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

Fifty-seventh session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 599th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 2 October 2006, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. FUJISAKI (Japan)

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

OPENING OF THE SESSION (item 1 of the provisional agenda)

1. The CHAIRMAN declared open the fifty-seventh session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He extended a special welcome to the delegations of Jordan and Portugal, which were attending their first plenary session as members of the Executive Committee.

Introduction of the 2006 Nansen Refugee Award recipient

2. The CHAIRMAN welcomed the recipient of the 2006 Nansen Refugee Award, Dr. Akio Kanai, who had himself been a displaced person after the Second World War and who had dedicated his life to improving the eyesight of refugees and displaced persons.

3. Mr. KANAI said that, as an optometrist, he had witnessed how improved eyesight could change people's lives. In 1983, he had begun to conduct vision aid missions in the hope that improving the eyesight of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps might enhance their future prospects; in all, he had carried out 24 such missions. The support of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had been crucial to the success of his work. International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and host Governments had also provided valuable assistance.

4. While he was honoured to receive the Nansen Refugee Award, his greatest reward was the happiness and gratitude of the refugees and IDPs who had benefited from his services. He hoped that his receipt of the Award would encourage others to use their own means to help those in need.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (item 3 of the provisional agenda) (A/AC.96/LVII/1/Rev.1)

5. The agenda was adopted.

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER AND GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 4)

6. Mr. GUTERRES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that UNHCR must remain faithful to its mandate while meeting the demands of a changing world. A far-reaching structural and management reform was absolutely indispensable if UNHCR was to build a stronger and more effective organization. The Senior Management Committee was currently being renewed.

7. At the Executive Committee's fifty-sixth session, he had made a number of commitments. The first commitment was to strengthen the Office's identity as a protection agency. At a time of rising intolerance, fuelled by security concerns and confusion in public opinion between migrants and refugees, UNHCR must focus its efforts on preserving asylum and

rebuilding trust in asylum systems. UNHCR was willing to cooperate with politicians, civil society and the media in order to promote tolerance. Preserving asylum also meant opposing all forms of refoulement and ensuring that international refugee law took precedence over national legislation, extradition treaties and bilateral arrangements.

8. Many of the situations discussed at the previous session remained of grave concern. Burundi's application of fair and effective asylum procedures for Rwandan refugees was a laudable exception. In order to strengthen protection, capacities must be built in both developed and developing countries. Building skills, institutions and coalitions should help to promote international cooperation and solidarity and facilitate real and fair burden-sharing.

9. Protection was at the centre of efforts to reduce statelessness. Traditionally, UNHCR had focused on giving legal advice to States. While it had helped hundreds of thousands of stateless persons in Ukraine, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Sri Lanka to obtain a nationality, its efforts had not always been successful. UNHCR would therefore focus on providing operational support and engaging in inter-agency cooperation, and would cooperate with the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Department of Political Affairs, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and NGOs in such areas as birth registration, population censuses, electoral assistance and awareness-raising. The objective was to enable stateless persons to become nationals of a State or, at the very least, to enjoy the basic human rights conferred by a legal identity.

10. Protection was also at the centre of UNHCR activities in the areas of internal displacement and the migration-asylum nexus. The Division of International Protection was placing increased emphasis on providing support to field operations, and additional staff would be deployed to regional offices. A new accountability framework had been established to ensure age and gender balance and diversity at all levels.

11. The recently appointed Assistant High Commissioner for Protection would lead the organization-wide debate on pressing challenges in the field of protection. The aim was to review and redefine the approach to such critical issues as mixed population flows, data protection, facilitation and promotion of voluntary repatriation, sexual and gender-based violence, statelessness, exit strategies, exclusion in a time of terrorism, alliances for protection, resettlement and internal displacement. He encouraged all members of the Executive Committee to participate in the debate.

12. The second commitment was to make UNHCR a predictable and fully engaged partner in the new approach to situations of internal displacement. In the collective response by the United Nations system and the broader humanitarian community to situations of internal displacement, UNHCR was responsible for the protection, emergency shelter and camp coordination and management clusters. For example, in Uganda, which was one of the pilot countries for the new cluster approach, over 300,000 displaced persons had been able to return home. In order to be effective, the new approach must be flexible, unbureaucratic and take account of the realities on the ground. It must foster a partnership based on a dialogue among equals for true shared responsibility.

13. In the countries where UNHCR country operations had not been slated for the cluster approach, efforts would focus on responding to people's needs within the limits of the agency's

own capacities. Capacities in Colombia, Sri Lanka and the northern and southern Caucasus, where UNHCR had been involved for a long time, were currently being reassessed, and UNHCR had encouraged the United Nations country team in Côte d'Ivoire to request a protection cluster. However, faced with a situation like Darfur, where there was no clear framework for the exercise of the so-called "responsibility to protect", the role of UNHCR was severely constrained and the international community was basically powerless.

