

by António Guterres

UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

The word “unprecedented” is quickly gaining currency in these times of multiplying and ever more complex conflicts. After the mass displacement and enormous humanitarian challenges of 2011, the year 2012 was even worse. More than 1 million people fled their countries of origin due to conflict and persecution, mainly from the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria), Mali, Sudan and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). That is the highest number of newly displaced refugees during any 12-month period since the beginning of the 21st century, exceeding the previous year’s record number. But we must never forget that behind the ever-increasing figures – of new arrivals, staff deployed, metric tons delivered and dollars spent on assisting the displaced – lie 1 million individual tragedies, 1 million fears, 1 million lives turned upside down, 1 million people missing their homes. Whatever limited material assistance humanitarian actors can provide to ease refugees’ suffering will never be enough to mend the trauma of having been uprooted by violence and fighting.


But if there were 1 million new refugees in 2012, that also meant that hundreds of thousands of doors were opened to provide them with safety and hospitality. Neighbouring countries maintained open borders despite heavy pressure on their own capacities. Relatives and friends, but in most cases total strangers, took in entire families under their roofs and shared what they had with them. Schools, mosques and churches, abandoned and even unfinished buildings were quickly transformed into shelters for the new arrivals. The fact that so many ordinary people – and their governments – did everything they could to help those in need, emphatically reaffirms the continued strength of the near-universal values underlying refugee protection.

**EMERGENCY RESPONSE:
STRETCHING THE LIMITS**

Throughout 2012, UNHCR and our partners raced to keep up with the ever-growing influx of refugees from four simultaneous crises in Syria, Mali, South Sudan and the DRC. Meanwhile, we were still dealing with the aftermath of the 2011 displacement crises in Côte d’Ivoire, Libya and Somalia, as well as the many protracted refugee situations around the world. This placed enormous stress on the organization’s human and financial resources, stretching our capacity beyond what we would have been able to cope with just a few years ago.

The fact that UNHCR did manage to respond to the challenges of 2012 highlighted the benefit of the major investments we have made in recent years to scale up our emergency response capacity. The Office’s ability to access technical capacity quickly and affordably through standby





A displaced mother finds temporary shelter with her children in an old classroom in Mugunga III settlement in eastern DRC, pending the allocation of a plot of land where her husband will build a new home for the family.

Stretching the Limits

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rosters managed by our NGO and government partners was essential to assure an emergency response that was both technically sound and very rapid. Over 460 of UNHCR's and partners'

staff were deployed on emergency missions during the year. Although this number was lower than in 2011 – due to longer mission duration and less turnover – it was still nearly twice as high as the deployment level in 2010. Similarly, the number of cargo flights delivering relief items from the emergency stockpiles rose to 129 in 2012 – double the number for 2011 and six times that of 2010. UNHCR's revamped global stock management allowed for increased efficiency in global coverage, assuring deliveries to operations in the shortest possible time.

UNHCR also established comprehensive corporate emergency policies and procedures in 2012, covering issues such as coordination and partnership, information management, staffing, fundraising and resource allocation. These are being reviewed and expanded continuously in light of lessons learned from ongoing emergency operations.

**DURABLE SOLUTIONS:
SUCCESS STORIES AND STRUGGLES**

While new crises added hundreds of thousands to the world's displaced population in 2012, a central focus of UNHCR's work continued to be on achieving what refugees most desperately need in the long run: a durable solution, with a real prospect for rebuilding their lives. Work began in 2012 on developing and implementing a range of comprehensive solutions strategies across the globe. This includes complementing the traditional durable solutions with wider opportunities through labour mobility and alternative legal stay arrangements.

Some 526,000 refugees voluntarily repatriated worldwide during 2012, similar to the numbers for 2011. This included both returns of more recently displaced refugees, as in the case of Ivorians, and the repatriation of more long-standing refugee populations, such as Angolans

and Liberians for whom refugee status ended in June 2012.

In resettlement, 2012 saw both positive developments and setbacks. Departures were up by 11 per cent over the previous year (68,000), but remained far below the global resettlement capacity. Resettlement submissions dropped to 75,200 – the lowest number in six years – as a result of difficulties in accessing certain refugee groups, for example in Syria and Kenya, as well as restrictive processing criteria and funding shortages. On a more positive note, the number of resettlement spaces available globally rose to 86,000, and two additional countries established regular resettlement programmes.

Several operations saw positive progress with regard to complementary solutions. India adopted a policy to issue long-stay visas and work permits to refugees, allowing them access to health, education and livelihood opportunities. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, some 135,000 families (600,000 individuals) of undocumented Afghans benefited from temporary stay arrangements under the Comprehensive Regularization Plan launched in 2011.

Local integration efforts continued in 2012. Thousands of refugees were naturalized in industrial countries. UNHCR worked closely with the Governments of Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo for the local integration of thousands of Angolan refugees. In Ghana, the Government adopted a policy on the local integration of Liberian refugees. These efforts however suffered from funding shortages, delaying for example the issuance of residence papers to some 47,000 former Angolan refugees after their refugee status ended in June.

**FUNDING, ACCOUNTABILITY
AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT**

Donor support for UNHCR's activities in 2012 was extraordinary, reaching a record USD 2.4 billion in voluntary contributions. The Office received additional funding from traditional donors, and reinforced measures to reach out to non-traditional ones, including the private sector. Private donors provided over USD 130 million in 2012, the highest level in UNHCR's history and an increase of 17 per cent over the previous year.

