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

Fifty-fifth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 583rd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 6 October 2004, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. ESCUDERO MARTÍNEZ (Ecuador)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

STATEMENT BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER, GUEST SPEAKER AND GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 4) (continued)

1. Mr. PURI (India) said that since the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was reliant on voluntary funding, it must endeavour to maintain high standards of impartiality, transparency and accountability in both its internal management and its programme implementation. He noted with satisfaction UNHCR efforts to review headquarters expenditure and budgetary planning, in keeping with recommendations by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ), and looked forward to the results of the headquarters review process.
2. A strategic adjustment in UNHCR approaches and programmes was required, since developing countries hosted the most refugees. The concerns of individual countries should be addressed in proportion to the burden they were carrying. A development-based approach that focused solely on refugees would be inadequate and might even exacerbate inequalities at the local level. International efforts to address relief and rehabilitation for refugees must be based on the global development agenda. India commended UNHCR for having recently joined the United Nations Development Group (UNDG).
3. The Multilateral Framework of Understandings on Resettlement would contribute significantly to international responsibility and burden sharing, particularly since the international refugee law framework was currently threatened by increasing xenophobic tendencies, violations of the principle of non-refoulement and new barriers in traditional countries of resettlement. It was important not to regionalize refugee situations, since that could be construed as an attempt to contain refugee movements.
4. India welcomed the increased attention that was being paid to mass influx situations, which placed tremendous strain on host countries' capacities and resources. The international community must be prepared to assist any host country that requested support. UNHCR should consider expanding its activities in respect of internally displaced persons (IDPs) only when it had adequate resources to do so, and if a specific request had been made by the State concerned.
5. In order to achieve the goals set in the Agenda for Protection, UNHCR must cooperate closely with the States involved and take into consideration the specific features of individual situations and the potential consequences of intervention. Efforts must be made to ensure differentiation between asylum and migration, and international protection must be guaranteed to genuine asylum-seekers.
6. Mr. THABANE (Lesotho) said that UNHCR programmes for sustainable reintegration and voluntary repatriation were essential for providing relief to countries that were overburdened with refugees. Many African countries had undergone slow and ineffective democratization processes, and external debt, coupled with the problem of donor fatigue, made them susceptible to conflict. Lesotho was disappointed that the recent meeting of the International Monetary Fund

and World Bank had not resulted in the cancellation of debts owed by the poorest African countries. He hoped that the debt problem would be solved and that the international community would help Africa to strengthen democracy in order to reduce the number of conflicts that led to refugee situations.

7. Lesotho was committed to the principles set out in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The country had adopted a system of local integration and had granted citizenship to a number of refugees from the Great Lakes region. It was to be hoped, however, that when the situation in that region had stabilized, those former refugees would renounce their new citizenship and return to their home countries.

8. Regarding the situation in Darfur, he said that the Sudanese Government must increase its efforts to resolve the country's deep-rooted internal conflicts. No amount of international support could solve the Sudan's problems if the Government was not willing to act.

9. Lesotho commended the cooperation between UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP), since influxes of refugees strained resources and exacerbated the problem of hunger in developing countries. The proposal for the establishment of a post of Assistant High Commissioner for protection was welcome, since assaults on refugee women and children were increasing.

10. Mr. YIMER (Ethiopia) said his delegation hoped that implementation of the Convention Plus initiative would result in effective protection and durable solutions in protracted and evolving refugee situations. It welcomed the efforts that were being made to implement the initiative in Somalia and the Great Lakes region. The drafting of a plan of action for the implementation of Convention Plus in Somalia was particularly positive. It would be advisable to establish fast-track projects to run in parallel with that plan, in order to enhance the sustainability of reintegration efforts and encourage repatriation to some areas of Somalia.

11. The principal challenge in Africa was to ensure lasting solutions to situations of refugees and internally displaced persons through repatriation and reintegration. In post-conflict situations it was important that development actors should focus attention on long-term reconstruction and reintegration. The targeted development assistance in countries of first asylum and countries of origin advocated in the Convention Plus initiative would benefit refugees and local communities alike.

12. UNHCR must strengthen the link between humanitarian and development organizations through the 4Rs approach in the case of returnees and development assistance for refugees (DAR) in protracted situations. Although development assistance for durable solutions must be made available to a greater number of countries, it must not be at the expense of development aid in general. Such assistance must be provided using additional funding from donor countries.

