changes that had taken place in Afghanistan over the past two and a half years had been followed by considerable progress in the humanitarian sphere, which had paved the way for a durable solution to the refugee situation in the form of voluntary repatriation. His country remained committed to the principle of voluntary repatriation.

22. Under the joint repatriation programme involving his country and Afghanistan more than 1.05 million refugees had returned home since April 2002 - an unprecedented operation in recent UNHCR history. In 2004 some 390,000 refugees had returned home, an average of 4,000 per day, and the number was expected to rise in 2005, particularly after the presidential election, in which roughly 600,000 Afghan refugees would be eligible to vote.

23. At the recent meeting of the Tripartite Commission composed of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Afghanistan and UNHCR, the need to continue the joint repatriation programme had been stressed, and it was to be hoped that the international community would help with financing. The return and successful reintegration of Afghan refugees and displaced persons called for a comprehensive approach that took into account the refugees' essential needs.

24. However, the current voluntary repatriation effort should not take precedence over UNHCR assistance programmes to meet the basic needs of the more than 1.2 million Afghan refugees who still lived in the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly the need for education and medical care. He appealed to UNHCR to take the situation on the ground in host countries into account when phasing down activities relating to Afghan refugees.

25. The assisted voluntary return of Iraqi refugees was equally a matter of urgency. Given the political changes in Iraq and in spite of the current security situation in that country, tens of thousands of Iraqis were impatiently demanding to return to their homeland. Over the last year many Iraqis had spontaneously repatriated, but very few had been assisted in their return, which was why a well-managed voluntary repatriation operation was needed.

26. The current refugee situation worldwide and the increasing challenges faced by UNHCR clearly indicated the need for an effective mechanism for international burden sharing. His delegation therefore supported the Forum and Convention Plus processes and welcomed the report of the Working Group on Resettlement. Consultations that took place within such processes should assess the weaknesses of the current regime for refugee protection and assistance and propose concrete solutions. At the same time, the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol remained valid. He welcomed the fact the Executive Committee would be focusing on international cooperation for burden and responsibility sharing in mass influx situations and expressed the hope that that discussion would lead to a specific arrangement for easing the burden on host developing countries, such as his own. In addition, the IOM Academy for Migration and Refugee Studies, which had begun its work in Tehran the previous month, could serve as a base for monitoring regional refugee and irregular migration problems and seeking durable solutions.

27. Mr. PRACHONPACHANUK (Thailand) said he was glad that although attention was being focused on emergencies such as the situation in Chad, protracted situations and durable solutions for them were not being forgotten by UNHCR. Thailand appreciated the more systematic approach that was being taken to protracted situations and supported the idea of their regular review. It also supported efforts to promote greater flexibility in selection criteria in order to provide more resettlement opportunities for refugees. The adoption of conclusions on international cooperation and burden and responsibility sharing in mass influx situations, was a positive step, but it should be borne in mind that burden sharing must be viewed in terms of global and not merely regional responsibilities.

28. He welcomed the statement by the Executive Director of WFP and said that food security was of importance not only in emergency situations but also in promoting post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction. As an agricultural country, Thailand looked forward to discussing ways and means of improving access to food assistance with WFP.

29. With regard to statelessness, Thailand held the view that solutions must take into account each country's specific circumstances and had adopted a pragmatic approach that sought to balance legitimate State concerns against humanitarian considerations.

30. He praised the UNHCR initiative to become a co-sponsor of the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). The Office's advocacy role would assist the holistic approach required to address the challenges posed by HIV/AIDS.

31. Turning to programmes in Asia and the Pacific, he said that the past year had been one of constructive dialogue between the Thai Government and UNHCR, particularly on status determination and admission and registration. Moreover, UNHCR activities in recent months had paved the way for the repatriation of more than 120,000 displaced persons. He welcomed UNHCR efforts to create conditions in Myanmar conducive to the return of displaced persons and the needs assessment and capacity-building activities it was conducting in that country. In Thailand the benefits of contingency planning had been appreciated, and he pledged his country's support for an inclusive approach that would involve all stakeholders in preparations for returns. While the objective of such preparations was to empower refugees, the matter of how to rehabilitate areas of Thailand affected by the presence of refugees should also be considered. He looked forward to the forthcoming visit to Thailand of the Assistant High Commissioner and the new Director of the Bureau for Asia and the Pacific to discuss such matters.

