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Summary record of the 580th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Monday, 4 October 2004, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Escudero Martínez (Ecuador)

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The meeting was called to order at 4.15 p.m.

General debate (agenda item 4) (*continued*)

1. **Mr. León Gross** (Spain) said that, for more than 25 years, his country had had the privilege of enjoying freedom and democracy, but had not forgotten that only a few decades earlier it had borne the impact of exile and emigration. Spain was strongly committed to the protection mandate of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Mr. Rodríguez Zapatero's Government had made the defence of multilateralism and the strengthening of the United Nations system the cornerstone of its international policy. The Government sought to promote multilateralism as an effective means to guarantee peace and security, a multilateralism that had as its pillars democracy, human rights, law and justice.

2. The quest for sustainable solutions, the settlement of tangled crises and improved coordination between humanitarian organizations working on the ground were key issues addressed in the Convention Plus initiative launched by the High Commissioner and deserved the full attention of the international community. He noted with satisfaction the excellent cooperation between UNHCR and the non-governmental organization (NGOs), whose activities on the ground guaranteed effectiveness.

3. Contemporary crises were a source of serious concern for the Spanish Government. The search for political solutions should not hold up humanitarian relief operations, as had happened in Darfur. Therefore, the Spanish Minister for Foreign Affairs, who had visited the region on 17 and 18 September 2004, had released special funds to support humanitarian intervention in the region. His Government also followed with great interest the long-standing crises in other regions, for example in Colombia, where UNHCR activities in the framework of the tripartite dialogue could play a key role in guaranteeing the safety of displaced persons.

4. With reference to deadlocked situations, he drew attention to the conflict in Western Sahara. His Government supported the efforts undertaken by the new United Nations Special Representative in close cooperation with the parties and neighbouring countries. The suffering inflicted on the residents of the camps at Tindouf for more than three decades must be ended. Spain was making every effort to find a solution that, within the United Nations framework, was in full compliance with international law.

5. UNHCR's intervention in Afghanistan, other Asian regions and the republics of the former Yugoslavia was encouraging. The reduction in the number of people placed under UNHCR protection was excellent news and 2004 could be the year when many refugees returned to their homes. However, the fact that there were 17 million remaining refugees was cause for serious concern.

6. Spain would increase its total contribution to UNHCR for 2004. Its voluntary contribution would be the same as in 2003, but an additional 1 million euros would be released for the crisis in Darfur. In addition, his Government had decided to increase considerably its voluntary contributions for 2005 and the following fiscal years in a concerted effort, with the international community, to alleviate the enormous scale of human suffering worldwide.

7. **Ms. Vincent** (Canada) said that the decision taken by the United Nations General Assembly in 2003 to remove the time limitation on the mandate of UNHCR had enabled the Office to improve its response to refugee movements and to focus on seeking lasting solutions. The return of refugees from Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Angola and the Balkans to their countries of origin and the emerging peace agreements, which might offer the same opportunity to millions of refugees in Africa, were advances worth mentioning; yet major challenges remained, such as the prolonged displacement of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal,

fresh refugee flows from Darfur and Haiti, and the massacre of refugees in Burundi. The emergency response capacity of UNHCR and its protection role were therefore of crucial importance, and efforts to protect refugees, especially with respect to the principle of non-refoulement, should be redoubled.

8. Insecurity in the refugee camps in Chad and Burundi demonstrated yet again the need to preserve the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum and to adopt a global approach to refugee protection. In June 2004, Canada had taken part in a meeting of experts to elaborate guidelines in that regard.

9. With regard to the safety of the staff of UNHCR and its partners in the field, Canada welcomed the internal review undertaken by the Office but hoped that account would be taken of the changes in the United Nations security management system. The "UNHCR 2004" process had established a broad strategic framework for responding to the new international situation. Canada considered that UNHCR should also review its management methods in order to improve its performance.

10. Canada welcomed the refugee protection initiatives undertaken at the regional level. It had supported the organization in June 2004, in Benin, of the conference of African parliamentarians, which had drawn up a programme of action for improved refugee protection and assistance in Africa. UNHCR should draw inspiration from that kind of innovative partnership.