13. Efforts should also be made to strengthen UNHCR policies for the empowerment of refugee women.

14. Ethiopia continued to seek durable solutions to protracted refugee situations and had repatriated some 232,000 Somali refugees since 1997. The Government welcomed the recent peace agreement concluded between the Sudanese Government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army. A process of formal registration for Sudanese refugees had been established in Ethiopia in preparation for their eventual repatriation to southern Sudan.

15. Ethiopia had recently adopted domestic legislation on refugees that was based on United Nations and Organization of African Unity conventions and protocols. The Government would continue to provide asylum and search for durable solutions to refugee problems, but would require donor support in order to provide effective assistance. Budget cuts and irregular food supplies to African countries, including Ethiopia, demonstrated the importance of a needs-based budget allocation system.

16. Mr. AMIRBAYOV (Observer for Azerbaijan) said that UNHCR had played a vital role in assisting his Government in establishing a national asylum system, improving citizenship legislation, reducing statelessness, developing the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector and establishing international partnerships. Azerbaijan was currently at a stage of transition between the emergency and development phases, and despite government efforts, international support was required if real progress was to be made. Efforts must be made to reawaken the international community to the humanitarian crisis in Azerbaijan, and coordinate international efforts more effectively.

17. His Government welcomed the renewed commitment of UNHCR to carrying out a needs assessment of the most vulnerable sectors of the displaced population in Azerbaijan and appealed to the Office to be more proactive in its plans and activities. His delegation commended UNHCR efforts to increase partnerships with other United Nations agencies and welcomed its plan to review its involvement in IDP crises.

18. Azerbaijan was dependant on UNHCR assistance to further develop its domestic asylum system and implement capacity-building measures. The Government had recently adopted a programme for improving living standards and increasing employment opportunities for IDPs, which took into consideration certain provisions of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The Government was keen to strengthen its cooperation with UNHCR and was looking forward to the visit from the High Commissioner, scheduled for the end of 2004.

19. Ms. RUGWABIZA (Observer for Rwanda) thanked the international community for the support it had provided for refugees in Rwanda whose repatriation the Government hoped to facilitate as soon as political conditions in their countries of origin had stabilized. The recent murder of 163 refugees in Gatumba had demonstrated the need to establish mechanisms to end impunity for armed groups and ensure the full implementation of peace agreements.

20. Thousands of refugees had fled Rwanda before and during the genocide in 1994. Restoration of the rule of law in the country had resulted in the repatriation of over 3 million Rwandan citizens. The Government appealed to UNHCR and the international community to assist in encouraging the remaining 70,000 refugees to return to the country, since voluntary repatriation was the most effective durable solution to refugee situations.

21. Her delegation also called on UNHCR to motivate donor countries to provide Rwanda with the funding needed to ensure the reintegration of returnees. In some cases, the lack of a suspension clause had led to a failure to implement tripartite repatriation agreements, which had slowed down, and in some cases prevented, the return of refugees. Rwanda was committed to respecting the provisions of international instruments for the protection of refugees, and supported all UNHCR efforts to strengthen such protection.

22. Mr. MNATSAKANIAN (Observer for Armenia) welcomed the incorporation of gender issues into UNHCR activities. His Government believed that the politicization of refugee situations to gain negotiating advantages should be discouraged, since it was a violation of refugees' human rights and often exacerbated their suffering. Armenia encouraged UNHCR initiatives to promote partnerships with other United Nations agencies that would result in greater consolidation and coordination of efforts in the field.

23. The Armenian Government attached particular importance to policy initiatives for the promotion of durable solutions to refugee problems, such as DAR and development through local integration (DLI). In the early 1990s Armenia had received a large influx of refugees, and it had since been relying heavily on UNHCR support. UNHCR had helped the Government to implement such practical solutions to refugee problems, as including development issues in domestic policies. Refugees enjoyed the same rights as all Armenian citizens, including the right to property ownership and to participation in the economic, social and cultural life of the country. Refugees were increasingly provided with opportunities for development and economic sustainability, and were an integral part of the country's poverty reduction strategy. Although a naturalization initiative had been adopted to encourage the full integration of the refugee population into Armenian society, the Government was taking care not to shift the focus away from refugees' specific needs simply by granting them the status of naturalized Armenians. Further UNHCR support was imperative for the continued advancement of Armenia's efforts, since domestic resources were limited.