32. Another subject of discussion between his Government and UNHCR had been assistance to persons of concern. Thailand had traditionally taken a humanitarian and open approach to those in need; however, given that that hospitality was sometimes abused, greater transparency and discretion by UNHCR on such matters would be appreciated.

33. Thanks were due to UNHCR for its work in resettling the Hmong population from Tham Krabok in the United States of America. That operation, which had benefited from the generosity of the United States, could be seen as an example of the strategic use of resettlement in a formal framework, which provided a comprehensive solution to a protracted situation.

34. Mr. HUGHES (Australia) said that for the second consecutive year there had been a welcome fall in the world refugee population. At the end of 2003, the total number of persons of concern to UNHCR stood at 17.1 million, a dramatic reduction in the 27 million persons of concern to UNHCR in 1995, and the total number of refugees at under 9.7 million. Those figures showed that it was possible to achieve results through the concerted efforts of UNHCR and States in tackling the root causes and adopting durable solutions.

35. At the same time, new protection problems had emerged, such as the outflow of refugees from Darfur. He was appalled by the humanitarian and human rights disaster in the Sudan; concerted international efforts were needed to find a lasting solution and alleviate the suffering and abuses.

36. The challenge for the international community was to sustain the momentum in finding solutions for the remaining 17 million people of concern to UNHCR, in particular the number of refugees in protracted situations. For although camps saved lives in the emergency phase, over the years they progressively wasted those same lives, and it was a sad fact that several million refugees were trapped in such situations without any hope of a solution. The successes posted by UNHCR and States in recent years had been achieved above all through voluntary repatriation, supported by resettlement and local integration, where appropriate.

37. In order to overcome the particular difficulties posed by protracted refugee situations, the international protection system needed to be dynamic and open to new ideas. Experience showed that the most effective solutions were part of a comprehensive approach characterized by a blend of ingredients appropriate to a particular situation. The Convention Plus initiative had the potential to provide such solutions; however, in order to obtain the desired results and ensure a comprehensive rather than single solution, more work needed to be done on aligning the three strands of the initiative. It was also necessary to move from the conceptual phase to practical implementation.

38. Australia had long experience with integration and resettlement, and while resettlement was, not always the only or the best durable solution, it had enormous advantages, offering refugees in first asylum countries dignity and security, easing the pressure on first asylum countries, and helping to resolve protracted caseloads. Australia heartily welcomed the High Commissioner's commitment to increasing the worldwide availability of resettlement places and called on UNHCR to ensure that its structures and processes supported that goal.

39. The resettlement function within UNHCR should be upgraded so that its leadership had sufficient authority to meet current and future demands, while UNHCR policy should focus more on resettlement as a durable solution, treating it as a mainstream function. The Office should increase its field support for the function, through such measures as the transfer of staff to resettlement field operations.

40. Mr. BRONI (Observer for Ghana) commended the High Commissioner for the Convention Plus initiative and his proposal to organize a subregional event in West Africa to consolidate the progress achieved on sustainable voluntary repatriation and reintegration. That event should result in support for some concrete projects that would benefit both refugees and local populations.

41. With regard to international protection, his Government not only honoured all its obligations under the relevant international instruments, but was also hosting some 60,000 refugees from all parts of Africa. It was the West African hub for the screening of refugees from the subregion and a screening centre for refugees resettled in North America, Australia and the United Kingdom.

42. Ghana's President and other African heads of State had worked tirelessly, through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to restore peace and stability to the subregion. However, poverty reduction, income generation and a higher quality of life were needed in order to build on those accomplishments. Targeted development assistance would facilitate the transition from relief to development and make the 4Rs concept a reality in the subregion.