11. Canada had participated in UNHCR-organized return operations to the Sudan, Liberia, Angola and Sierra Leone. Moreover, it would disburse an additional 3 million Canadian dollars in response to the new appeal for the repatriation and reintegration of Burundian refugees. To date, Canada had appropriated a total of 14 million Canadian dollars in non-earmarked contributions and more than 16 billion Canadian dollars in earmarked contributions at the country level and above.

12. Canada had sought to promote the more strategic use of resettlement and was pleased to note that the Convention Plus Core Group on the Strategic Use of Resettlements had developed a Multilateral Framework of Understandings on Resettlement, with the participation of the Group of 77 countries and NGOs. However, strategic resettlement would bear fruit only if a global solution was applied, combining the three sustainable solutions to refugee problems.

13. Canada was celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of its private refugee sponsorship programme. Some 180,000 refugees had been resettled in Canada and a total of 25,000 persons had benefited from protection under the resettlement programme and the refugee status determination system. Those results attested to the unbending resolve of the Canadian people and Government to improve the lot of refugees in the world.

14. **Ms. Svensson** (Sweden) said that the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution was a basic right and that all shared responsibility to ensure that it was respected. Refugee situations were due to many factors: human rights violations, oppression, violence, conflict and a late or inadequate response to crises. To resolve those problems, it was necessary to tackle the root causes of forced migration, increase efforts to support democracy, human rights and economic and human development, and do more to prevent violent conflicts. Asylum and migration policy should form part of a coherent long-term strategy. The burden of countries that hosted refugees should be shared, as should responsibility for providing protection for refugees and seeking lasting solutions. It was also important to build the assistance and protection capacities of the poorest host countries and to use UNHCR for that purpose.

15. The rich countries must contribute more to UNHCR. It was unacceptable that the Office lacked sufficient budgetary resources to meet even minimum standards of assistance to refugees. Funding was a joint commitment of the members of the Executive Committee. UNHCR's continued dependence on a small group of donors was neither equitable nor sustainable. There should be an increase in the number of donors and the regular budget of the United Nations should cover a larger share of the UNHCR budget.

16. Resettlement was another area in which responsibility should be shared. Sweden had increased its number of resettlement places that year. It welcomed the emergence of some new resettlement countries but urged others to follow their lead. Important work was under way to make the resettlement option more strategic so that the benefit for refugees could be increased. The dialogue between UNHCR and the countries concerned must be strengthened.

17. Sweden was convinced of the need for increased cooperation because migration affected all countries as countries of origin, countries of transit or receiving countries; some were even all three. While global cooperation was of key importance, regional cooperation also needed to be improved. The harmonization of asylum and migration policy within the European Union (EU) on the basis of shared responsibility was a step in the right direction. The EU had adopted minimum standards in five areas, laying the basis for a stable asylum policy. The closer cooperation had already made a difference, especially in the 10 new member States, which were no longer primarily countries of transit but also responsible for assessing asylum claims and offering protection. Another example of cooperation was the adoption of the EU Directive on Temporary Protection, which opened the doors of the 25 EU member States in the event of mass flows of displaced persons towards their borders. The next phase must start with the full implementation of the agreed rules, and UNHCR was invited to play a monitoring role to ensure its full conformity with the 1951 Geneva Convention.

18. **Mr. Sedki** (Algeria), speaking on behalf of the African Group, paid high tribute to the humanitarian staff of UNHCR and other institutions, who went to great lengths, sometimes even risking their lives, to alleviate the suffering of refugees throughout the world.

19. The African Group had greatly appreciated the introductory statement by the High Commissioner and welcomed his efforts to rationalize UNHCR management, enhance internal oversight, and ensure closer supervision of spending and more transparent management of staff and resources.

20. As had already been emphasized by the African Group, programme funding must remain voluntary. It should be noted in that regard that the countries of the South, which hosted two thirds of the refugee population, were not given credit for their contribution. Yet those countries were left alone, with their limited resources, to carry a burden that the international community ought to share with them as a matter of solidarity. Past action by UNHCR demonstrated that lasting solutions depended on overcoming obstacles that were largely of a political nature and that voluntary repatriation was the best solution for refugees.

