



Forced Displacement: Responding to the Challenge of the Next Decade

Statement to the Berlin Symposium for Refugee Protection by
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply honoured to be with you today to celebrate the 10th anniversary of this important and thought-provoking forum. Today has special resonance for me as it is the first day of my new five-year mandate as UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Later this year, in December, UNHCR will turn 60. Next year will mark the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees, the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness as well as the 150th anniversary of the birth of Fridtjof Nansen, the League of Nations' first High Commissioner for Refugees, after whom UNHCR's highest award is named.

Inevitably, the approach of these anniversaries has led us to reflect deeply on the state of the world's more than 43 million forcibly displaced people - 15 million of whom are refugees. To meet their protection needs in the next decade will require a sound understanding of the changing dynamics of displacement and continual adaptation by UNHCR.

Ladies and gentlemen,

UNHCR's core mandate to protect, assist and seek solutions for the world's refugees, excepting the roughly one third falling under the mandate of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, remains unchanged.

The date, 147 States have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol, or both. These instruments require States to cooperate with UNHCR in the exercise of its functions and provide the organization with a unique authority to intercede on behalf of individuals outside their country of origin in the absence of protection from their own country.

By virtue of a series of General Assembly resolutions dating back to 1974, UNHCR is also the international organization mandated to resolve the situation of stateless individuals and people at risk of statelessness. At the end of 2009, there were 6.6 million persons around the world known to be stateless, though unofficially estimates range as high as 12 million.

UNHCR takes its obligation to ensure respect for the integrity of its mandate with the greatest seriousness.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The world is changing, and the international community is confronted with new trends and challenges in relation to the forced displacement of people.

Today's global megatrends - population growth, urbanization, food and water insecurity, natural resource scarcity and, particularly, climate change – are increasingly inter-related, exacerbating conflict and combining in other ways that oblige people to flee their homes.

A study of rainfall and temperature records in Africa between 1980 and 2002 by researchers at Berkeley, Stanford, New York and Harvard Universities found that a one degree increase in temperature could increase the risk of conflict by 50 percent.

Most of the world's uprooted are now displaced within their own countries. Africa already hosts 40 percent of the world's estimated 27 internally displaced people. Even a rise in temperatures at the low end of the predicted range of the impact of climate change would significantly accelerate the conflict leading to displacement.

The primary responsibility for responding to situations of internal displacement lies with States. With respect to Africa, this underscores a fundamental unfairness of climate change: those least responsible and least resourced to respond will be the most affected.

At the same time, many of the people now crossing international borders are doing so in response to these trends. While they might not meet the criteria for refugee status set out in the 1951 Convention, they are nevertheless in need of protection and support.

Ladies and gentlemen,

UNHCR is not alone in the challenge of responding to forms of displacement that go beyond its formal mandate. The global humanitarian community is also evolving, developing new forms of cooperation and partnership, involving not just the UN but the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and other NGOs.

UNHCR sees itself as an organization with the experience, expertise and delivery capacity to be a central instrument of the international community in supporting states to protect, assist and resolve the plight of people who have been forced to flee from their homes and who find themselves in vulnerable circumstances.

In this context, UNHCR has assumed responsibilities even when persons have not crossed international borders. UNHCR is now leading the response to conflict-induced internal displacement in the areas of protection, shelter and camp management.

If asked to do so, we stand ready also to assume leadership at field level of the protection response in cases of natural disasters. This would of course be undertaken in close consultation and cooperation with relevant government and partner agencies, particularly UNICEF and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our evolution to date demonstrates that we can take on additional responsibilities while preserving the integrity of our core mandate. We will need this adaptive ability to respond to the three main challenges confronting UNHCR today.

The first challenge I would characterize as the growing resilience of crises. Major conflicts such as those in Afghanistan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo show no signs of being resolved. Conflicts that had appeared to be resolved or were on the way to being resolved, such as in southern Sudan or in Iraq, are stagnating. This is reflected in the lack of confidence to return among the people who were displaced by these conflicts.

As a result, last year was not a good year for voluntary repatriation. In fact, it was the worst in twenty years. Approximately 250,000 refugees went home in 2009. That is about one quarter of the average number of yearly returns over the last decade.

Already a majority of the world's refugees have been living as refugees for five years or more. Inevitably, that proportion will grow – if fewer refugees are able to go home.

Who will look after these refugees? Contrary to what populist politicians might have us believe, four-fifths of the world's refugees live in the developing world, increasingly in urban areas. They are hosted by communities which --though often poor themselves-- continue to welcome and support them.

To determine the relative burden of supporting refugees, UNHCR uses a statistical measure of the number of refugees per one US dollar of Gross Domestic Product per capita. By this measure, the top 25 host countries are all developing countries, including 14 Least Developed Countries.

