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

Fifty-fourth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 573rd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 30 September 2003, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. CHIARADIA (Argentina)
(Vice-Chairman)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

PRESENTATION BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER AND GENERAL DEBATE
(agenda item 4) (continued) (A/AC.96/980)

1. Mr. ALBIN (Mexico) said that his delegation strongly condemned all terrorist acts and supported calls for security for humanitarian workers throughout the world to be stepped up.
2. Mexico supported the search for realistic and durable solutions for refugees. The Framework for Durable Solutions provided new approaches to development assistance for refugees and for host developing countries. Integrating a development component into voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement programmes would, however, require a high level of coordination in order to ensure effective synergy among agencies on the ground and improve international protection, while fully respecting the mandate of each agency and the sovereignty of States.
3. For solutions to be truly durable, the international climate must be conducive to economic and social development and the elimination of the insecurity that was at the root of mass refugee movements.
4. The 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol remained the basic international legal instruments for refugee protection.
5. The Agenda for Protection and any agreements arising out of the Convention Plus initiative must help to strengthen implementation of the international protection regime. His Government did not agree that the 1951 Convention needed to be supplemented by special agreements. That was not to say that Mexico did not support the search for durable solutions through multilateral agreements; on the contrary, such agreements should help to consolidate international cooperation and solidarity and enhance burden and responsibility sharing, in accordance with countries' true capacities. His delegation called once again for the Convention Plus consultations and negotiations to be conducted in a more open and transparent manner. The aims, content and scope of any special agreements should be clearly defined before negotiations began, and the process should be conducted within the governing bodies of UNHCR and with the active participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
6. His delegation supported most of the measures proposed by the High Commissioner under the UNHCR 2004 process. Removing the time limitation on the Office's mandate would aid multi-year programming and funding, while five-yearly ministerial meetings would enhance international cooperation.
7. With regard to the migration/asylum nexus, Mexico believed that it was vital for UNHCR to focus on humanitarian care for persons who were forced to emigrate in search of international protection; management and supervision of voluntary migration were the responsibility of other bodies. Mexico supported the creation of strategic links between UNHCR and other international agencies and bodies in order to make it possible, in situations of mixed flows, to identify those in need of international protection and maximize cooperation on the ground. UNHCR should concentrate on its refugee-protection mission.

8. Mexico supported additional incremental increases in the allocation of funding from the United Nations regular budget and reaffirmed the voluntary nature of contributions to UNHCR. It could not, however, accept the proposed 30 per cent Base Level model.
9. Lastly, he said that NGO involvement in the Executive Committee's discussions and in the preparation of conclusions and decisions should be expanded, given that many of those decisions recommended concrete action by NGOs.
10. Mr. YIMER (Ethiopia) said that his delegation shared the High Commissioner's perception of the changing circumstances in which UNHCR was striving to carry out its mandate. UNHCR could most effectively discharge its mandate and protect its staff by scrupulously observing humanitarian principles, in particular those of neutrality and impartiality. He also welcomed the High Commissioner's statement regarding the need for greater partnership and enhanced coordination.
11. Protection of civilians from attack and/or persecution must remain the focus of humanitarian action. In practical terms, that could be achieved through constructive inter-agency dialogue and action to anticipate protection and security needs through an integrated multi-agency approach.
12. In the absence of a specialized agency dealing with internally displaced persons effective inter-agency cooperation and coordination was all the more necessary. His delegation supported the collaborative approach based on a clear division of labour respecting each agency's mandate. Proper coordination and supervision were, however, essential. At the field level, the arrangement worked best when the relationship between agencies was based on mutual understanding, respect and a cooperative spirit.
13. Voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees in their homeland remained the most preferred durable solution to the problem of refugees. His delegation welcomed the establishment of the 4Rs programme and supported the High Commissioner's initiative to promote development assistance for refugees. The inclusion of refugees in the development agenda was much appreciated as a recognition that refugees brought not only threats but also opportunities.
14. Yet there were inconsistencies in the way repatriation and reintegration were carried out: while there was immense pressure to repatriate refugees, there was also a reluctance to provide the required assistance for reintegration - and, by implication, for peace-building and development. His delegation therefore welcomed the renewed efforts by the High Commissioner to forge links with such development actors as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank.
15. Six out of the eight refugee camps in Ethiopia had been closed following the return of over 250,000 Somali refugees to their homeland. The remainder would stay until they were able to return in safety and dignity. Those developments represented a great achievement, given the complexity of the refugee situation and the history of conflict and instability in the subregion. His country had also been instrumental in reintegrating and rehabilitating the Somali refugees, processes in which donors and the NGO community had also been involved.

16. Meanwhile, Ethiopia continued to host Sudanese and Eritrean refugees. Until they were able to return home, his Government was developing a strategy to provide them not only with relief assistance but also with an opportunity to support themselves, thereby making the refugees agents of development and benefiting the local community as well. It was hoped that the strategy would also help to minimize damage to the environment.

