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

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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 622nd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 8 October 2008, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. VAN EENENNAAM (Netherlands)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 4) (continued)

1. Ms. NAHAYO (Observer for Burundi) said that with the signing of an agreement on a cessation of hostilities in May 2008, the peacebuilding process was well under way in Burundi. Despite the adverse economic climate, voluntary returns of Burundi refugees from the United Republic of Tanzania had picked up again. Some 500,000 refugees had returned home since 2002, 80,000 in 2008 alone, and a further 20,000 had returned under a programme launched by the High Commissioner to repatriate Burundis who had been in the United Republic of Tanzania since 1972. The remaining challenges were the reintegration of returnees in Burundi and the local integration of refugees who had opted to stay on in the United Republic of Tanzania.
2. The reintegration of returnees was crucial to peace and stabilization in Burundi, which was why her Government was determined to tackle the problem head on, in cooperation with partners and donors. There were two additional means of promoting reintegration. Integrated “peace villages” for landless persons and returnees provided a resettlement space geared towards long-term development. Mechanisms for the mediation and settlement of land disputes had been strengthened, helping to deal with problems relating to internally displaced persons, sustainable land management and persons expelled from other countries.
3. There were more than 30,000 Congolese refugees in Burundi and asylum-seekers were arriving every day. Her Government had therefore strengthened the legal and institutional framework for refugee protection, promulgating the Act on asylum and the protection of refugees in February 2008 and establishing the National Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons to manage asylum policy. She thanked UNHCR, the European Commission, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the main donor countries for their assistance with repatriation and reintegration programmes and said that she looked forward to even greater support in the future.
4. Mr. SIR DAR (Sudan) said that while his Government fully supported voluntary repatriation for refugees, it had found, in its long experience, that resettlement did not represent a comprehensive solution, given the high costs and small numbers of persons involved. The number of Sudanese refugees resettled abroad since 2007 represented a mere fraction of the total number of refugees arriving in the Sudan. His Government therefore appealed for more donor funding for resettlement and pledged to expedite procedures for delegations coming to the Sudan to undertake resettlement operations.
5. The existing budgets for basic humanitarian services in refugee camps in eastern Sudan were insufficient and were dwindling, notwithstanding the rise in the numbers of asylum-seekers arriving from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. Many refugees continued to live in “closed” camps without any humanitarian assistance from the international community for basic necessities. His delegation therefore requested that the actual needs of refugees in the Sudan should be included in the Global Needs Assessment.
6. The Sustainable Options for Livelihood Security in Eastern Sudan programme had not been implemented satisfactorily, owing to lack of funding, and he therefore appealed to UNHCR

to help evaluate the programme and devise effective alternatives. In addition, the first phase of a refugee registration programme was due to be completed in all camps in the Sudan by the end of 2008 and the second phase, for urban-based refugees, should be launched soon. He hoped that UNHCR and donor States would contribute the necessary funding for that programme as well.

7. Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the Sudan had concluded tripartite agreements with all neighbouring States, and voluntary return programmes for Southern Sudan and the Blue Nile State had been launched. Although some 290,000 refugees had returned home since 2005, the return process was being hampered, mainly by a lack of funding. A total of around 435,000 refugees were still waiting to return. Return areas also needed to be rehabilitated to ensure that returns were sustainable.

8. In Darfur, while his Government had done everything possible to resolve the situation swiftly and fairly, some rebel movements were determined to sabotage its efforts by attacking unarmed citizens and aid convoys, engaging in looting and killing sprees and even targeting the forces of the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur. Strong international pressure was needed to get those movements to desist, come to the negotiating table and help to create enabling conditions for the return of Sudanese refugees in Chad. UNHCR also needed to preserve the civilian nature of the camps in eastern Chad and remove armed elements from them.

9. A joint technical committee established to facilitate the hosting in the Sudan of some 2,000 Palestinian refugees trapped on the Iraqi-Syrian border had made progress and the refugees were due to arrive soon. He reiterated the need for funding for the voluntary return of Sudanese refugees to Southern Sudan and the Blue Nile State and for efforts to rehabilitate return areas, provide the necessary services to refugee camps in the east and implement environmental rehabilitation programmes.

10. Mr. THIRD (New Zealand) said that the current resourcing of UNHCR was unable to meet the increasing protection demand. His Government would increase its core funding by approximately 40 per cent in 2009 but recognized that increased contributions would not cover the gap; existing resources must be directed more effectively to those most in need.

