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

Fifty-eighth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 612th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 2 October 2007, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. MTESA (Zambia)

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CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS ON THE WORK OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE

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

GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 4) (continued)

1. Mr. ZIGIRA (Observer for Rwanda) said that since the 1994 genocide and the wars in the Great Lakes region, Rwanda had made a swift recovery and created a stable socio-economic environment through the commitment of his Government and bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Out of 3.3 million refugees, 99 per cent had been repatriated and reintegrated successfully, thanks to considerable efforts and the political will and generosity of the international community. His Government wished to maintain that spirit in dealing with the remaining 77,000 refugees, some of whom might be unwilling to return home because of crimes that they had committed. Between 70 and 80 per cent of their number were being held hostage by criminal elements and needed help to return home in order to regain their dignity. The persons of concern were scattered throughout 19 African countries, with the overwhelming majority in the Great Lakes region.

2. Over the past year repatriation activities had been limited because of heavy intimidation by elements among the refugees. It was to be hoped that with the conclusion of the Gacaca justice process in December 2007 the elements responsible would have fewer tools for spreading propaganda against repatriation. The application of the cessation clause to the special category of Rwandan refugees should provide an incentive to step up repatriation efforts and should yield good results, if accompanied by additional awareness-raising activities and resources for reintegration.

3. Rwanda also hosted around 50,000 refugees, mainly from the Great Lakes region, whose numbers had been rising steadily since March 2007. It needed increased resources to support their social and economic needs.

4. Ms. THOMPSON (Costa Rica) said that UNHCR was doing vital work in Latin America and the Caribbean region, where there was a constant flow of people seeking protection. Her Government, which had a long tradition of hosting refugees, had first-hand experience of the challenges involved in providing humanitarian assistance and protection. As a new member of the Executive Committee, it hoped to share its experience in order to find solutions for refugee problems worldwide. It also wished to help resolve the difficulties facing UNHCR in the areas of management, funding, balanced regional appropriations and reform.

5. She was in favour of the five key reform initiatives mentioned by the High Commissioner in his introductory statement and supported the regionalization of operations and the reorganization of the UNHCR regional office in San Jose towards that end. The main challenge facing Latin America at present was finding durable solutions, such as local integration and resettlement, for which international cooperation was required. She expressed the view that internal displacement should remain one of the Office's priorities, since the issue affected the Latin American region as a whole.

6. Her Government had made considerable progress with the implementation of the Mexico Plan of Action. Noteworthy developments included: the reform of the Migration Act to bring it into line with international standards; the signing of a cooperation agreement with UNHCR on the re-establishment of a government department for refugees; training on the protection of

refugees for immigration officials and members of the police and armed forces; and the drafting of a protocol for migrant holding centres, with particular attention paid to women and the victims of trafficking.

7. In the area of durable solutions, a number of programmes had been carried out. The “Cities of Solidarity” programme recognized the importance of promoting peaceful coexistence among nationals, migrants and refugees in order to ensure integration. Under the “Borders of Solidarity” programme, access for asylum-seekers and the situation at border posts were being monitored more closely. Over the past four years, the “Resettlement in Solidarity” programme had assisted over 1,000 refugees with serious integration or protection problems. She thanked the Governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Canada, the United States, Sweden, Iceland and Holland for their support in that connection.

8. Mr. NICHOLAS THORNE (United Kingdom) said that the past year had been extremely testing for UNHCR. The number of persons of concern had risen sharply while the resources available barely matched needs. The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) outstripped that of returnees. While his Government welcomed a better humanitarian response to IDP crises, it remained concerned by the security and access problems faced by aid agencies like UNHCR. The protection of IDPs was the responsibility of Governments and he called upon the States concerned to do more to prevent arbitrary displacement and to provide protection and assistance.

9. Turning to the worsening humanitarian situation in Iraq and its neighbouring States, he expressed his gratitude to the Governments in the region, in particular the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan, for the hospitality that they continued to show to Iraqis. He urged both Governments to maintain their exemplary open approach. The United Kingdom Government, in cooperation with UNHCR and the United Nations, would continue to help alleviate their burden.

10. The need for a flexible, strategically-focused organization that was better able to deliver its resources to people most in need had never been more critical. His Government supported the current process of structural and administrative reform and believed that it would steer UNHCR towards a sustainable future. It welcomed the High Commissioner’s commitment to the process and urged him to maintain the momentum. In that connection, the Swiss authorities were to be commended for their pragmatic and constructive approach to the restructuring taking place in several organizations in Geneva.

