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

Fifty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 618th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 6 October 2008, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. VAN EENENNAAM (Netherlands)

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

OPENING OF THE SESSION (item 1 of the provisional agenda)

1. The CHAIRMAN declared open the fifty-ninth session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN

2. The CHAIRMAN recalled that the number of refugees worldwide was growing while the space for humanitarian action was shrinking and United Nations staff and humanitarian workers risked being attacked. While his visits to refugee camps in Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic had clearly shown the difficulties of protecting those at risk, he had been encouraged by the efforts of UNHCR staff and the hospitality of the host countries towards their guests, and was hopeful that donor countries would increase their contributions for those situations.

3. He extended a special welcome to the delegations of Benin, Montenegro, Luxembourg and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which were attending their first plenary session as members of the Executive Committee. Their participation would enrich the Committee's discussions and strengthen support for the High Commissioner and his Office.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (item 2 of the provisional agenda) (A/AC.96/LIX/1)

4. The agenda was adopted.

5. A short film was shown, illustrating the work carried out by UNHCR on the ground.

STATEMENTS BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER AND THE GUEST SPEAKER
(agenda item 3)

6. Mr. GUTERRES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that adverse economic trends, financial turmoil and the unforeseen consequences of globalization and climate change had increased the number of people on the move in search of security and opportunities. Likewise, rapid population growth and urbanization, lack of employment and rising prices had created tensions which had been compounded by conflicts, increasingly involving competition over scarce resources. The result was that the number of refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide was rising, especially in urban areas. Those trends had important implications for UNHCR, which had been making an increasing number of emergency deployments, and for the Office's capacity and resources. Indeed, spending from the Operational Reserve in 2008 would be almost double that in 2007 and global expenditure in 2008 was set to increase by around 50 per cent over 2006.

7. UNHCR had launched the Global Needs Assessment process in eight countries in a drive to base its planning process on beneficiaries' rights and needs, and mainstream that approach in all its operations. Efficiency savings had released additional resources for field operations, making a real difference to beneficiaries. In 2007, savings of \$15 million had filled crucial gaps in dealing with malaria, malnutrition, reproductive health and sexual and gender-based violence. While, in 2008, savings of \$7 million had been freed up for new projects to address critical water

and sanitation problems and high levels of anaemia amongst women and children in refugee camps. UNHCR had approved an additional \$13.25 million for a water and sanitation project covering 16 countries, and the Budget Committee was deciding on an anaemia reduction programme. UNHCR had also taken steps further to strengthen field operations.

8. With regard to protection, UNCHR had drawn up a list of five priority issues, including refugee protection in the context of international migration and mixed population movements. In that connection, it continued to work with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to implement the 10-Point Plan of Action, while promoting improvements in asylum legislation and procedures. The task was a challenging one, as concerns about security and irregular migration had prompted States to introduce measures that threatened refugee protection. The establishment of a European Union asylum system represented a significant touchstone in that regard.

9. UNHCR had just completed a global evaluation of its work to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, and intended to establish a concerted strategy for the protection of women and girls. Some progress had been made in protecting stateless persons, and UNHCR had strengthened its commitment to protecting internally displaced persons in the framework of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The preparation of an African Union convention on internally displaced persons was an encouraging development in that regard.

10. Members of the Executive Committee had contributed in various creditable ways to finding the durable solutions for refugees, whether through repatriation, local integration or resettlement. In 2007, some 700,000 refugees and 2 million internally displaced persons had voluntarily returned home in safety and dignity, with support from UNHCR. Local integration initiatives in the United Republic of Tanzania, Latin America and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region had borne fruit, enabling refugees to live meaningful and productive lives by providing them with access to the labour market and education and fostering positive relationships with host communities, thus contributing to their successful reintegration upon return. Resettlement submissions by UNHCR had increased by 80 per cent since 2006, resettlement departures were 50 per cent higher than in the first half of 2008 than in the same period in 2007, and new resettlement countries were emerging. More and better efforts were needed, however, as too many people remained trapped in protracted refugee situations. UNHCR was therefore pursuing a special initiative to address five such situations and would discuss progress and related challenges at the forthcoming meeting of the Dialogue on Protection Challenges.