24. Ms. FERNANDO (Observer for Sri Lanka) said that the current ceasefire in Sri Lanka had enabled the free movement of persons and goods throughout the country for the first time in 20 years. An estimated 358,759 IDPs had spontaneously returned to their homes, and every day saw the return of more families who had sought refuge in India. The Indian and Sri Lankan Governments were cooperating closely on the orderly return of refugees, drawing on UNHCR assistance as required. UNHCR had been a strong partner for Sri Lanka and in 2003 had launched a supplementary relief programme for returning IDPs to help them during the transition phase.

25. Throughout the conflict, her Government had continued to deliver administrative, health, educational and welfare services, even in rebel-held areas, and had allowed humanitarian agencies to deliver assistance. United Nations agencies and NGOs had operated in Sri Lanka for many years, rendering valuable assistance. Sri Lanka was grateful to UNHCR and the donor community for the humanitarian support they had provided and hoped that the assistance would continue until a lasting solution was found that would satisfy all parties in Sri Lanka.

26. Mr. BAYOR DUWEH (Observer for Liberia) said that his Government was moving forward with the implementation of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement. It had already demobilized and disarmed more than 80,000 former combatants and prepared the ground for the

voluntary repatriation of over 300,000 Liberian refugees from the West African subregion and the reintegration of more than 260,000 IDPs. The Liberian Government and other stakeholders had adopted a Community Resettlement and Reintegration Strategy in June 2004, and a security assessment committee for resettlement had been established. The committee had already declared five counties safe for return.

27. IDPs had begun to undertake “reconnaissance” visits to their communities with a view to their voluntary return, resettlement and reintegration, and more than 50,000 refugees had voluntarily and spontaneously returned, although problems with the safety of their means of transport had triggered a national emergency. UNHCR and the Liberian Refugees, Repatriation and Resettlement Commission had decided to implement a facilitated repatriation approach, declaring 1 October 2004 the official starting date for repatriation. The first group of 144 refugees had arrived in Monrovia on that date, in what Liberia hoped would be the beginning of an ongoing and sustained process.

28. Adequate funding was needed if UNHCR and institutions in Liberia and other asylum countries were to discharge their obligations effectively and efficiently. International donors should do their part by increasing contributions, while the Executive Committee should give priority to Liberia when considering its programme budget. The donor community should also support measures to ensure the sustainability of return and reintegration.

29. He hoped that Liberia could be helped to make the transition from crisis to reconstruction and development, and to prepare the ground for free and fair general and presidential elections in October 2005.

30. Mr. SALLE (Observer for the Central African Republic) paid a tribute to donor countries and United Nations agencies for supporting his country’s search for durable solutions to its refugee problems. His Government was following the events in Darfur and in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo closely and hoped that the international community would do more to find a solution that would help to maintain peace in the subregion.

31. The Government of the Central African Republic had repatriated large numbers of Congolese and Sudanese refugees and hoped that the requisite financial support would be provided to the UNHCR country office. The country also needed international support in order to hold elections in 2005, establish security throughout the country and continue to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate former combatants.

32. Ms. KEANE (Ireland) expressed concern at the situation of refugees and IDPs in Darfur and at the prevalence of violence against women in situations of conflict and displacement. Her Government welcomed the steps taken by the High Commissioner to mainstream gender issues and his efforts to promote close cooperation between UNHCR and United Nations agencies and international organizations and to tackle the challenge posed by AIDS.

33. She welcomed the measures taken to consolidate and streamline the Office’s management procedures and encouraged the High Commissioner to continue to develop results-based management systems, as recommended by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU). Her delegation appreciated the open and transparent manner in which the issues raised in the recommendations of JIU were being handled.

34. There was much to recommend the idea of adopting a biennial cycle for the programme budget in order to facilitate long-term planning. Longer planning cycles helped donors with multi-year funding approaches, which Ireland had been developing recently. Ireland had contributed almost €7 million to UNHCR core resources in 2004 and a further €1.75 million for specific emergency needs. It would maintain or enhance its level of contributions in response to the agency's needs.