11. UNHCR was also to be congratulated on its positive approach to the United Nations and humanitarian reform processes, which he supported. Its leadership of the protection, emergency shelter and camp coordination and management clusters was commendable, especially considering the additional challenges that it posed to an organization with scarce resources. As the cluster leader for protection, UNHCR was at the sharp end of a complex and sensitive policy debate that tested the limits of its mandate. The Office must, however, continue on the path of humanitarian reform, which had slowly begun to make a difference. Clusters provided a more effective framework for delivery, and pooled funding mechanisms ensured a more coordinated and transparent response. Reform also entailed new working methods. Through the cluster approach, UNHCR had moved away from working through “implementing partners” and had been called upon to develop strategic partnerships on an inclusive, transparent and equal basis. He urged the Office to continue to foster partnerships in that spirit.

12. In 2007, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Canada had reached agreement on a three-year joint organizational strategy with UNHCR. The aim of the strategy was to strengthen the Office's operational capacity for delivery and its ability to meet its strategic objectives. It was an innovative tool that should ensure more effective cooperation with UNHCR by reducing administrative costs and providing more timely and flexible funding. In that regard, he expressed appreciation for the vital work carried out by UNHCR, which could count on his Government's full support in the coming year.

13. Mr. JOHNSON (Observer for Liberia) said that 14 years of armed conflict in Liberia had contributed to the increase in the number of refugees worldwide. Following the restoration of peace and democracy in 2003, Liberian refugees were returning home voluntarily or with UNHCR assistance. He thanked all those that had supported Liberian citizens who had fled to neighbouring countries during the conflict, in particular UNHCR, the many West African countries which had provided protection and accommodation and the other countries that had offered resettlement opportunities.

14. The Government of Liberia had enjoyed outstanding cooperation with UNHCR in implementing the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. He was grateful to the United Nations Mission in Liberia and the NGOs that had helped to ensure good governance and the rule of law in the country. His Government had placed security, economic revitalization and infrastructure development at the core of its poverty reduction strategy and viewed the restoration of local government as crucial for the creation of an environment conducive to the return of Liberian refugees and exiles. The Government intended to enhance cooperation with United Nations agencies, particularly UNHCR, to that end.

15. The conflict in Liberia had triggered a massive influx of persons into the capital city, Monrovia, and a cross-border exodus. Through various schemes, returnees were being reunited with their families. Refugees who had been unable to resettle in their countries of origin or destinations of choice should be provided with the necessary support for local integration, such as education, health care and other facilities. The Liberian Government was pursuing a policy aimed at guaranteeing returning refugees the same if not better facilities in rural communities than those provided in refugee camps. He appealed to UNHCR and donors for support so that returnees would choose to stay in those communities, instead of compounding the situation of overcrowding in Monrovia. There was also a need to increase subsistence support for returning refugees, with special consideration for those arriving from Ghana and Nigeria.

16. Liberia was also a host country for refugees from Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire and was taking steps to facilitate their integration or voluntary repatriation. He appealed for continued and timely delivery of support for Liberia in order to prevent any new conflict or the reversion of returnees to their refugee life. His Government was determined to keep the country on a course of peace and development and was counting on support and cooperation in that connection.

17. Mr. KABWEGYERE (Uganda) expressed appreciation to the High Commissioner for his practical leadership style, as exemplified during his recent visit to Uganda when he had personally accompanied Sudanese refugees to the border with Sudan.

18. Uganda and its partners had championed a number of strategies to find durable solutions for protracted refugee situations, including the Development Assistance for Refugees and Host Communities strategy, which had proved a particularly appropriate strategy. The initiative, which had operated largely on a bilateral basis with the Government of Denmark, required more multilateral support in order to ensure its success.

19. Over the past year the voluntary repatriation of Rwandan and Sudanese refugees in Uganda could have been more successful. The sustainable return of refugees was crucial for the restoration of peace and stability in the region. However, the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo posed a continual threat. He asked the international community to do everything possible to address the situation and to support the bilateral initiatives between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the efforts of the Tripartite Plus Joint Commission in that regard.

20. The Ugandan Government fully supported UNHCR involvement with IDPs. In the past year more than 700,000 IDPs had returned home following the restoration of security in northern Uganda. With the support of development partners, the Peace Recovery and Development Plan for northern Uganda was being implemented. However, severe flooding in eastern and northern Uganda had created a fresh humanitarian crisis in areas which were recovering from the effects of the rebellion led by Joseph Kony and to which IDPs were returning. More than half a million people had been affected and the Government had declared a state of emergency, launching an appeal for aid in cooperation with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). He urged the international community to help Uganda deliver assistance to those who were now fleeing from the devastation.