11. UNHCR had been actively engaged in advocacy to promote sustainable reintegration with States, institutional partners and United Nations agencies through the "Delivering as One" initiative. While good results had been achieved in the past year, UNHCR did not have the resources or capacity to provide all the essential elements of successful reintegration. The Office had recently evaluated its reintegration operations in Angola and Southern Sudan and had adopted a new reintegration policy, emphasizing the strategic role of UNHCR, the importance of partnerships and the need to build on the capacities of returnees and to support Governments in reassuming their responsibilities towards their citizens. The policy also stressed the need for return and reintegration to be built into national recovery strategies, development frameworks and peacebuilding processes.

12. UNHCR had taken a number of key actions to make it more effective, efficient, agile and responsive to beneficiaries' needs. With the streamlining of Headquarters functions, more resources and energy had been directed to the field. Headquarters staffing reductions, the establishment of the Global Service Centre and rationalization had helped to reduce the Headquarters budget and the proportion of staff costs in the annual budget. Further staffing reviews and restructuring initiatives, were planned bearing in mind the impact on, and rights of, staff members.

13. As a result of decentralization, regionalization and the devolvement of decision-making to the field, management accountability had been strengthened and guidance was becoming more closely linked to operational realities. Regional offices had already been established in Europe, and other functions were being relocated.

14. The new budget structure and resource allocation framework demonstrated the commitment of UNHCR to achieving results. In that regard, the Global Needs Assessment and the Global Accountability Framework would lay the foundations for a results-based management system. The field review had made good progress, and new policies would be introduced on expanding the use of national officers, improving work with implementing partners and attracting more senior staff to deep field locations. Moreover, comprehensive and much-needed human resources reforms were under way, in close consultation with the Staff Council, with a new emphasis on training that would be supported by the establishment of a learning centre in Budapest.

15. UNHCR was strongly committed to the "Delivering as One" initiative which it saw as a key opportunity to engage the entire United Nations system in finding durable solutions for the challenges included in its mandate. In the context of the Humanitarian Reform process, UNHCR had assumed greater responsibilities for internally displaced persons under the cluster approach. While the cluster approach represented a step forward in terms of enhancing the humanitarian response to crises, it was too process-heavy and not sufficiently results-based. The approach also needed to respect the integrity and specificity of institutional mandates. For its part, UNHCR had not experienced any conflict between its extended responsibilities for internally displaced persons and its obligations to refugees; on the contrary, it had discovered important synergies in its work.

16. Encouraging progress had been made in strengthening humanitarian financing. The Central Emergency Response Fund had already provided valuable support to a number of UNHCR operations, although the experience with country-level pooled funds had been more mixed. One issue was how to ensure that refugees' needs were appropriately reflected in funding allocations. Another was adequate funding for multi-country programmes for which pooled funding was determined at the national level.

17. UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations encountered complex dilemmas when engaging with integrated United Nations missions. While UNHCR recognized the important role of those missions and continued to work closely with them, particularly in the context of return and reintegration, it was also aware of the importance of preserving the autonomy of the humanitarian space and safeguarding the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, particularly in countries where a durable peace settlement had yet to be reached.

He had been working closely with Sir John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, on that issue and in the discussion of humanitarian space in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

18. UNHCR was determined to establish a full strategic partnership with its sister United Nations agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the NGO community. Together they were deeply involved in the Global Humanitarian Platform, which was a powerful alliance among equals. The Office's cooperation with the World Food Programme (WFP) had helped to avert disaster for many of its beneficiaries during recent food crises, and UNHCR currently had some 650 NGO partners through which it was channelling increasingly significant levels of expenditure. The Office's strategy of developing partnerships with the private sector, was already bearing fruit, as contributions from private donors had increased from \$21.7 million in 2006 to an anticipated \$50 million in 2008.