14. The third commitment was to address protection concerns in mixed population flows. Population movements would be one of the key issues of the twenty-first century. Globalization was an asymmetric phenomenon and could exacerbate existing disparities and disadvantages. The global labour market was a force to be reckoned with, since it involved both legal and illegal migration. Illegal migration could be curbed only through a comprehensive response that included meaningful opportunities for legal migration, development cooperation strategies to improve economic conditions in countries of origin, and international cooperation in the management of migration flows and measures to counter trafficking in persons and people smuggling.

15. Mixed population flows included both migrants and persons in need of international protection, including refugees. The role of UNHCR was to ensure that such persons received assistance. Measures to curb illegal migration must never work to the detriment of access to fair and efficient asylum procedures, and protection capacities must be built in countries of origin, transit and destination. The UNHCR 10-Point Plan of Action set out measures that could be incorporated into migration procedures to address asylum, without compounding the issue of irregular migration. UNHCR could assist States by identifying persons in need of protection, providing information on the country of origin, building national capacities and facilitating resettlement. UNHCR was fully committed to all international and national initiatives to address the problem of asylum.

16. The fourth commitment was to place greater emphasis on the sustainability of returns and the enhanced role of resettlement. The capacity of the newly established resettlement service was being strengthened to the end. UNHCR viewed resettlement as a strategic durable solution and worked closely with resettlement countries, especially the United States of America, to remove obstacles and increase annual immigration quotas.

17. While voluntary return remained the preferred durable solution, the complex situation in countries of origin often jeopardized its sustainability. The situations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, southern Sudan, Burundi, Afghanistan and Liberia, for example, had certainly improved. However, infrastructure and institutions had been destroyed and insecurity persisted, and many refugees and IDPs were reluctant to return home without knowing whether they would be able to eke out a living and have access to medical care. Fear of human rights violations was another serious concern.

18. Refugees were encouraged to repatriate only when their safety on return could be guaranteed. However, transition problems in post-conflict situations were not always addressed successfully. UNHCR was a member of the United Nations Development Group and was engaged in promising cooperation with UNDP. It had worked actively at the global level with the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission's programmes in Burundi and Sierra Leone. A concerted effort must be made to find durable solutions to the most protracted refugee situations.

19. The fifth commitment was to re-establish a quick and flexible emergency response capacity. In the past year, UNHCR emergency teams had been working in Lebanon, Timor-Leste and northern Pakistan. Experience in Lebanon had demonstrated the importance of a robust logistics capacity. As a result, the Division of Operational Support would be equipped with a modernized supply and management service, which would cooperate with the UNHCR emergency unit. The new Policy Development and Evaluation Service had already completed a real-time evaluation of the response of UNHCR to the emergency in Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic; its findings and recommendations would be used to improve the system. The quick and efficient deployment of expert staff and relief material almost anywhere in the world had been a hallmark of UNHCR. Unfortunately, while the number of staff available for immediate deployment had been increased, the establishment of sufficient emergency stockpiles was currently hampered by financial constraints.

20. The sixth commitment was to reform the Office and make it more flexible, effective and results-oriented. Reform was essential for the long-term sustainability of UNHCR and would be based on a thorough review of current procedures and structure. Over the past 15 years, fixed costs had steadily increased, and the Office had become less and less flexible when phasing out or scaling down operations and when forced to make budgetary adjustments. Financial problems increasingly affected core activities. In 2006, UNHCR would spend more on staff and its Administrative Budget and Obligation Document than on operations.

21. The Director for Structural and Management Change had begun a systematic review of all processes, structures and staffing in the Office. In particular, efforts were being made to move field support closer to the point of delivery in order to maximize its impact and to make administrative services more cost-effective. The field review was examining deployment methods in capitals, sub-offices and field offices, the balance of its workforce - both national and international - in operations, and the proportion of operations implemented through partnerships with others.

22. Staff had been consulted at all stages of the reform process. Measures to improve working conditions included the introduction of an annual global staff survey and a management assessment framework, and efforts to address staff welfare problems in difficult duty stations. Steps had been taken to ensure that UNHCR fully complied with the Minimum Operating Safety Standards. He paid tribute to the courage and sacrifice of staff members who had lost their lives during the previous year.

23. Postings processes were being simplified and made more flexible in order to enable UNHCR to deploy staff rapidly and effectively. The new resource allocation model that was being developed would give operations managers greater authority while ensuring better controls, accountability and transparency. The independence of the Inspector General's Office had been reinforced through a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services.