21. Mr. RAPACKI (Poland) said that he shared the High Commissioner's view that the growing number of refugees and IDPs and the complex nature of displacement posed a political and administrative challenge for UNHCR. He expressed his appreciation to UNHCR staff worldwide and to the High Commissioner for his effective leadership and personal involvement in refugee problems. In order to tackle the current challenges UNHCR needed to improve its effectiveness; the shift towards a more field-oriented approach was a step in the right direction.

22. He applauded the efforts to ensure greater financial stability and flexibility, the new budget structure and the swift implementation of the Joint Inspection Unit recommendations for a biennial budget.

23. He supported the regionalization process, but stressed that it must take into account the specific situation of each region and subregion. While West European States had been dealing with refugee and asylum problems for decades and had developed suitable mechanisms, regulations and institutions for that purpose, Central European countries like Poland had much to do in the areas of capacity-building and legal assistance for refugees. UNHCR played an important role in that connection. He therefore hoped that the Office would retain its valuable presence in the new member States of the European Union. UNHCR reform would be judged by its results and his Government would spare no effort to contribute to their achievement.

24. Mr. YIMER (Ethiopia), noting that the number of persons of concern to UNHCR had increased between 2005 and the end of 2006 from 20.8 million to 32.9 million, said that while in certain parts of Africa some progress was being made in improving the situation, still, UNHCR

faced many challenges. It had to make the distinction between asylum-seekers and migrants more clear, and it had to address critical needs for health services, nutritional assistance and clean water in certain countries, including Ethiopia.

25. Voluntary repatriation was still the most desirable durable solution to refugee problems, but where it was not possible, another solution was resettlement. Countries of resettlement and UNHCR should consider adopting more flexible criteria in the light of the large-scale and protracted refugee situations in developing countries that hosted refugees. The Commission of the African Union had drafted a convention for the protection and assistance of IDPs in Africa, the main objective of which was to ensure that such protection and assistance was placed in an appropriate legal framework.

26. He expressed support for the efforts of UNHCR to become a more flexible, effective and results-oriented organization and to design a budget structure that would allow for oversight by the Executive Committee, meet donor requirements and channel more resources into operations, while a streamlined and efficient headquarters provided direction and overall support. Solutions for refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR required optimum collaboration with United Nations agencies, other international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

27. Ethiopia currently hosted nearly 85,000 refugees, mainly from the Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea. Between 1997 and 2005 some 245,000 Somali refugees had been repatriated to Somaliland. A tripartite commission had been set up and had met to discuss the repatriation of Sudanese refugees from Ethiopia, adopting a plan of action for 2007 and 2008. So far in 2007, over 18,000 Sudanese refugees had been repatriated in safety and dignity as compared with just over 4,600 in 2006. The refugee camps that had hosted Sudanese refugees had suffered from environmental degradation and required rehabilitation. UNHCR should promote additional activities to address such problems in refugee-impacted areas.

28. Since October 2007 Ethiopia had received over 4,000 Eritrean refugees, and some 6,000 refugees from Somalia. Continued donor support was vital to providing such refugees with the assistance that they required.

29. Mr. KASHEA (Namibia) said that in 2007 the Namibian Government had further strengthened its relationship with UNHCR in the joint search for durable solutions to the protracted refugee situation in the country. While the number of refugees in Namibia was small in comparison with other countries, the Government, recognizing the need for expeditious and fair hearings of asylum claims, had made efforts to reduce the backlog of asylum applications. At the same time, the country was still receiving new arrivals, mainly from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Government had undertaken a registration and verification exercise in camps and urban areas and now had a much more accurate database on asylum-seekers and refugees, including information about their education and skills. In Namibia there were over 7,000 asylum-seekers, mainly from Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

30. Namibia was grateful for the funding and technical assistance that it had received from UNHCR and the European Union, and for the food assistance provided by the World Food

Programme and the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund. The expertise provided by UNHCR in conducting satellite mapping of the Osire camp had had the additional benefit of transferring skills to Namibian personnel.

31. A survey of refugees had ascertained that many of them had skills that were in short supply in Namibia, and that there was an interest in local integration, in particular among Angolans. The Namibian Government would now have to review the legal framework to remove barriers to their integration, while ensuring that only refugees of good character were considered. He expressed support for the reform process undertaken by UNHCR.

32. Mr. KUSIMBA (Kenya) said that Kenya's Refugee Act had finally entered into force in May 2007, thus establishing a legal framework for the protection of refugees. The Government still faced a number of challenges in regard to implementation of the Act, including the establishment of an effective asylum and refugee management system and capacity-building in the areas of registration, refugee status determination and the issuance of identity documents, functions hitherto performed by UNHCR. The Danish Government had already pledged some 19.7 million Danish kroner for capacity-building activities, and Kenya appealed to other donors for their support.