19. The most valuable asset of UNHCR was its staff but maintaining a deep field presence exposed many staff members to considerable risks. In that connection, he paid a tribute to three staff members who had lost their lives in the past year: Karim Bentebal and Nabil Slimani in Algiers and Mahamat Mahamadou in Chad. The Office continued to look for effective ways of minimizing the risks, including by ensuring that humanitarian action and organizations were perceived as neutral and impartial. In addition, the overwhelming majority of UNHCR offices were currently compliant with United Nations Minimum Operating Security Standards, the few exceptions were being addressed and UNHCR had strengthened its network of regional field security advisors and was updating and expanding its security training for staff.

20. In 2007, he had pledged that UNHCR would improve its interaction with members of the Executive Committee. The Dialogue on Protection Challenges had already proved its worth, and he was grateful for the excellent work carried out over the past year by the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman and the Rapporteur. He extended a warm welcome to the delegations of Benin, Luxembourg, Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and assured all the Committee members that dialogue with them would continue to be based on the principles of transparency, trust and cooperation.

21. There were two pressing concerns that should be brought to the Committee's attention. One was for 2009 funding, which was insufficient to meet the global needs of beneficiaries and cope with growing demands. It would be tragic if humanitarian funding should decline at the very time that demand for assistance was growing. Since failure to meet the needs of the world's poor would only engender further turmoil, continuing to invest in solutions for UNHCR beneficiaries was a matter not only of generosity but also of enlightened self-interest.

22. The coming year should be used for a serious and systematic debate about the international response to the growing scale of forced displacement. Questions included how climate change and other adverse trends would impact on forced displacement, whether the international community could address those challenges with the current legal and normative framework or whether new standards and instruments were needed. That led to the question whether the traditional principles of humanitarian action were still relevant and how they related to newer concepts such as "human security" and "the responsibility to protect". He wondered whether the current architecture of humanitarian action was adequate, or whether new institutions, coalitions and partnerships were required. Those questions formed the basis of an important and necessary

debate, in which leadership could come only from Member States. Only by thinking and acting together was it possible to reserve the rights and needs of the people who fell under the UNHCR mandate. That was the challenge before the Executive Committee, at its current meeting.

23. Mr. KELLENBERGER (President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)) said that there were two key challenges to providing protection and humanitarian assistance in situations of armed conflict and violence. The first was to have a clear understanding of the complex environments concerned, and the second was to respond effectively to the multiple needs of affected populations. In that connection, although international humanitarian law expressly prohibited arbitrary displacement of civilian populations or attacks on civilians or civilian property, the law frequently was not respected. Efforts should therefore be made to encourage States, the authorities concerned and other parties to a conflict that controlled a given territory to bear their responsibility for providing protection and solutions in such situations. Action to ensure compliance with the law must be prioritized, as a matter of urgency.

24. The plight of internally displaced persons was at the heart of the current reform of the United Nations humanitarian system. While ICRC welcomed the various United Nations humanitarian reform initiatives, in particular the cluster approach, it was incompatible with its independent status to take part formally in that approach. A collaborative approach was essential, however, in order to avoid gaps and duplication in addressing needs, while efforts to enhance coordination and dialogue must be based more on respect of certain basic principles than on ever-more refined coordination mechanisms.

25. The basic principles in question were very simple. First, humanitarian actors should match their statements with substantive action, being realistic about the number of beneficiaries to be assisted and their capacity to assist them. Second, they must be transparent about genuine humanitarian access and the extent to which they relied on, and monitored the work of, implementing partners and provided them with adequate structures. Third, they must develop a common understanding of the fundamental concepts that they used, while remaining flexible in their humanitarian response and avoiding artificial distinctions between the various phases of a disaster or conflict. Observance of those principles would boost the credibility, transparency and accountability of the humanitarian sector.