35. Ms. NGENDAHAYO (Observer for Burundi) recalled that concern had been expressed at the fifty-fourth session of the Executive Committee about the scheduled massive repatriation of Burundian refugees living in the United Republic of Tanzania and the additional burden of asylum-seekers from neighbouring countries, in particular the Democratic Republic of the Congo. During his visit to the area in November 2003, the High Commissioner had grasped the situation on the ground that was causing concern. In that connection, she thanked the High Commissioner for according priority to the refugee situation in Africa in general and the Great Lakes region in particular.

36. Since refugee movements were the consequence of violence and human rights violations, any viable solution to the problem required the restoration of peace and stability in the countries and regions of origin. By signing the Arusha Peace Agreement, the people of Burundi had signalled their determination to end violence and work for peace, reconciliation and development. With the signature on 16 November 2003 of a Global Ceasefire Agreement with the National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD/FDD), peace had been restored on most of its territory.

37. Such developments and cooperation with UNHCR had allowed for the repatriation of refugees from the United Republic of Tanzania and the return of IDPs. In 2004, more than 80,000 persons had been repatriated, and a further 120,000 returns were possible before the end of the year. Almost half of the 300,000 IDPs had returned home according to a census carried out with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in April 2004. The Government had stepped up the decentralization of services for assisting returnees by opening up entry and exit points in Muyinga, Ruyigi, Canzuko and Makamba, and by providing the different regional units with human and material resources. Resettlement and reintegration programmes had also been implemented in accordance with the 4Rs approach, and the community had been involved in such exercises in order to avoid tensions.

38. In spite of its problems, Burundi had always been a place of asylum for many refugees. For more than 30 years some 20,000 Rwandan refugees had been well integrated in Burundi society and had enjoyed the same rights as nationals. More recently, some 30,000 Congolese refugees had been offered asylum. Burundi thus faced the dual challenge of organizing the repatriation of its own citizens and receiving refugees from neighbouring countries. She praised the international community and UNHCR for their practical assistance and said that her country counted on the Office's continued support for the drafting of national legislation on asylum and the establishment of a national refugees commission.

39. All peace-loving people had been deeply shocked by the cruel massacre of innocent refugees in Gatumba in August 2004. Without prejudging the conclusions of the investigations currently under way, it was possible to qualify the incident as genocide. The massacre was typical of terrorist groups which preferred to attract attention by the atrocity of their acts rather

than to negotiate. Unfortunately, the security problems caused by such groups were not confined within national frontiers, and the incident in question had also affected the security of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania. It was in view of that interdependence that the International Conference on the Great Lakes region was to be convened, and it was to be hoped that that forum would give fresh impetus to peace in the region as a whole. In the meantime, and pending more durable solutions, it had been agreed with UNHCR that the Government would work with United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB) to protect the refugee camps and keep the Congolese refugees far from the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

40. The Government of Burundi was firmly committed to the cause of refugees and IDPs and believed that their rehabilitation was a prerequisite for peace, security and stability. The challenges that such rehabilitation posed could be overcome through partnership and solidarity on the part of all actors involved. It should be noted that several countries had pledged their support for a national programme for the rehabilitation of victims during the Forum of Partners for Development in Burundi held in Brussels in January 2004. It was to be hoped that increased solidarity, resource mobilization and direct funding for victim rehabilitation and refugee programmes would make the dream of peace and security in Burundi and the Great Lakes region a reality.

41. Mr. KURTEKKIN (Turkey) said that the fact that 3.6 million Afghans had returned to their homes since 2002 was a welcome sign that the overall situation in Afghanistan had improved. However, many challenges remained, which could be addressed through international cooperation, combined humanitarian activities and the implementation of the Afghan Comprehensive Solutions initiative.

42. The results of the return programmes in other parts of the world were also encouraging, and Turkey hoped that more refugees would return to Iraq, too, once the situation there had improved. There had, however, been a lack of progress in certain regions, particularly the Middle East. No effort should be spared to end the existing stalemate in the region and resume the quest for peace.