17. Mr. SHEN Yongxiang (China) said that the global situation allowed little optimism. Protracted refugee situations tended to be neglected by the international community in favour of newly emerging situations in hot spots around the world. Not only did that give rise to serious economic and social problems for host developing countries, it also discouraged others from acceding to the Convention and thereby making themselves available to receive refugees.

18. His delegation welcomed the Framework for Durable Solutions and wholeheartedly endorsed the UNHCR 2004 process and the appeal to the international community to support UNHCR efforts to strengthen the Office's internal management and enhance its efficiency. It also supported UNHCR efforts to further strengthen cooperation and coordination with development bodies of the United Nations system and humanitarian agencies. In cooperating with other international organizations, UNHCR should concentrate on its core protection mandate, observing the principles of humanitarianism, non-political involvement and neutrality.

19. In his opening statement the High Commissioner had referred to illegal immigrants to China. Some clarification of that situation was required. As neighbours, China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had traditionally maintained close ties. Recently, as a result of a series of natural disasters, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had been experiencing serious economic difficulties, and some Koreans had entered China in order to seek a livelihood. Such illegal entrants did not meet the criteria established in the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol but were motivated by economic considerations. Despite the fact that they had had an adverse effect on public order and security in the border regions and caused a certain amount of instability, the Chinese Government and people treated them well and in accordance with international law and humanitarian principles.

20. As a State party to the Convention and the Protocol, China had always honoured its international obligations. It had received up to 280,000 refugees and made contributions to UNHCR in accordance with its capacities. His Government was, however, resolutely opposed to any blurring of the distinction between refugees and illegal immigrants and to the artificial creation of refugee problems. Encouraging illegal immigration could trigger large-scale illegal border crossings, thereby creating genuine humanitarian disasters.

21. Mr. de SMET (Belgium) said that his delegation wished to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Italy on behalf of the European Union on the previous day.

22. Adequate solutions to the problems of asylum and international protection could be found only within a multilateral framework. Regional cooperation and development of protection capabilities in the regions of origin were thus of fundamental importance. Closer cooperation and coordination between UNHCR, other organizations within the United Nations system, in particular the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the

Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP), NGOs and Governments, were also essential. With regard to policies relating to the asylum/migration nexus, his delegation encouraged a collaborative approach involving all partners, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

23. The three initiatives referred to in the High Commissioner's report (A/AC.96/980) - Development Assistance for Refugees (DAR), the 4Rs programmes and Development through Local Integration (DLI) - represented an important contribution to the search for durable solutions.

24. Turning to the regrettable shortfall in funding, he said that his delegation, while fully aware of the problems created by shifting to a budget that more closely reflected refugees' real needs, encouraged UNHCR to continue examining the feasibility of such an option.

25. Belgium attached particular importance to transparency and governance and would continue to follow the discussions on budgetary and administrative issues closely. Greater clarity and rigour would undoubtedly encourage donor countries not only to increase their core contributions but also to reduce their earmarked contributions, thereby improving the predictability of funding.

26. Ms. GABR (Observer for Egypt) commended UNHCR for the successful work that it did in conflict zones, in spite of security threats, financial constraints and the restrictions that had been placed on the provision of assistance in some zones, in breach of international refugee law and international humanitarian law.

27. Egypt supported the search for durable solutions to refugee problems, provided that they took account of the practical impediments to local integration of refugees in host developing countries and the need to mobilize development assistance for host developing countries to finance refugee assistance programmes, build their refugee protection capacities and help refugees achieve social and economic stability upon their return to their countries of origin.

28. All the themes included in the UNHCR 2004 initiative should be addressed as a single package, since they were interconnected and interdependent.

29. With regard to the Convention Plus initiative, compliance with the existing norms of international protection should be strengthened and priority given to the practical implementation of international humanitarian law as it related to refugees. The initiative should be rooted in the 1951 Convention and its Protocol with a view to strengthening international protection for refugees on an ongoing basis.

30. As to the asylum-migration nexus, poverty had become one of the main causes of migration flows. That issue should be addressed creatively and positively with a view to finding humanitarian solutions rather than focusing exclusively on ways to protect borders. Greater transparency was needed in the framework of the Action Group on Asylum and Migration (AGAMI) in order to draw on contributions from Permanent Missions in Geneva.

31. The timely provision of adequate financing for UNHCR field activities would guarantee the proper implementation of the Agenda for Protection and facilitate burden sharing and capacity-building for host developing countries. Consideration should be given to the sufferings

of refugees in all aspects of their lives, including the threat posed to their very survival by the steady decline in UNHCR budgetary resources, which could have grave consequences for host communities. Donors should take account of those factors when making financing decisions.

32. Egypt welcomed the adoption by the Economic and Social Council of draft decision E/2003/L.4, recommending that the General Assembly should consider expanding the Executive Committee to include Egypt. Her delegation looked forward to the adoption by the General Assembly and the Executive Committee of resolutions that would pave the way for Egypt's membership on the Committee in 2004, acknowledging the country's support for international protection efforts.