26. Although protection and assistance for internally displaced persons lay at the core of the ICRC mandate, it was only one aspect of its work. ICRC had often voiced concern about the perception that people who had not been displaced were comparatively safe and that internally displaced persons were therefore the victims at greatest risk. In fact, some vulnerable groups might be physically unable to leave a conflict zone or prevented from fleeing.

27. Displacement was a dynamic, multidimensional phenomenon and did not lend itself to a single all-purpose solution. In meeting the many challenges faced by internally displaced persons, therefore, account should also be taken of a range of factors, including economic security issues, for example, which were key factors influencing people's decision-making.

28. In recent years, ICRC and UNHCR had been increasingly involved in the same fields of operations. Cooperation between the two organizations and enhanced dialogue were key to ensuring a swift and efficient humanitarian response for those in need, and he looked forward to the further development of that dialogue and cooperation.

GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 4)

29. Mr. WITTEN (United States of America) said that there were five central principles that might guide the Executive Committee in its work. The first was protection, which was a fundamental obligation and should be seen as the prism through which structural and management reforms were reviewed for their impact on those needing help. UNHCR should not sacrifice that obligation and core posts in the organization to reform.
30. The second principle was burden sharing, which required not just financial contributions but also States' full participation in finding solutions for refugees. No other undertaking required as much burden sharing as the permanent resolution of protracted refugee situations. In that regard, UNHCR should be commended for its efforts to resolve such situations and for the progress made on third-country resettlement. He announced that more than 5,300 Bhutanese had been resettled to the United States as part of a multi-government effort to resolve the protracted refugee situation in Nepal and that many more would be resettled in the United States in 2009.
31. The third principle was good management. His Government strongly supported the motivation behind the critical reform process under way at UNHCR. Since the first phase - outposting to Budapest - had been completed, the goal of the second phase should be to increasing effectiveness and efficiency, focusing on the needs of beneficiaries. The guiding principle should be accountability for the Office's mission. While staff numbers was a measure of success, it was not the final goal; placing the right people in the right jobs was critical.
32. The fourth principle was need-based budgeting. The Global Needs Assessment was a welcome process, and he was aware of the future funding implications of its wide-scale application. Hence, issues such as management of expectations and budget allocations and the prioritization of unfunded or underfunded activities would require additional scrutiny and discussion.
33. The fifth principle - dialogue - was an essential aspect of the internal reform effort. Regular consultations with Member States should be viewed as an opportunity, not an impediment to progress. They would ensure that potential donors understood how reform would make UNHCR a more effective partner that was worthy of increased support. The United States, for its part, remained a committed partner of UNHCR, and had contributed more than \$500 million in 2008 to UNHCR activities. It had resettled more than 60,000 refugees in the United States in 2008, including over 18,000 ethnic Burmese, 13,800 Iraqi refugees and vulnerable persons of many other nationalities. He saluted UNHCR staff for the work that they did, often in difficult environments, and said that he continued to look to UNHCR as the centre of excellence for humanitarian protection and solutions.
34. Mr. MATTEI (France), speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that the candidate countries Turkey, Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia and Georgia, had aligned themselves with his statement. He commended UNHCR staff for their work in the field, sometimes in life-threatening conditions.

35. He said that the world's 67 million forcibly displaced persons faced increasing levels of insecurity. The European Union, which contributed 45 per cent of UNHCR funding, was particularly concerned at the increase in the number of refugees under the UNHCR mandate and the large number of conflict-induced internally displaced persons worldwide. At the same time, it welcomed the fall in the number of stateless persons relative to 2007. In order to strengthen the international protection regime, all States that had not yet done so should accede to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which remained the cornerstone of international protection for refugees.

36. Since Europe received the most requests for asylum of any continent, the European Union had enacted legislation to harmonize standards and move towards a genuine common asylum policy based on the draft European Pact on Immigration and Asylum. The Pact aimed, inter alia, at establishing common asylum standards, increasing solidarity towards Member States facing a massive influx of asylum-seekers, and creating a European asylum support office. It furthermore sought to increase cooperation with UNHCR in order to ensure better protection to asylum-seekers applying from outside the European Union. A clear indication of the European Union's common vision of humanitarian aid was the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid adopted in December 2007, which sought to improve the collective response of member States of the European Union and other actors to humanitarian crises.

