

## **Keynote Address**

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### **NGO-UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs**

**Palais des Nations, Geneva**

**27 September 2005**

I am very pleased to be your guest speaker today. For the past twenty-five years I have been working on refugee and human rights issues and during most of that time UNHCR and NGOs have been a very important part of my professional life. I have many close friends and colleagues among you.

When I was invited to be your speaker, it was suggested I might address some of the challenges confronting NGOs today. NGOs have a long history of providing invaluable assistance to refugees and other displaced people and their involvement in contemporary crises have been critically important in saving many lives. In recent years, NGOs have also expanded their activities to new tasks, such as the protection of refugees in conflict zones and providing for security to their own international and national staff in dangerous settings. NGOs have also lobbied for and provided assistance to new groups of people uprooted by war and persecution, such as the internally displaced and vulnerable groups such as refugee women and children.

While these and other challenges confronting NGOs are extremely important, I would like to speak about one of the most complex and difficult problems facing the international community today, that of "protracted refugee situations". This is an issue that James Milner and I have been working on for some time and I would like to share some of our thoughts with you. We first became aware of the significance and dimensions of the problem in 2001 after a brief visit on behalf of ECRE and the USCR to the Somali refugee camps around Dadaab in northern Kenya. At the time these were among the most violent camps in the world. The refugees we spoke to had been warehoused in these camps since the early 1990s and they complained that they were invisible to the international community. There appeared no end in sight to their predicament. We were very depressed by what we saw and heard and on the flight home, we talked about little else.

Soon afterwards, however, we came to realize that there are dozens of Dadaabs in the world today. In fact, nearly two-thirds of refugees in the world today are trapped in protracted refugee situations and the average length of stay in these virtual states of limbo is now an incredible 17 years, up from an average 9 years in the early 1990s. Such situations occur on most continents in a range of environments including camps, rural settlements and urban centres where

refugees' food, shelter and other social needs are often not met. The overwhelming majority of these populations are to be found in some of the world's poorest and most unstable regions, and are most frequently the result of neglect and inaction by a range of regional and international actors.

The situation confronting these refugees is not dissimilar to the predicament of tens of thousands of refugees in Europe in the 1950s and early 1960s who stagnated in camps in Western Europe. When I was writing my book on UNHCR a number of years ago, I spent a lot of time in the UNHCR archives. When researching the 1950s and 1960s, I came across disturbing accounts of the psychological impact that the long periods of idleness, frustration and dependence had on the displaced persons in the camps in Europe. It was clear that these conditions led not only to lives of unrealized potential but also in some cases to despair, violence and even suicide. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees at the time, called the camps "black spots on the map of Europe" that should "burn holes in the consciences of all those privileged to live in better conditions". He complained that if these conditions persisted, the problems of refugees would fester and the role of his Office would be reduced to "simply administering human misery." While the problem of displaced persons in Europe was finally resolved some 20 years after the end of the Second World War, the contemporary protracted refugee crisis shows no signs of being resolved in the near future despite the urgent need for a global response.

In a June 2004 Standing Committee paper, UNHCR pointed out that "protracted refugee situations stem from political impasses. They are not inevitable, but are rather the result of political action and inaction, both in the country of origin and in the country of asylum. They endure because of ongoing problems in the country of origin, and stagnate and become protracted as a result of responses to refugee inflows, typically involving restrictions on refugee movement and employment possibilities, and confinement to camps."

This analysis starkly illustrates how chronic refugee situations are the combined result of unresolved political and security problems in the country of origin, the inadequate policy responses of the country of asylum, and the lack of sufficient external engagement in these situations. In fact, the prolonged presence of refugees is caused largely by both a lack of involvement by a range of peace and security actors to address the conflict or human rights violations in the country of origin and a lack of donor government involvement with the host country. Failure to address the situation in the country of origin means that the refugee cannot return home. Failure to engage with the host country reinforces the perception of refugees as a burden and a security concern, which leads to encampment and a lack of local solutions. As a result of these failures, NGOs and UNHCR are left to compensate for the inaction of those actors responsible for maintaining international peace and security. They also have been left to cope with caring for these forgotten populations and attempting to mitigate the negative implications of prolonged exile.