33. A tripartite agreement between the Governments of the Sudan and Kenya and UNHCR had helped to put the repatriation of Sudanese refugees on course. He reaffirmed the commitment of the Kenyan Government to respect the free will of refugees when choosing when to return to their countries. Voluntary repatriation should be encouraged by ensuring that "pull factors" were in place in the Sudan, including the delivery of basic services and the restoration of peace and security. More services such as education, the provision of clean water and medical care were also needed.

34. The environmental degradation in areas of Kenya that hosted large numbers of refugees was now being addressed by UNHCR, in coordination with various stakeholders. Environmental issues remained crucial to ensuring peaceful coexistence between refugees and host populations. In addition, with the departure of some Sudanese refugees from the Kakuma camps, the Government planned to transfer some persons from the overcrowded Dadaab camps, which currently housed some 175,000 people. The transfers were all the more imperative as new asylum-seekers were arriving in Dadaab from Somalia, but first steps would have to be taken to protect the environment in the area. While the project was modest, it was hampered by a lack of resources.

35. In order to ensure that bona fide refugees were well treated, the Government of Kenya, with the financial and material support of UNHCR, had embarked on a programme to issue identification cards to refugees. Satisfactory progress had been made in Nairobi, but further support was required for other urban centres. His Government was satisfied with the reassurance given by UNHCR that its expanded responsibilities regarding IDPs would not detract from its core mandate. He urged UNHCR to show flexibility in addressing IDP problems and in drawing up related budget proposals.

36. Mr. LY (Observer for Senegal) said that Senegal had set up two national commissions to deal respectively with eligibility for refugee status and the management of refugees and displaced people. Representatives of UNHCR sat on both bodies, with a view to ensuring transparency and objectivity and better protection for asylum-seekers.

37. The Government of Senegal was pleased that the Mauritanian Government had undertaken to find a prompt and definitive solution for the situation of Mauritians who had fled to Senegal and Mali. He commended the Mauritanian Government for fostering dialogue and cooperation with all segments of Mauritanian society in order to facilitate the return of the Mauritanian refugees. A tripartite agreement was currently being drafted by the Governments of Mauritania and Senegal and UNHCR on the voluntary return of the refugees from Senegal and the UNHCR regional office in Senegal was playing a vital role in that regard. The international community should provide more financial support for UNHCR to enable it to meet the increasingly complex challenges involved in protecting and preserving the dignity of those in need of its help.

38. Mr. GUTTERES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that UNHCR was aware that refugees were sometimes taken hostage by radical and even armed groups that prevented them from engaging in the search for a solution to their predicament. He took note of the Rwandan Government's concerns about new arrivals, mainly from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He welcomed the improvements made in asylum law in Costa Rica and the fact that the Costa Rican Government had pursued policies corresponding to the three pillars of the Mexico Plan of Action.

39. He thanked the Governments of Canada, Denmark and the United Kingdom for working with UNHCR to ensure close cooperation with the donor community. The Liberian Government was also to be congratulated for its voluntary repatriation programme and the immense effort that it had made to guarantee conditions conducive to sustainable return of refugees and displaced persons. The international community should support those efforts more strongly. In Uganda, where refugees did not live in camps but in settlements and under the same living conditions as the local population, development assistance was essential to creating harmony between the two communities. The recent floods had only made it more urgent to support programmes such as the recovery and development plan for northern Uganda.

40. UNHCR was aware of the need for the regionalization policy to take account of the specificities of different regions. It would assist Central European Governments in establishing refugee protection systems commensurate with the standards in other European Union countries. UNHCR would also work with the Governments of Ethiopia and the Sudan to facilitate the return of Sudanese refugees. It was also helping the Governments of Ethiopia and Kenya to rehabilitate refugee-impacted areas and deal with new refugee arrivals, notably from Eritrea and Somalia.

41. He congratulated the Namibian Government for improving its asylum system and for its effective assistance to refugees and he expressed the readiness of UNHCR to continue working with the Governments of Senegal and Mauritania to ensure the successful return of the Mauritanian refugees.

42. Mr. GROVER (India) welcomed the fact that UNHCR was working with other relevant actors to ensure greater allocation of resources for sustainable repatriation and returns. UNHCR intervention on IDPs, however, should complement but not supplant the efforts of national authorities to address the challenges of internal displacement and must be subject to the approval of national authorities or the conditions established by the United Nations General Assembly, based on due consideration of the Office's mandate, the availability of resources and a possible exit strategy. He welcomed the decision to carry out IDP operations on a project basis and to make the project budget subject to Executive Committee oversight. He also expressed support for the collaboration between UNHCR, the Global Migration Group and the Global Forum on Migration and Development, and said that he hoped that it would lead to a consensus on promoting regular migration.