37. He commended the High Commissioner for opening up a humanitarian space during the recent crisis in Georgia and requested the parties concerned to ensure free and safe access to the people in need. The European Union would strive to negotiate a political solution to the conflict, inter alia through a civilian observation mission. Other crises must also be borne in mind, including the crisis in Chad, where the European Union Force (EUFOR) had begun to restore confidence and security, and those in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He also expressed support for the High Commissioner's efforts to address the protection needs of vulnerable people in international migration flows, and called upon transit countries to cooperate more closely with UNHCR and to step up their efforts against human trafficking.

38. He encouraged UNHCR to continue its cooperation with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other stakeholders in developing its lead role in the relevant clusters and supporting the system of humanitarian coordinators. He welcomed the commitment of UNHCR to the Global Humanitarian Platform and to finding durable solutions for refugees. While voluntary return was the preferred durable solution, local integration and resettlement should also be encouraged. In that regard, the European Union intended to conduct a mission to assess the situation of the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan and explore the possibility of resettlement in other States. Durable solutions were the best way of responding to protracted refugee situations and he awaited with interest the High Commissioner's forthcoming Dialogue on Protection Challenges on that theme.

39. He expressed support for the UNHCR reform process, and said that he hoped that the best possible alternatives would be offered to UNHCR staff following outposting. Decentralization, regionalization and the new budgetary structure would certainly improve transparency and response capacity. The European Union supported the general conclusion proposed for adoption at the current session, and looked forward to other future thematic conclusions on gaps identified in protection.

40. Mr. GAUZE (Côte d'Ivoire), speaking on behalf of the Group of African States, expressed concern about the impact on the increasing number of refugees and other persons under the UNHCR of the current food crisis; the Office should conduct a study or hold a general debate on the matter. The resurgence of local conflicts which jeopardized the integrity of the humanitarian space, and the situation of urban refugees, were further issues of concern, and UNHCR should strengthen its cooperation with relevant national bodies in host countries in order to share the refugee burden and create durable solutions for such situations.

41. He was not in favour of using criteria such as integration potential in admission and resettlement programmes. Legislation on asylum procedures should include concepts such as vulnerability and States should apply the definition of "refugee" set out in the 1951 Convention in order to leave less scope for differences in interpretation. At the same time, practices in certain countries similar to refoulement, and the holding of asylum-seekers in conditions not dissimilar to imprisonment, were a matter of grave concern, as were the new trend towards a presumption of clandestinity, discrimination against African refugees and the exploitation of vulnerable refugees, in particular for trafficking.

42. The efforts of the United Republic of Tanzania to ensure local integration through naturalization were commendable, and similar initiatives should be encouraged. The human rights situation was a determining factor in successful integration, and must be accompanied by greater assistance in the areas of health, education and employment. UNHCR must continue to take into consideration requests by States for the application of the cessation clause so that refugees could see for themselves whether the situation in their homeland had improved.

43. He said that he looked forward to the African Union Special Summit of Heads of State and Government on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons in Africa to be held in Kampala in April 2009 and that a side event on the Summit would be organized during the current session. He hoped that all stakeholders would attend both events.

44. He expressed support for the UNHCR reform process and the streamlining of Headquarters operations, and said that he looked forward to further decentralization, regionalization and possible outpostting. The African States should be better represented among Headquarters staff, however.

45. Mr. MOHTAJ (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that a large number of displaced persons in the Islamic Republic of Iran had arrived when the country was facing considerable challenges. They nevertheless had been given access to the same health, education and other facilities as Iranian nationals. Only 3 per cent of the approximately 1 million Afghan and Iraqi refugees lived in camps. The international community provided relatively limited financial and practical assistance, however.