24. Specially designed software would be at the core of the results-based management framework for operations. The new software would be compatible with the management systems renewal project, the finance and supply management modules of which were currently being introduced in Asia and the Americas. The project would be introduced in Africa in October 2006, and applied at headquarters and in Europe and Central Asia, South-West Asia,

North Africa and the Middle East. Results-based management and the management system renewal project were crucial reform tools that would improve financial, budgetary, logistical and human resources information for the change process.

25. In the light of the financial crisis in UNHCR at the end of 2005, measures had been taken to enable the Office to get through 2006 with as much financial stability and predictability as possible. Managers had been asked to plan their activities at 80 per cent of the 2006 figures approved by the Executive Committee, and efforts had been made to safeguard activities with immediate and tangible benefit for refugees. Procurement and programmes with a longer-term or strategic impact had been deferred or reduced. A zero-growth policy for staff at headquarters had been instituted, and travel and temporary assistance at headquarters had been sharply reduced. Targeted approaches in the field had saved the Office US\$ 20 million in 2006. The Deputy High Commissioner had been involved in efforts to reinvigorate the Council of Business Leaders in order to raise funds from the private sector. The new Director of the Division of External Relations would oversee increased targets for such funding. Those measures would ensure that no further cuts would be required to carry out all activities in 2006, as long as support from donors remained at the 2005 level.

26. The 2007 budget was some US\$ 100 million less than the 2006 budget. It was based on transparency and realistic assumptions about possible funding levels, with additional margin for manoeuvre in the form of Operational Reserve I at 10 per cent of programmed activities. Items classified as operations would represent a higher percentage of the Office's global costs than staff and the Administrative Budget and Obligation Document. In order to make that budget a reality, principal donors should maintain their high level of support for the Office. UNHCR had received support in 2006 from the Central Emergency Revolving Fund to help finance several under-funded programmes.

27. The Deputy High Commissioner's vision and determination had been fundamental to the reform process and budget policy changes. She had managed a smooth transition to a new management model in which the Deputy High Commissioner would have functions more clearly focused on the financial management of the Office.

28. Ms. SAUERBREY (United States of America) said that partnerships were critical to all facets of the work of UNHCR. The core posts of protection and community service officers should be maintained, since their work was at the heart of the Office's mandate. As Project Profile was mainstreamed into operations worldwide, UNHCR should ensure that recent improvements in refugee registration were maintained and that registration became routine in new refugee situations. She commended the conclusion on women and girls at risk that would be adopted at the current session as an important advancement in the protection of such persons.

29. She commended the efforts to introduce results-based management and the Structural and Management Change process. UNHCR should consult broadly and regularly with staff and member States during that process. Governments, implementing partners and those affected by the changes should lend their support and work together in a spirit of mutual trust and cooperation.

30. Partnerships with Governments and NGOs were the key to achieving durable solutions, as had been demonstrated by the return of refugees to southern Sudan, the Congo, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. UNHCR should work with the Governments of Nepal and Bhutan to help the Bhutanese population in Nepal; the long-awaited refugee census in Nepal would be an important first step. Priority should be given to durable solutions and, to that end, UNHCR should expand its referral capacity for refugee resettlement. Refugee-hosting countries should also take measures to improve the integration of refugees into their communities, and more countries should come forward to provide refugees with a new start in life.

31. Partnerships were necessary in identifying IDPs and responding to their needs. The cluster approach required respect for the role of all stakeholders and held Governments responsible for creating the conditions that caused forced displacement. It also required UNHCR to be prepared to increase its staff and programmes to respond to long-term crises involving large numbers of refugees and IDPs, and to encourage such preparedness among its protection partners.

32. Partnerships were also key to security. The deteriorating situation in Darfur had shown what happened when such partnerships were lacking. Joint efforts were necessary in order to be prepared for new outflows of Sudanese refugees to Chad, and to ensure that humanitarian workers were protected. She paid tribute to the heroism of the staff of UNHCR, NGOs, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and others who served those whose lives were at risk.

33. The United States remained a committed partner with UNHCR, to which it had contributed almost US\$ 339 million in fiscal year 2006. Greater burden-sharing and a new commitment to partnership were crucial to the success of UNHCR operations.

34. Ms. RASI (Finland), speaking on behalf of the European Union, the acceding countries Bulgaria and Romania, the candidate countries Turkey, Croatia and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the countries of the Stabilization and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, as well as Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, said that the European Union strongly supported the efforts of UNHCR to find durable solutions to refugee situations. It remained concerned about the 23 million persons who remained displaced owing to violence and armed conflict worldwide, and about the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Darfur.