33. Egypt had an outstanding record for extending protection to refugees, in keeping not only with the spirit of the relevant international instruments, but also with its own historical and religious traditions. It supported endeavours to strengthen the role of the Executive Committee and to encourage participation by NGOs in its activities.

34. Ms. WHELAN (Ireland) said that Ireland wished to align itself with the statement made by the representative of Italy on behalf of the European Union. Her delegation offered its condolences on the recent death of so many staff members in Baghdad.

35. Ireland supported UNHCR efforts to assist refugees in "forgotten emergencies" and hoped that the new Consolidated Appeals Process would encourage public and political debate and draw attention to UNHCR's work in those parts of the world that were no longer on the international news agenda.

36. Ireland was concerned at the increasing bilateralization of emergency humanitarian assistance, and welcomed the High Commissioner's proposals on multilateralism, coordination, partnership and burden sharing. The broad-based consultations envisaged under Action 7 were particularly important.

37. UNHCR could be most effective by mainstreaming its specific and distinctive protection mandate and performing a strong advocacy role in international frameworks such as the Common Country Assessment/United Nations Development Assistance Framework (CCA/UNDAF) process in order to ensure that refugees' concerns remained high on the development agenda.

38. Ireland welcomed the recommendations in Action 8 of the High Commissioner's report and concurred on the importance of strengthening UNHCR's partnership with States. It also attached priority to inter-agency cooperation in the field, but believed that such cooperation should allow each body to build on its own area of expertise while respecting others' mandates, thereby ensuring a more coherent response to humanitarian crises.

39. Ireland had increased its contribution to the UNHCR core budget by 18 per cent in 2003, allocating nearly 7 million euros, and had contributed a further €2.2 million for emergency and recovery purposes. Her delegation acknowledged the efforts being made by the High Commissioner to resolve the chronic funding difficulties.

40. Mr. ESCUDERO MARTÍNEZ (Ecuador) said that the significance of the conclusions reached during the current session would depend on the extent to which they facilitated and enhanced appropriate access to international protection for those entitled to it. There was a risk that linkages between the concept of refuge and other situations that fell outside the UNHCR mandate might impede access to international protection. If serious humanitarian consequences were to be avoided, it was important that UNHCR should be able to respond to current realities and reach those who genuinely needed protection.

41. Ecuador supported the initiatives that had been proposed, including those under the Convention Plus initiative, always within a context of facilitating and enhancing international protection.

42. Ecuador's humanitarian response, particularly to the increasingly serious effects of the conflict in Colombia, had repeatedly been cited as a model. The number of Colombians seeking asylum in Ecuador had increased tenfold in the past 10 years. The Government's response had always been efficient and effective despite the country's limited capacity. UNHCR had praised Ecuador's policy of integration and independence for refugees, which avoided the need for camps and facilitated protection and security, while its registration process was a model that UNHCR planned to implement in other countries of the region. Information campaigns and projects to increase capacity in host communities were planned.

43. Unfortunately, without a major injection of funds, all those arrangements would soon run into difficulties. The humanitarian crisis in Colombia affected the entire continent and particularly Colombia's immediate neighbours. In view of the limitations of Ecuador's own capacity, and in accordance with Goal 3 of the Agenda for Protection and the Framework for Durable Solutions, urgent consideration must be given to other relevant aspects of protection, such as the welfare and development of host communities, who were unjustly subjected to the effects of crises for which they were not responsible and for which they should not be obliged to pay.

44. Ms. RUGWABIZA (Observer for Rwanda) said that her Government wished to express its appreciation to UNHCR for its programmes to assist some 35,000 refugees from the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and from Burundi. Rwanda would spare no effort to ensure that they would be able to return home as soon as security conditions allowed.

45. Thanks to the restoration of the rule of law and good governance in Rwanda, more than 3.2 million Rwandan refugees had been repatriated; some 70,000 more were being encouraged to return home. Her Government was counting on UNHCR and the international community, as well as all those countries that had taken in Rwandan refugees, to support programmes for their repatriation and resettlement.

46. Despite the firm commitments from the parties, the tripartite agreements on voluntary repatriation of Rwandan refugees had not always been promptly implemented, owing to a lack of resources. Rwanda therefore fully endorsed the comprehensive 4Rs approach advocated by the High Commissioner and called on UNHCR to continue to mobilize the support of development partners for her Government's efforts to provide housing, education, drinking water, health care and income-generating activities for the returnees.

47. Mr. JAKUBOWSKI (Poland) said that his delegation wished to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Italy on behalf of the European Union. Poland appreciated the role that UNHCR had played in responding to challenges in various parts of the world, and particularly wished to see greater UNHCR involvement in Central and Eastern Europe, since cooperation could help to resolve many of the region's refugee issues in a manner that both satisfied the States concerned and benefited the refugees themselves. Active participation in the work of UNHCR would remain a priority for Polish foreign policy.