43. The first group of Liberian refugees had returned to their country voluntarily on 1 October 2004. Ghana commended all those involved in that process, especially civil society groups, and wished to express its gratitude to the African leaders and United Nations officials who had lent it their personal weight and prestige. The international community should maintain its interest in the peace process taking place in Liberia and other African States and help with demobilization, reconstruction and reintegration in order to allow those countries to re-emerge as stable democratic societies governed by the rule of law.

44. An adequate "repatriation package" was needed for all Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees who voluntarily returned to their country, with particular emphasis placed on women and children returnees. Short-term humanitarian relief could not address the problems in conflict-torn or post-conflict societies. Peace meant not only the elimination of the causes of war, but also the creation of an enabling environment.

45. The decommissioning of weapons was vital to guaranteeing human security in Africa. The Ghana National Commission on Small Arms was working with civil society groups to prevent the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, while the security forces and immigration officers regularly conducted joint security inspections to weed out antisocial elements at the Buduburam refugee camp in order to ensure the protection and security of refugees. The inspections were conducted with full respect for the human rights of those concerned.

46. The special circumstances of African host countries should be taken into account when allocating resources for refugee maintenance, given the strain that the refugee burden placed on their fragile economies, environment and infrastructure. Disparities in resource allocation should be addressed to ensure that the same standards of care and protection were applied in all regions and to prevent vulnerable refugees from having to resort to emigration.

47. Mr. HIMANEN (Finland) called on the international community to work with UNHCR in strengthening the international protection regime. Finland supported the Office's efforts to develop a common understanding of what "effective protection" meant under international human rights and refugees law, since they were vital to understanding such issues as the causes of secondary movements. The existing protection regime did not always respond adequately to the changing realities that prompted people to move within countries or across borders. While

Finland fully supported the Convention Plus and other relevant initiatives, it believed that there should be an ongoing debate on new challenges, new approaches and implementation. At the same time, UNHCR needed adequate resources and qualified staff for its day-to-day field work.

48. Finland appreciated the Office's efforts to promote voluntary repatriation, particularly in post-conflict situations. However, better cooperation between UNHCR and other development actors was needed to ensure the safe and sustainable return of refugees and bridge the gap between humanitarian relief and development assistance. Finland welcomed the framework for strategic use of resettlement, but believed that more countries should be involved and should allocate resources to ensure its successful implementation.

49. His delegation attached great importance to the question of gender-based violence against refugee women and children and urged the effective implementation of the UNHCR Guidelines for Prevention and Response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. Gender and age consideration should be mainstreamed in protection activities.

50. His country intended to maintain its financial support for UNHCR at the present level. It recognized the Office's difficulty in funding budgeted programmes and appreciated the open and constructive dialogue it had established with donors to try to find new resources. It was crucially important that UNHCR should prioritize its activities and adhere strictly to its mandate.

51. Finland was deeply concerned about the worsening security environment and targeting of UNHCR staff. The security situation in refugee camps had also deteriorated, increasing the vulnerability of refugees. More attention should be paid to balancing staff security with action to address humanitarian needs.

52. Mr. DASSYS (Côte d'Ivoire) commended the High Commissioner for his personal commitment to resolution of the conflict in Liberia and the situation in Darfur. He congratulated UNHCR on the quality of its documents, particularly the Note on International Protection (A/AC.96/989), but pointed out that paragraph 12 of that document did not accurately reflect the situation in Côte d'Ivoire. The Act of May 2004 on the identification of persons and residence of aliens entitled refugees and asylum-seekers to receive identity documents that could serve as residence and work permits. The Ivorian authorities did not, therefore, place any institutional barriers in the way of refugees. Moreover, an asylum bill was currently before the National Assembly.