43. India, which had played host to some of the largest refugee populations in modern history, applied the principle of non-refoulement, offered refugees an outstanding level of protection, and had successfully repatriated a large number of refugees through bilateral arrangements.

44. The Government of India welcomed the reforms taking place at UNHCR and called on UNHCR to acknowledge the contribution of developing countries to furtherance of the UNHCR protection agenda.

45. Ms. de HOZ (Argentina) said that the security of operations and of humanitarian staff was an issue of great concern, and she saluted the UNHCR personnel working under difficult conditions in the field. She expressed support for the initiatives undertaken by UNHCR to increase the effectiveness of field operations and requested ongoing updates on implementation of the decentralization and regionalization policy.

46. It was essential to examine the links between refugees and migration from a perspective that differentiated clearly between the work of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR. Activities for the protection of IDPs should be funded separately and funding refugees should not detract from refugee operations, which remained a priority. The role of UNHCR in leading the clusters on IDP protection and camp coordination and management was welcome in that context.

47. Her Government hoped that the draft conclusion on children at risk would be implemented properly in the field. In that regard, she recalled that the final document issued by the Ibero-American Summit at its meeting in 2006 included safeguards guaranteeing respect for international refugee law and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Argentina had furthermore updated its refugee legislation to improve standards for protection.

48. Mr. GUTH (European Commission) welcomed the fact that, despite rising numbers of refugees and IDPs, the High Commissioner was set to balance the UNHCR budget and was making steady progress in the process of reform. The case for further use of the cluster approach was now stronger than ever. As a donor providing substantial support to the United Nations to build up cluster capacity, the European Commission would follow subsequent developments and carefully examine the results of ongoing evaluation.

49. The European Commission was entering a crucial phase in the construction of the Common European Asylum System, which should help address the divergences in asylum practices across the European Union identified by UNHCR. UNHCR involvement in the process was welcomed and encouraged. Moreover, efforts were being intensified to ensure that protection was duly taken into account in EU border-control policy and operational activities. He expressed support for the dialogue and strengthened cooperation between UNHCR and the EU external borders agency, Frontex. He also welcomed the launch of the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, which should offer a platform for addressing gaps in the international protection framework such as rescue at sea.

50. Mr. ALEINIK (Belarus) expressed satisfaction with the level of cooperation between his country and UNHCR. Two UNHCR projects had been conducted in Belarus in 2007 to strengthen the asylum system and to increase potential for local integration. Joint work had also been carried out to improve legislation on immigration and refugees, enhance the skills of officials and ensure legal and social protection to refugees.

51. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), at its conference on refugees and migrants held in 2005, had emphasized the need to find ways of furthering cooperation on migration, asylum and displacement issues. In February 2006, the Euro-Asian Programme on Forced Displacement and Migration had been established with most CIS countries and a number of EU and Asian countries agreeing to take part. Although the General Assembly, in a series of resolutions, had called for efforts to develop the Programme, progress with implementation had been rather slow. Since it offered a useful platform for international dialogue and cooperation, efforts must be intensified to strengthen the Programme.

52. Mr. BAKAYOKO (Côte d'Ivoire) said that the situation in Côte d'Ivoire was improving, with the signing of the Ouagadougou political agreement, the appointment of a new Prime Minister and the commitment made by the recently established Government to implement the road map. A peace flame had been lit in Bouaké on 30 July 2007 to symbolize the reunification of Côte d'Ivoire, a joint command centre for the two former warring forces had been set up and mobile judicial hearings continued with a view to issuing documentation to Ivoirian citizens in preparation for the elections. Transparent and open elections were due to be held in the coming months.

53. Peace and security was therefore returning gradually, but the most difficult phase, that of post-conflict reconstruction, still lay ahead. The Ivoirian Government was making plans to integrate 25,000 Liberian refugees and 20,000 Ivoirian refugees abroad, to rehabilitate areas hosting refugees, and to assist the dignified and secure return of over 2,000,000 IDPs. Additional clusters for areas including emergency shelter, health, nutrition, water and sanitation were urgently needed.

54. His Government had created the Eligibility Committee to determine refugee status, a national appeals board, and an inter-ministerial committee for IDP protection, and planned to establish a humanitarian committee to harmonize field activities. The Government had also contributed \$80,000 to UNHCR. However, it still needed international support to confront humanitarian challenges and to achieve social cohesion.

55. Mr. BESSEDIK (Algeria) said that failure to address the structural causes of migration in Africa had resulted in restrictive refoulement practices, closure of borders, curbs on the movement of persons and the proliferation of migration flows and trafficking networks. Humanitarian work had in recent years been constrained by a grave and persistent financial crisis and by the pressures on host countries, particularly in developing countries. In that regard, efforts to deal with the IDP issue must be undertaken strictly in line with the competence of each United Nations institution.