21. Local integration of refugees entailed a great many difficulties, especially in the event of a massive influx. Asylum countries that were already struggling to look after their own population were unable to cope with the burden of refugees without outside help. The African Group therefore took the view that the basic principles of international solidarity and burden sharing should form part of a strategic partnership between donor countries and countries that bore the heavy responsibility of hosting refugees, especially in the most affected regions such as Africa, where the number of refugee centres had increased and the number of refugees, although somewhat reduced, remained a matter of concern.

22. The African Group welcomed the action that had been taken in Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and recently in Darfur and Chad. It also noted that there had been an upsurge in inter-African solidarity in the framework of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

23. For decades thousands of Palestinian refugees had been residing in a number of different countries and were still waiting to exercise their right of return. Moreover, the Security Council had invited donors to give generously to the assistance programme for Africa, where a number of regions were severely affected. For their part, the African countries were fully meeting their responsibility to mitigate the sufferings of displaced people who were at the mercy of the elements and deprived of their rights.

24. **Mr. Baird** (United Kingdom) said that during the past year UNHCR had been faced with new problems such as the Darfur crisis and the violence against refugees in Burundi. It was encouraging to note, however, that there had been a decline in the number of refugees worldwide and that several peace processes were enabling UNHCR to plan the repatriation of large numbers of refugees, particularly in Africa. In that connection, the United Kingdom wished to pay tribute to all UNHCR staff, particularly those working in very difficult conditions. It also welcomed the organizational reforms implemented by UNHCR management, which should improve the Office's ability to carry out its mandate.

25. His delegation urged all donors to support UNHCR financially to the best of their ability. For its part, the United Kingdom contributed some \$30 million in unearmarked funds to the Office of the High Commissioner each year, and had contributed a further \$12 million in 2003 in response to special appeals. It was currently conducting a mid-term review of its funding agreement with UNHCR. Discussions were under way about funding the post of consultant to work with the team on standards and indicators relating to gender and age. In that connection, the United Kingdom welcomed the launching of the initiative aimed at mainstreaming gender and age in the work of UNHCR, a pilot phase of which was being successfully implemented in West Africa.

26. The United Kingdom was also pleased to note that UNHCR was now helping to finance the UNAIDS programme. It looked forward with interest to hearing at future meetings of the Executive Committee about progress made by UNHCR in the fight against AIDS, harmonization in the context of the "Three Ones" principle and implementation of the decisions of the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board.

27. With regard to needs-based planning and budgeting, it would be interesting to hear how the new approach was being put into practice on the ground. The United Kingdom suggested in that regard that the registration of all refugees, especially unaccompanied minors, should be prioritized.

28. With regard to resettlement programmes, it should be borne in mind that for many refugees the very real possibility of third-country resettlement markedly reduced their willingness to return to their own countries. For instance, many Sierra Leoneans who were still in camps in Guinea had clearly stated their desire for resettlement in North America or Australia. Those hopes were encouraged by the fact that significant numbers of refugees from that part of Africa had in fact been resettled in third countries.

29. The United Kingdom strongly supported the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative and hoped that UNHCR would work closely in that context with other United Nations partners, under the leadership of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Emergency Relief Coordinator, to develop more prioritized and strategic common humanitarian action plans and consolidated appeals and more sophisticated methodologies for humanitarian needs assessment. UNHCR should also seek to channel its unearmarked resources towards neglected emergencies to counterbalance inequities in the distribution of earmarked contributions.

30. The United Kingdom welcomed progress in implementing the Agenda for Protection and would report later on its own progress on that front, especially in strengthening the implementation of the 1951 Convention in terms of protection of vulnerable groups, integration of refugees into British society, addressing the root causes of refugee movements, combating smuggling of migrants and human trafficking, and providing durable solutions.

31. In that connection, the British Government had introduced a voluntary return programme called “Explore and Prepare” that allowed Afghans with refugee status in the United Kingdom to return to their country for up to one year to see the situation for themselves, to participate in reconstruction and to consider returning permanently. A similar programme had been successfully implemented in Kosovo some years previously.

32. Progress had also been made in resettlement, which was another durable solution. The United Kingdom had received its first resettled refugees in March 2004 and looked forward to continuing its collaboration with UNHCR and other partners in that area. It strongly believed that resettlement provided a durable solution for some of the world’s most vulnerable refugees and would be happy to share its experience with States that were interested in that type of solution.