53. It was encouraging that the international community should take an interest in return as a durable solution. In the case of Liberia, however, conditions favourable to sustainable return had not yet been created. Although the Governments of Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sierra Leone had signed tripartite agreements for the voluntary repatriation of Liberian refugees, the efforts made to receive and reintegrate them in their country of origin had been rather modest. Greater international solidarity was needed to make Liberia attractive to its people. That was the only way to make return a durable solution, and it might also serve to turn the Liberian peace process into a driving force for stability in West Africa and a means of combating the trafficking in arms, mercenaries, drugs and prostitutes.

54. In 2002, some 6,000 refugees had been evacuated from Côte d'Ivoire and resettled in the United States of America in what was a fine example of international solidarity in difficult circumstances. Thanks were due to the United States, Norwegian and Swedish Governments and to UNHCR for making that operation possible. However, there were still Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire who required assistance with integration, and the Ivorian Government could not shoulder the burden alone. It welcomed the innovative approach taken by the Zambian Government and UNHCR in including refugees among the population groups that could benefit from the Millennium Development Goals. That approach should be supported and encouraged in countries with protracted refugee situations.

55. Côte d'Ivoire and the African Group ardently wished to strengthen their dialogue with UNHCR on changes to human resource management, in accordance with well-established principles.

56. Mr. OUVRY (Belgium) welcomed the step taken by the European Commission to grant the Executive Committee special observer status. His delegation also welcomed the efforts made by UNHCR to rise to the challenge of international refugee protection in emergency situations, as well as its role in seeking durable solutions. However, it deplored the fact that refugees, particularly women and children, continued to be the victims of violence and attacks, in spite of efforts by the Office and its partners to improve their security.

57. Although Belgium favoured any measure that helped to make the protection component of the Office's mandate operational, it nevertheless believed that the proposal to create a new post of Assistant High Commissioner for protection should be considered within the context of the Headquarters review.

58. UNHCR was to be commended for improving the protection of women refugees and mainstreaming gender considerations throughout its operations. However, many challenges still lay ahead: in the Great Lakes Region, for example, while significant progress had been made on voluntary repatriation, recent developments suggested that more political energy and considerable budgetary resources would be needed for the foreseeable future. It was vital that a significant portion of the Annual Programme Budget should be earmarked for that region, and Belgium hoped that supplementary appeals would remain an exceptional tool, subject to the criteria of relevance and unpredictability of requirements.

59. The progress made by UNHCR towards transparent and effective management was welcome, and efforts to further rationalize organizational methods and processes should be continued. To ensure greater financial stability and resource predictability, the Office should also consider adopting a biennial budget cycle, while retaining the flexibility to respond to emergencies. Budget planning should help to increase the volume of multi-year commitments from a growing number of donors.

60. As the complexity of the Office's tasks grew, close coordination with the rest of the United Nations system became even more vital. Belgium welcomed the steps taken by UNHCR to co-sponsor UNAIDS as well as its close partnership with WFP.

61. Mr. RODRIGUES (Mozambique) said that Mozambique recognized the importance of the Convention Plus initiative for attaining the objectives set out in the Agenda for Protection, and pledged renewed support for UNHCR's efforts to implement that initiative. His delegation noted with satisfaction the recent improvements in the Office's financial situation, which were a result of continued support from the international community.

62. Mozambique appreciated United Nations policies aimed at promoting partnerships among its agencies and welcomed in particular the progress that had been made through the partnership between UNHCR and the New Economic Programme for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in establishing peace and security programmes in post-conflict areas and recovery programmes for transition countries. His delegation also noted with satisfaction the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between WFP and NEPAD, which addressed a broad range of African concerns, including food security, livelihood protection, nutrition, HIV/AIDS and capacity-building. The mobilization of partnerships by UNHCR for primary education and health for refugees was a valuable contribution to the attainment of the eighth Millennium Development Goal. The particular vulnerability of women and children continued to be a cause of serious concern, and Mozambique encouraged UNHCR to pursue measures for their protection.