56. The situation in Western Sahara was a matter of incomplete decolonization in the context of a settlement plan providing for the exercise of the Saharan people's right to self-determination. The UNHCR census of refugees could not be divorced from the settlement plan without undermining the purpose of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), namely, that of identifying voters eligible to participate in the referendum on self-determination. He reiterated his deep concern at the unilateral and discriminatory decision taken by UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) to reduce the number of recipients of humanitarian aid to 90,000. He requested an explanation of the decision, given that the joint UNHCR-WFP surveys of the Tindouf camps had found that 39 per cent of children under the age of 5 were malnourished and over 68 per cent of refugees were anaemic.

57. Self-determination for the Saharan people was a cause that urgently required the support of the entire international community in order to remove the political obstacles to settlement of the conflict. In that connection, and in response to the recurrent and groundless allegations made by the Permanent Representative of Morocco, he said that he wished to make a number of points.

58. First, the return of Saharan refugees to Western Sahara had been misrepresented as the return of Moroccans to their native land. The refugees had even been described as being held against their will, which was an insult to UNHCR and the other international organizations and NGOs present in the area. Such comments would make the Saharan refugees particularly cautious: they wanted to return to their homeland, not to Morocco. Their misgivings were heightened by the fact that Morocco would only protect them if they agreed to renounce calls for Western Saharan independence and publicly denounced the Saharan authorities and the human rights situation in the Tindouf camps.

59. The situations of the Saharan and Afghan refugees could not be compared, since there was a fundamental difference between the internal conflict in Afghanistan and the decolonization of Western Sahara. Furthermore, the allegations that aid had been diverted had been refuted by UNHCR; Algeria was bearing most of the refugee burden. With regard to the census, it was paradoxical that the representative of Morocco claimed that the refugees were Moroccan citizens and encouraged both donors to reduce humanitarian aid for them. In that connection, in the framework of the settlement plan signed by Algeria and Frente POLISARIO, an identification commission had been set up and had registered 155,430 Saharans between 1997 and 2000. The current figure was 165,000. While the Moroccan Government claimed to be concerned about the burials of Saharans in the camps, it had built a "wall of shame" to shield the rich part of Western Sahara from the thousands of Saharans living in distress. It was not a benevolent State defending its citizens but one taking an irredentist approach which had led to a conflict between two fraternal peoples. Algeria was closely following the Manhasset process and reiterated its support for United Nations efforts to find a definitive solution to the issue that guaranteed the people of Western Sahara the right to self-determination.

60. Ms. DIDIGU (Economic Community of West African States - ECOWAS) said that the ECOWAS Commission, through the Department of Humanitarian and Social Affairs, was working with UNHCR and other international agencies to develop its capacity to respond to humanitarian issues in a timely and effective manner. The Department's mandate included development of a humanitarian relief and assistance capacity; disaster risk reduction; development of a peacebuilding and conflict resolution capacity; trafficking in persons and human security; protection; and labour and health issues. In 2008, it intended to adopt a policy on humanitarian affairs. ECOWAS had also set up the Emergency Response Team to respond to humanitarian crises and threats to human security. Several training workshops for civilian experts had been held in collaboration with UNHCR in 2006 and 2007.

61. A multilateral agreement on local integration of Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees in Nigeria had been signed by the relevant Governments, ECOWAS and UNHCR in June 2007. The historic agreement sought to formalize the right of all ECOWAS citizens to integrate into their host country. The Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees in question had ultimately opted to remain in the host country under a changed status. The Government of Nigeria was to be commended on that bold step. The Commission intended to recommend that the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government should adopt local integration as an option for addressing the problem of refugees, bearing in mind the socio-economic implications and the need for UNHCR support.

62. ECOWAS was developing a regional migration policy to respond to increasing irregular migration and to link migration with development. As part of the process, support measures and partnerships with third countries would be established. ECOWAS was encouraged by the cluster approach and again called for the involvement of regional organizations in efforts to address humanitarian problems in their regions.

63. Ms. PICTET-ALTHANN (Sovereign Military Order of Malta), reporting on the work done by Malteser International to provide Iraqi refugees in Syria with their basic requirements, said that further medical programmes for Iraqi IDPs and refugees were being planned. She expressed the hope that efforts would be made to build upon the important progress made with regard to the refugees from Myanmar living in camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, as greater freedom of movement would enable the refugees to build a better life. In the meantime, international assistance must continue, and Malteser International would pursue its primary health-care projects for 32,000 refugees in two camps.