35. In spite of many regrettable developments, there had been some positive trends. The global refugee population was at its lowest since 1980. Large numbers of refugees and IDPs had been able to return home, particularly in Africa and Afghanistan. Thousands of refugees had been repatriated to southern Sudan, the return of Liberian refugees was under way and the return of Congolese refugees was continuing.

36. The European Union recognized the invaluable contribution of many host countries, particularly developing countries that hosted refugees in protracted refugee situations. The European Commission had developed regional protection programmes to support those efforts by improving refugee protection as close to home as possible, and to find durable solutions.

37. The European Union attached great importance to the institution of asylum and the protection of refugees in accordance with international law. The European Union was developing a common European asylum system that would establish a common asylum procedure and a uniform status for persons who were granted asylum or subsidiary protection. While the number of asylum applications in the European Union had fallen sharply, the number of irregular migrants had increased. The European Union wished to enhance cooperation with UNHCR to develop means of identifying persons in genuine need of protection. As agreed by the European Council in December 2005, the European Union had given special attention to the situation in Africa. The Euro-African Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development, which had been held in Rabat in July 2006, had adopted a declaration and a regional action plan to strengthen dialogue between countries of origin, transit and destination in the African region. The European Union looked forward to the organization of a meeting of European Union and African ministers to discuss migration and development.

38. The United Nations High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development in September 2006 had noted that the movement of refugees was a special case, since refugees enjoyed a special legal status under international law. The protection of refugees in mixed population flows should form an integral part of migration policy in order to ensure that the needs of people on the move were met. That was a significant challenge for current and future protection regimes.

39. The European Union was endeavouring to strengthen the international protection regime, and its Agenda for Protection reflected a common understanding of the challenges involved. The European Union had begun implementing the Agenda right after its adoption in 2002, and was currently preparing to hold a discussion to evaluate its success.

40. The European Union welcomed the new role of UNHCR as a cluster leader in camp coordination and camp management, protection and emergency shelter in conflict-related internal displacement situations. Effective coordination with other United Nations agencies, ICRC, NGOs, host countries, donors and other partners would contribute to the success of that mechanism. The European Union commended the Central Emergency Revolving Fund initiative and its impact on so-called “forgotten emergencies”.

41. While it was clear that UNHCR required additional resources and capacity to fulfil its new commitments to protect and assist IDPs, she stressed that its core mandate to assist and protect refugees remained equally important. The European Union supported UNHCR in its protection of stateless persons and welcomed the conclusion on statelessness that would be adopted at the current session. It encouraged UNHCR to take more active measures to identify, prevent and reduce statelessness.

42. The European Union stood firmly against intolerance, xenophobia and exclusion, and wished to remain a place where refugees could rebuild their lives in safety and dignity.

43. The European Union welcomed the Office’s efforts to mainstream age and gender into all its programmes from the very beginning of the planning phase. It noted with satisfaction the High Commissioner’s Five Commitments to Refugee Women and five global priorities for refugee children.

44. The European Union member States and the European Commission together were by far the largest contributors to UNHCR. While the Office's financial situation had improved slightly in 2006, it remained precarious. The fact that only 10 donors supplied 80 per cent of contributions was not a desirable state of affairs. As a result, actual budget allocations remained to a large extent resource-driven. The European Union was committed to continuing discussions with UNHCR on how to achieve a predictable, fundable and transparent budget, and encouraged UNHCR to keep administrative expenditure under continual review and to maintain its focus on operations. The European Union supported the High Commissioner's efforts to broaden the donor base and achieve more equitable burden-sharing.

45. Mr. HOSSEINI (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that, in spite of significant progress in Afghanistan that had enabled Afghan refugees and displaced persons to return home, the Afghan refugee situation was still the most protracted and complicated refugee situation in the world. For the past 27 years, the Islamic Republic of Iran, with its limited national resources, had hosted a massive population of Afghan refugees and displaced persons as well as hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees. Although the international community had recognized the contribution of the Islamic Republic of Iran to refugee protection and assistance, it had yet to provide tangible assistance to alleviate the negative socio-economic impact of large refugee populations.

46. The Islamic Republic of Iran was at the crossroads of irregular population movements in the region and had to spend considerable human and financial resources to cope with the illegal movements of people across its borders. Most refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran benefited from subsidized public services, and refugee children were able to continue their education in Iranian schools. Over 1,000 patients with refractory diseases had been identified among the refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Such persons received special identity documents and exceptional fixed-term residence permits that enabled them to benefit from free medical care.

47. The hasty action to cut the Office's food, health and education assistance programmes placed refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran in a difficult situation. Such assistance should be reinstated for the most vulnerable refugees, who lived in camps.