33. With regard to the Convention Plus initiative, the United Kingdom attached great importance to the Multilateral Framework of Understandings on the Strategic Use of Resettlement and stressed that such a strategy should not be conducted in isolation but as part of a comprehensive arrangement for finding solutions.

34. Convention Plus also addressed the vexed issue of irregular secondary movements of asylum-seekers and refugees, two groups that were increasingly mixed. Such movements raised a number of issues, particularly smuggling of migrants and human trafficking, problems that were currently being tackled by all Governments. The United Kingdom looked forward to working with UNHCR, other countries and the voluntary and community sector on those issues, while continuing to focus on meeting the needs of refugees.

35. **Mr. Helgesen** (Norway) said that his country encouraged the High Commissioner to continue using his leadership position to forge international partnerships to meet the urgent protection and assistance needs of refugees and to provide them with durable solutions. The time was ripe to put into practice the High Commissioner’s acclaimed “4 Rs” concept (repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation, reconstruction) in a number of post-conflict countries.

36. Although the number of repatriations had increased, 17 million refugees were still of concern to UNHCR. Norway appreciated in that context the High Commissioner’s initiative aimed at focusing more attention on refugees who had been in exile for a long time and had no immediate prospect of a durable solution. Additional development assistance should be channelled to refugees and their host communities. Such assistance should help refugees to develop their productive capacities, which would also benefit the economy of the host country. Refugee hosting developing countries should explore further the possibilities for cooperation with donors and international financial institutions on such initiatives, which could also contribute to poverty reduction.

37. UNHCR should focus more on resettlement and increase its assistance to emerging resettlement countries. Norway would increase its resettlement quota for the following year, subject to parliamentary approval.

38. The international community’s efforts to improve the lot of refugees should be based on the principle of burden sharing. It would be a serious mistake to count on host countries continuing to afford protection to refugees simply because they had no choice. Host country “fatigue” must be taken seriously by donors. All States must contribute to the prevention of

conflicts and forced displacement and participate in the search for durable solutions. Donor States must live up to the pledges made at the Monterrey Conference and scale up official development assistance.

39. The idea that UNHCR should afford protection and assistance to refugees in their region of origin was not new. What was new was that the international community was more willing to offer host countries better burden-sharing arrangements. Norway appreciated the involvement of UNHCR in the development of more coordinated European refugee and asylum policies. It considered that such active cooperation would help to guarantee the primacy of the 1951 Convention. The right to seek asylum and access to asylum procedures should not be undermined and the fundamental principle of non-refoulement should be respected.

40. Norway had strengthened its ability to handle asylum applications but, like many other States, experienced great difficulty in returning rejected asylum-seekers to their countries. In that regard, he noted the significant role played by the views and recommendations of UNHCR as to the conditions in countries of origin when States had to determine whether to return a person who was not or no longer in need of international protection. Material safety standards might be legitimate in the context of voluntary repatriation of persons who were staying legally in a host country. But they were not when it came to the return of duly rejected asylum-seekers. Return was an essential element in maintaining the integrity of a State's asylum and refugee policy. As always, Norway counted on the cooperation of UNHCR in that regard.

41. **Mr. Shikapwasha** (Zambia) said that although the repatriation programme for Angolan refugees was progressing at a slow pace, it should be completed by the end of 2006. However, that aim could not be achieved without additional funding and Zambia appealed to the International Organization for Migration for assistance in that regard. The Rwandan repatriation, on the other hand, was more difficult because of the frequently unjustified resistance of the refugees. The Zambian Government was therefore calling for application of the ceased circumstances clause to the refugees who had fled following the events that had occurred in Rwanda in 1994. That was an essential step if asylum was to be reserved for those in need of international protection.

42. Zambia commended the High Commissioner on progress in the Convention Plus initiative, in the framework of which it was implementing the Zambia Initiative, a promising poverty reduction programme in refugee hosting areas. The major problem was yet again lack of funds and Zambia therefore called on the international community to join the United States, Denmark, the Japan International Cooperation Agency and Sweden in supporting the project. The programme was of regional scope inasmuch as the refugees could apply its benefits in their countries of origin, thereby promoting sustainable returns and reintegration and consequently enhancing peace in the region.

