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

Fifty-fourth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 578th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 3 October 2003, at 10.30 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. BOULGARIS (Switzerland)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.50 a.m.

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (agenda item 13) (document without a symbol, distributed in the meeting room)

1. Ms. JOYCE (Rapporteur), presenting the draft report of the fifty-fourth session, thanked the members of the Executive Committee for the confidence that they had placed in her. She also expressed her gratitude to Ms. Lynch, her predecessor as Rapporteur, the secretariat of the Executive Committee and the staff of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for their assistance in preparing the draft report. A list of the decisions taken by the Standing Committee, as well as the High Commissioner's opening statement and the Chairman's summary of the general debate, would be annexed to the final version of the report. The report would then be submitted to the Third Committee of the General Assembly as an addendum to the High Commissioner's annual report.

2. The report of the fifty-fourth session of the Executive Committee was adopted.

CLOSING STATEMENT BY THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

3. Mr. LUBBERS (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) welcomed the Executive Committee's support for his proposals to remove the time limit on UNHCR's mandate and to enhance linkages between UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations. He welcomed the support expressed by many members of the Executive Committee for an increase in UNHCR's share of the United Nations regular budget and hoped that representatives of Member States would pursue that proposal in the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly. He also welcomed the Executive Committee's support for the idea of convening a ministerial meeting every five years of the States parties to the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol and of other States members and observers of the Executive Committee.

4. He noted that strong support had been expressed for the Convention Plus initiatives aimed at strengthening the international protection regime, enhancing burden-sharing and achieving durable solutions. Delegations had emphasized the importance of the initiative both in addressing protracted refugee situations and in developing approaches to new refugee situations.

5. Humanitarian personnel were exposed to increasing dangers in their work in the field, and he thanked the members of the Executive Committee for their support of the measures taken to strengthen security. Security concerns also extended to the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the field, and he called on the Executive Committee to make every effort to obtain the release of Arjan Erkel, a Médecins Sans Frontières staff member kidnapped over a year earlier in Dagestan.

6. Some delegations had expressed reservations about the changes that had led to the abolition of the positions of Coordinator for Refugee Women and Coordinator for Refugee Children. Others had supported that approach, the aim of which was to mainstream age and gender sensitivity in all UNHCR programmes. Although some progress had been made, much remained to be done to ensure that the needs of women and children were prioritized in all UNHCR operations.

7. Many delegations had expressed support for UNHCR's efforts to encourage the development of more effective registration systems and to promote resettlement not only as a protection tool but also as a durable solution. He appreciated the generosity of resettlement countries, particularly the United States of America, which had maintained its policy of admitting resettled refugees in spite of new security hurdles.
8. Many delegations had also expressed support for capacity-building initiatives in countries of first asylum and in refugees' regions of origin. Some had rightly warned that such initiatives should not lead to burden-shifting. As Ms. Feller had emphasized, UNHCR's goal was to guarantee effective protection to all refugees everywhere. That was an obligation, not a choice. All too often, States failed to live up to their pledges to protect people fleeing from violence and persecution. He was deeply concerned at the increasing tendency of Governments to shield their populations against foreigners. Xenophobia was rife in many countries, and refugees and asylum-seekers were vilified both by politicians and the media almost as a matter of routine. While efforts to improve the efficiency and credibility of asylum systems must continue, it was important to guard against over-restrictive procedures and practices that were not consistent with international law.
9. Urgent action was necessary to find durable solutions to "forgotten emergencies", such as the camps of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, which had been in existence for more than 10 years. He had been encouraged to hear that the Nepalese and Bhutanese Governments had recently held high-level meetings and that more meetings were scheduled for the coming weeks. He hoped the process would lead to concrete results.
10. UNHCR needed resources to attain its goals. The funding gap for 2003 was still US\$ 15 million, which he hoped would be filled by the end of the year. The budget approved for 2004 amounted to US\$ 955 million; the increase was largely the result of the decision to mainstream the supplementary programmes, particularly the programme for Afghanistan, into the annual programme budget. Although some donors who had traditionally earmarked their donations were not in favour of that solution, there was no way round it; however, it was still possible to make choices by earmarking some of the funds contributed to the annual programme budget. He hoped that Governments would make concrete commitments to fund the whole budget at the pledging conference on 8 December 2003. The European Union countries and the European Commission together constituted UNHCR's largest donor, and he fully supported the suggestion that the European Commission should be accorded enhanced status in the Executive Committee. Although the number of donor countries had gradually increased, 80 per cent of UNHCR's budget continued to be funded by eight donors. It would not be possible to speak of genuine multilateralism until the donor base was expanded.
11. A number of delegations had called for the Executive Committee to take a closer look at budgetary and finance issues. The budget document for 2003 was more detailed than in previous years and had been submitted earlier. Further steps would be taken to enable the members of the Executive Committee to become more involved in discussions on financial management.

CLOSURE OF THE SESSION

12. The CHAIRMAN said he had been impressed by the commitment displayed by the delegations throughout the discussions, in which 65 observer States and many intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations had participated. He commended the spirit of conciliation in which they had been conducted, even when sensitive issues had been raised. Nearly 100 speakers had taken part in the general debate, during which many constructive comments had been made. The debate on international protection had provided an opportunity to draw the first conclusions from the implementation of the Agenda for Protection. The adoption of the conclusion on proposals arising from the UNHCR 2004 process had also been a major step forward.

13. He welcomed the willingness to improve cooperation within the United Nations system, as illustrated by the active participation of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance at the current session, the quality of the dialogue with NGOs and the success of the parallel events, which had provided an opportunity to consider some issues in greater depth. He shared the concerns expressed by the Staff Council in its statement on the safety of humanitarian personnel.

14. Following an exchange of courtesies, the CHAIRMAN declared the session closed.

The meeting rose at 11.45 a.m.