As UNHCR itself points out, however, prolonged care and maintenance does not constitute a solution for protracted refugee situations. Being stuck in a chronic and unresolved refugee situation with no sustainable solution in sight can not be considered to offer refugees effective protection. While assistance to longstanding refugee populations through humanitarian agencies is important, it is no substitute for sustained political and strategic action. So long as discussions on protracted refugee situations remain exclusively within the humanitarian community, and do not engage the broader peace and security and development communities, they will be limited in their impact. Humanitarian programs have to be underpinned by long-lasting political and security measures if they are to result in lasting solutions for refugees. More generally, the international donor community cannot expect the humanitarian agencies to fully respond to and resolve long-standing refugee problems without the sustained engagement of the peace and security and development actors.

Unfortunately, the contemporary response to protracted refugee situations stands in stark contrast to the international response to some of the major long-standing refugee populations during the Cold War, when the geo-political interests of the West led to large-scale engagement with a number of prolonged refugee crises. This engagement resulted in the formulation and implementation of comprehensive approaches drawing on the three durable solutions of repatriation, local integration and third country resettlement. Such approaches were central to resolving the situation of displaced people remaining in Europe long after World War II, of millions of Indo-Chinese refugees and of the Central American refugee situation in the 1980s. In responding to the protracted presence of refugee populations today, it is important to remember that by understanding the particular character of each refugee situation, and by considering the needs, concerns and capacities of the countries of first asylum, the country of origin, resettlement and donor countries, along with the needs of refugees themselves, the international community has successfully resolved the plight of numerous refugee populations in the past fifty-five years.

Such approaches also need to be rooted in an understanding of the relationship between forced migration and international security since the end of the Cold War and in an understanding of the security concerns of many developing states. The nature of protracted refugee situations in the developing world has changed. During the Cold War, these situations were addressed as part of the geo-political interests of the superpowers, primarily the United States. In recent years, declining donor engagement in refugee situations, coupled with the peripheral place of much of the developing world in the international system, makes many host states especially vulnerable to both domestic and external pressures and shocks. Given the regional dynamics of many conflicts in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the inability of many host states to insulate themselves effectively from the spill-over of conflict, the prolonged presence of refugees becomes an increasingly important political issue, both domestically and regionally. This has

led to a new political and strategic environment within which solutions must be crafted. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that the task is not simply to replicate past solutions, but to fashion new solutions, drawing on the lessons of the past, but appropriate to the new environment.

A striking feature of past comprehensive approaches to protracted refugee situations was the significant and important advocacy, implementing and monitoring roles played by NGOs. In the past, NGOs drew public attention to the plight of longstanding and often ignored refugee populations; challenged the status quo, especially the warehousing of refugees and the long-term care and maintenance programs in camps; lobbied governments and international organizations to attach political importance to resolving these situations; promoted durable solutions, including responsive resettlement programs, repatriation and local integration; and finally monitored the protection aspects of the comprehensive approaches adopted.

These and other important precedents demonstrate how comprehensive solutions may effectively respond to the challenges of today's 33 protracted refugee situations around the world. While each approach that I have mentioned used different combinations of the three durable solutions, they share the common feature of representing concerted efforts on the part of a wide range of actors to address the particular needs of individual refugee situations. This lesson is highlighted in UNHCR's Agenda for Protection, which emphasizes the need for "more coherence in integrating voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement, whenever feasible, into one comprehensive approach, implemented in close cooperation among countries of origin, host States, UNHCR and its humanitarian and development partners, especially NGOs, as well as refugees."