48. His Government firmly believed that voluntary repatriation continued to be the most durable solution for Afghan refugees. To that end, the Joint Programme between the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Interim Authority of Afghanistan and UNHCR for Voluntary Repatriation of Afghan Refugees and Displaced Persons had been signed in April 2002 and would remain in force until 21 March 2007. While over 1.46 million Afghan refugees and displaced persons had returned home since the start of the Joint Programme, the rate of return had declined sharply since 2005. His Government appreciated the international community's support for the Joint Programme, and called for additional support to improve it. Since reintegration was the most critical phase in the return process, it was important to create conditions in Afghanistan that adequately addressed the basic needs of returnees. Together with Afghanistan and UNHCR, his Government was considering innovative ways and means to improve voluntary repatriation.

49. Following the political changes in Iraq, most Iraqi refugees had been enthusiastic about returning. However, security concerns and a lack of adequate facilities in Iraq had dampened their enthusiasm. Nevertheless, many Iraqi refugees wished to return, and their legitimate demand for return had not yet been satisfactorily met. In a number of cases, repatriation from the Islamic Republic of Iran had been postponed or cancelled.

50. The refugee problem was an international responsibility and required proper international attention. He stressed the importance of resettlement as an effective tool for burden- and responsibility-sharing and as a preferred durable solution.

51. Mr. RIND (Pakistan) said that Pakistan had always been at the forefront of efforts to address the root causes of displacement and had consistently advocated the peaceful settlement of conflicts. Over the past 25 years and despite limited resources, Pakistan had hosted millions of Afghan refugees. There were approximately 2.3 million Afghans living in Pakistan, which was possibly the largest displaced population since the Second World War. He commended the international community and UNHCR for supporting Pakistan's efforts to cope with its refugee situation.

52. In repatriating Afghans, Pakistan had adhered to the principles of voluntarism and gradualism contained in the Tripartite Agreement between Afghanistan, Pakistan and UNHCR. Pakistan was not in favour of an unlimited continuation of refugee programmes. A proactive approach was needed to accelerate the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Afghanistan, since the pace of repatriation of Afghans would ultimately depend on the sustainability of returns and Afghanistan's absorption capacity.

53. Positive changes in Afghanistan had created an environment conducive to the voluntary repatriation of over 2.8 million Afghans from Pakistan since 2002. However, in 2006 less than half of the planned repatriations had taken place; that was not encouraging.

54. Any unilateral redefining of a refugee situation was not acceptable. Subsequent status determination, if any, must be a joint effort on the part of all stakeholders.

55. He requested support for Pakistan's three-year strategy for Afghans in Pakistan and asked the international community to assist the Government of Pakistan in ensuring the sustainable repatriation of Afghan refugees. Pakistan was holding consultations with UNHCR on modifying the UNHCR-assisted repatriation programme by moving from individual travel assistance to appropriate reintegration assistance for returnees with a view to further facilitating and promoting sustainable repatriation.

56. He thanked UNHCR for its invaluable support following the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005.

57. Mr. JAZAIRY (Algeria), speaking on behalf of the Group of African States, commended the efforts of UNHCR and its partners to enhance the protection of refugees. Reform should be carried out in a transparent manner, in accordance with the principles governing international relations. They should provide UNHCR with a swifter and more flexible response capacity.

Budgetary constraints should not alter priorities or weaken the protection of refugees. Overlaps with other key players in the humanitarian sphere should be avoided. Regional offices should serve as needs assessment platforms for evaluating resource requirements, and expenditure at the headquarters level should be rationalized in order to take account of the real needs of the Office.

58. He expressed concern at the decreasing volume of UNHCR resources and appealed to member States to support the extension of the donor base. The doctrine of burden- and responsibility-sharing needed to be improved in order to do justice to the solidarity of host countries which included many African countries.

59. UNHCR had enough evaluation indicators to be able to plan its intervention, coordination and capacity-building activities and quantify host country contributions in order to devise better and more coherent action plans in favour of refugees. Appropriate resources must be mobilized to certain regions of the world, particularly Africa. Reintegration of repatriated refugees in post-conflict situations required some investment in order to rehabilitate administrative and legal structures and consolidate assistance programmes within countries' longer-term development plans in order to sustain the pace of return. Wider support was needed from the international community to pursue and consolidate dignified voluntary returns of refugees and IDPs and to promote adequate and efficient humanitarian working conditions. Such support was needed to enhance cooperation between the African Union and UNHCR and coordinate a joint approach to address the humanitarian situation in Africa. Innovative projects should be implemented to help bridge the gap between short-term humanitarian programmes and longer-term development assistance.

