

Repatriation of Refugees in Africa

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Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to speak to you today on a subject that is central to the work of my organization. I hope that at the end of this discussion you will have better insights into the activities that UNHCR and its partners undertake to assist refugees to return home, their contributions to peace processes as well as the challenges that the UN as a whole is facing today in building sustainable peace.

UNHCR's Mandate and the Pursuit of Durable Solutions

As you may know, my organization, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, commonly referred to as UNHCR, is mandated to provide international protection for refugees and cooperate with governments in seeking lasting solutions for their plight. Most fundamentally, protection means ensuring that refugees can reach safety, are not returned to danger and can enjoy basic human rights while in the country of asylum.

No one should be a refugee forever. UNHCR begins the search for solutions from the moment the refugee is granted asylum. Logically, we can help refugees achieve solutions in three ways. They can freely decide to go home. They can settle permanently in the country of asylum, or they can start new lives in a third country. UNHCR refers to these three options as voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement. UNHCR can only identify and realise solutions with the participation of the refugees

and the support of governments. Finding the most appropriate solution for a refugee is a challenging task.

UNHCR views resettlement to third countries as an important protection tool for refugees. UNHCR establishes criteria and decides whether refugees need resettlement as a solution on an individual or group basis. Governments ultimately decide how many refugees and which individuals to accept for resettlement. Very few refugees are able to resettle to other countries – usually between 1 and 2 percent of the global refugee population. The traditional immigration countries – Australia, Canada and the United States – currently have the largest refugee resettlement programmes, although several European countries also have important programmes. During the first half of 2007, UNHCR referred some 11,000 refugees in Africa for resettlement, including Burundians from Tanzania, Somalis from Kenya and Congolese from various countries.

Local integration becomes possible when the country of asylum offers refugees the possibility to remain permanently through the granting of permanent residence or naturalization. In the past, governments have been reluctant to offer local integration, hoping that refugee situations would be temporary. We are now witnessing a change in Africa, where UNHCR is discussing local integration for longstanding refugee populations with governments in several countries, most notably in West Africa and more recently in Southern Africa.

For the vast majority of refugees, going home to the country of origin will be the only viable durable solution. For UNHCR, repatriation must be voluntary and take place in conditions of safety and dignity. The voluntary repatriation process and, in particular, sustainable reintegration require UNHCR to work in concert with an array of actors, with a view to ensuring that the necessary conditions – political, security, humanitarian and development – are in place. UNHCR's efforts in this area start well before a conflict has ended. These efforts include peace education and skills development projects in refugee camps, which enable refugees to contribute toward the consolidation of peace upon their return home.

At the same time, UNHCR does not see peace building as time bound to the post-war phase. As an organization, we are in a unique position to contribute towards peace building efforts during times of conflict by empowering refugees to be peace brokers. More specifically they can become peace advocates in countries of asylum, reinforce the negotiation processes, and serve as mediators and reconciliation activists in their home communities. Additionally, skills obtained during their time in exile contribute to the economic recovery of their country.

Refugees and Building Sustainable Peace

Voluntary repatriation operations frequently follow the signing of a peace agreement. Successful peace negotiations can open up new possibilities for refugees to return home and restart their lives. In fact, their return often serves as a barometer of the success of a peace settlement. Failure to address the causes and consequences of displacement can undermine peacebuilding efforts. UNHCR strongly believes that refugees and other conflict-affected persons are important stakeholders in efforts to bring peace. Together with peace negotiators and mediators, UNHCR is working actively to promote the engagement of refugees and displaced persons in peace processes. This can be through direct participation in peace talks or through efforts to ensure that their interests are understood and reflected in the agreements reached.

Implementation of peace agreements often involves the deployment of peacekeeping forces to countries affected by conflict. These missions are mandated to establish and maintain a secure environment, which also helps to create conditions conducive to the return of refugees and other displaced populations. This includes as well the strengthening of democratic processes to enhance good governance, and the reinforcement of rule of law institutions to ensure greater respect for human rights. When organising voluntary repatriation, UNHCR assesses such factors as progress in disarming and demobilising former combatants, the presence of landmines and the restoration of civil authority.

While physical security is critical, so is access to basic assistance and services. Before going home, refugees and displaced persons will want to know the answer to some very fundamental questions: Will the food assistance I receive keep my family alive until the first harvest? If I get sick, will I be able to find a doctor or medicine? Will my children be able to attend school? Returning refugees must also have some means of livelihood.

When the minimum conditions for survival are met, UNHCR begins to facilitate return. Here, I must emphasise the minimum conditions. The stark reality is that many refugee and displaced children are not able to continue their schooling immediately upon return. The available health services available will be very basic. Some returnees may have to walk several kilometres to the nearest clinic or dispensary.

Refugee and displaced women, who constitute a significant part of returning populations and head many households, have particular concerns that relate to risks of sexual and gender based violence so prevalent in post-conflict situations and difficulties in accessing services or reclaiming property.

The government's capacity to maintain law and order may also be limited in the areas of return. The local police may be poorly trained and badly equipped. Justice institutions may recover slowly, leading to delays in adjudicating criminal cases or the release of the accused. The situation is especially precarious where many ex-combatants are present and, having no means of earning a living, resort to crime.