48. Once it had joined the European Union, Poland would become the member having the longest border with a non-European Union State, placing it at the forefront of Central Europe's refugee protection system. While its cooperation with UNHCR was satisfactory, the Polish Government firmly believed in the need for a stronger UNHCR presence in Poland and the region.

49. The Polish Parliament had adopted a series of laws that thoroughly overhauled its legal framework with respect to asylum-seekers and refugees. UNHCR regarded Poland's asylum procedures as being of a high international standard.

50. In early October 2003, Poland would host a meeting of international judges for refugee affairs. In September 2003, it had amended its rules concerning child refugees to incorporate UNHCR standards. The Government had also organized special "tolerance" training courses for members of the police force and other services dealing with refugees. A network of NGOs that helped to protect refugee rights had been further developed.

51. His delegation believed that UNHCR should do more to combat HIV/AIDS. It welcomed the assistance provided by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) in many countries and its efforts to establish an international partnership to combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic. UNHCR sponsorship of UNAIDS would significantly enhance the Programme's capacity and effectiveness.

52. Mr. MAPURI (United Republic of Tanzania) said that the Regional Conference on the Challenges of Refugee Protection in Africa, held in his country in September 2003, had been attended by high-level delegations from a number of African States and by representatives of UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the African Union. Participants had expressed their gratitude to UNHCR for facilitating the holding of the Conference. The Conference had focused in particular on the Agenda for Protection; the root causes of refugee movements; the safety and security of refugees and host communities; encouragement of self-reliance in protracted refugee situations pending the establishment of durable solutions; and international solidarity and burden sharing, including resource mobilization and partnership strategies.

53. The Conference had called on States and other stakeholders to ensure the full implementation of the Agenda for Protection in order to deal with issues not covered by existing refugee instruments. All States had been urged to respect human rights, the rule of law and sound principles of good governance in order to prevent refugee flows and promote sustainable voluntary repatriation. They had been encouraged to adopt all possible measures to identify, disarm and separate armed elements and intern them, where possible, in separate facilities. They

had also been urged to protect refugee women and children against all forms of sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation and to prosecute perpetrators in accordance with their national laws. In situations where repatriation was not immediately possible, States had been asked to give serious consideration to comprehensive and integrated strategies aimed at encouraging self-reliance among refugees.

54. States had been invited to seek additional funding to ensure the sustainability of return and reintegration within the 4Rs framework, to develop binding multilateral agreements to strengthen solidarity and burden sharing and to ensure that resources for refugee protection were available on a more equitable, reliable and predictable basis.

55. The Conference had agreed to continue the debate on safe havens to protect civilians in situations of armed conflict. It had discussed the participation of the States of the region in the Convention Plus process and had called for further annual conferences to be held, subject to resource availability.

56. Speaking on behalf of the States members of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), he noted that senior government representatives from 12 SADC countries had met in Botswana in September 2003 to share information and discuss issues of common concern with regard to refugees and asylum-seekers. Notwithstanding the impact of political, economic and social developments on the members of SADC, those countries remained committed to meeting their obligations towards the refugees and asylum-seekers they hosted. The Botswana meeting had welcomed the positive events that had taken place in Africa, believing that they could help States and UNHCR find durable solutions for refugees.

57. The end of the civil war in Angola had paved the way for the voluntary repatriation of 450,000 Angolans, a matter in which SADC took particular interest. Some 150,000 refugees had already returned to their homes and many more had registered to do so in the foreseeable future. However, the voluntary repatriation and reintegration programme faced many challenges, the most important being the issue of security and limited access to areas of return owing to the presence of lethal landmines. SADC appealed to the Executive Committee and to the international community at large to assist Angola in that regard.

58. The Botswana meeting had noted the encouraging developments that had taken place in the peace process in the Great Lakes region. Those advances held out the promise of a return to peace, security and stability not only in the countries concerned, but also in neighbouring States, some of which had been hosting refugees from the Great Lakes region for many years.

59. The political will shown by African leaders in promoting peace and reconciliation in the region was a testament to their commitment to resolving the region's social, economic and political difficulties, particularly those underlying forced population displacement. The fact that some Governments in the region had made cash contributions for refugee operations and had provided emergency relief assistance, land and other basic necessities for refugees was a further example of that commitment.

60. SADC welcomed the High Commissioner's acknowledgement of the role that member Governments played in responding to refugee needs. While States continued to host refugees and asylum-seekers, often beyond their capacity to do so, they could not effectively address

refugee problems on their own. Host countries that had large refugee populations and protracted caseloads or had recently emerged from conflict needed additional assistance to receive and return refugees. The call by the African Union for more equitable burden sharing should therefore be viewed in that context.