60. With regard to the protection of IDPs, he said that a number of complex issues needed to be addressed. The Group of African States was particularly interested in the establishment of a partnership between UNHCR and the various humanitarian actors in order to build a coalition capable of addressing emergencies and to ensure greater commitment on the part of States to burden- and responsibility-sharing. In view of the unstable financial situation of UNHCR, funds earmarked for refugees must be dedicated to that purpose only and as a matter of priority. UNHCR should take a progressive approach to the question of IDPs based on the adoption of additional programmes that did not have any adverse effects on the protection of refugees. He stressed the need for developed countries to increase their capacity for hosting refugee candidates for resettlement.

61. Greater commitment on the part of donors in the form of unconditional voluntary contributions would enable UNHCR to respond swiftly to emerging situations. UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration should continue to work towards optimizing the complementarities of their respective roles through closer cooperation, in particular between their external offices.

62. The HIV/AIDS epidemic was still a heavy burden for many countries, particularly countries in Africa, and it was necessary to coordinate the activities of all those involved in its prevention and control. The Group of African States supported the Office's efforts, in cooperation with other United Nations agencies, Governments and NGOs, to develop ways to give refugees access to treatment and to improve the quality of life of people living with HIV/AIDS.

63. Mr. CHOI Hyuck (Republic of Korea) said that, in many parts of the world, the question of refugees and IDPs posed formidable challenges, and it was the international community's shared responsibility to provide protection for such persons. He stressed that host countries around the world should consider the potentially harsh punishments that might await an individual being forcefully repatriated to his or her country before they took the decision to do so.

64. He commended the Office's ongoing efforts to increase its efficiency through results-based management. His delegation was confident that UNHCR staff would maintain their morale, enthusiasm and professionalism during the reform process. He welcomed the Office's efforts to engage all partners, broaden its funding base and cooperate with the private sector. In 2005, in addition to its annual contribution, the Government of the Republic of Korea had committed more than US\$ 60 million in humanitarian assistance to the victims of the tsunami, earthquakes and other disasters. In 2006, it had contributed US\$ 1.5 million to UNHCR and would strive to increase its annual contribution in the coming years.

65. Mr. STEINER (Germany) said that UNHCR played a unique role as protector of refugees and asylum-seekers worldwide. He was concerned about the refugee situations in many countries, particularly in the Darfur region of the Sudan. Since April 2006, UNHCR had not been able to carry out activities in Uzbekistan following the closure of its office. He appealed to the Government of Uzbekistan to allow UNHCR to return to Uzbekistan and to grant international observers access to Uzbek citizens who had recently been deported from Kyrgyzstan.

66. UNHCR must adapt its management, administrative and financial structures to the changing situation. While refugee figures worldwide were at a historic low, the number of IDPs was on the rise. He welcomed the fact that the reform process was being conducted in a transparent manner in consultation with UNHCR staff and members of the Executive Committee.

67. He noted that the UNHCR budget for 2007 was based on the austerity levels introduced at the beginning of 2006. In order to ensure adequate, predictable and sustainable funding, UNHCR must define its priorities. In particular, Germany would welcome any steps to broaden the current donor base.

68. He noted that UNHCR was assuming an expanded role in the inter-agency response to internal displacement situations and that it was responsible for the protection, emergency shelter and camp coordination and management clusters for IDPs in armed conflicts. Germany supported such efforts as long as they did not undermine the capacity of UNHCR to fulfil its core mandate.

69. The cluster approach was still in a test phase; although there were encouraging signs, additional data was needed. UNHCR should base its action on a clear IDP policy, taking account of the IDP situation worldwide, previous experience in addressing the problem of IDPs, and the financial implications for UNHCR in relation to its core mandate.

70. Mr. RIPERT (France) said that the unpredictability of the Office's budget had made strategic planning and management difficult and jeopardized the ability of UNHCR to meet its obligations in crisis situations.

71. In Darfur, hundreds of thousands of refugees, particularly women and children, were living in wretched conditions and were at the mercy of militias and armed groups. In addition to the massive and repeated human rights violations, the resumption of military movements on the border was particularly worrying. The situation in Darfur affected the whole region; in particular, Chad and the Central African Republic could not afford to be destabilized by a crisis that was already straining their capacities. France was prepared to cooperate with the High Commissioner in strengthening security at camps on the Chadian border.

72. The security of humanitarian operations and staff must be taken into account and adequately budgeted, in accordance with the guidelines established by the General Assembly.

73. France commended the efforts made by UNHCR to determine the status of refugees, identify and register asylum-seekers and promote the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol. Another important issue was the relationship between asylum, migration and development. Measures to limit irregular migration should not affect refugees' access to asylum territories and procedures. France would pay particular attention to that matter in the context of the follow-up to the Euro-African Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development, which had been held in Rabat in July 2006.