11. He welcomed the progress in the UNHCR reform process, and said that his Government would continue to provide unearmarked and predictable multi-year contributions to allow UNHCR to prioritize effectively on the basis of the strategic plan for 2008-2009; he urged other member States to follow New Zealand's lead.

12. With regard to reform, UNHCR should embrace the "Delivering as One" initiative to ensure more efficient use of existing resources and more engagement in United Nations development processes. The initiative might help to improve the response to the problem of transition from relief to development and provide access to a greater range of expertise and resources to resolve protracted situations. It would also benefit UNHCR in its work with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and in emergency preparedness contingency planning.

13. UNHCR should strengthen its partnerships and routinely undertake inter-agency assessments with key partners to ensure minimum transaction costs and a more holistic impact for beneficiaries. The importance of partnerships with Governments, donors and the private

sector must be acknowledged and strategic guidance provided on resource mobilization and civil society involvement. In the interests of optimizing resources, efforts should be made to ensure that UNHCR was not diverted from its core mandate.

14. He welcomed the focus of the forthcoming Dialogue on Protection Challenges on protracted refugee situations and looked forward to seeing the UNHCR policy on urban refugees. Resolving such situations required an integrated approach, for example through United Nations country teams.

15. The High Commissioner had referred to enhanced dialogue and cooperation with Member States; yet UNHCR had not always facilitated meaningful dialogue with them. Participatory processes were important and the release of the budget paper the evening before the 43rd meeting of the Standing Committee had not allowed sufficient time for feedback. In the year of the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it was troubling to see an increase in the number of people deprived of fundamental human rights. If UNHCR worked more effectively, including by committing to age, gender and diversity mainstreaming, it could offer them greater protection.

16. Mr. RISTOVSKI (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) said that his Government had successfully dealt with a number of refugee crises, providing shelter for 1,500 Albanian refugees in 1991 and for 3,500 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992. The greatest influx of refugees (360,000) had been in 1999, following the conflict in Kosovo, and there were currently around 140,000 refugees in the country. Those crises could not have been managed so successfully as they had been without the support of UNHCR.

17. Since 2005, his Government had been striving to harmonize national legislation with European Union legislation on refugee protection. New legislation, including on employment of foreigners, asylum and temporary protection, had been enacted and existing legislation on citizenship had been amended. A number of European Union directives on family reunification and minimum standards for the acceptance of asylum-seekers had been incorporated into national legislation, while an asylum processing centre, with accommodation for up to 150 persons, had been established recently. In line with current trends, a strategy for local integration of refugees and foreigners would shortly be adopted by the Government. In regard to those efforts, he assured UNHCR of his Government's continued cooperation in furthering protection for refugees' rights.

18. Mr. BENTIL-OWUSU (Ghana) said that respect for the rule of law and good governance were vital to eradicating protracted refugee problems in Africa. He thanked the High Commissioner for responding to the call for a review of the voluntary repatriation package for Liberian refugees in Ghana. Since the review had upgraded the package to \$100 for adults and \$50 for minors, there had been a tremendous increase in the number of voluntary returns: 8,000 in 2008 alone, compared with 6,000 between 2004 and 2007.

19. A sizeable Liberian refugee population remained in Ghana, however, and further support was needed for the voluntary repatriation programme under the relevant tripartite agreement signed in April 2008. UNHCR should intensify its efforts to assist all the refugees until durable solutions had been found. In that regard, he appealed for resources to conduct a verification exercise of Liberian refugees in Ghana by the end of the first quarter of 2009.

20. Mr. MARUPING (Lesotho), said that the international community must not allow the current global economic crisis to divert its attention from refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons. For its part, his Government would continue to support UNHCR and many of its partners, especially the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as the “Delivering as One” initiative. The Government welcomed the fact that some 2 million internally displaced persons had been voluntarily returned, and supported the greater focus of UNHCR on that category of beneficiaries.

21. The Government of Lesotho would be actively participating in the elaboration of an African Union convention to protect and assist displaced persons in Africa. It encouraged States which had not yet done so to accede to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and to make every effort to prevent the refoulement of refugees.

22. As a nation with first-hand experience of displacement, Lesotho was committed to improving the lives of displaced persons, and would therefore continue to give its unwavering support to UNHCR.

