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

Fifty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 626th MEETING

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

Chairman: Mr. VAN Eenennaam (Netherlands)

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CLOSING OF THE SESSION

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The meeting was called to order at 11 a.m.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS (agenda item 12)

1. Mr. MONTALVO (Ecuador), speaking on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, nominated Ms. Thompson (Costa Rica) for the office of Chairperson.
2. Mr. LOULICHKI (Morocco) seconded the nomination.
3. Ms. Thompson (Costa Rica) was elected Chairperson by acclamation.
4. Mr. PHUANGKETEOW (Thailand) nominated Ms. Miller (Australia) for the office of Vice-Chairperson.
5. Mr. GOODERHAM (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and Mr. JAZAIRY (Algeria) seconded the nomination.
6. Ms. Miller was elected Vice-Chairperson by acclamation.
7. Ms. FORGO (Hungary) nominated Ms. Birladianu (Romania) for the office of Rapporteur.
8. Mr. MONCKE (Nigeria) seconded the nomination.
9. Ms. Birladianu was elected Rapporteur by acclamation.
10. The CHAIRMAN observed that the gender balance had been redressed with the appointment of three women to the Bureau.
11. Ms. THOMPSON said that the Executive Committee should be guided in its work by its mandate to create the conditions in which those displaced due to conflicts and natural disasters could have a secure and dignified place to live and promote the conditions for a lasting solution to their situation. As Chairperson elect, she pledged her full support to the High Commissioner, whose knowledge and commitment to the humanitarian agenda were widely respected.
12. Ms. MILLER said she was honoured to be appointed Vice-Chairperson. She looked forward to working in a dynamic Bureau and with the High Commissioner and other colleagues in UNHCR on the important protection work of the Executive Committee.
13. Mr. GUTERRES (High Commissioner) said that he looked forward to working with the Chairperson elect and noted that her country had an exemplary asylum record. The Vice-Chairperson elect had proven a strong ally of UNHCR and her country was an example of best practices in asylum policy. Her presence on the Bureau would contribute to ensuring an adequate environment for asylum.
14. The CHAIRMAN said that having witnessed the miserable conditions in which refugees there lived during his recent visit to Damascus and Amman, he wished to remind the Executive Committee that the real centre of its work and of that of UNHCR was people.

The meeting was suspended at 11.30 a.m.

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE FIFTY-NINTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (agenda item 14)

15. Ms. TUDAKOVIC (Rapporteur), introducing the draft report on the fifty-ninth session, said that the draft general conclusion on international protection set out in the report would be the first general conclusion to be adopted by the Executive Committee since 2005. It would allow members to address a number of the most topical issues of concern in protection, including age, gender and diversity mainstreaming, protracted refugee situations, resettlement, internal displacement and statelessness.

16. Among the draft decisions in the report, attention should be drawn to the draft decision on possible ways to improve the identification of themes for Executive Committee conclusions on international protection and the process of preparing, drafting and finalizing conclusions, which reaffirmed the important role of Executive Committee conclusions on international protection and sought to reinvigorate the process for elaborating them.

17. A list of the decisions of the Standing Committee and the Chairman's summary of the general debate would be annexed to the final version of the report, which would then be submitted to the Third Committee of the General Assembly as an addendum to the High Commissioner's annual report. As noted in footnote 1 of the draft report, summary records of the session, providing a full account of the deliberations of the Committee, would be made available.

18. Mr. ISMAIL (Pakistan), referring to paragraph 15 (r) of the decision on possible ways to improve the identification of themes for Executive Committee conclusions on international protection and the process of preparing, drafting and finalizing conclusions, said that any discussion on protracted refugee situations should consider the impact of such situations on host countries, especially developing countries.

19. The CHAIRMAN said that he took it that the Committee wished to adopt the draft report of the fifty-ninth session of the Executive Committee.