63. Although there had been increases in funding for projects in several regions, African refugee programmes continued to be underfinanced. Donations should not be earmarked for specific programmes but should be distributed equally, since inadequate funding for Africa was sending the wrong signal to vast numbers of people in need across the continent. His delegation endorsed the statement on the situation in Darfur made by the representative of Algeria on behalf of the Group of African States.

64. As a host country, Mozambique had registered over 10,000 asylum-seekers over the past five years. The Government was particularly concerned about the lack of resources available to assist the increasing number of refugees from the Great Lakes region. Efforts to provide legal status for asylum-seekers in Mozambique were being increased, and over half of the asylum applications filed over the past 12 months had been granted. However, further efforts were needed to speed up repatriations, which were still very slow.

65. Ms. GABR (Egypt) said that her delegation's participation in the work of the Executive Committee underscored Egypt's sincere commitment to international humanitarian work and protection efforts. That support stemmed not only from Egypt's commitments under international instruments, but also from the country's historical and cultural traditions.

66. With regard to UNHCR activities in Africa, she said that although the re-establishment of peace in some countries had led to the voluntary return of large numbers of refugees, efforts were needed to consolidate those achievements. Governments and donors should continue to support reconstruction and reintegration in war-torn countries, while care should be taken to maintain the purchasing power of the UNHCR budget and to prevent any reduction in, or indeed increase the level of, contributions and donations.

67. When appointing staff to its regional bureaux, UNHCR should select persons from the region in question in order to improve its understanding of the situation on the ground and its

identification of the assistance required. The Office should also design comprehensive regional and international capacity-building strategies, particularly for developing countries with economies in transition that were hosting large refugee populations or had protracted caseloads.

68. The financial situation of the UNHCR office in Cairo adversely affected that office's capacity to cope with the growing numbers of refugees coming to Egypt. The Egyptian Government was willing to consider the Office's proposals for improving the situation of refugees in Egypt, provided that any arrangements formed part of comprehensive capacity-building programmes and that the international community actively shared the burden.

69. The problems of refugees in Egypt should be seen in the context of the wider problems of Africa, as stated in the Agenda for Protection. The aims of the Agenda and the Convention Plus initiative could only be achieved by increasing the Office's resources and its ability to direct resources towards those areas where they were most needed. The international community should make a greater commitment to burden sharing and to honouring its obligations under the relevant international instruments.

70. Egypt had done everything possible with its United Nations partners to ease the suffering of internally displaced persons and refugees in Darfur. It recognized the complexity of the issues involved and hoped that the international community would go beyond apportioning blame to providing humanitarian assistance and, with the support of the African Union, helping the Sudan help itself. Such crises needed to be handled objectively and impartially if lives were to be saved.

71. Ms. de HOZ (Argentina) said that her Government was aware of the global challenge that must be faced in respect of refugees. Argentina commended the efforts of UNHCR, and would soon be making a voluntary contribution to the Office.

72. Although progress had been made in reducing the number of refugees worldwide, further action must be taken to improve awareness of, and swift reactions to, potential emergency situations. The efforts of UNHCR in Darfur, where it had shown determination in the face of a wide range of problems and logistical difficulties, were to be commended. Her delegation condemned the recent attacks on local and international UNHCR personnel, and endorsed the measures the Office was taking to protect its staff in the field.

73. Argentina welcomed the efforts made by UNHCR to collaborate with other humanitarian organizations and commended the Office for becoming the tenth co-sponsor of UNAIDS.

74. Twenty years had passed since the adoption of the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, which had made a valuable regional contribution to international refugee law. As a result of the Declaration's provisions, considerable headway had been made in improving the situation of refugees across South America and beyond. Argentina welcomed such progress and supported the call by UNHCR for States to consider what further measures could be taken in the future. Argentina had participated in a subregional meeting in Brasilia and an Argentine delegation would be present at the conference to be held in Mexico City in November 2004 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Declaration.