23. Ms. MARTIASHVILI (Observer for Georgia) said that in response to the developments in Georgia in 2008 her Government had acted immediately to save lives and provide food, shelter and other necessities to the displaced population, which had numbered about 300,000 at the height of the crisis. Approximately 60,000 persons were currently unable to return to their homes in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and the villages north of Gori, and the Government continued to provide them with free health, education and other basic services. Plans existed to provide displaced persons with new and rehabilitated housing, livestock, land and money to help them towards self-reliance and also to involve them in decision-making in accordance with the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

24. The 220,000 persons displaced between 1991 and 1993 from Georgia proper (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) still lived in communal centres or with host families, lacked proper living conditions and depended on government allowances. Her Government had therefore adopted a national action plan for internally displaced persons in July 2008. Although the current emergency had shifted the focus from protracted displacement to the urgent needs of newly displaced persons, the plan remained relevant. She called on the donor community to support the action plan, which must be implemented without delay.

25. Ms. DIXON BARNES (Observer for Liberia) said that, in the past year, much had been achieved in terms of assistance to refugees in Liberia and Liberian refugees in host countries. Her Government and UNHCR had stepped up their cooperation; asylum and appeals committees for refugee status determination had been reactivated; and the voluntary repatriation programme for Liberian refugees in the West African subregion had been resumed. To date, nearly 68,000 Liberian refugees remained abroad, although more than 7,900 had returned, mostly from Ghana. Recent events in Ghana had made it necessary to plan for the return of nearly 15,000 Liberian refugees by the end of 2008, although weather and other conditions posed a serious threat to the plan.

26. In 2008, a comprehensive communication strategy had been agreed to promote the return of Liberian refugees and plans had been made to establish a technical working group to implement repatriation decisions and investigate all means of transporting the maximum number

of returnees. The registration and repatriation process would continue to be improved in order to accelerate returns, and family unity would be maintained by encouraging non-Liberian spouses of registered Liberian refugees to obtain all relevant documents prior to repatriation. The necessary measures would be put in place for returns from Ghana by land and air.

27. The return of Liberian citizens, while welcome, posed a great challenge. Returnees needed to be involved in effective development programmes to support sustainability, especially outside the capital Monrovia. The Government had designed a national reintegration programme to support vulnerable returnees in becoming productive members of society, and it remained committed to improving its repatriation, asylum and appeals system and the local integration process.

28. Ms. MLADINEO (Observer for Croatia) said that her Government was making every effort to facilitate the voluntary return and reintegration of refugees in Croatia from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro and of Croatian refugees wishing to return. It had adopted a national action plan to accelerate its housing programme and resolve the issue of former tenancy rights; housing had been allocated to more than 2,400 families since 2007 and thousands of others were due to be settled in 2009.

29. Croatia was determined to complete the resettlement process, which required steady financing and was long and painful for the persons concerned. It would not be able to resolve the situation on its own, however, but needed international support to achieve the goals set forth in the Sarajevo Declaration. Lastly, her Government supported the ongoing reform of UNHCR, which it was following with great interest.

30. Ms. PICTET-ALTHANN (Observer for the Sovereign Military Order of Malta) said that the High Commissioner's calls for a consensus on the responsibility to protect and for a corresponding extension of international humanitarian law should be supported by all stakeholders. The Order's worldwide relief service, Malteser International, had expanded its activities in Africa, providing food, for example, for 18,000 displaced families in South Kivu, medical and psychological support for victims of sexual violence and assistance in combating malaria in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It was also providing aid for 120,000 persons in Darfur and 1 million in Southern Sudan.

31. In Asia, the Order had provided relief assistance to the victims of cyclone Nargis which had struck Myanmar in May 2008, and was among the first to have provided relief assistance in the capital, Yangon. It also ran a basic health-care programme in two refugee camps in Thailand, covering 30,000 persons.

32. Having provided emergency relief and implemented development projects in Afghanistan for five years, the Order had been obliged to close its office in Kabul for security reasons. Since Afghanistan still needed humanitarian assistance, however, the Order continued to support projects through partner organizations. Similarly, through a partner organization in Sri Lanka, Malteser International assisted displaced persons and the growing number of people affected by the conflict in Sri Lanka.