61. SADC supported the DLI concept. Indeed, the “Zambian Initiative”, was a concrete example of the concept in action. Mozambique’s endeavours to integrate refugee self-reliance strategies into its national development plans were also consistent with the DLI approach. Such initiatives deserved ongoing assistance and support from SADC and the international community.

62. The increasing number of refugees involved in secondary movements within SADC countries was another area of concern. The Botswana meeting had reviewed Executive Committee Conclusion No. 58 and reaffirmed the need for a harmonized regional approach to such movements. The question of durable solutions for Rwandan refugees in the region should be managed within the framework of the Tripartite Agreements.

63. The complexity of refugee protection in the region, including the question of mixed flows, gave added impetus to the call for assistance in national capacity-building to help States shoulder their protection responsibilities more effectively. Without international support, it would be difficult for most SADC countries to develop the capacities needed to receive, register and assist asylum-seekers in accordance with their international obligations.

64. While SADC States sought to promote sustainable and equitable economic development and enhance the quality of life of their people, they recognized that the consolidation of peace, stability and security throughout Africa and an adequate response to the root causes of forced displacement and refugee flows were essential preconditions for prosperity and growth. SADC called upon the international community to support its efforts to find meaningful and lasting solutions to the plight of refugees.

65. Mr. KHUDAIR (Observer for Iraq) said that he was honoured to have the opportunity to address the Executive Committee in his capacity as Iraq’s first Minister for Refugee and Migrant Affairs. The Ministry had been established after decades of suffering which the Iraqi people had endured under the repressive Ba`ath party regime.

66. That regime had imposed its tyrannical rule on all sectors of Iraqi society, subjecting them to torture, murder and imprisonment. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis had been forced to flee the country, depriving it of valuable intellectual, political and scientific skills; he himself had only recently returned to Iraq after 23 years in exile. Now the new Ministry intended to help Iraqi refugees throughout the world return to Iraq and assert their rights.

67. The people of Iraq and its Governing Council were grateful to those countries, particularly Iraq’s neighbours and Saudi Arabia which had generously hosted Iraqi refugees and provided them with protection and assistance for purely humanitarian reasons. Those countries continued to shoulder an enormous burden in supporting and protecting Iraqi citizens and hoped that with the establishment of the new Ministry and the gradual return to normality in Iraq the way would be opened for their return.

68. In spite of the difficulties that Iraq was currently facing, efforts were being made to collaborate with the allied forces and the United Nations to establish health, educational, housing and other systems to facilitate the refugees' safe and successful return. He appealed to Iraq's neighbours to show forbearance, until the conditions were right for the refugees' return. It would only complicate matters and compound the problems inherited from the previous regime if the return process were to be carried out in excessive haste. The return process should be orderly and should take account of Iraq's capacity to absorb the returnees.

69. His country grieved for those persons who had lost their lives while supporting Iraq's liberation and striving to guarantee Iraqis a life of dignity. It hoped that their endeavours, which would never be forgotten, would be continued by others. The Iraqi Governing Council had in fact decided to name a street and the square in front of the United Nations building in Baghdad after Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello.

70. Iraq appreciated the humanitarian work that UNHCR did on behalf of refugees in difficult and dangerous circumstances. It hoped that its field operations in Iraq would continue and that appropriate mechanisms would be put in place to ensure that it did. UNHCR personnel should return to the country to carry out the programmes so badly needed by the Iraqi people, particularly the most vulnerable and neediest sectors of society. United Nations personnel and the staff of other humanitarian agencies and NGOs should likewise return to help resolve Iraq's problems and ensure a return to normality. The withdrawal of United Nations personnel, including UNHCR staff, could only have an adverse impact on humanitarian efforts. The international community should demonstrate its political will to deal with the existing situation and should not allow those seeking to destabilize Iraq to succeed in their evil designs.

71. The Government of Iraq stood ready to cooperate with UNHCR and with host and donor countries, and looked forward to receiving their support for the new Ministry. The establishment of the Ministry sent a clear message to the world about the new Iraq's commitment to democracy, humanitarian cooperation and friendship with other States.

72. Archbishop TOMASI (Holy See) said that the emphasis placed by UNHCR on a comprehensive and collaborative approach to refugee protection and assistance acknowledged the link between concerted action and successful management of refugee crises. Inter-agency collaboration and private sector partnerships should produce better services for displaced persons and more effective resource management. The linkage with development was particularly important, since it turned displaced persons into protagonists, empowering them to contribute, once repatriated, to the reconstruction of their countries of origin. While emergency camps could be justified, UNHCR should press for alternatives that allowed refugees to take control of their lives.

73. Efforts to prevent sexual abuse and exploitation of refugees should begin from the moment of displacement. Keeping family units together was a powerful means of prevention. Local authorities and the international community should introduce prevention measures in camps, including refugee participation, registration, adequate food supplies and medical assistance when abuse occurred. The best way to defend against abuse of power was to inculcate respect for the dignity of every person.