46. The presence of the displaced persons and refugees had created various problems relating, inter alia, to illegal employment, human trafficking, drug smuggling and the re-emergence of infectious diseases. UNHCR assistance was needed to encourage those persons to return home. Skilled and peace-loving Afghan refugees, for example, could play a positive role in the stabilization and reconstruction of their country, and the international community should therefore create the right conditions for their repatriation by providing humanitarian aid and fulfilling reconstruction commitments in Afghanistan. Since the pace of voluntary repatriation

had been slow in recent years, greater emphasis should be given to third-country resettlement. The fact was that most refugees were hosted by developing countries which were not in a position to offer local integration solutions. Therefore, a transparent, realistic and fair mechanism for burden-sharing was needed, given that the global refugee problem was in fact a collective responsibility.

47. Mr. KHAN (Pakistan) said that Pakistan had enjoyed close cooperation with UNHCR in connection with the 3 million Afghan refugees whom it hosted - the largest refugee population in the world. Although it shouldered the burden largely alone, it had received support from the international community, for which it was grateful.

48. During the High Commissioner's recent visit to Pakistan, agreement had been reached on important matters, including the need to continue the voluntary and gradual repatriation of refugees under the relevant tripartite agreement. The High Commissioner had recognized the negative impact of the protracted stay of Afghan refugees on host communities in Pakistan, and an appeal would therefore be launched to raise \$135 million for the implementation of a pilot project entitled "Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas" in the North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan. In that connection, he looked forward to the High Commissioner's forthcoming Dialogue on Protection Challenges, and appealed to the international community to direct humanitarian and financial assistance to stabilization and reconstruction in Afghanistan, which were essential for sustainable repatriation. He also pledged his support for the success of the Conference on Return and Reintegration of Afghan Refugees to be held in Afghanistan in November 2008.

49. Mr. HUGHES (Australia) said that UNHCR faced a unique range of challenges which had a protection dimension that went beyond the scope of the 1951 Convention. International debate would be vital in reaching common ground on solutions, and it should not be assumed that the solutions applicable to refugees would be relevant in other contexts or that the same actors would necessarily be involved. He nevertheless cautioned against extending the UNHCR mandate, lest the Office's capacity to respond to existing requirements should be compromised.

50. UNHCR had made good progress in dealing with protracted refugee situations, including repatriation to Afghanistan and in Africa, and the resettlement of Bhutanese citizens. While the Office's capacity to make optimum use of resettlement places had been enhanced by the establishment of the Resettlement Service, much more needed to be done, since resettlement requirements were likely to triple in 2009. UNHCR should work with States to consider how to prioritize resettlement places and involve more Governments in the resettlement framework.

51. His Government had added 500 refugee places in its 2008-2009 humanitarian programme, specifically for persons affected by the conflict in Iraq. A total of 13,750 places for refugees and persons in need of a humanitarian solution would be provided for 2009-2010. Elsewhere, in some countries of the Asia-Pacific region that were not party to the 1951 Convention the practice of providing protection was being undermined. His Government would continue to support its regional partners by providing resettlement places and by funding projects to improve the protection of displaced persons. The Australian Government would also pursue efforts with Governments in the region to crack down on people smuggling and trafficking. It had abolished the Pacific Solution and the system of temporary protection visas to ensure that refugees were not adversely affected.

52. Structural and management reform had been essential for UNHCR in addressing current and future challenges and targeting resources. The time had come, however, to take stock of the reform and its benefits for refugees and internally displaced persons. In that connection, his Government looked forward to the High Commissioner's visit to Australia in 2009, and trusted that it would help to strengthen its partnership with the Office.

53. Mr. FRISCH (Switzerland) said that the High Commissioner had set himself the difficult task of consolidating the Office's protection mandate in the context of emerging conflicts, natural disasters and climate change. He welcomed the regionalization policy and the strengthening of the Office's field presence, as they would benefit the Office's persons of concern. At the same time, he expressed the view that the protection of refugees and of internally displaced persons must be the focus of any reforms. The implementation of operational protection must also be monitored and field management improved.