33. In Europe, the Order had been providing medical assistance to the displaced population in Georgia since August 2008. As the lives of people in distress on the high seas were also a subject

of great concern, the Order had also signed an agreement with the Government of Italy in 2007 to enable its doctors and nurses to take part in sea rescue operations for the large numbers of irregular migrants seeking asylum in Italy. Its teams provided immediate medical assistance to migrants, who were often in a very critical condition.

34. In the light of new and emerging challenges, her delegation welcomed the High Commissioner's proposal for a new humanitarian protection compact to address increasingly complex global problems more effectively, as well as his championing of the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, which were at the heart of the Order of Malta's daily humanitarian work.

35. Mr. GOLOVACI (Observer for the Republic of Moldova) said that his Government had made considerable efforts to meet its obligations for refugee protection in keeping with the European Union-Republic of Moldova action plan and European law, and with a view to becoming a member of the Executive Committee in 2009.

36. The Republic of Moldova had amended its refugee and asylum legislation significantly to bring it into line with international standards. It had entered into a mobility partnership with the European Union in June 2008 in order to facilitate legal migration, improve asylum procedures and combat illegal immigration. A twinning project on migration management with Germany and Romania would be launched in 2009.

37. He welcomed the internal reforms under way at UNHCR, which would increase the organization's transparency and rapid response capacity. He expressed appreciation for the High Commissioner's pragmatic approach to the refugee situation in the Republic of Moldova and the hope that cooperation between his Government and the country team would be enhanced in the coming years.

38. Mr. GUTERRES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that he applauded the success of the return and reintegration programme for Burundian refugees, in particular those arriving from the United Republic of Tanzania, despite the considerable challenges, and he welcomed the idea of peace villages. Notwithstanding the difficulties, the Government of Burundi had demonstrated great generosity in hosting a large number of Congolese refugees, and he welcomed its efforts to enact a law on asylum and refugee protection.

39. He noted with much appreciation the Sudanese Government's history of generosity towards refugees, including more than 150,000 Eritreans. UNHCR would be allocating more extrabudgetary funds for eastern Sudan and expanding its resettlement programme, in collaboration with the Sudanese authorities. While the Office had made every effort to fund the return operation for Southern Sudan and the Blue Nile State adequately in 2007 and 2008, logistical problems, floods and, in some instances, the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army, had compelled it to suspend repatriation from camps in Uganda for security reasons. Nevertheless, it remained committed to the programme.

40. He acknowledged the considerable challenges of reintegration. The problem was not reconstruction but construction of needed infrastructure. UNHCR was firmly committed to

maintaining the civilian character of the camps in Chad, in particular through the presence of the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT). He called on the representative of the Sudan to use his good offices to advance UNHCR activities in Darfur.

41. He noted with appreciation the points raised by the representative of New Zealand concerning the “Delivering as One” initiative and UNHCR work with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. He also took note of the comments on enhanced partnerships with Governments, donors and the private sector, an area where significant progress had been made. The Office would address the concerns raised about its interaction with Member States.

42. He said that the Government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia had been a key player in establishing stability and protecting refugees, and the Office was following with interest its efforts to modernize its asylum system. With regard to Ghana, UNHCR was wholly committed to the successful repatriation of Liberian refugees, and wished to strengthen cooperation with the Government of Ghana to find solutions for the remaining refugees.

43. He noted the considerable challenges for the Government of Liberia with its return and reintegration programme, and echoed the appeal to the international community to do more to ensure the sustainability of the returns.

44. He recalled that UNHCR was working closely with the Government of Georgia to support the persons who had been displaced recently, as well as the more than 200,000 persons displaced by previous crises. More international support was needed to guarantee those persons their rights and decent living conditions.

45. He was encouraged by the Croatian Government’s commitment to resolving the situation of refugees still in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and he counted on the high-level presence of Croatia and others at the forthcoming Dialogue on Protection Challenges, which was intended to complement the Sarajevo Declaration process.

46. Mr. MONONGA (Observer for Malawi) said that Malawi, while committed to protecting refugees and asylum-seekers, was currently facing a number of challenges in dealing with irregular population movements. It had been blamed for failing to control asylum-seekers properly, and fears had been raised that Malawi was being used as a transit route for smuggling and trafficking of people. His country would shortly host a regional meeting sponsored by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on those issues, and hoped that the event would help it to meet the challenges identified.

47. His Government urged UNHCR to continue to strengthen its financial base, especially as the numbers of refugees and other persons of concern had grown during the past year. It also thanked resettlement States, in particular those which offered educational scholarships to refugees from Malawi, as education was critical to rebuilding refugees’ lives.