74. France was pursuing a policy of "co-development", intended to enhance migrants' contribution to the development of their countries of origin.

75. With regard to efforts to combat HIV/AIDS, he drew attention to the signing on 19 September 2006 of an agreement creating an international drug purchase facility to give countries of the South access to affordable antiretroviral drugs. The facility would meet in Geneva the following week to decide on its first operational activities. He was certain that UNHCR would take a keen interest in the drug purchase facility.

76. His delegation appreciated the High Commissioner's efforts to introduce institutional reform, particularly transparency with regard to member States. UNHCR should ensure that its reforms were carried out within the general context of the reform of the United Nations and in accordance with the proposals made by the High-level Panel on United Nations System-wide Coherence. It was particularly important to ensure respect for the principle of bilingualism when recruiting UNHCR staff.

77. France had improved its asylum system on the basis of the Office's recommendations regarding the definition of refugee status. The average time for processing asylum applications had been reduced by two thirds over the past three years, while ensuring quality examinations on a case-by-case basis, that included interviews with asylum-seekers. In order to improve efficiency, France and Germany had decided to combine their efforts, and both countries had jointly contributed to the UNHCR appeal for Lebanon.

78. Mr. SATJIPANON (Thailand) said that Thailand supported the greater involvement of UNHCR in the cluster approach, particularly with a view to providing humanitarian assistance for IDPs. He hoped that the cluster approach would be developed on the basis of a cost-effective and focused strategy, which would significantly contribute to the overall improvement of resource management.

79. Throughout the world, there was a growing realization that broader migratory movements and forced displacement overlapped, and that a comprehensive response was required to address the complex nature of the migration-asylum nexus. Thailand welcomed the adoption of the 10-Point Plan of Action to Address Mixed Migratory Movements. The Plan should be implemented in a balanced manner, taking account of the legitimate concerns of host countries and the principle of international burden-sharing.

80. The complexity of contemporary migration flows was particularly evident in the Asia-Pacific region as a result of social and economic disparities, as well as the dynamics of regional development. Countries in the region had become countries of origin, transit or destination and, in some cases, all three. The key challenge was to develop a response that combined a coherent approach to migration management with effective refugee protection. In some cases, the promotion of regular and legal channels of migration and the regularization of the irregular migrant population could meet the labour needs of host countries and reduce international protection requirements for the persons of concerned. Regional consultative processes could play an important role in promoting common understanding and strengthening States' capacities to address refugee and migration issues through an exchange of views and best practices. UNHCR should therefore continue to support the work of the regional consultative processes.

81. Thailand had made particular efforts to address the problems of legal status and the right to identity. In that regard, it had established regulations on the registration of all births, deaths and changes of domicile, and had acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

82. The High Commissioner's visit to Thailand in August 2006 had marked the beginning of a new phase in cooperation between the Thai Government and UNHCR. The High Commissioner had witnessed significant developments in Thailand's efforts to improve the situation of displaced persons from Myanmar and to facilitate their access to education and employment opportunities. Thailand was committed to integrating Myanmar displaced persons infected with HIV/AIDS into the national health-care system, and to issue displaced persons with identity cards in accordance with the national strategy on the status and rights of individuals.

83. Although voluntary repatriation was the preferred solution for Myanmar displaced persons, Thailand was also open to the use of resettlement as a durable solution. In that regard, it appreciated the support of resettlement countries that had demonstrated a spirit of burden-sharing, particularly the United States, Canada and Australia. Thailand appreciated the visit of the United States Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, which had strengthened the already excellent cooperation between Thailand and the United States.

84. The past year had given rise to several new challenges for Thailand, including an increased number of illegal immigrants and the use of Thailand as a transit country for trafficking in persons. While consistently adhering to the principle of non-refoulement of persons in real need of international protection, Thailand had to address its own security concerns. In that connection, it called on all parties concerned to consider the burden that Thailand had to bear, and to provide assistance in developing medium and long-term solutions.

85. Ms. OVERVAD (Denmark) said that UNHCR had made considerable progress in implementing humanitarian reforms in partnership with other humanitarian actors and NGOs, and the international community supported the High Commissioner's commitment to providing protection and assistance to refugees and IDPs. Denmark welcomed the launching of the Structural and Management Change process. UNHCR should strengthen operational outreach to beneficiaries in the field and ensure flexible resource allocation mechanisms for operational activities. The lead role of UNHCR in the three clusters of protection, emergency shelter and camp coordination, and its strengthened IDP activities, constituted a changed operational environment, and Denmark therefore hoped that the reform would take account of the consequences of those changes.