But despite donors' generosity, UNHCR was forced to make difficult choices as needs on the ground had risen exponentially and the available funding covered a smaller share of overall requirements than in 2011. We took measures to curb expenditures already in mid-year, such as limiting procurement, travel and training, and made efforts to contain staff costs. While this helped to maintain operations throughout



UNHCR / J. YANKEE

The High Commissioner meets a group of unaccompanied Sudanese refugee girls waiting for biometric registration at Yida settlement in South Sudan.

the year, significant funding gaps remained, especially in protracted situations.

UNHCR pursued efforts to address areas for improvement identified in recent external audit reports. Good progress was made on strengthening accountability and oversight within the organization. The Independent Audit and Oversight Committee created in late 2011 took up its work during 2012 and made several recommendations for improvements. The Office also established an Internal Compliance and Accountability Committee made up of several senior managers under the leadership of the Deputy High Commissioner, to ensure effective organizational accountability by reviewing and monitoring recommendations received from various internal and external oversight bodies. Several other key initiatives were launched in 2012, including the development of an organizational risk management framework and a project to strengthen policy coherence and better knowledge management for accountability. UNHCR also finalized and promulgated an internal policy on gross negligence, and started an internal review of its evaluation function.

In 2012, the Office's efforts to improve financial management were marked by the

full implementation, for the first time, of the International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS). In addition, some 24 new positions were created to strengthen field capacity in financial management and project control. This was only about half of the positions initially planned, as a result of the heavy strain put on the organization's resources by the year's major emergencies. These measures were complemented by training, targeted field support missions and better communication on financial policies and instructions. UNHCR also continued to work on improving the management of implementing partnerships.

INVESTING IN PARTNERSHIP

The past year saw significant efforts made in the area of partnership, most notably through a Structured Dialogue with the NGO consortia InterAction and ICVA, as well as with IFRC. This process reviewed the quality of our engagement with partners and made specific recommendations for improvement in 2013 and beyond – including strengthened collaboration in advocacy, capacity-building of local partners, urban refugee situations, and strategic dialogue. In addition, UNHCR invested significantly in building the capacity of local NGOs and community-based organizations. Initiatives focused on strengthening technical service

delivery, financial control, grant and proposal writing, as well as organizational management.

UNHCR and UNICEF worked on developing more effective and predictable ways to cooperate in refugee operations, and signed several country-level Letters of Understanding. The Office continued to enjoy a strong working relationship with WFP, carrying out joint impact evaluations of food assistance in protracted refugee situations and developing a joint Plan of Action for cash-based interventions. UNHCR remained fully engaged, under the leadership of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, in the development of the IASC's Transformative Agenda to strengthen leadership, coordination and accountability in emergency

the statelessness conventions: five to the 1954 Convention and seven to the 1961 Convention. This brought the total of new accessions to 23 since the beginning of UNHCR's campaign two years earlier. In addition, about one quarter of the countries that pledged at the Ministerial meeting to adopt a statelessness determination procedure did so in 2012.

With regard to the protection gap facing people forced to cross international borders as a result of climate change and other environmental hazards, several States acted on their 2011 pledge to initiate a consultative process to better understand such cross-border movements, including best practices of how to address

 **WE WILL CONTINUE TO FOCUS ON STRONGER PARTNERSHIPS, BOLSTER EMERGENCY RESPONSE CAPACITY, AND ADDRESS IDENTIFIED GAPS WHILE SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION AND SIMPLIFICATION.** 

response. Efforts will continue to enhance UNHCR's specific roles in the cluster approach, while also strengthening leadership and coordination in refugee emergencies, and establishing a clear and effective interface between the two coordination mechanisms in mixed situations.

In December, the 2012 High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges brought together over 200 religious leaders and staff of faith-based NGOs under the theme of Faith and Protection. The meeting confirmed the close link between the principles of refugee protection and some of the fundamental values shared by all major faiths. In addition to making an important contribution to interreligious cooperation and dialogue in the humanitarian field, the event resulted in a number of concrete proposals to enhance UNHCR's partnership with faith-based humanitarian actors and local religious communities, recognizing that they play a fundamental role in providing protection, assistance and solutions to the world's displaced people.

MOVING FORWARD IN PROTECTION

Throughout 2012, UNHCR offices around the world worked closely with their government counterparts to implement the pledges made by States at the December 2011 Ministerial meeting commemorating the anniversaries of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. A record number of countries acceded to one or both of

protection concerns in this context. Known as the Nansen Initiative, this process is led by a Steering Committee of several States, in which UNHCR and IOM participate as observers.

Significant investments were made in 2012 to strengthen the prevention of and response to SGBV. Special projects were launched at the beginning of the year in 12 UNHCR operations, covering a wide range of activities. Similarly, UNHCR's education strategy began yielding positive results after its first year of implementation, with both primary enrolment rates and refugees' access to university studies on a clear upward trend. Thanks to the Educate a Child initiative, some 176,000 additional children have been enrolled in primary school during the current academic year.

CONCLUSION

2012 was an enormously challenging year for UNHCR and the humanitarian community in general. The first months of 2013 give little reason to hope that the pressure on the organization will ease significantly in the near future - on the contrary. To be able to cope, we will continue to focus on stronger partnerships, bolster emergency response capacity, and address identified gaps while seizing opportunities for innovation and simplification. Beyond that, further strengthening our performance in core protection areas remains at the heart of our efforts to ensure that UNHCR is ready for the challenges that lie ahead. ■



A Somali refugee waters tree seedlings at a nursery supported by UNHCR near Hilaweyn camp in Ethiopia.