43. The number of recent visits to Darfur by the High Commissioner and other members of the international community were evidence of a common commitment to ending the plight of the people in that area and of the seriousness of the humanitarian situation there. Turkey welcomed the steps taken by the Sudan to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian relief and had itself already dispatched some aid to Darfur. The close cooperation between UNHCR and WFP was a good example of the kind of inter-agency cooperation needed to meet such challenges.

44. Receiving countries should recognize the importance of exclusion in reducing the number of asylum-seekers. Improved measures to prevent abuses of asylum procedures could serve to divert resources back towards areas of greatest need.

45. Security concerns and global terrorism posed a challenge to humanitarian operations and humanitarian workers. Turkey supported UNHCR efforts to improve the security of its staff and hoped that they would be replicated throughout the United Nations system.

46. There was increasing global awareness of the problems and challenges posed by large-scale human movements. The ministerial meeting on refugee issues to be held by the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 2005 was evidence of that trend. Intergovernmental consultations and improved international cooperation would undoubtedly help to raise that awareness further.

47. Mr. MARTÍNEZ (Mexico) said that Mexico welcomed the efforts undertaken by UNHCR to adapt to new realities. Accordingly, his Government endorsed the proposed appointment of an Assistant High Commissioner for protection, on condition that the creation of such a post had no adverse implications for the regular budget. Likewise, his Government was sympathetic to any new administrative measures intended to enhance the security of UNHCR personnel and the Office's capacity to respond effectively to events, such as the biennialization of the UNHCR budget. At the same time it was incumbent on all States and intergovernmental and non-governmental bodies to help UNHCR carry out its mandate and identify durable solutions to refugee problems by working together in a coordinated manner and in a spirit of solidarity.

48. Mexico's commitment to the institution of asylum was illustrated by its intention to host an event to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, which would undoubtedly elicit proposals to benefit refugees and asylum-seekers in the Latin American region. Furthermore, since March 2002 the Mexican Federal Government, acting through its Commission for Assistance to Refugees (COMAR), had assumed direct responsibility for refugee status determination. His Government was also examining the possibility of bringing national legislation into line with international instruments on refugees.

49. Mexico fully endorsed the provisions of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which enshrined the principle of non-refoulement and respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of refugees and asylum-seekers. The Agenda for Protection and agreements resulting from the Convention Plus initiative should provide a basis for enforcing the international protection arrangements articulated in the Convention and the Protocol. In any event, practical and durable solutions to refugee-type situations must always be anchored in international law and cooperation. Accordingly, all negotiations under the Agenda for Protection and the Convention Plus initiative should seek to involve as many countries and other relevant stakeholders as possible in order to ensure the fullest possible exchange of opinions and experiences.

50. His Government had taken note of the conclusions of the core group on a multilateral framework of understandings on commitments needed for plans of action with a resettlement component, and hoped that those endeavours would be worthily complemented by the work of the core groups on irregular secondary movements and development assistance, once methodological problems in those areas had been sorted out. Many of the problems that triggered refugee flows were rooted in poverty, and it was therefore essential that the development requirement should remain in the forefront of deliberations under the Convention Plus initiative.

51. Mr. GIACOMINI (France) said that in view of the recent disgraceful attacks on humanitarian personnel, his Government intended to keep the spotlight on the issue of staff safety, especially in the Security Council. On the other hand, he was pleased to note that the

financial position of UNHCR was less precarious than it had been in previous years. The donor base had widened and many donors - France included - had made an effort to pay their contributions earlier in the financial year. However, greater responsiveness on the part of donors had to be matched by better management and administrative practices within UNHCR.

52. The number of refugees worldwide had decreased, partly as a result of successful voluntary return operations such as those in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Afghanistan. Inter-agency coordination had also improved, as shown by the recent relief efforts to help Sudanese refugees in Chad. France was particularly concerned by the serious human rights violations taking place in the Sudan. It should be noted that the humanitarian crisis in the Darfur region could cancel out the benefits that the Sudan had a right to expect with the return of peace to the southern part of the country. The crisis was also a destabilizing factor for the region. The international community should continue to put pressure on all parties to the conflict to ensure that they fulfilled their obligations under Security Council resolutions 1556 (2004) and 1564 (2004). Specifically, the Sudanese Government should put an end to the atrocities of the Janjaweed, arrest the movement's leaders and cooperate with an international commission of inquiry in order to investigate reports of violations of human rights law in Darfur. Encouragement should also be given to the African Union's efforts to settle the conflict.