48. Mr. TCHARIE (Observer for Togo) said that the process of national reconciliation in Togo had brought greater stability to the country, and his Government was now determined to ensure the return of its refugees and internally displaced persons. Hence, since the signing of tripartite agreements with Benin and Ghana in April 2007, numerous repatriation operations had taken

place as a result of which there remained only 4,667 Togolese refugees in Benin and 3,000 in Ghana, as compared with 26,500 and 17,500 respectively in 2005. The refugees who had opted to remain in Ghana during repatriation operations conducted between 1995 and 1998 had benefited from local integration. While the pace of repatriation from Benin had slowed in recent months, repatriation continued, creating a need for resettlement support. He therefore appealed to the international community to step up its assistance to the Togolese Government in that connection.

49. Togo was also a host country. More than 8,000 refugees who had come from Ghana in 1994 had now been integrated, and there were also approximately 1,555 urban refugees, mainly from Côte d'Ivoire and the Great Lakes region. Togo had yet to ratify the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and to establish appeals committees for refugee status determination. He hoped that with the return of political stability those failings would soon be remedied.

50. Mr. PINJO (Observer for Bosnia and Herzegovina) said that when the Dayton Agreement had been signed, the number of refugees and displaced persons from Bosnia and Herzegovina had accounted for more than half the population. Although the majority of refugees had now been integrated in their host countries, nearly 80,000 remained in need of durable solutions. According to official records, the number of internally displaced persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina had fallen from around 550,000 in 2000 to 125,000 in 2005. Despite progress achieved since 1995, security remained a problem, in particular landmines.

51. Interest in return and repatriation remained high even though the realities in the home country were discouraging. During the period 2003-2007, approximately €316 million had been invested in reconstruction in Bosnia and Herzegovina to ensure the sustainable return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and increased funds had been allocated for that purpose in 2008. While significant results had been achieved, much remained to be done to guarantee everyone their right to return.

52. Mr. HOVHANNISYAN (Observer for Armenia) said that his Government appreciated the assistance given by UNHCR to Iraqi refugees in his country. The allocation which UNHCR had secured from the Central Emergency Response Fund had provided them with essential support at a critical juncture. The decision to designate funds from the special appeal to Iraqi asylum-seekers in Armenia was also welcome. Those seeking permanent residence had been housed in a residential complex in order to allow them to integrate and rebuild their lives.

53. UNHCR had been instrumental in supporting Armenia's efforts to assist refugees and internally displaced persons fleeing the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia relied on the continuing cooperation of UNHCR to deal with the new influx of refugees and asylum-seekers from Iraq and share the costs of refugee assistance and integration activities.

54. Mr. CASTILLERO CORREA (Observer for Panama) said that, for many years, Panama had been receiving refugees as part of regional and continental migratory flows; current influxes consisted primarily of persons fleeing conflict in the jungles of Colombia. His country sheltered as many refugees as it could, given the size of its territory and population.

55. The institutional and legal framework for refugee protection in Panama had been strengthened over the past 20 years. Decree No. 23 of 1998, for example, was one of the most advanced instruments in the region for addressing the needs of refugees and displaced persons. Panama had also been integrating its refugee and displaced population, a process that had required some legal reforms in keeping with the 1951 Convention. Mechanisms had been established for the prompt delivery of identity documents and streamlining of the verification process, and four categories had been defined relating to foreigners entering the country in search of protection: refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons and persons under the temporary humanitarian status of protection. Refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons enjoyed the same rights and obligations as temporary residents.

56. On 9 May 2008, the National Assembly of Panama had approved a measure granting permanent residence status to recognized refugees who had lived in Panama for more than 10 years. It should be noted that the refugee definition which Panama used was not the one in the Cartagena Declaration but the one in the 1951 Convention. In addition, following bilateral talks with Colombia in early September 2008, the Government of Panama had decided to grant permanent resident status to 528 Colombians residing in Panama, and both countries had agreed on the need to proceed with the completion of the Transboundary Displacement Mechanism.

57. Lastly, he expressed his Government's satisfaction at the decision of UNHCR to establish a regional platform for Latin America. His Government was fully committed to assisting UNHCR in developing that new entity and its conversion into the United Nations Regional Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean.