43. With regard to food insecurity, it was regrettable that the refugees who were still dependent on humanitarian assistance were seriously affected by food shortages, especially since in the past that situation had led to riots that had endangered public security and the safety of humanitarian workers. Although every effort was made to encourage their repatriation, self-reliance or local integration, the refugees could not be deprived of food; otherwise UNHCR would be failing in its core mandate of protecting refugees. Like many other countries, Zambia continued to host a large number of refugees on its territory and was therefore particularly concerned about food shortages. If left unresolved, that problem could give rise to restrictions on the granting of asylum, especially in the poorest host countries. Zambia therefore called on the international community to support the World Food Programme in that regard.

44. The long-term solution, however, lay in giving more support to self-sufficiency programmes like the Zambia Initiative. In the province in which the project was being implemented, refugees and their host communities had actually sold their excess food output to the World Food Programme for the benefit of other refugees.

45. In conclusion, he said that even where countries were confronted with a prolonged refugee presence or new crises, they must make every effort to guarantee the safety of persons in need of international protection until a durable solution was found.

46. **Archbishop Tomasi** (Holy See) said that many refugees throughout the world were still deprived of their most basic human rights. In many cases, they were denied the right to work and were thus dependent on food aid, their freedom of movement was restricted, and they were confined to poor and remote regions where their presence risked igniting a conflict with local people who were not much better off than the refugees. The international community did not seem to have the necessary institutional capacity to realize the rights of refugees. Initiatives like Convention Plus had enhanced the protection of refugees, who were particularly vulnerable in countries of first asylum. But a greater economic and financial commitment was necessary. If refugees could exercise their rights, they would become agents of development, even in their host country, instead of relying on assistance. To be viable, the option of third country resettlement also required greater international cooperation. Otherwise, millions of people would remain warehoused in camps, living in subhuman conditions. Camps were and must continue to be an emergency and hence a temporary solution. Long-term refugees — 7 million had been refugees for 10 years or more — were a growing phenomenon, creating generations of children who had become adults before their time and were without future prospects.

47. Voluntary repatriation was a durable solution when the situation in refugees' countries of origin had improved, but it should take place in conditions of safety and dignity and should be accompanied by guarantees and follow-up measures. For instance, young people born in camps should be helped to adapt to life in rural areas, micro-credit systems should be set up, property and land rights issues should be settled, and so forth. That clearly called for appropriate programmes backed by adequate long-term funding. However, refugees would be more inclined to agree to voluntary repatriation if they knew that they were not moving from a camp to an equally miserable life in their own country but could be sure of a dignified return involving reconciliation.

48. Conflicts throughout the world were compelling many people to leave their homes because of fear of violence and human rights violations. The cost of such forced population movements was very high: suffering, loss of life and societies that had to be rebuilt. The international community should not hesitate to take innovative steps to address such situations.

49. International human rights law and humanitarian law required Governments to provide for the security of persons under their jurisdiction. If, however, a State was unable or unwilling to assume that responsibility, the international community should take action in its place. It should consider the need for a "humanitarian intervention". In that connection, Pope John Paul II had said that when a civilian population risked being exposed to the attacks of an unjust aggressor notwithstanding political and non-violent initiatives, it was lawful and even mandatory to disarm the aggressor. Measures to that effect should, however, be limited in time, precise in their aims and conducted in accordance with international law by an authority that was internationally recognized. The United Nations should not hesitate to take such measures in the context of an equitable decision-making process and on the basis of its Charter, since interventions of that kind could save lives and help people separated from their homes to find a place to live in dignity, security and peace.

50. **Mr. Moesby** (Denmark) observed that, 50 years after having entered into force, the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees remained — unfortunately, one might say — more relevant than ever. However, new approaches such as the Convention Plus should be explored. Denmark, together with Japan, was promoting targeted development assistance for refugees. Tangible results were expected in the near future. They would serve to create an appropriate framework for an international system of burden and responsibility sharing.

51. Strengthening the protection of refugees in their regions of origin was part and parcel of the Convention Plus initiative. Denmark was working on a broad spectrum of activities, supported by a specific budget, to enhance the self-reliance of refugees. UNHCR played a key role in that approach, by seeking durable solutions for refugees and host communities, and by ensuring that they were implemented. After a difficult start, the Sri Lankan 4R project had shown how important (and sometimes difficult) it was for the different United Nations institutions to cooperate among themselves on the ground. Emphasis on the field perspective was also crucial to ensuring that a solution was truly durable. Any project involving application of the 4R principle therefore required the involvement of staff in the field, linking up with local structures and identifying local needs.