64. Health care and education, combined with rehabilitation and capacity-building measures, were at the core of the Order of Malta's humanitarian assistance programmes. Some of its humanitarian personnel, however, had difficulty carrying out their work, owing to security concerns and human rights violations. That continued to be the case in the Sudan, where Malteser International was active both in Darfur and in southern Sudan. Some 800,000 refugees, IDPs and residents had received its aid in southern Sudan, while projects in North Darfur had provided medical assistance for up to 120,000 persons. Despite the tense security situation the Order of Malta wished to extend the programme, if the necessary funding was secured. After outlining the work of the Order of Malta in Sri Lanka and the Democratic Republic of the Congo

she said that the last project implemented by the Order of Malta in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in conjunction with UNHCR, which focused on care for returnees and on income-generating measures, had been successfully concluded, having helped those concerned to play an active role in their own recovery.

65. Mr. GUTERRES (High Commissioner) said that he agreed with the representative of India that primary responsibility for IDPs lay with national authorities and that UNHCR would be engaging in a process of cooperation with India, which would involve annual consultations. He thanked the representative of Argentina for her comments regarding the important issue of security and safety of humanitarian personnel and congratulated her on the adoption of the new legislation relating to the protection of refugees. He affirmed the importance of the multidimensional partnership between UNHCR and the European Union. The financial support of the European Commission was extremely important. UNHCR was following with interest the development of the second phase of European Union asylum legislation, and was committed to fully participating in the relevant work and debate. He expressed his appreciation for the recent European Union decision on security arrangements in eastern Chad and the north-eastern Central African Republic, which was important for the security of humanitarian personnel. The European Commission would be very welcome to participate fully in the Dialogue on Protection Challenges, which would include discussion of the issue of rescue at sea.

66. He expressed appreciation for the statement by the representative of Belarus and confirmed UNHCR commitment to the Euro-Asian Programme on Forced Displacement and Migration, in which he hoped all member States would be involved. He thanked the representative of Côte d'Ivoire, whose country had always maintained a generous attitude to refugees, offering not only assistance and protection but also guarantees of local integration. It was necessary for donors to match that generosity. To date, however, it had been very difficult to secure funding from the international community for the IDP programme. He hoped that situation would change, so that Côte d'Ivoire could bring its political process of national unity and reconciliation to a successful conclusion, and thus enable the mass return and reintegration of IDPs.

67. He thanked the representative of Algeria for his comments on the problems of refugees throughout the world and on the need for UNHCR to improve its work in that regard. Concerning the important issue of food for West Saharan refugees, UNHCR and WFP were determined to guarantee adequate supplies of food, both in terms of quality and quantity. Problems of malnutrition - including anaemia - were not caused by insufficient quantity but the absence of a number of essential micronutrients such as iron. It was therefore essential to improve the quality of the food supplied. It had been decided to increase the quantity of food supplied but a census was required to determine the needs objectively. He hoped that the Algerian Government would support UNHCR in that regard. The issue at hand was a practical one, not a political one.

68. He expressed his deep appreciation to the representative of ECOWAS, which played an important role in conflict prevention and resolution. The prevailing environment in West Africa was one of the most promising examples of regional cooperation in the world and the ECOWAS Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment provided an excellent framework for UNHCR multilateral agreements. He valued the partnership with ECOWAS, which he hoped would be developed further in the near future. He congratulated the representative of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta on the important work being carried out

in the Syrian Arab Republic and commended the high-quality work carried out by Malteser International in Thailand, the Sudan, Sri Lanka and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and much appreciated its cooperation with UNHCR in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Statements in exercise of the right of reply

69. Mr. SOCANAC (Observer for Croatia) said, in response to the comments made by the representative of Serbia, that Croatia was committed to the outcome of the Sarajevo Declaration and had in that regard proposed that a ministerial conference be held in Sarajevo. So far, Bosnia and Herzegovina had accepted the proposal. Croatia was ready to continue providing housing for refugees and to respond to every voluntary decision to return. It was also strengthening bilateral relations with all the parties involved in the Sarajevo process for the return of refugees.

70. As for the issue of the former holders of tenancy rights, the Croatian Government would continue with the housing programme for former holders of tenancy rights. It would not, however, agree to a solution involving compensation for those not wishing to return to Croatia to integrate in their country of origin. The possibility of a donor conference might provide the bridge to a lasting solution. Croatia remained open to bilateral cooperation with Serbia on that issue. He urged the parties in the Sarajevo process to hold a ministerial conference as follow-up to the Sarajevo Declaration adopted in 2005. The current political situation - or a decision by one of the countries involved in the Sarajevo process - should not prevent that conference from being held, as it could provide a holistic approach to the regional problem. Individual issues should not be pinpointed in order to block the process as a whole.