58. Ms. RODRIGUES (Mozambique), speaking on behalf of Malawi, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Republic of Tanzania, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and her own delegation, said that the "Delivering as One" initiative offered the best prospect for meeting the expectations of developing countries and donors and responding more coherently and effectively to host Governments' priorities and the need to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

59. She called on United Nations Headquarters to show how savings on administrative costs led to increased funding for development in the country where the savings were made and to resolve the differences in practices and procedures hampering progress on "Delivering as One", drawing on lessons learned in developing countries.

60. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), together with Headquarters offices and specialized agencies, must ensure that the Resident Coordinators were empowered to help the United Nations to deliver more effectively and collectively by embracing the development strategies of programme countries. United Nations Headquarters must also allow for innovation in the "Delivering as One" framework by decentralizing decision-making to the country level and accepting pooled funding and harmonized reporting. It must make use of national budgetary and executive systems, where possible. Lastly, it should address the issue of overlapping instructions to country teams, setting priorities in line with government priorities. Those efforts should be complemented by untied, unconditional and predictable funding from donors.

61. Mr. RABGYE (Observer for Bhutan) said that his delegation shared the High Commissioner's strategic vision for the year ahead and appreciated that the safety of

staff and persons of concern remained a priority issue. He urged UNHCR to continue to strengthen its compliance with the United Nations Minimum Operating Security Standards, and encouraged States to support UNHCR security needs. Given the need for a culture of security in field operations in order to create a safe environment for refugees, acts of violence and intimidation in camps must be dealt with swiftly. He shared the concern of UNHCR regarding violence by persons registered in or operating from refugee camps in Nepal, and emphasized that any form of violence was inconsistent with the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum and refugee status.

62. Mr. CHIPAZIWA (Observer for Zimbabwe) said that Zimbabwe currently faced numerous challenges, including a severe food shortage and the imposition of illegal economic sanctions by some Western Governments. Pressures had been lessened, however, as a result of an agreement signed by the three main political parties on 15 September 2008 to form a coalition Government.

63. Zimbabwe remained committed to upholding its obligations under domestic and international law for protecting and assisting refugees and asylum-seekers. The Zimbabwe Refugees Committee determined refugee status on the basis of both the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. The Committee also ensured that refugees were not forcibly returned to their country of origin.

64. Zimbabwe currently hosted more than 5,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly from the Great Lakes region. More than 60 per cent lived in the Tongogara Refugee Camp, while the remainder lived in urban areas. A verification exercise, intended to update the refugee caseload and improve implementation of the refugee programme, was currently under way.

65. In the past year, Zimbabwe had begun to experience an influx of bogus asylum-seekers, who made false declarations to border immigration officials and then disappeared within a month of admittance. Identifying genuine asylum-seekers was proving to be a challenge. After the Waterfalls Transit Centre had been closed and all new asylum-seekers required to report to the Tongogara Refugee Camp, a reduction in the abuse of asylum facilities had been noted.

66. Mr. VALENCIA (Ecuador) said that humanism and solidarity were the guiding principles of Ecuador's refugee policy. To date, Ecuador had fulfilled the vast majority of its obligations under international humanitarian law in respect of refugees; its legislative regime in that area served as a model for other countries in the region. Ecuador currently hosted nearly 200,000 asylum-seekers, mostly Colombians. The new Constitution adopted in September 2008 clearly established the obligation to protect refugees, while referring to the "principle of universal citizenship, the free circulation of all the inhabitants of the planet and the gradual elimination of the status of alien as a means of addressing unequal relations between countries, especially North-South relations".

67. In September 2008, the Government had introduced a new refugee policy explicitly reaffirming the principles of the 2004 Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action. It was the first State policy in Latin America on refugee protection. Under the policy, the Government had announced plans for a registration drive, initially to register some 50,000 Colombian asylum-seekers in the provinces bordering Colombia. The ultimate goal of the drive was to document everyone seeking international protection in Ecuador and to guarantee them all the

rights enshrined in the Constitution. In addition, the Border Solidarity programme had been created for the most vulnerable refugees, together with the City Solidarity programme for Colombian refugees living in cities.

68. An important component of Ecuador's refugee policy was its regional agenda. The arrival of thousands of refugees in Ecuador had entailed many difficulties, including a spillover of violence and illegal activities in border regions. Ecuador needed international support to deal with what was the largest number of refugees hosted by any country in the western hemisphere. Ecuador urged States and the United Nations to take a burden-sharing approach to the humanitarian tragedy caused by the Colombian conflict. It welcomed the establishment of the UNHCR regional office in Panama, provided that it was administered efficiently and did not adversely affect the operation of the UNHCR office in Ecuador.