54. The concept of humanitarian space remained crucial during humanitarian crises, and there should be more systematic dialogue and allocation of tasks between UNHCR and ICRC in order to strengthen the protection of civilians in conflict-induced situations of internal displacement. The Swiss Government, for its part, was developing a "whole government" approach, overhauling its cooperation and humanitarian aid services and redefining its responses inter alia to mixed migration and repatriation. In the light of the UNHCR appeal for the greater involvement of development actors, the Government intended to make more staff available and to develop partnerships for UNHCR projects.

55. Ms. LYON (Canada) said that her Government welcomed the High Commissioner's initiative on protracted refugee situations and that Member States and UNHCR must now rally together to find durable solutions for them, including through approaches which combined security, humanitarian assistance, development and resettlement and helped both urban and camp-based refugees.

56. Canada welcomed the Office's commitment to a human rights based approach and its leadership of the protection cluster for populations affected by conflict, including internally displaced persons. UNHCR should continue to ensure the effectiveness of the protection cluster in the field and the relevance of tools developed at the global level to those on the ground, updating the Executive Committee regularly on the impact of its protection cluster responsibilities on operations, particularly potential increases in the number of UNHCR beneficiaries. Lastly, her Government commended UNHCR on its management reform and encouraged it to develop clear benchmarks to measure its success.

57. Mr. JOHANSEN (Norway) said that his Government strongly supported the Office's expanded role in protecting internally displaced persons and encouraged it to step up efforts to build its protection and response capacity. Norway would shortly be hosting an international conference on the integration of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement into national, regional and global legal frameworks. It encouraged UNHCR to continue to cooperate with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and relevant agencies to protect internally displaced persons and to refine and adjust working methods in inter-agency cooperation. UNHCR should also contribute to and benefit from the United Nations reform process, capitalizing on system-wide expertise to address cross-cutting issues such as gender.

58. Norway supported UNHCR efforts in connection with Afghanistan and was committed to strengthening the United Nations presence there. Political solutions must also be found, and the humanitarian space must be respected and protected.

59. He commended the High Commissioner for advancing and expanding the internal reform process. The importance of full transparency in implementation could not be overestimated, not least as a means of addressing staff morale issues. He said that he also welcomed the solid financial management of the Office and the fact that UNHCR had been fully financed in recent years. Further clarification and dialogue were needed, however, on the needs assessments carried out by United Nations country teams.

60. His Government had recently presented a new humanitarian strategy seeking to reconcile humanitarian imperatives with political concerns and priorities, which it viewed as interdependent. Norway, as a committed humanitarian partner, advocated a global humanitarian system for all that included closer cooperation among Member States and continued support for United Nations and humanitarian reform.

61. Mr. KITAJIMA (Japan) said that his Government applauded the swift response by UNHCR to the recent tragic occurrences in Georgia and the active role of the High Commissioner in assisting people of concern there. The international community must now act together to address protracted refugee situations such as the Afghan situation, which was becoming desperate, and the plight of refugees in urban areas, such as that of the millions of Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries.

62. His Government, which had recently published a study on resettlement, continued to cooperate and engage with the Office in discussions on refugee protection and refugee status determination. Assistance with the return and reintegration of refugees, using tools such as vocational training, education and medical care, was essential to finding durable solutions to refugee situations and promoting human security. In that regard, the “Delivery as One” initiative would help UNHCR and development organizations to provide such assistance more effectively. At the fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD IV) held in 2008, human security had been the topic of a side meeting, ably chaired by the High Commissioner.

63. His Government appreciated the Office’s reform efforts, and expected the Global Needs Assessment, the new budgetary structure and the Focus software to lead to results-based management and further benefits for the persons of concern.

64. Mr. VAN MEEUWEN (Belgium) commended the Office for providing assistance to the persons covered by its mandate, including the Georgian people. He said that an alarming number of humanitarian workers had been victims of deliberate attacks in the past year, and the international community must therefore address that issue and back free, unfettered access to victims of humanitarian crises.