86. The population of concern to UNHCR was changing. While the number of refugees worldwide was decreasing, the number of IDPs was growing. IDP activities should therefore be mainstreamed into UNHCR programmes. Durable solutions to protracted refugee situations constituted an important area of the work of UNHCR. Denmark welcomed the Office's commitment to becoming more involved in early recovery, since that could help to bridge the gap between relief and development. He hoped that the Office's cooperation with the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission would focus attention on the achievement of durable solutions.

87. Countries of asylum and countries of origin should include forcibly displaced persons in their national development plans and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, and he urged UNHCR to continue its advocacy role in that field. States were responsible for providing protection for refugees, which could be a heavy burden for countries in refugee-producing regions. Denmark was committed to engaging in capacity-building, and burden- and responsibility-sharing, and welcomed the ongoing effort by UNHCR to identify protection gaps. The structural reform and transformation that were taking place must benefit the world's refugees and displaced persons.

88. Mr. GUTTERES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that the statements that had been made represented an informed vision of the work of his Office and an important contribution to its future development. The beginning of the Executive Committee's work had been symbolic, since the first four interventions had been given by representatives of the four regions that were the most significant partners of UNHCR with regard to both their financial support for the Office and their capacity to host large numbers of refugees. One of the objectives of the internal reorganization of the Office was to increase its protection capacity.

89. He hoped that a solution would soon be found to the problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, since the commitment of several resettlement countries and the goodwill of both the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal had made it possible to begin registration and the first stage of resettlement. UNHCR was committed to cooperation with the European Union, and the

European Commission in particular, to maintain Europe's status as a continent of asylum while defining and implementing the new European asylum system. Efforts must be made to ensure that the growth in the number of illegal migrants did not have a negative impact on capacity to provide protection for those who required it.

90. It was particularly important to ensure that return was sustainable, and efforts must be made to avoid situations in which refugees became illegal migrants on their return home. UNHCR welcomed the organization of a conference on refugees to be held in Islamabad, and looked forward to cooperating with the Government of Pakistan in order to prepare for that event. Support must be provided to ensure that refugee-impacted areas were properly recovered for the normal use of the population when return took place. It was often difficult to distinguish between refugees and IDPs, and IDP activities should therefore be included in the Office's annual budget. However, budgetary allocations for those activities must not be to the detriment of projects for refugees, and the Executive Committee's guidance would be particularly important in that regard.

91. Multilingualism was essential to the Office's activities; in addition to English and French, Arabic, Russian and Spanish, were widely spoken by staff in the field. It was essential to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity in the Office's work.

92. He was pleased to note Thailand's progress in carrying out its asylum policy, and commended the Government's efforts to issue identity cards to all refugees, improve Myanmar refugees' freedom of movement and access to the labour market, and increase their access to the education system. Those developments were particularly important, and he hoped that the current political situation in Thailand would not have a negative impact on the progress made. The resettlement of Burmese refugees from Thai refugee camps to the United States and other countries was particularly encouraging.

93. Ms. SAUERBREY (United States of America) said that she wished to express her Government's appreciation for the work carried out by the Deputy High Commissioner, who had been driven by her commitment to refugees and the humanitarian work of UNHCR.

94. Ms. CHAMBERLIN (Deputy United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that she would spend her remaining three months in office working towards the establishment of an effective, results-based management system.

95. Ms. JANJUA (Pakistan) said that her Government welcomed the High Commissioner's support for the ministerial conference of the members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference that would be held in Islamabad. Further discussions were required to develop methods of ensuring support for refugee-impacted areas. She expressed her Government's appreciation for the work carried out by the Deputy High Commissioner, particularly while she had been resident in Islamabad. The presence of UNHCR staff in Pakistan following the 2005 earthquake had been particularly appreciated.

96. Mr. HOSSEINI (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that more time should be allocated to allow host countries, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, to complete their statements to the Executive Committee.

97. Mr. ENDO (Japan) asked the High Commissioner to comment on the progress made under the cluster approach.

98. Mr. GUTTERES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that the establishment of the cluster approach had been a step forward in the work of his Office, since it had been the first effort to take a coherent approach to IDP situations worldwide. It was a methodology that had been tested in major emergencies in Pakistan and Lebanon, and four pilot projects were under way in Uganda, Somalia, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Although the approach had resulted in some coordination difficulties at the outset, the cluster approach had become a positive development in emergency response capacity at the international level. An evaluation of progress made and problems encountered was needed, and UNHCR was prepared to discuss the future development of the cluster approach. The Office would work in partnership with all other actors to ensure the success, flexibility and adaptability of the cluster approach, and to avoid bureaucratic procedures within the clusters.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.