69. Mr. PAIVA (International Organization for Migration (IOM)) said that the current challenge before UNHCR and IOM was how to manage migration successfully and humanely while ensuring international protection for refugees. Mixed migration was one of the main areas of cooperation between the two organizations which had continued to evolve. In order to address the situation in the Gulf of Aden, for example, they had jointly established and chaired the Mixed Migration Task Force, which had later been recognized as a model of good practice in cooperation. A first regional workshop on mixed migration flows had been initiated by UNHCR and a second would be convened jointly by UNHCR and IOM. Such cooperation also extended to the field.

70. Meeting the needs of the internally displaced was another field where IOM and UNHCR cooperated closely. IOM had devoted considerable attention to the question of the relationship between climate change, environmental degradation and population movements, a topic to which the High Commissioner also attached great importance. It should not be forgotten either that millions of refugees had benefited from smooth operational cooperation between the two institutions as a result of nearly 60 years of working together on third-country resettlement and voluntary repatriation.

71. IOM particularly appreciated the regular and open dialogue that it had with its UNHCR counterparts in the area of refugee resettlement, including through its participation in the UNHCR Working Group on Resettlement. IOM remained committed to ensuring its capacity in those areas, while exploring new ways to address changing demands.

72. Mr. LINDE (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)) said that IFRC was developing a global policy on migration for its national societies that would standardize the provision of assistance and protection to migrants, including asylum-seekers and refugees. A new advisory body on migration, consisting of senior experts from 16 national societies, had recently met to embark on that initiative. The partnership between the national societies and UNHCR also reached down to the local level, where migrants took part in assessing their own needs.

73. The Federation's national societies played an important role as auxiliaries to public authorities in the area of humanitarian action. One of the Federation's highest priorities was to support the capacity of the national societies to utilize that role in a cooperative manner and ensure respect for the humanitarian principle of assisting migrants solely on the basis of their

needs, not on their legal status. The Federation shared the High Commissioner's concern about the increasing difficulty in successfully claiming asylum, especially for asylum-seekers who were part of mixed population movements. Consequently, IFRC fully supported the development of specific legal and institutional regimes for different categories of concern.

74. Mr. LUGALA (Sudan Health Association), speaking on behalf of a wide range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), said that, over the past year, there had been numerous situations in which the rights of persons of concern to UNHCR had been flouted and humanitarian organizations had been denied access to them.

75. Humanitarian space was fundamental to the work of humanitarian organizations, and he therefore expressed concern about the situation in the Vanni region of Sri Lanka, where more than 200,000 internally displaced persons and others were unable to find safety, and humanitarian organizations had been ordered to leave. He urged the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to ensure unimpeded access.

76. In many parts of Afghanistan, humanitarian access had become impossible. The recent killing of four colleagues from the International Rescue Committee was a stark reminder that humanitarian organizations no longer enjoyed the respect required to assist populations in need. He urged the international community to reassess the integration of humanitarian response into the broader political agenda of nation-building.

77. Iraq's displacement crisis had become more complex. One way for international humanitarian organizations to operate inside Iraq was through local and national NGOs, which needed international support to help increase their response capacity. NGOs had found the High Commissioner a close ally on issues of humanitarian access and space. They welcomed his leading role in demanding respect for the integrity of the humanitarian mission and his commitment to partnership. The Principles of Partnership endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform must be put into practice in daily operations on the ground.

78. He expressed concern about the quality of the relationship between several NGOs and UNHCR in South Africa. While NGOs had called for UNHCR leadership in responding to government policies such as the closure of camps, the expected reaction had not been forthcoming from the UNHCR country office. While he understood that working with a Government which failed to fulfil its obligations under international human rights law was not easy, sometimes UNHCR should highlight the rights of affected populations, instead of focusing on the numbers of blankets and tents distributed.

79. Many persons of concern to UNHCR were concentrated in urban centres, yet UNHCR operations for urban refugees to date had been modest. The UNHCR urban refugee policy would be a critical step in addressing their specific needs, as would the deployment of more staff on the ground. The need to ensure that protection underpinned all operations was even more apparent in the response to internally displaced persons. UNHCR staff must develop the skills to be able to switch easily from refugee to internally displaced persons operations.