53. France welcomed the proposal to establish the post of an Assistant High Commissioner for protection, but such an appointment should be carefully considered in consultation with donors. Effective protection of refugees also depended on the presence of a sufficient number of officers in the field, a condition that was currently not being met, especially in the case of French-speaking protection officers.

54. Lastly, his Government doubted the wisdom of drafting an additional protocol to deal with mass exoduses of refugees, given that a number of practical mechanisms already existed, particularly at the European level. In such situations the European Union had opted for the solution of temporary protection without granting refugee status en masse. Such a solution did not rule out the possibility of considering individual cases, nor was it the only possible approach. Further research was perhaps needed to determine what mechanisms had a track record of success in situations of mass exodus.

55. Mr. ALI (Uganda) said that his Government particularly welcomed the High Commissioner's initiatives to mainstream gender and HIV/AIDS and to rehabilitate and reintegrate internally displaced persons. Notwithstanding certain positive developments earlier in the year, the refugee situation in the East and Central African region was still unresolved. Accordingly, Uganda appealed to the international community and the African Union to redouble their efforts to seek durable solutions for the region. Special attention should be paid to the long-term reconstruction and development of war-affected areas.

56. Currently home to 235,000 refugees, Uganda was continuing to implement strategies that integrated the needs of refugees into broader national development plans. His Government had initiated a self-reliance strategy to enhance the productive potential of refugees and host populations through targeted improvements in the socio-economic conditions of host communities. Such an approach allowed refugees to have access to services and programmes intended for local people without discrimination. Consequently, more than 65 per cent of refugees in Uganda were no longer dependent on relief aid.

57. With support from the Danish Government, Uganda had embraced DAR as the best way to deal with protracted refugee situations. Success in the area of voluntary repatriation had been mixed: it was important to remember that, in many cases, circumstances on the ground precluded refugees from returning to their countries of origin, and for them durable solutions were the only answer.

58. Although the High Commissioner had referred to an improvement in the overall funding situation, his Government was concerned lest the overall picture obscure budget cuts at the country level. The principles of international solidarity and burden sharing should continue to apply. In its efforts to promote food security, the Ugandan Government had placed heavy emphasis on local food production. Refugee villages in Uganda were production zones, selling food to WFP for consumption in other African States.

59. Mr. CHATTHA (Pakistan) said that Pakistan's hospitality to the 3 million Afghan refugees in its territory was well known. Under the terms of the tripartite agreement between Pakistan, Afghanistan and UNHCR, those refugees were scheduled to return home gradually as soon as conditions permitted. Ultimately, the date of the refugees' return depended on Afghanistan's absorption capacity. Given the political and economic instability in the region, UNHCR and the international community had a continuing moral obligation to help Pakistan support its large Afghan refugee population. To that end, the donor community could develop attractive repatriation packages and set up a repatriation endowment fund.

60. Ms. LABORA RODRIGUEZ (Observer for Cuba) said that over the years UNHCR had increased its cooperation with Cuba, and frequent visits had been made to the country, the most recent one in July 2004. She hoped that Cuba would be able to rely on the continuing support of UNHCR in the future. Given that the countries from which most refugees and displaced persons originated were among the least developed, durable solutions required greater bilateral and multilateral efforts to provide concrete assistance and eliminate the obstacles to development and the enjoyment of human rights.

61. It was vitally important to safeguard the humanitarian and apolitical nature of UNHCR, in keeping with the Office's Statute and the principles enshrined in the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, particularly with regard to the definition of a refugee. The distinction between economic migrants and refugees was becoming more and more vague, with some people taking advantage of refugee status for their own purposes. It was also necessary to abide by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and criteria for the assistance and protection of internally displaced persons. Cuba remained committed to providing UNHCR with the support and cooperation it needed to fulfil its noble aims.

62. Mr. MBEMBA FUNDU (Democratic Republic of the Congo) thanked UNHCR for its unwavering support for his country in the protection and assisting of refugees. Security in camps, separating civilians from combatants and keeping refugees at the distance stipulated by relevant international instruments must remain a matter of concern to States and UNHCR. If those principles had been upheld, incidents such as the massacre of Congolese citizens in Gatumba could have been avoided. His Government condemned that massacre and was awaiting the outcome of an international commission of inquiry to establish who the perpetrators had been and what their motives were.