20. It was so decided.

CLOSING STATEMENT BY THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

21. Mr. GUTERRES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that several key issues would underpin the Committee's collective endeavours in the coming year. The first was the issue of burden-sharing. Ways must be found to address the concerns of many host countries about the impact of a large refugee presence on their economy, social services, security and local environment. Burden-sharing would require financial support but also solidarity with host communities, many of which were themselves exposed to poverty and underdevelopment. It also implied environmental rehabilitation and other measures to mitigate the effects of the refugee presence on host communities.

22. Delegations had rightly highlighted the potential of the “Delivering as One” approach. He believed, however, that finding durable solutions required a coherent and systematic approach to burden-sharing that went beyond the United Nations and host Governments to include international financial institutions, bilateral development agencies, NGOs and the private sector. He hoped that the Kabul conference would be a landmark in promoting strong international solidarity and effective collaboration on reintegration challenges relating to Afghan refugees. Solidarity and collective engagement were also key to progress in protracted refugee situations, and he welcomed the opportunity to explore that issue further with members during the forthcoming Dialogue on Protection Challenges.

23. The need for a more effective and results-oriented humanitarian response was being addressed by the humanitarian reform process, which was already proving its worth. While important synergies had been found between the organization’s refugee operations and its increased involvement in internal displacement under the cluster approach, the latter approach had not undermined the integrity of the Office’s mandate or the fulfilment of the obligations that UNHCR had towards refugees.

24. Many delegations had expressed support for the Office’s renewed focus on humanitarian space and the reassertion of core humanitarian principles. UNHCR was working closely on those issues with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, and hoped to engage a range of other actors in it in the coming year. Even though the work of UNHCR was clearly shaped by broader political dynamics, the Office must ensure that it maintained its core humanitarian values. In that regard, the Global Needs Assessment and other relevant tools would allow for a more systematic prioritization of beneficiaries’ needs and would help assess progress in attaining results.

25. In addition, stronger and more systematic protection delivery, which depended on fostering a culture of tolerance and solidarity, was needed. He welcomed the calls by delegations for the organization to intensify efforts to tackle racism and xenophobia. In the sixtieth anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNHCR must work harder to address the root causes of intolerance: poverty, inequality and insecurity. It also needed to strengthen joint efforts to protect refugees in the broader context of international migration. As highlighted in the general debate, it was possible to couple national migration policies with protection-sensitive border management and unimpeded access to asylum. The empowerment of women, girls’ education, access to livelihoods and economic empowerment must also remain at the centre of the organization’s work in the coming year.

26. UNHCR needed to adapt its working methods to meet the needs of persons of concern. Although traditional protection models based on the establishment of camps were becoming less relevant, it was not yet clear what would take their place. The questions before UNHCR were how to improve the exercise of its mandate in urban areas and how public institutions in urban areas could develop the capacity to serve both their usual clients and displaced populations.

27. During the fifty-ninth session, much of the focus had been on beneficiaries’ rights and needs. There had been a clear consensus that the performance of UNHCR was best judged by its impact on the lives of those for whom it cared. Yet by supporting the world’s displaced and stateless persons, UNHCR also contributed to the attainment of broader objectives. When UNHCR provided protection and solutions, it helped to maintain international peace and

security, create the conditions for sustainable development, advance the cause of human rights and promote more effective and equitable migration management. The resources that members so generously provided to UNHCR enabled it to increase support to some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people; they also represented an investment in a more peaceful and prosperous world.

CLOSING OF THE SESSION (agenda item 15)

28. The CHAIRMAN said that the Executive Committee should not lose sight of the persons of concern to UNHCR, some of whom lived their entire lives in camps. It was instructive to visit the camp populations in order to appreciate their suffering at first hand and help to ensure that humanitarian concerns were no longer subordinated to political considerations. Countries that met the needs of an enormous number of refugees deserved greater recognition, while more support for the work of UNHCR could be secured through public awareness activities.

29. After the customary exchange of courtesies, the CHAIRMAN declared the fifty-ninth session closed.

The meeting rose at 12.25 p.m.