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42nd Meeting of the Standing Committee
Agenda Item 4(a) – Protracted Situations

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There are millions of refugees locked in exile in situations which drag on, sometimes for decades, without horizons or resolution. People wile away hours, days, their youth, even a lifetime in shabby camps or shanty settlements all over the globe. They are no-one's priority, an ignored statistic. These are facts which are extremely difficult to alter, but this is, of course, not a reason not to try.

This Committee will review a document [EC/59/SC/CRP.13] which describes how UNHCR would like to progress on the issue of protracted refugee situations, and why. This is explained in the document against some basic considerations which I want now shortly to list, to frame our discussion:

- **Although the number of situations has declined over the past decade, from 39 in 1998 to 30 today, and the overall number of refugees affected from some 8 million to just over 5 million, the numbers could rise again if large refugee populations are left without durable solutions, for example in CAR, Chad, DRC and the Sudan. The substantial decrease in the number of refugees in protracted situations can actually be attributed to a handful of major repatriation operations in recent years, notably to Afghanistan.**

- **Protracted refugee situations breed their own serious difficulties. Protection problems resulting from the passage of time, as much as out of the refugee predicament as such, become increasingly apparent. They include gender and domestic violence, anti-social youth behaviour, negative survival strategies.**

- **The host states, donors and others have other understandable reasons for concern about absence of progress with these situations. Community unrest, environmental damage and insufficient resources for open-ended care and maintenance are among their concerns. So too are onward irregular movements, or camps which may serve as a breeding ground for further regional insecurity.**

- **The oft talked about relief-to-development continuum, or rather the absence thereof, is a part of the picture. UNHCR is but one among many actors who must contribute to the process of finding solutions. The challenge is to bring all these relevant actors to the table.**

- **As often commented upon is the so-called "CNN" effect, used to explain how the media's interests can end up driving international concerns and funding priorities. Routine situations unfortunately have little attraction for the media and, when its focus shifts, that of the politicians and the donors will often follow. However, the political will to deal with the causes and effects of protracted situations, together with donor investment in solutions, both are essential if protracted situations are to be resolved.**

The initiative announced by the High Commissioner has three main objectives:

- **to serve as the rationale for solid, policy-oriented discussion with UNHCR's partners about why situations become protracted and what to do about them;**

- **through this, to rekindle interest on the part of all in working more collaboratively together, making available to the collective effort a wider range of knowledge and expertise than refugee situations can usually command, and;**

- **to focus in particular on certain situations where there is now greater likelihood of some progress being made.**

As to the first of these objectives, you will be aware that protracted refugee situations will be the subject of the High Commissioner's December Protection Dialogue. The deliberations of this Standing Committee, which in themselves build upon an earlier Informal Consultative meeting also devoted to the topic, are part of a process of policy discussion and will assist us to structure the December dialogue. Incidentally, we intend that urban refugee issues be a discrete topic within the broader dialogue and, for this purpose will circulate a new set of Guidelines.

The second of these objectives recognises not least that development actors have to become more significant partners for the refugee assistance community. The reality of protracted situations is that they are so because return to countries of origin meets obstacles which cannot be surmounted in a reasonable period. Stay in countries of asylum is increasingly difficult the longer people are left without self sufficiency possibilities and the more their stay taxes the tolerance and infrastructure of local communities. Care and maintenance is not the solution over a longer period. Livelihood strategies which benefit host and refugee communities are a far more productive way forward for all concerned. Such strategies revolve around the creation of opportunities for people to lift themselves out of poverty or dependency, and base themselves on efforts to build existing refugee capacities through, not least, provision of loans and tools, as well as on income generation projects, agricultural development activities and vocational training programmes. Livelihoods will, of course, be accessible in direct proportion to the availability of basic rights. Where freedom of movement is limited, there is no access to land or the labour market, and individuals lack legal status, residence rights and documentation, livelihood options are hugely constrained.

As to the third of the objectives for the initiative, in consultation with field colleagues, and taking counsel also from ExCom members who have earlier expressed themselves on this initiative, Bureau colleagues have selected five protracted situations which might benefit from being included within the initiative at this stage: Burundians in Tanzania; Eritreans in Eastern Sudan; Afghans in Iran and Pakistan; Rohingyas in Bangladesh; and Bosnian and Croatian displaced in Serbia. We are also reviewing how the initiative could be use to help specific urban refugee groups.

The first half of this year has seen protracted situations being prioritised for visits by the Troika and Bureau Directors. The High Commissioner has, in this context, visited both Tanzania and Bangladesh. The AHC-O has recently paid a visit to West Africa. I have been to Eastern Sudan, Iran and Serbia. Together we have covered a large number of the situations which will constitute a pilot for activities within the frame of the initiative.

In conclusion, I want to revert to an interesting presentation on protracted refugee situations by Mr. Jan Pronk, a former Development Minister with the Dutch Government. Many members of this Committee had the advantage of being present for it. There were a number of reflections offered which merit careful thought by this Committee. It was rightly observed, in our view, that humanitarian assistance alone is no solution at a certain point. Protracted situations are marked by their political contours and require responses at the political level, including when it comes to their causes. Host countries bear the brunt of the burden, a fact which needs to be politically acknowledged, but also responded to through provision of stronger support both to the refugees and to the hosting communities. All three solutions to refugee situations must be part of a coherent strategy for resolving protracted situations. *Delivering as One* by the UN family, with UN partners pulling together as part of a team, would promote greater coherence. In the same vein, governments need to be further encouraged not to make too fine a distinction between humanitarian and development aid budgets. Development programming can be quite sophisticated but this in itself can have the disadvantage that the basics, such as reconstruction needs, can be overlooked.

These observations are on the one hand self-evident, and on the other, perhaps because of this, they can easily get lost. The High Commissioner's initiative should hopefully assist to keep them squarely in focus. At this point, what we are asking of this Committee is that it lends its encouragement and support to the initiative and the overall directions set for it, as outlined in the paper before you. We also hope that states, and in particular the donor and resettlement countries, will accept to review how their support to the objectives set for the initiative can concretely be strengthened. We will of course pursue an even-handed approach to solutions which place a primacy on voluntary repatriation, but builds in self reliance initiatives and strategic use of resettlement. We hence would also like to have the confirmation from host states and, as appropriate, of the countries of origin, of their support to working in a collaborative framework with UNHCR and partners to ameliorate the situation of the affected refugee populations over the shorter and longer term. In short we need at this point buy-in from all concerned states and other partners, including civil society, in the form of

encouragement, cooperation with, facilitation of and concrete support for activities within the frame of this initiative.