63. The Democratic Republic of the Congo bordered nine other countries and had long been a country of asylum. The refugee situation had reached crisis point in 1994, when more than 150,000 Rwandans had flooded into the country. Initially stationed in the provinces of North and South Kivu, the refugees had been forced by the 1996 war to cross the country, with major casualties and environmental damage resulting.

64. At present there were 314,529 refugees from neighbouring countries in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. With the restoration of peace in some countries, steps had been taken towards voluntary repatriation, including the signing of tripartite agreements with Angola, the Congo and the Central African Republic.

65. Around 111,000 Angolan refugees had been integrated with UNHCR assistance in villages in Bas-Congo province, but surprisingly had not been officially registered. There were approximately 25,000 more refugees in a similar situation who risked being overlooked by the repatriation process. His Government and that of Angola had agreed to bring the matter to the attention of UNHCR with a view to finding an appropriate solution.

66. Although the Democratic Republic of the Congo was a host country, some 350,000 Congolese citizens were still refugees in neighbouring countries, including the United Republic of Tanzania, which was hosting 150,000 of them. The transitional Government was committed to restoring the rule of law and promoting peace and reconciliation, which should encourage the voluntary return of those refugees. Aware of its responsibilities towards refugees and IDPs, the Government was doing its utmost to re-establish security in the areas concerned and to conclude repatriation operations before the elections scheduled for June 2005.

67. Considerable efforts were being made to ensure the return of more than 4.5 million IDPs. In some places their return would coincide with that of refugees, and to avoid possible tension between the different communities the Government had requested an extension of the UNHCR mandate with respect to IDPs. It also sought the support of the appropriate United Nations specialized agencies in assessing the damage caused to the country's flora and fauna, including in the Virunga National Park, by flows of Rwandan refugees between 1994 and 1996, with a view to seeking compensation.

68. Given that the main cause of the refugee problem in the region was war, he called for the establishment of an anti-war front to promote peace and security in the Great Lakes region. In that connection hopes were pinned on the International Conference on the Great Lakes region, scheduled to be held in November 2004. He appealed to the international community to assist in the consolidation of peace, security and stability in a region where armed groups manipulated by certain Powers sought to balkanize and plunder countries such as his own.

69. In October 2002 legislation on the status of refugees had been passed, thereby demonstrating the Government's political will to comply with its international obligations. The legislation established a national committee for refugees, which had been in operation since April 2004 with the support of UNHCR.

70. Mr. CABRERA HIDALGO (Ecuador) said that Ecuador's chairmanship of the current session could be viewed as the international community's recognition of the country's humanitarian credentials: in view of the protracted crises in Columbia, Ecuador was leading

efforts to provide international protection in the region. However, in addition to recognition, greater support and resources for the implementation of its national programme would be welcome.

71. It was important to focus on measures that combined the search for durable solutions with the principle of international solidarity and shared responsibility. In that connection he welcomed the efforts of the inter-American system to enhance the concept of resettlement. He also expressed satisfaction at the attention being paid to the linkage between local development and protection. In Ecuador's experience, there could be no real protection and local integration without the development of host communities.

72. His delegation was concerned at the increased reduction in humanitarian spaces. While shared responsibility was being discussed, moves were being made to close the frontiers of even more countries, making legitimate international protection even more difficult in those countries best equipped to provide it. Similarly, resources that should be made available as part of shared responsibility were being blocked. He deplored such double standards.

73. Ecuador continued to maintain a distinction must be drawn between international socio-economic problems deriving chiefly from inequitable labour market conditions and those resulting from humanitarian crises. Such problems should be handled by bodies having a specific mandate to do so; refugees, migration and international trafficking in persons or terrorism could not all be addressed together or by the same means.

74. The time had come to find better solutions for sharing responsibilities, in accordance with the Agenda for Protection. Such sharing must include the countries from which refugees or asylum-seekers originated. At its fifty-fourth session, the Executive Committee had adopted a conclusion on facilitating and cooperating in the return of persons who were not entitled to international protection. However, such cases posed an additional burden on host countries, often with a serious impact on the economic, social and political stability and security of the communities concerned. That was not mere hypothesis: it was currently happening in Ecuador.