52. UNHCR had declared 2004 to be the year of repatriation, especially in Africa. In that connection, a mechanism was needed to attract the required funding and guarantee a multi-actor approach in order to help ensure voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity. Such a mechanism should also encourage cooperation on the ground by making the allocation of funds dependent on receipt of joint applications from at least two organizations.

53. Inter-agency cooperation was also of key importance in guaranteeing the effectiveness of early warning systems. Information sharing was crucial in that regard. Early warning was closely linked to security and emergency preparedness, but it was also essential for prevention. The international system was slow to respond: the earlier the warning, the greater the possibility of rapid intervention, which could thus save lives.

54. Early warning systems also had a role to play in the area of development. For example, a warning issued in good time could facilitate adjustment of development tools such as the Common Country Assessment/United Nations Development Assistance Framework (CCA/UNDAF) and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) processes, and thereby prevent a crisis or even a conflict.

55. He commended UNHCR's strategic work in the fight against HIV/AIDS and its co-sponsorship of UNAIDS, which was an excellent example of inter-agency cooperation to which Denmark planned to contribute.

56. Unfortunately, there was no reason to assume that humanitarian needs would decrease in the years ahead. The best possible use should therefore be made of the resources available, focusing on international burden sharing and giving priority to the regions of origin of refugees.

57. **Ms. Joiner** (Observer for the African Union) said that, since adopting its Constitutive Act, the African Union had undertaken several processes and initiatives to achieve the development objectives of peace, security, stability, good governance and democratization, rapid and sustainable development, and poverty eradication, and had created a solid political framework for African-led responses to challenges on all fronts. Those new arrangements demonstrated the African Union's determination to take full control of the peace and security of the continent's peoples in a holistic manner.

58. In the humanitarian sector, the continent had continued to face difficulties since the previous meeting of the Executive Committee, and dramatic events such as the murder of more than 100 refugees in Gatumba, Burundi, in August 2004 had only strengthened Africa's resolve to fight to eliminate all forms of violence and conflict. The continent was more determined than ever to put an end to the twin problems of conflict and underdevelopment, and it was now strongly believed in Africa that there could be no development if the protagonists themselves were in a constant state of displacement, turmoil and conflict.

59. The humanitarian situation in Darfur was far from satisfactory. Since 2002, that crisis had become a major test case for the African Union which currently concentrated a substantial proportion of its human and material resources on Darfur. A September 2004 meeting had laid the foundations for what might be a lasting political settlement. Despite its limited resources, the African Union had deployed some 300 soldiers to the region, and consultations were under way to strengthen that presence.

60. Political and diplomatic breakthroughs had also contributed to the ending of conflicts in several African countries, such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, and to the signing of peace agreements, as in southern Sudan and Côte d'Ivoire, and the African Union was grateful to its partners and collaborators in the international community for their tireless efforts in helping it to bring peace to the countries concerned.

61. The international protection of refugees and displaced persons was a major concern of the African Union, which had recently appealed once again to its member States and non-State actors involved in armed conflicts to comply with international humanitarian law, asking those of its member States which had not signed the treaties relating to refugees to do so at their earliest convenience. At its July 2004 summit, it had been decided that the 1969 Convention of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa should be retained in its current form, and that the safety and security of refugees and of host countries, as well as other areas not covered by the Convention, should be addressed through the adoption of annual non-binding decisions of the Assembly of Heads of State upon recommendation of the Commission and Executive Council of the African Union. The Union would continue to cooperate with UNHCR within the framework of the Comprehensive Implementation Plan in order to identify issues of the highest importance that needed to be addressed through decisions of that nature.

