

Introductory remarks by George Okoth-Obbo, Director, Regional Bureau for Africa, for
“Overview of UNHCR’s Operations in Africa”, 59th Meeting of the Standing Committee of
the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme.

Room XVIII, Palais des Nations

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Mr Chairman

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning.

Mr Chairman, I have only some 7 minutes to overview no less than 38 UNHCR Country and Regional operations in which the Office is caring for more than 12 million persons of concern with an annual budget of US\$ 2 billion and expenditures in the order of US1 billion. That is a tough ask. So, I will trust that distinguished delegates will have had the opportunity to go through the “Overview of UNHCR’s Operations in Africa” which has been prepared for this session of the Standing Committee.

That would allow me to focus on the eminent highlights of that overview, which show a mixed typology of operations, situations, achievements and challenges. I should begin with by far the most positive of these, that is, situations characterized by a drive towards some degree of solutions or even where closure of the operation should be possible. Of the major Comprehensive Durable Solutions Strategies that the Office has been taking forward since 2009, the Angolan refugee situation continues to be drawn down steadily, most notably through repatriations which have continued from Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia. Indeed, in Namibia, the strategy is to have essentially closed that operation in the course of 2015, while, in Zambia, the strategic framework for durable solutions that was described in some detail at the Executive Committee last year as then still a work in progress has now been completed and should see some 10,000 Angolan and Rwandese refugees fully locally integrated over the next two years. The Rwandese Comprehensive Durable Solutions Strategy itself has moved somewhat slower than the others. Even so, some 6,000 refugees repatriated in 2013. The Malian refugee situation is another one that is moving tentatively as

far as refugee returns are concerned, with now some 7,000 having been confirmed to have returned spontaneously. This leaves 150,000 of them in Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger still waiting for, from what they themselves underscore to us, security conditions in the North of Mali to become even more predictable.

Elsewhere, UNHCR has assisted 19,000 Ivorian refugees to return home for a cumulative total now of 225,000 of the 300,000 that initially fled the country and, from the Republic of Congo, 57,000 DRC refugees in all returned home last year, with the decisive part of that refugee population now having come home. In West Africa, we expect to have completely closed the chapter on the remaining Liberian refugees, especially if the issuance of national passports to those who have opted for local integration can be completed in a timely manner as now scheduled while, in Benin, with the authorities having started issuing long-term residence permits to mainly the Togolese refugees in that country, we are foreseeing a closure of that operation by or during 2015 all remaining equal.

I can reiterate that UNHCR's determination remains to bring closure to as many protracted refugee situations as can be drawn down properly in a protection and solutions-due manner. So that I do not fail to mention an important situation in this respect, let me remind that in Tanzania, work is continuing for the finalization of the naturalization of the 165,000 former Burundian refugees in that country. Delegates will also have seen in the "Overview" that in that country, naturalization certificates are being processed for the 1,300 Somali Bantu refugees in Chogo Settlement. We aim to reach the same outcome for the Burundians.

Delegates may also recall that the situation that commanded attention and discussion at the Executive Committee in October last year was that of the 1 million Somali refugees for whom the High Commissioner has launched the "Global Initiative on Somali Refugees" apropos which we described a pilot project then in the making for the repatriation of a target of 10,000 refugees mainly from Kenya. In the period since then, a Tripartite Agreement for that repatriation operation was concluded between the Kenyan and Somali Governments and UNHCR. A lot of preparations for the commencement of the exercise have also taken place. We are now working to secure the funding to start implementation of the project although it is also true that the Office is closely studying the implications of the recent spike in Al Shabaab attacks in Somalia which have even targeted UNHCR staff and greatly diminished the scope and level of the Office's operations in the country accordingly.

Turning now to the state of protection, I can report that asylum remains solid and resilient in Africa where some 3 million refugees are finding in exile the safety and protection they have lost at home. Yet, unfortunately, we also have witnessed during this period instances in which the most core and essential requirements and adherences of the protection system have been put under extreme stress or even been brazenly flouted. Asylum-seekers and refugees have been killed in targeted assassinations. Many refugees have been forcibly returned to uncertain fate in their countries of origin, the very situation that the cardinal principle of non-refoulement seeks to prevent. We are facing difficulties in gaining access to people who clearly merit to be dealt with under refugee obligations, yet whose refugee status has been deliberately kept uncertain. We are being refused access to or operational engagement with IDPs for whom UNHCR is responsible to extend protection and other services as per the Cluster Approach. We also have a particular and very concerning situation in which a refugee camp has virtually lost its civilian and humanitarian character and the protection rights of refugees have been badly transgressed. The fight against SGBV continues in UNHCR operations across the Continent, including in its IDP operations. I should also confirm to the Standing Committee that in Africa, UNHCR is working to deepen and widen the footprint of its activities to prevent statelessness. With this in mind, let me appeal to all the Governments concerned please to respond positively to the campaign UNHCR is launching for accession to the two Conventions on Statelessness and for which a special Treaty Event will take place here in Geneva in July this year. We hope very much to see you there.

To round off on the protection theme, Mr Chairman, I must appeal once again for the cooperation and unbending commitment of States in fulfilling the most essential tenets of the system. In some of the instances in which these protection obligations are compromised, national security priorities are invoked. Yet, national security need not be considered as contradictory with refugee or IDP protection. Ways can be found to meet both in ways that give expression to the most fundamental protection and human rights of those concerned. On UNHCR's part, I can commit to a partnership in working together to find such solutions.