80. During the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges in 2007, a commitment had been made to deal more effectively with the survivors of mixed migratory sea

crossings. He encouraged UNHCR to perform the role for which there had been so much support during the Dialogue. He furthermore looked forward to the forthcoming Dialogue and encouraged States to come along with possible solutions to protracted situations in mind. Often the only solutions for such situations were political ones, which were indeed the responsibility of States.

81. The frank discussion facilitated by the High Commissioner's Dialogue was perhaps a model that the Executive Committee might consider. He urged the Executive Committee to find more innovative ways to support the High Commissioner in his mandate. Expressions of support must be turned into more concrete actions, which included ensuring access for humanitarian organizations for those in need of protection and assistance.

82. Mr. BHATTARAI (Observer for Nepal), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that Nepal condemned terrorism in all its manifestations. For the past 17 years, it had provided shelter and protection to Bhutanese refugees on humanitarian grounds, cooperating with the international community and UNHCR in managing the refugee camps in its territory. The Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal were managed according to international standards, and Nepal had ensured adequate security in all the camps.

83. There was no evidence of the existence of any extremists in the camps, as had been intimated in the statement by the representative of Bhutan. It did not seem fair to link Bhutan's internal law-and-order problem and exclusion policy to refugees living in camps far from Bhutan's borders. Rather, that appeared to be another excuse to further prolong the resolution of the humanitarian problem posed by the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal and to remain indifferent to their suffering.

84. Ms. RABGYE (Observer for Bhutan), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that her Government regretted the highly questionable assertions made by the representative of Nepal the previous day when speaking in the exercise of the right to reply, some of which he had just reiterated. Her Government was of the view that such assertions, and their tone and tenor, had no place in either the current debate or in the Executive Committee meeting.

85. Mr. GUTERRES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that he agreed with the observer for Malawi that only a regional approach could solve the problems posed by irregular population movements, such as those in the southern African region. He congratulated the Government of Malawi on its initiative to host a regional meeting to discuss the problem, and said that UNHCR would be pleased to participate in it.

86. He was gratified to note the success of the voluntary repatriation of Togolese refugees and the Togolese Government's plans to fill the gaps in its protection regime through the ratification of international instruments. Although considerable progress had been made with returns to Bosnia and Herzegovina, problems remained and needed to be addressed. For that reason, he was happy to count on the participation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia in the forthcoming protracted refugee situations dialogue.

87. He said that the successful resettlement of Iraqis of Armenian ancestry was a demonstration of how States and UNHCR could work together to solve a complex problem. He

confirmed that an agreement had been reached with the President of Panama on the establishment of a regional platform for Latin America that would be incorporated into the inter-agency Regional Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean in Panama.

88. He echoed the views expressed on behalf of six Member States concerning the advisability of decentralizing UNHCR decision-making on the resource allocation process. In response to the concern expressed by the representative of the Sudan, he furthermore reiterated the strong commitment of UNHCR to preserving the humanitarian and civilian nature of its interventions, in particular with regard to asylum.

89. In response to the statement by the observer for Bhutan, he noted that, while it was fair to say that there had been some incidents in refugee camps in Nepal, it was also fair to say that the Nepalese police had made a considerable effort to restore security to the camps. UNHCR was hopeful about the political agreement reached in Zimbabwe and its impact on the country's humanitarian problems. Even in the midst of its political crisis, Zimbabwe had continued to ensure the protection of refugees.

90. UNHCR had followed with interest the recent introduction of Ecuador's refugee policy and endorsed Ecuador's efforts to register Colombian asylum-seekers. He reaffirmed the support of UNHCR for the Ecuador Plan and its Border Solidarity programme.

91. With regard to IOM, he said that he wished to convey how highly UNHCR valued its cooperation with that agency. He believed that only the combined approach of the two agencies could be effective in resolving many of the problems of complex population movements. He commended IFRC for appointing a special representative on migration, whose work to address the protection challenges of complex population movements was extremely important. The cooperation between UNHCR and IFRC under the shelter cluster had always been solid, and had been further strengthened by the participation of the ICRC President as keynote speaker at the opening of the Executive Committee meeting.

92. He wished to convey to the representative of the Sudan Health Association that the comments on specific aspects of cooperation between UNHCR and NGOs commanded the Office's full attention.

The meeting rose at 1.15 p.m.