74. The search for durable solutions was complicated by the tension existing between the right of persons to seek asylum and the right of Governments to regulate the admission of foreigners. Policies must take account of the needs of all persons concerned, while drawing a distinction between different types of needs. His delegation commended those States that had welcomed refugees despite the great sacrifices involved. Support for local development would encourage more States to welcome displaced persons, and the international community should show the political will to promote the sustainable societies in countries of origin.

75. Mr. FANNAH (Observer for Sierra Leone) expressed his country's gratitude to UNHCR and the United Nations for providing technical, financial and military support for peace and recovery in Sierra Leone. He commended the High Commissioner for his commitment to finding lasting solutions to refugee crises, as exemplified by his recent visit to Liberia and his visit to Sierra Leone earlier in the year, which had bolstered the confidence of refugees and internally displaced persons, strengthening the country's resolve to support international and regional instruments for the protection of refugees.

76. The authority of the central Government had been established throughout Sierra Leone: the police and the army had been deployed throughout the country, elections had been held for all chiefdoms and local elections were due to be held in 2004. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Special Court had become operational, while most donors were supporting reform programmes aimed at decentralization and better social services for communities.

77. All chiefdoms but one had been declared safe for resettlement. The remaining chiefdom was unsafe, not because of any internal security concerns, but because of cross-border raids originating in Liberia. That was in fact unhindered access to every part of the country, and mechanisms and structures were in place to address civil matters. The Government and its partners were also pursuing various peace and reconciliation initiatives.

78. Some 450,000 internally displaced persons had been resettled throughout the country, and all camps, except those for amputees and the war-wounded, had been closed. An additional 150,000 returnees had settled in various parts of the country, mainly with UNHCR support. Approximately 137,000 refugees from the subregion were due to be repatriated and reintegrated.

79. To address the challenges of rehabilitating and reintegrating such large numbers of displaced persons, the Government and its partners had established mechanisms to coordinate the recovery process. Recovery committees had been set up, a national recovery strategy had been devised and an interim poverty reduction paper had been prepared. The 4Rs initiative was actively supporting that process.

80. However, Sierra Leone was also hosting some 69,000 Liberian refugees, of whom 55,000 lived in camps, 7,500 in border areas and 6,500 in urban areas, in addition to approximately 500 former combatants, who had been identified and interned in separate camps. Peace in the subregion was the most durable and sustainable solution to the refugee crisis, and the recent events in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau pointed to the need to support subregional peace processes and good governance. It was only through sustained regional and international

action that peace and stability could be achieved, fostering donor confidence and attracting capital investment so that Governments could reduce their dependency on donors for the provision of community services.

81. Adequate funds should be made available to UNHCR country offices for the repatriation and reintegration of Sierra Leonean returnees and the provision of assistance to Liberian refugees. While the problem of underfunding for Sierra Leone had been addressed, the standard of support for refugees in that country and elsewhere in Africa should be improved. Such improvements were crucial to addressing issues such as HIV/AIDS, sexual exploitation and gender-based violence, and the environment. More support was also needed for the DLI approach in order to reduce pressure on host communities, foster tolerance of refugees and facilitate the future integration of refugees in host communities.

82. Sierra Leone hoped that the recent peace efforts in Liberia and Ghana would be replicated in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau. It appealed to Sierra Leonean refugees to return home and help to rebuild their country.

83. Mr. SCHRAVESANDE (South Africa), associating himself with the statement made by the representative of Algeria on behalf of the Group of African States, expressed his deep shock at the recent attacks against the United Nations in Baghdad, which clearly represented an assault on the notion of multilateralism.

84. South Africa acknowledged and supported efforts to reinvigorate UNHCR activities so that the Office could deal with refugees in a more comprehensive manner. Such efforts were consistent with the aims and objectives of the New Economic Programme for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The creation of a dignified environment for refugees in host countries and in their countries of origin upon their return was of the utmost importance.

85. Neither UNHCR nor host countries could comprehensively address refugees' needs without taking other relevant factors into account; the complexities of war and civil strife demanded such an approach. International assistance was thus vital to the success of such efforts, as was greater burden sharing by the international community. South Africa believed that the Convention Plus process should help developing countries find durable, rights-based and protection-oriented solutions within a more predictable and structured framework, and it looked forward to participating in the discussions.

86. South Africa attached great importance to conflict resolution and peacekeeping measures to achieve regional peace and reconciliation and stem the tide of human displacement occasioned by war. Accordingly, his country was actively involved in efforts to secure peace in the Great Lakes region and in post-conflict management in Angola. African leaders were committed to finding durable solutions to the problems facing Africa. The Peace and Security Council of the African Union, which was expected to become operational in the near future, would provide a framework for dealing with African conflicts in a structured manner. In like vein, the SADC Mutual Defence Pact and Charter on Fundamental Social Rights had recently been signed by all SADC member countries with a view to addressing the root causes of human displacement and creating a stable and secure environment conducive to sustainable development.