75. The Argentine Government was currently taking measures to improve its domestic legislation on refugees, including the drafting of a new migration law. The Government also hoped to adopt a new asylum law, that would incorporate more advanced standards and regulate issues relating to refugees, unaccompanied minors, gender inequality and family reunification. Argentina had always sought to apply the most generous and advanced measures in its efforts to provide protection to refugees and ensure gender and racial equality and religious freedom. Refugees enjoyed the same rights as all other persons in the country, such as access to legal assistance and health care, which was often costly.

76. Mr. BRUNI (Italy) said that it was important to maintain a clear distinction between the notions of migration and asylum. Italy shared the concern of UNHCR that ad hoc mechanisms should be established to allow timely and effective decisions to be made as to who was entitled to international protection and who was not. Owing to its geographical location, Italy was exposed to both regular and irregular migratory influxes, particularly from north Africa, a situation that could entail the use of political asylum to achieve economic and migration-related aims. Particular efforts must be made to prevent organized crime networks involved in trafficking in persons from perpetrating such abuse.

77. Italy supported measures to find durable solutions to the problem of refugees and refugee-producing situations, and was particularly in favour of burden and responsibility sharing across the international community. New mass influxes of refugees in Africa were a source of particular concern and showed that there was a need to improve protection standards by building the protection capacities of countries of origin. Such measures would lead to an increase in long-term solutions, such as voluntary repatriation, integration and resettlement. Further progress could be made by establishing multilateral sectoral agreements, as advocated by the Convention Plus initiative. Policy guidelines should be devised for the management of mass influx situations in order to achieve fair burden sharing, encourage durable solutions and avoid protracted refugee situations. Practical and pragmatic approaches for dealing with emergency phases in mass influx situations could be found by increasing cooperation between UNHCR and other United Nations agencies.

78. Although Italy wished to reserve its final decision on the proposal to establish a post of Assistant High Commissioner for protection, it considered any proposal to protect the mandate of UNHCR to be noteworthy, and recognized the potential benefits of rationalizing the Office's senior management structure. His delegation welcomed the establishment of a Policy Protection Unit. The UNHCR budget for 2005 would be carefully considered by the Italian Government, which intended to uphold its traditional financial commitments to the Office.

79. His delegation wished to pay a tribute to the courage of humanitarian staff from all organizations. Recent crises in the field had demonstrated the need to address staff security issues, and Italy would remain committed to supporting all those working to alleviate refugee problems around the world.

80. Mr. BOULGARIS (Switzerland) noted that 50 years had passed since the adoption of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, and encouraged all States that had not yet signed or ratified the Convention to do so. UNHCR must increase its activities in respect of stateless persons, by stepping up measures for prevention and technical assistance and broadening the geographical scope of its activities.

81. UNHCR funds and human resources should be redistributed more equitably between assistance and protection, since protection was currently under-resourced. The UNHCR protection mandate should be strengthened, and protection should be integrated into the Office's operational activities. Switzerland considered that the proposal to establish a post of Assistant High Commissioner for protection should be discussed in greater detail, in the context of a general discussion on the current UNHCR management structure.

82. Switzerland was making efforts to disseminate the Agenda for Protection among all those working in the country's asylum sector. A symposium on asylum was due to be held in Bern, which would focus on the implementation of the Agenda in Switzerland.

83. It was imperative that food security should be ensured for refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees, and Switzerland welcomed the joint food programmes that had been established by UNHCR and WFP, which demonstrated the importance of strengthening cooperation in the field of international humanitarian action. In many regions, the security situation on the ground, particularly for humanitarian staff, was deteriorating, and Switzerland supported UNHCR measures to protect personnel, in accordance with the 1949 Convention on the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field. He paid a tribute to the courage of all humanitarian staff working in crisis situations.

84. Switzerland commended UNHCR for its activities in the Democratic Republic of Korea and the progress that had been made in Sierra Leone, Angola and Liberia. It hoped that the newly resumed bilateral operations involving Nepal and Bhutan would lead to the swift repatriation of refugees from Bhutan who were currently living in the Khundunabari refugee camp. Complaints had been made regarding the respect of individual mandates in the United Nations Integrated Mission Task Force in Liberia, and he wondered whether UNHCR might report on its own experience in that regard. The situation in Darfur continued to cause great concern, and the information that had been provided by the High Commissioner had been appreciated. A similar account of the current situation in northern Uganda would be useful.