Reintegration Activities and Challenges

As I speak, UNHCR is managing voluntary repatriation operations from ten different countries in Sub-Saharan Africa for refugees from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Togo, Somalia – although only to Somaliland in the north – and the Southern Sudan. This picture is constantly evolving. Earlier this year, UNHCR formally concluded voluntary repatriation operations in Angola and Liberia.

We are poised to begin shortly the repatriation of Mauritians refugees who have been living in Mali and Senegal for nearly two decades.

Bringing refugees home is often operationally and logistically complex. The provision of transport is usually a major component of UNHCR's assistance. Return can take place by truck or bus, aircraft or ship. For example, refugees from Southern Sudan are returning both overland and by air. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, people are travelling over land and a lake. There are often many return processes occurring simultaneous from many countries of asylum.

The real challenge, however, begins when they reach home and begin to re-establish their lives. In Africa, UNHCR's support for the reintegration process typically begins with a "returnee package" that includes such basic relief items as plastic sheeting, blankets, tools and cooking sets. UNHCR's continuing assistance in return areas typically takes the form of community- based reintegration projects. The aim is to rehabilitate essential infrastructure and revive critical services, such as health care, education, clean water, sanitation and the other essential requirements of a viable community. Returning refugees, internally displaced persons and civilians who did not leave the area all benefit. UNHCR often will also support income generation and livelihood projects to restart economic activity.

Implicit in this approach is UNHCR's philosophy that peace building is not only about capacitating the government and its institutions, but is also about protecting and empowering people in a manner that promotes and facilitates reconciliation among community members. This is a complex process. For return, reintegration and reconciliation – to succeed, people need to feel safe, have faith in their justice system, gain confidence in the police and security forces, consider the government to be legitimate and be able meet their basic needs.

Voluntary repatriation and reintegration are perhaps the most satisfying aspect of working with UNHCR. Seeing families reunited again after years of separation is remarkable, and an air of excitement is often tangible in the return areas. It is immensely rewarding to witness the impact of our

work – helping people to rebuild their communities, witnessing homes being constructed in former war zones, seeing crops growing in fields that were barren and visiting lively markets mushrooming.

Too often, however, the promise of peace is shattered. As I noted a moment ago, we formally concluded repatriation exercises in Angola and Liberia. But this is not the first time that we have established return operations to these countries. In the late 1990s, I was the UNHCR Representative in Angola. We were working toward voluntary repatriation when fighting resumed and the country relapsed into conflict, bringing a halt to our efforts. Liberia, my own home country, has also struggled to resolve a conflict that began nearly three decades ago. Both Angola and Liberia now appear to be on track toward peace, and I am personally optimistic that peace will be sustained. Nevertheless, the peace processes in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Southern Sudan all remain fragile. We should take this as a challenge to intensify our peace building efforts, so that the dividends of peace are tangible and match the high expectations of the people of these countries.

Peace consolidation efforts must ensure that the needs of returning refugees and IDPs are systematically included in transition, peacebuilding or development strategies. This is especially important as the reintegration of displaced persons is increasingly becoming a key indicator of progress in the peacebuilding process. Peacebuilding strategies should, as much as possible, be people centered, focusing not only on capacitating the government and its institutions but also enabling people to rebuild their lives through programmes that reach districts and local communities. Peace education, co-existence and reconciliation activities should form an integral part of peacebuilding strategies, especially since disputes around land and property issues and youth unemployment are common problems in post conflict situations.

Building durable peace is fundamental for the lasting reintegration of refugees and other war-affected populations. The international community has recognised this reality and is investing both energy and resources toward efforts to make peace sustainable. The creation of the Peace Building Commission –

of which Japan has most recently assumed chairmanship – is perhaps the most important example of this trend. The Commission was created out of the recognition that around half of the countries that emerge from conflict relapse into violence within a few years. UNHCR is very encouraged by the priority areas of focus which the Commission has defined. And we are particularly appreciative of the tangible support and attention that Japan and other key nations are giving to this important endeavour. In particular, Japan's promotion of the concept of human security, expressed through targeted assistance to community development is making a difference in Liberia and South Sudan.

Before concluding, I would like to emphasise that partnership is indispensable in protecting refugees and realizing durable solutions. UNHCR's key partners cover the entire spectrum: governments in countries of asylum and origin, donors, the UN agencies and the NGOs, each of which has a critical role to play. Governments in countries of asylum are indispensable in promoting the protection of refugees in their countries and in identifying solutions. Donors provide not only the resources needed to facilitate return and reintegration but also political advice and support. UN peacekeeping missions – both their civilian and military components – are critical in creating conditions conducive for return, including restoring the rule of law, rebuilding judicial systems and creating democratic processes. Within the UN family, UNHCR is working with other agencies to build more synergies to ensure a seamless transition from humanitarian to longer term development. Last but not least, I would state clearly that UNHCR cannot fulfil its responsibilities to refugees without our NGO partners. In many ways, NGOs are both the arms and the eyes of UNHCR.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not say that Japan has been among UNHCR's greatest friends and most steadfast supporters over the years. The Japanese government – through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and under the distinguished leadership of our former High Commissioner, Mrs. Sadako Ogata – has worked closely with UNHCR to develop strategies for addressing reintegration needs in areas of return. On behalf of the current High Commissioner, Mr. Antonio

Guterres, and UNHCR, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Government and People of Japan.

I close with a Kenyan rally call *Harambee!* Let's pull together.