87. UNHCR's co-sponsorship of UNAIDS was both timely and necessary. UNHCR should take note of the importance of regional strategies for HIV/AIDS prevention and control and the application of such strategies to refugee populations.

88. His Government continued to be deeply concerned by the ever-decreasing financial support for UNHCR programmes in Africa. Adequate funding of UNHCR programmes had resulted in some striking successes in the past, such as the repatriation of thousands of Mozambican refugees in the early 1990s. The discrepancy between levels of funding for African refugees and refugees elsewhere was completely unacceptable, and the international donor community should act decisively to redress the balance.

89. Mr. KUSSUMUA (Observer for Angola) said that his delegation associated itself with the statement made by the representative of Algeria on behalf of the Group of African States. During the past 50 years inadequate humanitarian assistance had exacerbated the vulnerability of many African refugees to violence and disease. The southern African region had responded by establishing a unified framework to strengthen measures of protection for asylum-seekers and refugees, identifying durable solutions for refugees and revising international instruments to take account of changing circumstances.

90. Most of the 13,000 refugees in Angola were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Owing to the continuing instability in their homeland, efforts were being made to integrate them locally with help from UNHCR. In a broader context, Africa's refugee problems could be resolved only by ensuring peace, sustainable social development and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States and by clamping down on illegal weapons trafficking and support for rebel and terrorist groups.

91. After more than two decades of civil war, Angola had finally embarked on a new phase of reconciliation and reconstruction. It was a matter of priority for his Government to reintegrate more than 5 million people who had been directly affected by the armed conflict and to repatriate and generate a livelihood for almost 450,000 refugees living in neighbouring countries. Although all Angolans yearned to return to their homeland, their homecoming was often made difficult or impossible by the proliferation of landmines, impassable roads and the lack of a proper social infrastructure at their point of destination. The Angolan Government could hardly be expected to shoulder the burden of repatriation and resettlement on its own, and it therefore appealed to all donors to help ease the transition to normality.

92. Ms. PORTOCARRERO (Venezuela) said that her delegation fully supported the High Commissioner's comments on the need to strengthen cooperation between UNHCR and other entities both inside and outside the United Nations system. It was particularly important to bolster the link between UNHCR and States, especially the major donors, in order to yield lasting benefits. Multilateral efforts must always be channelled towards meeting real needs. In addition, UNHCR had an invaluable role to play in focusing the attention of the international community on specific refugee situations and acting as a clearing house for governmental and intergovernmental initiatives.

93. The recent politicization of the asylum issue had made it much more difficult to alleviate humanitarian crises. Venezuela advocated a strong link between peace, security, humanitarian action, human rights and development policy. International solidarity and burden sharing were essential if refugees were to be afforded primary protection. Asylum, of course, occupied a central place in international protection arrangements, but other forms of protection envisaged by the Convention Plus initiative were worth considering, provided that they did not run counter to the spirit of international law.

94. The Venezuelan authorities were deeply aware of their responsibilities towards persons arriving in Venezuela in search of protection, and accordingly a National Commission for Refugees had been established in July 2003 to ensure that the rights of all displaced persons were properly respected. In addition, a bilateral agreement had been concluded with the Colombian Government to process internally displaced persons in border regions.

95. Mr. SOUALEM (Algeria) said that the success of the Afghan repatriation operation should not be allowed to obscure the magnitude of the post-conflict problems that persisted in Afghanistan and threatened to wipe out all that had been achieved. It should be noted, however, that post-conflict management was the responsibility of development agencies rather than of UNHCR. The most satisfactory lasting solution to refugee problems was voluntary repatriation, which was the option that the international community should always encourage where conditions permitted. Local integration in cases of mass refugee influxes was not really feasible: asylum countries had enough trouble coping with the needs of their own populations, and the presence of large numbers of refugees posed a threat to their social cohesion and national security.

96. Lack of funding for refugee operations continued to be a major concern. Governments should be pressed to bear the operating costs of UNHCR field offices in their territory; the possibility of private-sector funding should be explored; and the United Nations should be asked to increase its contribution to UNHCR from the regular budget. His Government welcomed the High Commissioner's efforts to streamline the work of the Office, strengthen internal oversight and keep a closer watch on expenditure. The audits conducted at headquarters and in the field and the field inspection missions had enabled the Office to tighten up its own procedures and to demonstrate to donors that UNHCR resources were being used effectively. However, the High Commissioner should explain why the current vacancy rate in his Office was running at 9 per cent, equivalent to 113 posts.

97. Reforms were pointless unless they benefited refugees directly. As the Group of African States had noted, UNHCR's voluntary funding arrangements should be maintained. The countries of the South hosted two thirds of all refugees, and yet the costs they bore as host countries were not recognized or shared equitably by the international community. As to other proposed initiatives, Algeria supported the idea of holding a ministerial conference every five years, because such a high-level diplomatic meeting would help to keep refugee issues at the top of the political agenda. Conversely, the proposal to perpetuate UNHCR's mandate was unwelcome because it might encourage political bodies to sidestep their responsibilities by weathering emergencies rather than actively seeking to resolve problems. The Forum provided for under the Convention Plus mechanism should be answerable to the Executive Committee.