62. The security of refugees and displaced persons was a problem closely linked to that of their international protection, and the African Union strongly condemned atrocities committed against such persons and against relief workers. It was also committed to stepping up preventive measures to pre-empt such incidents. For example, following persistent acts of aggression against displaced persons and relief workers in Darfur, the Ceasefire Commission of the African Union established in April 2004 had deployed ceasefire monitors and protection forces to the conflict areas in Darfur. The African Mission in Burundi continued to exercise its mandate in that country, within the security agenda of the African Union. Slowly but surely, Africa was building up mechanisms and approaches to facilitate the settlement of African conflicts by Africans. The African Union favoured closer cooperation with UNHCR and its field-based staff in order to see how the African Union's observers and the troops protecting them could support UNHCR's humanitarian activities in Darfur, Chad, Burundi and other African countries.

63. Turning to the question of repatriation and the obstacles to the safe return and reintegration of refugees and displaced persons, she expressed the view that it was for the countries of origin to create an environment favourable to the return of their nationals. The socio-economic challenges to be addressed in the repatriation context concerned the root causes of conflicts, humanitarian relief, the question of land, respect for individual human rights, damage to the morale of the populations affected, burden sharing, rehabilitation of

damaged infrastructure and other development-related matters. At its summit in July 2004, the African Union had reaffirmed the importance of voluntary repatriation as one of the most durable solutions to the refugee problem, and had urged the member States concerned to create conditions conducive to the repatriation of refugees and their sustainable reintegration in their communities. Member States had requested the Commission of the African Union to involve itself closely in the programme of mass voluntary repatriation, resettlement and reintegration of refugees in the member States in the coming years. The African Union took the view that the way forward for repatriation lay in promoting new solutions and programmes; it would encourage United Nations entities and the donor community to work with its member States in support of post-conflict programmes in the countries concerned.

64. She emphasized the African Union's interest in strong partnership with UNHCR. At the 2004 summit, the Commission of the African Union had been requested to continue monitoring the problem of refugees and displaced persons, to pursue the implementation of the Comprehensive Implementation Plan and to take the necessary measures for the revitalization of the Coordinating Committee on Assistance to Refugees. However, funding remained a challenge and a brainstorming meeting had been held with the ambassadors of donor and friendly countries in Addis Ababa, with a view to sensitizing them to that issue. The recommended options for resource mobilization were under review and the Commission of the African Union would submit the proposed measures to the partners of the Union once its strategic programme for the period up to 2007 was adopted.

65. **Mr. Qaderi** (Observer for Afghanistan) thanked the Executive Committee for having invited the Afghan delegation to say a few words at that crucial stage for Afghanistan in the Bonn process, a few days before elections which were another milestone in progress towards the normalization of the country. The level of confidence in Afghanistan's present and future was reflected in the fact that, over a period of two and a half years, more than 3 million people had returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran, with the help of UNHCR, and had actively participated in the reconstruction of the country. Despite enormous challenges, most of the returnees had successfully taken the first steps towards reintegration, partly thanks to international support. UNHCR had built more than 100,000 shelters and dug more than 10,000 wells in the areas where returnees were concentrated. Other reintegration programmes were being conducted by the Afghan Government, including a solidarity programme, an emergency employment programme, an area-based development programme and a microfinance programme. In the longer term, those efforts would however require more and continued support, as 2 million Afghans were still living outside the country. For most returnees, access to services such as drinking water, education and health was not at the same level as they had enjoyed in the countries of asylum. The problems most frequently reported were a lack of housing, particularly in the towns, and unemployment in general. The drought in the south and south-west of the country had caused some security problems, hindering substantial repatriation to those areas. In order to sustain the already large-scale returns and provide possibilities for currently displaced persons or refugees also to return, continued and even increased assistance from the international community was essential, as were the presence and support of the International Security Assistance Force. He therefore appealed to donors to invest more in long-term projects and in a security framework for Afghanistan.

66. One of the critically important conditions for successful return and reintegration was the voluntary nature of return; it was also important that the returns should take place in a controlled and orderly fashion, in accordance with the absorption capacity of Afghanistan. The need for voluntary, informed, gradual and planned returns, which did not exceed the country's absorption capacity, had been discussed at a tripartite meeting with Iran and UNHCR. He appealed to all countries that hosted Afghan refugees to consider the need for voluntary, gradual and dignified return of those persons, and thanked the countries

concerned for their continuing hospitality towards Afghan refugees. Returns which were not voluntary were not only likely to be unsustainable but could trigger reverse movements.

The meeting rose at 5.50 p.m.