65. Belgium attached particular importance to Africa, especially the Great Lakes region, and urged UNHCR to allocate the necessary resources to the continent and region, including from its annual programme budget. He commended the Governments and peoples of the United Republic of Tanzania and Burundi, as well as UNHCR, on their efforts to find a lasting solution for

Burundians who had been refugees since the 1970s. Belgium also supported UNHCR efforts to protect Afghan and Iraqi refugees, and had provided targeted contributions to assist host countries and ease the humanitarian crisis pending the finding of a durable solution for them.

66. UNHCR should participate actively in the “Delivering as One” initiative, which could help to address protracted refugee situations and facilitate returns and resettlement. The Office should also advocate in development forums for systematic inclusion of return and reintegration in development plans. Increased protection for women, children and older persons, gender mainstreaming in all operations and better access to health care, sexual and reproductive rights and education would facilitate integration and protect refugees’ human dignity.

67. He commended UNHCR for its participation in the humanitarian reform process, its partnerships with other agencies and non-governmental organizations and its involvement in the Global Humanitarian Platform. He also welcomed its commitment to internal reform and encouraged the Office to create synergies with other United Nations organizations, while providing the necessary support to staff. Belgium also fully supported the global needs approach to UNHCR programmes and budgets.

68. With regard to funding, his Government welcomed the efforts to promote best practices and increase transparency. It had renewed a multi-annual funding agreement for 2008-2011 for the programme budget, and its contributions would be complemented each year by targeted funds for specific programmes. Belgium would continue actively to support UNHCR operations.

69. Mr. GUTERRES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that he fully endorsed the five principles outlined by the United States representative and the comments on refoulement, the risk of which had increased in recent years. He concurred on the need for good management reform and the allocation of more funds for dire situations which went largely ignored. As needs-based budgeting was a complicated undertaking and there would not be enough funds to meet all needs, prioritization was vital. He was fully committed to ongoing dialogue with Member States on UNHCR activities and reform.

70. He was grateful to the representative of France for presenting asylum as central to the debate on migration, and he called for a harmonized asylum system in Europe. He said that he appreciated the role of the European Union in protecting the humanitarian space in eastern Chad and welcomed the forthcoming Special Summit on Refugees, Returnees and the Displaced to be held in Kampala. He was also grateful to the Islamic Republic of Iran for providing generous, long-standing protection to Afghan and Iraqi refugees, despite limited resources, and he agreed on the importance of voluntary repatriation. He acknowledged the considerable challenges of hosting so many Afghans and the need for burden sharing to alleviate their plight.

71. He was encouraged by the commitment of Pakistan to addressing the complex problem of Afghan refugees in that country. The international community must express its full solidarity with the displaced in Pakistan and provide assistance in North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan. He also noted the positive developments with respect to asylum institutions in Australia, and agreed that the definition of “refugees” under the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees should not be revised, lest the scope of protection was thereby diminished.

72. He was particularly grateful to the Swiss delegation for its comments on humanitarian space. From his discussions with the International Committee of the Red Cross, he had learned much about the importance of cooperation and coordination in that area. Inter-agency cooperation should not detract from any agency's mandate, however. He also took note of the Canadian support for the reform process and of the comments on the role of UNHCR in the protection cluster. He noted Norway's comments on the gender issue, which was at the heart of the Office's human resources and protection policies, and on the political dimensions of humanitarian action. Indeed, humanitarian situations must be resolved politically, without detriment to humanitarian space.

73. He commended Japan for its role in TICAD IV and for putting human security, which played a crucial part in humanitarian and development activities, at the centre of the international debate. He also took note of the importance that Belgium attached to the Great Lakes region. Funds should be mobilized to address the dramatic situation in such regions. In conclusion, as the United States representative had stated, it was important that available funds should meet the needs of persons of concern and should not be spent only on the structural costs of the organization.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.