

**44<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee  
3-5 March 2009**

**Agenda item 4 (c)**

**Outline for the oral update on the High Commissioner's 2008 Dialogue  
on protracted refugee situations**

*Revised version*

The second meeting of the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges which took place in Geneva on 10 and 11 December 2008 explored the issue of protracted refugee situations. The Dialogue is not a formal policy or decision-making body. Nevertheless, the High Commissioner considers its deliberations as important in helping the Office shape its future policies, strategies and activities for tackling the challenges under discussion.

Highlights of the 2008 Dialogue and some of the steps that UNHCR is taking to follow up on these outcomes of the meeting are summarized below.

Participation and organization of the 2008 meeting

The 2008 Dialogue was attended by representatives of 87 States, 8 bodies from the United Nations system, 3 intergovernmental organizations, 27 NGOs and 10 other organizations, as well as academics and experts attending in their personal capacity. The High Commissioner presided over the plenary sessions of the meeting, which included a keynote address by the Prime Minister of the United Republic of Tanzania, H.E. Mr. Mizengo Kayanza Peter Pinda, and presentations by the Deputy Commissioner, Commission for Social Action of Sierra Leone, Mr. Charles Rogers, on the local integration of Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone and by the Senior Policy Advisor of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Affairs of Canada, Ms Jessica Thompson, on the Canadian Government's global approach to protracted refugee situations (*L'Approche Gouvernementale Globale*).

After an initial plenary discussion, the Dialogue was pursued in four break-out sessions co-chaired by States or an NGO representative together with a UNHCR senior manager. Each group considered the same set of issues concerning protracted refugee situations and then reported back on the outcome of their deliberations to the final plenary session. In closing the Dialogue, the High Commissioner summed up the main themes that had emerged during the two days of deliberations. That summary was later distributed to all participants. All documents related to the Dialogue can be found at UNHCR's website.

Summary of discussions and outcomes

It was recalled that there were more than 30 protracted refugee situations worldwide. While the Office was making due efforts to address all of these situations, five in particular – Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan; Burundian refugees in the United Republic of Tanzania; Eritrean refugees in Sudan; Croatian and Bosnian refugees in Serbia; and Rohingya in Bangladesh - had been selected under the High Commissioner's Special Initiative on Protracted Refugee Situations to exemplify the nature and complexity of the problem and to energize efforts to drive forward either durable solutions or improvements in the life of the refugees concerned as they remain in asylum.

In considering both the global problem of protracted situations as well as the five which are part of the High Commissioner's Special Initiative, the Dialogue examined the traditional solutions for refugee situations – voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement – and others which might offer

alternative options, such as pertinent migration arrangements and channels. These solutions needed to be all-encompassing, mutually reinforcing and sustainable. Clearly, voluntary repatriation remained the preferred solution for refugees.

At the same time, the Dialogue agreed that local integration should not be given less importance, as it would sometimes be the only option for meaningful solutions in many refugee situations. These included cases where refugees are in particularly difficult legal, social or economic conditions, have been in exile for long periods, or are unable to return to their countries of origin. Across the board, their conditions and quality of life in asylum would have to be improved and their ability to fend for themselves enhanced. In this context the Dialogue laid particular emphasis on the need to increase opportunities for both primary and secondary education and vocational training for refugees (including through distance learning). Other steps highlighted included the importance of enabling access to employment or other forms of income-generating activities, as well as even bolder and more permanent ones such as the decision taken by the United Republic of Tanzania to grant citizenship to thousands of Burundian refugees who have been in that country for nearly four decades.

It was recalled that political will on the part of all concerned is the first essential step for attempting to tackle protracted situations through any of these solutions. International solidarity and burden sharing are also critical, particularly for those situations where first-asylum countries have borne the burden of hosting and caring for large numbers of refugees over long periods of time. The Dialogue underlined the role of the international community, firstly with respect to political and diplomatic engagement in conflict prevention. Secondly, it was agreed that ample financial support had to be provided to underpin voluntary repatriation, self reliance, local integration and other initiatives geared towards durable solutions. Local host communities and refugee-impacted areas also required support, so as to reduce the risk of conflict, increase the protection space for refugees and facilitate local integration in suitable cases. To ensure that return - or local integration - was sustainable, development partners and actors would have to be more closely engaged in creating the necessary conditions, especially in those countries recovering from conflict. The importance of the roles played by the Peacebuilding Commission, international financial institutions, UNDP, other early recovery partners, and the Delivering-as-One initiative was underscored.

The issue of resettlement too received extensive attention at the Dialogue. A call was made for the resettlement countries to make available more resettlement places which, when used strategically can be both an instrument of protection as well as a burden-sharing mechanism. It can also complement and further other solutions such as voluntary repatriation and local integration. Obviously, resettlement should be managed well to avoid impeding other solutions, calling for flexibility in the prioritization of groups for resettlement.

The Dialogue drew attention to the role and incumbent responsibilities of countries of origin not only at the end, when voluntary repatriation takes place, but throughout the refugee cycle itself. The role of refugees was also highlighted, with the Dialogue stressing that they should not be seen just as a burden, but rather as positive contributors to their own situation, as well that of their host communities and countries.

### Follow-up

Drawing on the results and momentum generated by the Dialogue, UNHCR has accelerated its plans with respect to the five protracted situations under the High Commissioner's Special Initiative. Efforts are under way to elaborate comprehensive plans, in close coordination with host countries, countries of origin, NGOs, international organizations and other stakeholders. In developing and following up on these plans, the Office intends to take advantage of regional or situational "core groups" that could be established to focus on the respective situations. Other relevant stakeholders and players, including local or international media establishments and diaspora organizations, will be associated with relevant initiatives.

UNHCR will work to bring the issue of protracted refugee situations onto the agenda of inter-agency and other relevant fora, such as the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the Peacebuilding Commission, Delivering as One, the OECD's Development Assistance Committee, international financial institutions and the African Union, to enhance collaboration with multiple actors in resolving protracted situations. In addition, UNHCR will request ExCom Member States to bring the issue of solutions for protracted situations to the governing bodies of other relevant agencies they may be members of, such as UNDP, the World Bank or other financial and development partners who could have an impact on the situation in question.

*UNHCR*  
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