Most significantly, the lessons from past comprehensive plans of action, such as Indochina and Central America, are that humanitarian efforts must be closely linked to political and diplomatic initiatives. Successful CPAs critically relied on external political initiatives that preceded and laid the foundations for humanitarian and development programs. For comprehensive solutions to work, countries of origin need stable central governments – ones which require considerable external support in order for new political roots to take hold. This necessitates not only humanitarian assistance but also coordinated engagement from a range of peace and security and development actors.

Increased external involvement in regions of refugee origin, comprehensive solutions to protracted refugee situations, and a more holistic approach to ensure effective refugee protection in the regions of refugee origin is not only the best way to meet the protection needs of refugees, but also is an effective way to respond to the concerns of host governments in the developing world and to address the concerns of Western states.

Such an approach would have many benefits:

- It would ensure effective protection in the region of origin, thereby diminishing the need for some individuals to migrate to the West to seek such protection;
- It would be structured around managed comprehensive approaches, thereby ensuring the predictability sought by Western states;
- And finally it would work toward the comprehensive solution of chronic refugee situations, thereby contributing to both the protection needs of refugees and the legitimate concerns of many countries of first asylum.

NGOs have a crucial role to play in the success of new approaches to protracted refugee situations today. In recent years, in cooperation with key governments NGOs have become major actors in their own countries and on the international front. The international campaign against landmines, the establishment of the International Criminal Court, the environmental movement and anti-globalization protests are all manifestations of the growing power of civil society, strong NGOs and grass roots movements worldwide. Just prior to this meeting, a number of NGOs, researchers and others met at the North-South Civil Society Conference on Refugee Warehousing to discuss concrete to exchange information and to strategize for the future. In a few days, ECRE member agencies will debate 'The Way Forward: Europe's Role in the Global Refugee protection System'. UNHCR too has taken initiatives, particularly through Convention Plus, the Somalia CPA and Afghanistan Plus, to develop more systematic and structured responses to long-standing refugee problems. These and other initiatives are important steps towards developing a partnership between northern and southern based organizations to build protection capacity in regions of refugee origin and towards building an action plan for improving the status of protection for those stuck in chronic refugee situations.

NGOs need to build on these and other initiatives to make the public, the media and policymakers aware of the shameful existence of so many protracted refugee situations around the world and to encourage their governments and the international community to take a more principled, holistic and global approach to improving refugee protection. This will involve a number of undertakings.

Primary amongst these are:

- promoting a better understanding of conditions in regions of refugee origin, including the impact of restrictive northern asylum policies on the asylum situation in the south;
- developing greater solidarity between NGOs in the South and the North;

- developing and implementing training programs and independent monitoring mechanisms that involve host governments and their civil societies on the issues central to providing protection for long-term refugee populations; and
- promoting durable solutions, including responsive resettlement programs and better targeted development funding for host governments that and facilitates local integration and addresses the needs of both refugee communities and the host societies.

The scale and dimensions of the problem of protracted refugee situations today requires an urgent global response. The resolution of these problems will not be achieved easily or quickly. However, we should all remember and be encouraged by the fact that history contains repeated examples of hope, of resistance by organizations and individuals who have sought to achieve a more just and compassionate future. We have successfully resolved protracted refugee situations in the past and we can do it again.

In closing, I would also like to remind us all why we are here today and why we think our work on behalf of refugees is important. Our friend and colleague, Arthur Helton, who was killed in the suicide bombing of the UN in Baghdad two years ago, once wrote that “by solving refugee problems and dealing with the fears and insecurities that both give rise to refugees and animate refugee responses, we may begin to deal better with the insecurities that characterize the new century.” I would add that refugees also matter because they are a litmus test of how tolerant and just we are as a society, as a nation and as an international community. On a personal level, I have always been inspired by the dignity, humanity and resourcefulness that refugees display in the face of great odds. Their courage has taught me to be courageous, and their ability to hope in seemingly hopeless situations has given me strength on my own road to recovery. If we believe in the importance of every individual who is a refugee and if we believe in the humanitarian ideals of Arthur, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and the hundreds of other NGO and UN staff members who have been killed or injured in recent years, we cannot permit protracted refugee situations to continue to exist.