98. Algeria had a long tradition of welcoming asylum-seekers from all nations and also refugees fleeing drought in the Sahel. The Security Council had recently reiterated the applicability of the peace plan for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara, many of whom had found refuge in Algeria, and had invited donors to support the assistance programme for the Saharan people. In addition to demonstrating its solidarity with the Saharan people, Algeria had inaugurated an assistance programme worth US\$ 10 million for countries affected by drought and flooding.

99. Mr. MUNTEANU (Observer for the Republic of Moldova) said that, although the Republic of Moldova had acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, enacted a national legal framework on asylum and established a State Department for Migration Affairs, the practical realization of measures to assist migrants was hampered by the country's dire economic situation. To give practical effect to laws and regulations on refugee and asylum matters, the Republic of Moldova required ongoing financial and technical assistance from UNHCR and other international organizations. Asylum inevitably entailed integration, which also necessitated legal and financial support from the State.

100. Following the strengthening and eastward extension of the border of the European Union, it was anticipated that the Republic of Moldova would become a staging post for increasing numbers of asylum-seekers. The task of controlling asylum-seeker flows was immeasurably complicated by the uncertainty that prevailed on the country's eastern border. Basically, the country had been split in two. Owing to the unresolved armed conflict in the Transnistrian region, which was not under the de facto control of the Government, large numbers of people had been obliged to flee their homes. His Government's priority was to reunite the country and encourage internally displaced persons to return.

101. With the assistance of UNHCR and other donors, a centre for refugees and asylum-seekers would shortly be opened in the Republic of Moldova. His Government could not, therefore, understand why UNHCR was contemplating the closure of its Moldovan office. The High Commissioner's wish to move towards a regional, rather than a country-based, system of management and financing was understandable in countries with strong economies and the appropriate infrastructure to cater for refugees and asylum-seekers, but quite a different approach was called for in the Republic of Moldova.

102. Mr. MACHAGE (Kenya) said that his delegation wished to associate itself with the statement made at a previous meeting by the representative of Algeria on behalf of the Group of African States. Kenya's commitment to international and regional conventions on the protection of refugees remained solid: his country enjoyed a long tradition of providing asylum and protection to refugees from neighbouring States and was among the top five refugee-hosting countries in Africa. However, the plight of refugees had become worse as resources had diminished: in Kenya's refugee camps food rations had been cut and many refugees were without shelter as the rainy season approached. In countries where poverty levels were high, refugees were often seen as receiving better treatment than the host communities. Real or perceived disparities between refugees and host communities were a source of perennial hostility and conflict. Clashes at the Kakuma camp in Kenya in June 2003 had actually claimed a number of lives.

103. To address the frictions caused by competing priorities and limited resources, it was essential to renew international solidarity and burden sharing while also acknowledging that the connection between refugee protection and adequate financial support to asylum countries was especially important in Africa. There was a perception that international support for refugees had diminished, yet asylum countries were still expected to abide by their obligations. True solidarity could be demonstrated by making adequate financial and resource support available, renewing the commitment to a global system of refugee protection and engaging in global dialogue on contemporary refugee, security and migratory realities. In the past, the discussion of refugee problems had been largely confined to conventional refugee and humanitarian issues, without raising the questions of national security or law and order. That situation should change.

104. Special efforts must be made to strengthen the refugee regulatory system. Laws and regulations would introduce predictability and clarity, for example by defining who was and was not a refugee. A legislative framework also established rights, obligations and administrative arrangements. Yet very few countries in Africa could boast of coherent structures for the proper registration of asylum-seekers or the determination of refugee status, and thus the line between genuine and bogus asylum-seekers and refugees was often blurred. Although UNHCR had made substantial contributions to developing refugee legislation in a number of African countries, including Kenya, its efforts to develop institutional structures and arrangements for refugee management had thus far proved inadequate.

105. Host countries also required assistance in establishing effective border controls to deter the movement of weapons, illegal migrants, criminals and drugs that frequently accompanied refugee flows. UNHCR and the international community must recognize that such assistance should form part of the support package offered to host countries to enable them to meet their obligations towards refugees while ensuring their own security needs.

106. It was important to continue to persuade the public of the need for refugee protection. The frequent misperceptions about refugees in the minds of local populations must be dispelled. Governments and even UNHCR were not necessarily the most effective agencies for getting the message across, and it was therefore vital to forge effective partnerships with civil society and grass-roots organizations for advocacy purposes.

107. Kenya believed that the most viable durable solution to the refugee crisis in Africa was voluntary repatriation. In that spirit, his Government was making every effort to help end the conflicts in Somalia and the Sudan. The refugees from those countries who were currently living in Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, the Central African Republic, Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo would then be able to return home and rebuild their countries.

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.