85. Switzerland urged UNHCR to be transparent in its organizational management. It was not clear why, despite the recent reduction in UNHCR staff, the Office's budgetary requirements had continued to increase. For its part, Switzerland would carefully consider any requests for the deployment of specialist staff to respond to the specific needs of the Office.

86. Ms. FORERO UCROS (Colombia) said that humanitarian crises spawned by internal conflict, terrorism and violence required a coordinated response from the United Nations system, Member States and NGOs. The threats to democracy posed by the ongoing violence in her country could only be overcome through international cooperation, both in terms of identifying solutions and building national capacities. Her Government was working closely with UNHCR on the complex problem of internal displacement in Colombia. A national framework for providing assistance to displaced persons had been established and appropriate priorities had been set.

87. Her Government's policy was based on the concept of democratic security, meaning that the State should have a presence throughout the national territory and endeavour to reduce levels of violence, an objective that had been achieved. The authorities had also sought to revitalize the

economy and increase social investment. To that end, the Social Solidarity Network had sponsored the reconstruction of a number of villages destroyed in terrorist attacks. The same body had helped to rebuild private homes, health centres and cultural and sports facilities. International assistance was required to ensure that displaced persons could subsequently return to their homes and safely benefit from the investment that had been made. The resettlement programme was complemented by another scheme designed to overcome a principal cause of internal displacement, namely food insecurity. To date some 70,000 Colombians had returned to their homes and approximately 600,000 farmers had been enrolled in agricultural projects to ensure that people could be fed locally.

88. The Colombian Government acknowledged the fundamental importance of the tripartite agreements it had concluded with neighbouring countries and UNHCR to deal with the problem of Colombian refugees abroad. It also recognized the need to follow up the development projects established pursuant to those agreements.

89. The twentieth anniversary of the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees in November 2004 would provide a valuable opportunity to reflect on the most appropriate mechanisms for promoting effective refugee protection and durable solutions to refugee and internal displacement problems in Central and Latin America.

90. Mr. GIGABA (South Africa) said that during the apartheid years South Africans had often found shelter and protection abroad; today they were keen to repay the debt by working with other countries in a multilateral framework to find durable solutions to refugee problems. South Africa had become a donor to such UNHCR programmes as repatriation to Angola, assistance to refugees in the Great Lakes region, and repatriation of Sudanese refugees to the southern Sudan. His Government had also made food donations and facilitated peaceful settlements to conflicts and wars.

91. All too often, however, international solidarity and the political will to banish poverty were in short supply. Under the terms of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), African leaders had made a plea for resources to be transferred from developed to developing countries. It was self-evident that if developing countries were encouraged to develop, wars and conflicts would cease and fewer people would flee their countries of origin. The transfer of resources from the developed to the developing world would enable host countries to bear the cost of hosting refugees and reduce xenophobia caused by competition for scarce resources between local people and refugees. At the same time, education campaigns were needed to make populations in receiving countries aware of the values of human solidarity and compassion.

92. The High Commissioner's Convention Plus initiative was important because it advocated the principles of multilateralism, responsibility and burden sharing as the best approach to tackling refugee challenges. The emphasis on durable solutions was particularly welcome. At the same time, the international community should redouble its efforts to alleviate the plight of the most vulnerable refugees, namely women and children. South African women had on several occasions worked together with women from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi to empower them to work for peace and development in their own countries.

93. Mr. STEINER (Germany) said that his Government sincerely appreciated the untiring commitment of UNHCR personnel and deplored attacks on the staff of any humanitarian organization. UNHCR remained the German Government's most important international partner in the field of humanitarian assistance, with German contributions to UNHCR in 2004 amounting to some €21 million to date. In addition, Germany was a major host country for refugees. It was imperative to deal with the root causes that forced people to flee their countries; the Governments of countries of origin had a special responsibility to safeguard respect for human rights, fight oppression and poverty, and ensure the return of refugees to their homes in safety and dignity.