Mr Chairman, I turn now to what has been the decisive feature of Operations in Africa since the last meeting of the Executive Committee namely the explosion of new emergencies or an aggravation of existing ones. As we speak now, the Central African and South Sudan situations are the most evocative of these heart-wrenching crises. Between them, they have, in the space of less than three months, added a total of over 230,000 new refugees – 180,000

from South Sudan and 55,000 from the Central African Republic (to say nothing of some 90,000 third country nationals forced to flee CAR) and over 1.5 million internally displaced persons, 840,000 in the Central African Republic and 730,000 in South Sudan.

The grim barbarities, atrocities and human rights transgressions which have accompanied these crises are all too well known to require any echo by myself here today. What I would like to highlight for the attention of the Committee are their consequences.

First of all, humanitarian crises of this scale and rapidity add to what is already a critical agenda of refugee and IDP response for the Organization. In just the two months of this year, UNHCR has had, for the CAR and South Sudan emergencies alone, to seek a total of nearly US\$ 100 million in supplementary budgets. While we have received important pledges, funding availability is on the whole otherwise quite slow and, against the magnitude of what is required, unfortunately quite limited. Not only are these programmes themselves being very tightly squeezed, on-going ones are also put under even greater pressure. As UNHCR has to stand up emergency responses to these rapidly evolving situations at very short notice, both staff and even financial resources are having to be diverted from existing programmes, in turn thereby compounding the problems of those programmes themselves.

In addition to workforce and financial stresses, I would like to highlight the particular predicament we face with food for refugees for both new and on-going programmes. Already from the end of last year, WFP's resourcing challenges meant that it was obliged to cut back its basket for refugees, sometimes by up 50%, so as to stretch available resources as far as possible. Almost all the refugee operations in Africa are affected. When it is considered that, in Ethiopia, South Sudanese refugees are arriving in very poor condition with very critical Global and Severe Acute Malnutrition indicators, and likewise the Central African refugees in Cameroon, it is not too dramatic to characterize the shortage of food that we face in Africa as patently a matter of life and death.

The other point that I wish to echo is that, in these two crises, UNHCR has been extended in its protection functions on behalf of IDPs as in no other thus far. We are learning a lot, most crucially that, on one hand, our presence and engagement can make a real and telling difference for people who, as in the Central African Republic, are trapped literally waiting to be massacred. Yet, we have also seen glaringly the limitations of the effect which an agency

such as UNHCR can bring to bear in the face of the kinds of adversities which Muslims are facing in the Central African Republic for which, at this stage, only international military and police forces will be the entity that can assure safety and security in a meaningful way. Since his mission to the country some two weeks ago, the High Commissioner has joined the strong calls being made for the increase of these forces and for some of that capacity to be dedicated to humanitarian objectives, particularly the protection of the entrapped Muslims and others at grave risk. Allow me, Mr Chairman, to reiterate those calls here.

Mr Chairman, on some level, it can be understood that acute emergencies must command a telling part of the available resources. It is at the same time not sustainable that emergencies should account for over 70% of UNHCR's expenditures in Africa while solutions drawn only about 8% of it and livelihoods only some 3%. It is critical to find a way meaningfully to attribute resources to the search for solutions. Moreover, in this connection, other refugee situations, including the Mali Situation, the Burundians in Tanzania, the Angolans and Rwandese in Southern Africa and the Somalis in Eastern and Horn of Africa should particularly not be forgotten.

I would like to assure the Standing Committee that UNHCR will sustain its efforts both to save lives and foster core protection in the spiraling emergencies and also keep driving forward solutions in all the other situations. In these efforts, we shall continue to rely on the solidarity and partnership of the over 460 Governmental and non-Governmental partners with which we work in the Africa region, including over 300 NGOs, 160 of them national NGOs. I wish to acknowledge the pivotal role of these partners and also, particularly, the host populations who often are the first and even only responders in under-girding asylum, protection and other humanitarian solutions. The host Governments also assure conditions in which we and other humanitarian actors can carry out our operations safely. We are grateful for this support and facilitation too.

To UNHCR's financial donors, I would like to extend heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for your support. With it, we have been able to be there from the very onset and to save lives. Unfortunately, the demands remain considerable and we are obliged to issue one supplementary appeal after another. I must thus at the same time make a call upon you to continue supporting UNHCR in the most timely and fulsome manner possible.

To the Committee as a whole, please continue in every way possible your support for UNHCR and our multiple efforts as I have just resumed them.

Mr Chairman, concluding now, I would like to leave the Committee with, I am afraid, thoughts which even reflect some anguish. In these last three months, the crises in South Sudan and the Central African Republic have left the humanitarian universe, if not indeed the Africa region itself, reeling from perhaps the most compelling humanitarian crises we have had to cope with since the refugee and displacement crisis that resulted from the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. We have seen ethnic, political, religious or regional identity instrumentalized and employed in a diabolical and visceral enterprise of hatred, brutality, carnage, egregious and unspeakable human rights abuses and the unraveling of the whole social and economic fabric in what some have even, in the case of the Central African Republic, warned as the prospect of genocide. With thousands of people being forced to flee their homes under such extreme circumstances, even the most fulsome humanitarian responses that the international community can manage will amount to but only palliative bandage care. Only the astute, responsible and sustainable management of the political, religious, ethnic, or regional diversities which should otherwise provide capital for rich and productive nationhood will allow us to build veritable foundations upon which our societies can move forward in peace, stability and with a focus on the growth and progress we owe ourselves. Great human and social attributes should not be perverted. This year, we have in Continental Africa no less than 10 elections and next year another 9. We should be able to approach them free of fear that yet other humanitarian crises will unfold from them. Rather, we should have confidence that every other such event provides the opportunity for our societies, our countries, our nations and our Continent to stride even further forward in nourishing ever-stronger democracy, the rule of law, constitutionalism, social and economic progress and the trust of Africans in the safety, security and peace they should be able to find and count on at home.

Thank you Mr Chairman. Thank you very much to the Standing Committee.

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