Pakistan is top of the list, with 745 refugees per US dollar of Gross Domestic Product per capita. Germany is the first developed country on the list, in 26th place, with 17 refugees per US dollar of Gross Domestic Product per capita.

We have to do more to find solutions for refugees.

In some situations, integration in the first country of asylum is possible. In countries which operate asylum systems, every individual grant of refugee status opens up a durable solution.

Last year, more than a quarter of a million asylum-seekers received an international protection status in Europe, North America or Oceania. Recently, through the remarkable generosity of the Government and people of Tanzania, more than 162,000 Burundians who were displaced to Tanzania in 1972 have been granted citizenship.

Achieving the conditions favourable to local integration in Tanzania would not have been possible, however, without the massive programme for voluntary repatriation to Burundi and meaningful third country resettlement programmes put in place for Burundian refugees over past years.

Resettlement is the process through which refugees are permanently relocated, usually from less developed countries, to new countries of permanent residence, most often in the developed world. Refugees are resettled when they cannot safely remain in their countries of first asylum or have no prospect of finding a lasting solution there.

Last year resettlement was a remarkable success, with more than 128,000 refugees presented by UNHCR to various countries for resettlement. This represents a doubling of resettlement submissions in five years.

Regrettably, this rate of submissions is not sustainable if the number of resettlement places made available does not keep pace. Currently, the number of resettlement places available to UNHCR worldwide is about 80,000. Without more places we will inevitably produce a long waiting list of refugees who have been identified as needing resettlement but who have nowhere to go.

Important if tentative steps have been taken towards the establishment of an EU-wide resettlement program. A robust resettlement program at the EU level would increase the places available to refugees in need of them and represent tangible evidence of international solidarity and burden-sharing.

In my view, resettlement should be a cornerstone of European asylum and international cooperation policy. In recent years, Europe has made available in the range of 6,000 resettlement places annually or about 9 percent of all places worldwide.

Last year, Germany established a resettlement quota of 2,500 places for Iraqi refugees. The 'Save me' campaign running in 55 cities, with 23 City Councils having declared their willingness to admit resettled refugees, shows that there is broad public support for an annual resettlement program.

UNHCR would warmly support a decision by the Government to turn its ad hoc admissions into an annual program, in cooperation with UNHCR. This would be a major contribution to helping refugees in need of resettlement worldwide.

At the same time, for most refugees, voluntary repatriation will remain the preferred solution. Here the challenge is to make voluntary repatriation meaningful. This is primarily a political challenge – the need being to establish sustainable peace. Security will allow people to return but economic opportunities and development are needed to enable them to remain.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The second major challenge UNHCR faces today is the shrinking of humanitarian space. Small arms and banditry are proliferating. Peacekeepers are sent to places where there is no peace to keep. Our ideas about peacekeeping may be being outpaced by events.

The human rights agenda, out of which UNHCR was born and upon which it depends, is increasingly being subordinated to the agenda of national

sovereignty. In terms of peacekeeping, two major UN missions have been asked by countries where they are located to scale down and to leave.

The space in which UNHCR and other humanitarian actors operate continues to diminish. There are more attacks on aid personnel, by both States and non-State actors. UNHCR lost three staff members in separate attacks in a single operation in one six month period last year. Humanitarian organizations are denied access to affected populations. Assistance programs are diverted or manipulated. Humanitarian agencies are expelled.

UNHCR is deeply concerned by these developments and their implications for the effectiveness of our work, for the safety of our staff and the humanitarian and non-political character of the organization.

A priority in the years to come will be advocating for the preservation and expansion of humanitarian space. Vital to these efforts will be catalyzing the support of the developing countries and emerging powers to which the world balance of power is ineluctably shifting. Without these States embracing the human rights agenda, UNHCR and other humanitarian actors will almost certainly lose the space they need to do what they have been mandated to do.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The third major challenge we face and one which is of particular relevance here in Europe is the erosion of asylum space. There are some positive developments, such as the establishment of the European Asylum Support Office in Malta, which we understand may come into being as early as December this year.

But overall, the trends are worrying. It has become ever more difficult for people seeking protection to have access to the territory of countries where they can seek this protection. In addition, there has been a perceptible rise in racist and xenophobic acts.

As worrisome as the acts themselves is the apparently growing tolerance for this type of behavior, though it is important to acknowledge the efforts of some governments to denounce and combat it.

Strong counter-forces are needed to stanch the increase in xenophobic sentiment, particularly at the intersection of the so-called Muslim and western worlds.

A modest but important initiative by UNHCR in this regard is our effort to generate a better understanding of the compatibility of concepts of protection in international refugee law and Islamic tradition.

Together with the Organization of the Islamic Conference and Prince Naif University in Saudi Arabia, UNHCR commissioned a book on the subject by Cairo University scholar, Professor Ahmed Abu Al-Wafa.