94. The High Commissioner was right in saying that the world had taken too long to react to the crisis in Darfur. The political and humanitarian response was still insufficient. Massive human rights violations continued to leave large parts of the population with no choice but to flee, resulting in huge numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. A substantial part of the German Government's emergency relief contributions, totalling €32.5 million, had been channelled into UNHCR relief efforts. Additionally, Germany had allocated €1 million to assist the African Union in its efforts to cope with the situation in Darfur. It was incumbent on the Government of the Sudan to protect its citizens. Its failure to do so had prompted action by the international community, and it was therefore misguided to accuse the international community of interfering when the Sudanese Government had so miserably neglected to honour its most basic obligations.

95. Ms. GARAMVÖLGYI (Hungary) welcomed the High Commissioner's report on his visit to Chad and the Sudan. It was to be hoped that the Sudanese Government would make genuine efforts to remedy the crisis in the Darfur region.

96. From a European perspective, it was important to strike a balance between the objectives of the European Union and those of UNHCR and not to overlook international humanitarian and refugee law standards when protecting European interests. UNHCR and Hungary had cooperated closely since 1989, and the High Commissioner's Office had been instrumental in establishing and improving an effective refugee management system in Hungary. That cooperation had led to the establishment of a regional office in Budapest servicing the whole of the Central and Eastern European region. Eastern European States were well acquainted with refugee issues because migration corridors originating in Central Asia and the Far East, and in the Middle East and East Africa, passed directly through them. Accordingly, the European Union and UNHCR should cooperate more closely in fashioning a common asylum policy and a standard asylum procedure. There was considerable scope for blending UNHCR reintegration projects in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, with the European Union's plans for common resettlement and voluntary repatriation programmes.

97. Ms. RAOUL (Observer for the Congo) said that the Congo was currently home to 69,000 refugees, of whom 59,000 were being assisted by UNHCR, although the actual total was probably higher. She welcomed the recent signing of a tripartite agreement by the Governments of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and UNHCR. Her Government was fully aware of its obligations towards refugees and respected the principle of non-refoulement. UNHCR should therefore review the level of assistance it provided to the Congo, both for persons seeking asylum in the country and for Congolese refugees abroad,

notably in Gabon. Moreover, a programme was needed to repair damage caused by refugees during their stay in the Congo. Her delegation commended the recently formed Congolese National Committee for Assistance to Refugees, which handled all refugee determination procedures in the country, as a model for the subregion and requested technical and financial support for its activities.

98. Mr. RAPACKI (Poland) said that while Western Europe had witnessed a decline in the number of asylum-seekers and refugees, the reverse was true of Poland. Most of the refugees in Poland came from Eastern Europe and the Caucasus; a large number were Chechens. For many refugees, Poland had become a more attractive destination since its accession to the European Union. The country's refugee reception centres were currently bursting at the seams, but although such a situation presented obvious social, humanitarian and security concerns, his Government was nevertheless of the view that building another "iron curtain" along the Eastern border of the European Union would not decrease westward refugee flows.

99. Poland shared the High Commissioner's view that a single European policy - the "EU prong" - was needed to address the phenomenon of mixed flows of asylum-seekers and economic migrants. Such a policy should be reflected in the implementation of a common asylum system, and the launching of a pilot programme focusing on a specific group of refugees would be a good starting point for developing the idea.

100. In the context of the review of UNHCR's organizational structure in Europe, his Government believed that the UNHCR office in Warsaw should continue to play an important role. Finally, the recent strengthening of partnership between UNHCR and UNAIDS was a welcome development, given that a growing number of refugees were victims of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and therefore suffered discrimination on account of their refugee status and their illness. It was to be hoped that the new partnership between the two agencies would help to reduce the stigmatization of refugees with HIV/AIDS.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.