75. His delegation endorsed the conclusions of the subregional meeting held recently in Cartagena to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. That meeting had afforded an opportunity to give prominence to refugees at the regional level.

76. Mr. ALAGHBASH (Sudan) said that the voluntary return of refugees was a strategic objective for the Sudan. However, lack of funding was often the biggest obstacle to its realization, and he hoped that the Committee would continue to accord priority to the mobilization of resources.

77. The Tripartite Commission had set 31 December 2004 as the deadline for the voluntary return of Eritrean refugees and the end of October 2004 for the final screening of refugees who were unable to return. However, funding shortfalls had prevented the implementation of operational measures. The Eritrean refugees should be allowed more time, and the obstacles to execution of the programme should be removed.

78. The Sudan had learned much from more than four decades of hosting and caring for refugees, for which it had received various forms of international and donor support. However, in recent years, with the application of the suspension clause to Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees, most of the burden had been shifted onto the Sudan's shoulders, belying much-vaunted claims about partnership and international burden sharing.

79. The Sudan was unconvinced about the timing and haste of the application of the suspension clause. The international community should help to mitigate the impact of that measure, since Eritrean refugees in the Sudan had not been given time to return voluntarily. The many refugees who would remain in the Sudan had been left to that country and UNHCR to manage, without any involvement of the country of origin. Moreover, increasing numbers of asylum-seekers were pouring into the country, placing a further strain on services and resources.

80. The reopening of the UNHCR office in western Darfur had enabled UNHCR to send international staff to protect Chadian refugees and monitor Sudanese refugees in Chad with a view to their voluntary repatriation. Moreover, the humanitarian situation of IDPs in Darfur had improved considerably, although the assistance reaching the area was still not enough to meet their needs. His Government appealed for more international support in that area.

81. On the security front, the Government had taken steps to provide protection and security to IDPs in Darfur, deploying large numbers of police officers and agreeing to the presence of African monitoring troops. It was moving forward on the peace process in southern Sudan and was negotiating to resolve the crisis in Darfur. The Sudan needed international support to help the large numbers of Sudanese refugees return voluntarily to their country, and looked to UNHCR to protect the refugees in the interim.

82. Although the Sudan had devised programmes and prepared proposals for comprehensive rehabilitation in areas affected by the long-term presence of refugees, they had yet to be implemented. The Sudan hoped that the agreement to compensate it for damage resulting from protracted refugee situations would be honoured.

83. Ms. ISHO (Observer for Iraq) said that the numbers of refugees and displaced persons in Iraq was an indication of the very complicated humanitarian situation there, which called for international cooperation. There were approximately 1.5 million Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers abroad, and as many, if not more, with special status who were not registered. According to key international organizations, there were also more than 1 million IDPs eagerly waiting, along with other persons of concern, to go home. Yet despite its tireless efforts in cooperation with the international community, the Government was having difficulty creating the necessary conditions for their return and reintegration, not least because of the lack of material resources.

84. She thanked the countries hosting Iraqi refugees, asking them not to encourage their return until the security situation had improved and basic assistance was available. The Government was striving to resolve disputes arising from measures imposed by the former regime, including property confiscation, forcible resettlement and removal of nationality. The Government would not prevent the return of refugees, but was unable to ensure that their needs

would be met. Despite the prevailing harsh conditions, some 190,000 persons had returned home the previous year, 16,000 of them with the assistance of UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Others had returned spontaneously but could not gain access to basic amenities.

85. As part of its reintegration into the international community, Iraq was considering acceding to the 1951 Convention on the Protection of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol as well as to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons. Iraq was already abiding by the provisions of the 1951 Convention in respect of the 100,000 foreign refugees in the country, by providing them with legal protection and other assistance. To that end it was endeavouring to raise funds for the establishment of refugee programmes and to cooperate with UNHCR on refugee issues.

86. She concluded by expressing her gratitude to all the countries that had helped bring Iraq back into the international community, with which her Government stood ready to cooperate in order to overcome the challenges facing it.

The meeting rose at 1.10 p.m.