71. With regard to the question of the convalidation of working years spent in formerly occupied areas, he emphasized that the matter was the subject of a cooperation agreement between the Croatian Government and a Croatian Serb political party. The representatives of that party had expressed their satisfaction with his Government's approach. Meanwhile, experts from the Croatian Government were working on an appropriate solution for implementation of the existing rules on convalidation. As far as implementation of the Road Map of Croatia was concerned, the equivalent of 500 million Swiss Francs had been earmarked in the State budget for 2006 and 2007, and the refugee return and local integration programme continued to be implemented. Croatia was in the final stages of solving 1,400 cases of former holders of tenancy rights and was committed to solving all remaining cases by the end of 2009. The headway being made in that regard was well-documented.

72. Mr. DABETIC (Serbia) said that tens of thousands of refugees were waiting for a solution, and in the case of tenancy rights 100,000 people were affected. He had appreciated Croatia's efforts to date, but they were a long way from producing a lasting solution. He was in favour of a regional, not a bilateral approach, as set out in the Sarajevo Declaration. Results, rather than endless discussion, were what was needed.

73. Mr. LOULICHKI (Morocco) said that he was obliged to state his position, in view of the Algerian Government's refusal to allow a census of persons living in refugee camps. The census was a binding international obligation, and was needed to determine the population's needs. Donor contributions could then be adapted to real needs. It saddened the Moroccan people to see some of its compatriots living on humanitarian assistance; Muslims did not accept such

humiliation of their peers. The representative of Algeria had made a distinction between the situation of refugees in Afghanistan and those held sequestré against their will in Tindouf. The real distinction was between a country like Pakistan, which was cooperating in order to find a solution to a regional problem and another, Algeria, which was blocking a political solution to the Western Saharan dispute.

74. Regarding the allegation that international aid had been diverted, there was evidence from NGOs that quite a bit of the humanitarian aid received had been sold in neighbouring countries. There were even reports in the Algerian press of disagreements between the Algerian authorities and the Algerian Red Crescent over the issue. The notion that he had personally encouraged donors to reduce humanitarian aid was an insult to the intelligence of the members present. With regard to the comments on a census of 155,000 West Saharans, the representative of Algeria was confusing the process of identification with that of pre-registration. Pre-registration had been carried out on the basis of approximate figures only; he could provide detailed figures on the process of identification.

75. Mr. SOCANAC (Observer for Croatia) acknowledged that problems existed but said they could not be solved quickly. Croatia was open to dialogue, and called upon all the signatories to the Sarajevo Declaration, including Serbia, to hold a ministerial conference to evaluate the positive effects of the Declaration. However, it would be unacceptable if any postponement or cancellation of the conference were to be used as the basis for assessing whether or not a country had fulfilled its obligations. It was also unacceptable to make the success of the whole process dependent on two outstanding issues, which one country used to apply pressure in order to block further cooperation.

76. Mr. BESSEDIK (Algeria) said that the current impasse was a result of Morocco having reneged on its commitments. While Morocco had shown a lack of constancy, Algeria had not: it had always insisted that the issue of West Sahara should be settled in the framework of the right to self-determination. The census must be conducted within the same framework: if the population was registered under a census, it should be allowed to express its views on its own future. That had not been the case so far. While it was true that Pakistan had conducted a census of Afghan refugees, the question of self-determination did not arise in that case. In Afghanistan displacement had taken place as the result of an internal conflict, and not as a result of occupation by a foreign power, as in Western Sahara.

77. Mr. LOULICHKI (Morocco) said that Morocco had not reneged on its commitments: the United Nations had declared the settlement plan to be inapplicable and that another political solution must be found. Morocco had submitted an autonomy plan in good faith. For the international community, the settlement plan was obsolete. Morocco was convinced that the census would take place, as it was a humanitarian issue. He hoped that Algeria would cooperate and allow the census to take place. Its cooperation would help achieve peace, justice and dignity, which was also the aim of Morocco's autonomy plan and of its efforts to prepare infrastructure, for those who returned following Algeria's acceptance of the census.

78. Mr. BESSEDIK (Algeria) said that the prevailing confusion was the result of Morocco's indefensible position. If Western Sahara was really part of the Kingdom of Morocco, as claimed, he wondered why a wall containing over a million anti-personnel mines had been built to section

off the most fertile land from other areas. The United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization spoke not of a plan for autonomy but rather of the right to self-determination. There was a world of difference between the two.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS ON THE WORK OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE
(Item 5)

79. The CHAIRMAN drew attention to the draft reports of the 38th, 39th and 40th meetings of the Standing Committee (EC/58/SC/CRP.8 and Corr.1; EC/58/SC/CRP.19/Rev.1; and EC/58/SC/CRP.27). If he heard no objection, he would take it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the draft report.

80. It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 5.55 p.m.