The book shows that refugee law is not an imposition of the West. Similar principles of protection and hospitality have been present in the Arab and Islamic worlds since ancient times.

In Eastern Europe, UNHCR has supported efforts to bring together civil society groups to report and denounce hate crimes.

Here in Germany, I am heartened by the relatively more positive and measured public discourse on these issues than in other countries. Having overcome the enormous challenges posed by German unification, perhaps citizens of Germany are less daunted by the different though undoubtedly still significant challenges posed by integration of foreigners.

In my view, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious societies are not just good but inevitable. We need politicians everywhere to recognize and extol this – to unapologetically endorse the value of tolerance. We need to rally for people, not against them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Too often, currently, a control orientation guides the approach to refugees. UNHCR does not dispute the right and indeed the obligation of countries to control their borders but this must be done in full respect of international human rights obligations. We want to ensure that border controls are not implemented in ways that block access to protection for persons who need it.

It is important to keep things in perspective. The total number of new asylum claims in all European countries in 2009 was 286,700 – virtually the same number as in 2008. By way of comparison, South Africa alone received more than 222,000 claims last year.

While there are some worrying trends, such as the increase in claims by unaccompanied and separated children, the main issue is not the overall number of claims but their skewed distribution.

Given that the number of claims in Europe as a whole stayed roughly the same, the claims that were not being made in some countries were being made in others.

France saw its number of claims rise sharply, for the second year in a row. The number of claims in some of the Nordic countries also rose. Germany's number increased slightly to 27,600 – fifth overall in industrialized countries, but just 14% of the number of claims lodged in 1990, the year of German unification.

Understandably, people seek protection where they believe they can find it. Unless and until there is a harmonized approach to refugee status determination in Europe, with asylum-seekers enjoying an equal chance to obtain protection whether they apply for it in Greece or in Sweden, we are likely to see a continuation of the uneven distribution of claims evident today.

The reality is that today, recognition rates in some countries are effectively nil, whereas for the same group of asylum seekers they may be as high as 80% in other countries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the legislative level, progress is needed on the European Commission's proposals for strengthening asylum in Europe. The suggested amendments to the existing asylum instruments – in particular to the Dublin II Regulation and the Directives on Reception Conditions, Qualification for protection and Asylum Procedures would help to ensure a consistent and high quality European asylum system.

I believe there are three essential aspects of a common European asylum system. It must be accessible to those seeking protection. It must ensure high quality and consistent decision-making – perhaps, one day, even an EU refugee status. And it must promote solidarity, within countries of the EU, between countries of the EU, and between the EU and the wider world.

Germany's agreement to admit 100 international protection beneficiaries from Malta is an important gesture in this regard. Its leadership on a protection-oriented approach to further harmonization of asylum procedures in the European Union is vital to the success of such an effort.

With respect to Greece, which bears a disproportionate burden of claims by virtue of its geographic location, I am heartened by the expressed desire of the Government to reform its asylum process in line with international and European standards. In light of the competing challenges for the Government's attention and resources, this will take time. In the meantime, UNHCR continues to recommend that transfers of asylum seekers to Greece under the Dublin Regulation be suspended.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In response to the challenges I have set out, two priorities will guide the work of UNHCR.

First, strengthening our capacity to meet the needs of the people we care for. Particular attention is required to address gaps that currently exist in the response to refugees in mixed migratory flows and protected situations, and to IDPs living outside camps, especially in urban areas.

Second, we will continue to enhance our emergency response capability in a livelihoods-focused and environmentally-sensitive way, taking due account of the needs of host families, communities and States.

I appreciate that UNHCR is trying to scale up to the anticipated increase in humanitarian needs at precisely the moment when the second wave of the global economic downturn is washing over countries everywhere but particularly in Europe.

Through an ambitious program of reform, UNHCR has increased the scope of its activities in the last four years by 50 percent with the same level of staffing worldwide and 30 percent fewer in Geneva. We have decreased staff and headquarters costs as a proportion of total expenditure and increased the percentage of funds spent through implementing partners. We have sought to make ourselves as efficient as possible in order to maximize the resources available for the people we care for.

Donors to date have responded appreciatively. We are committed to continuing to justify their confidence. Understanding that significant cuts are anticipated in the federal budget, it is my sincere hope that the German government will be able to maintain its contribution to UNHCR at last year's level.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to return to the anniversaries we will commemorate in 2011. The commemoration activities we are planning are not an end in themselves. They are a means by which to broaden and renew support for the principles of international refugee and human rights law upon which the people we care for depend.

The commemorations will culminate in a Ministerial meeting in December 2011 at which we hope States will pledge concrete actions to resolve specific refugee problems. For our ultimate goal is to put an end to forced displacement. To put an end to statelessness. To find a dignified, durable solution for every refugee.

I encourage the German government and civil society to play a leading role in this effort.

Thank you very much for your interest, your commitment and your attention.