

REFUGEES

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2003:
Year In Review

AFGHANISTAN

The Most
Important
Operation



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Going home... the good news



PHOTO BY ZALMAI

IN THE MID-1990s, UNHCR cared for some 27 million people, more than at any other period in its 53-year history. Since then, the numbers have slowly declined.

In 2001, two million refugees and other persons 'of concern' were taken off the agency's rolls. The following year, 2002, the latest for which comprehensive statistics are available, the overall figure of people in need of help remained relatively stable at around 20.6 million. But that obscured an important and encouraging trend—far more people were continuing to go home than there were new refugees fleeing.

In that period, the number of civilians who had returned to their towns and villages but UNHCR was now helping to restart their lives, rose from less than 500,000 to nearly 2.5 million. In contrast, the number of people receiving assistance in emergency type situations dropped from 18.3 million to some 16 million.

The year 2003 was a period of consolidation in this trend. Major movements in areas such as Afghanistan, Angola and Sri Lanka continued, but at a reduced rate. This will likely be repeated during the forthcoming 12 months, and with hard work and a little luck during various peace initiatives currently underway, several new repatriations may begin back to places such as Sudan.

The distressing news is that humanitarian work is under threat as never before. The

August 19 bombing of U.N. headquarters in Baghdad in which 22 persons were killed and scores wounded underlined that what has been described as the 'moral shield' which protected aid workers, has been seriously compromised and that field staff, both international and local, are now seen as potential targets for religious zealots, irregular armies and militias around the world.

In November, that threat came dreadfully true when UNHCR's Bettina Goislard, a 29-year-old French national working in Ghazni city south of the Afghan capital of Kabul, was coldbloodedly murdered by two gunmen on a motorcycle.

Physical danger in refugee situations will never be totally eliminated, but the major challenge for agencies such as UNHCR in the coming months will be to devise operational strategies to guarantee reasonable safety for their staff while allowing them to effectively help millions of people in need.

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers describes the continuing return of civilians to Afghanistan amidst economic ruin and a worsening security situation as a "remarkable achievement." A young Afghan photographer, Zalmai, highlights a difficult repatriation in an outstanding photo essay in this edition. A worldwide photo exhibition and a photo album highlighting Zalmai's very personal look at his devastated but hauntingly beautiful homeland will be launched in 2004.



Death and destruction at U.N. headquarters in Baghdad.

2003

“It feels like a nightmare from which we are hoping to wake. If only it were.”

There were solid achievements in 2003, but the bomb in Baghdad overshadowed everything

IT WAS THE MOTHER OF ALL CRISES. As war clouds gathered across the Middle East at the beginning of the year, humanitarian agencies mobilized their own legions in anticipation of an impending catastrophe which threatened to swamp the entire region.

In the wake of the first Gulf War in 1991, an estimated two million people had fled their homes. Determined this time not to be overwhelmed by another human tidal wave as they had been in that earlier conflict and then in Africa's Great Lakes in the mid-1990s and in Kosovo at the end of the decade, aid agencies positioned battalions of workers, tents and emergency supplies across the Middle East... and waited.

In the event, of course, it was a refugee crisis that never happened. As American and coalition armored columns rolled up Saddam Hussein's army within a matter of weeks, the bulk of Iraq's population sat tight in their towns and villages and only a few thousand sought safety outside the country's borders.

With the shooting war seemingly over and crisis avoided, attention turned... briefly... to positive projects to help hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who had been internally exiled from their homes by the old regime and to coax back some of the millions of civilians who had fled the country entirely and settled abroad.

Perhaps a turning point in one of the world's oldest humanitarian crises had at last been reached and millions of

displaced civilians would soon be streaming back to their long abandoned homes.

That reverie was almost immediately shattered. On the bright, clear morning of August 19, an orange flatbed truck inched down an access road and parked adjacent to the United Nations headquarters building in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. Moments later, more than 2,000 pounds of high explosive packed into the vehicle erupted in billowing flames and thick smoke dealing death and destruction. Huge sections of the main building at the Canal Hotel HQ were demolished. Twenty-two people including Sergio Vieira de Mello, the head of the U.N. mission in Iraq, were killed and 150 people wounded.

“It feels like a nightmare from which we are hoping to wake,” said U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan. “If only it were.”

ALL CHANGE

In the few dark, shocking moments it took to trigger the bomb, the immediate needs of not only millions of needy Iraqi civilians, but also the global role of the United Nations and the shape of future humanitarian operations everywhere were called into question as rarely before.

The carnage and resultant uncertainty in Baghdad cast a dark cloud over other humanitarian developments, both good and bad, in 2003.

On the positive side, hundreds of thousands of civilians continued to go back to their towns and villages in Afghanistan during the year, though the rate of return dropped significantly compared with the previous twelve months. Floods of other people across the globe—in Sri Lanka, Eritrea, Angola and other regions—also began trying to stitch their lives together again, often after years or decades of exile.

A transitional government was installed in the Democratic Republic of Congo following what was described as “the deadliest documented conflict in African history” in which an estimated 3.3 million perished. Talks inched



UNHCR/AM. NADAR FARHAD/DP/AFG • 2003

UNHCR's Bettina Goislard: killed in the line of duty.

SARAH ARAB/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



AP/SUZANNE PLUNKETT

Women helping to rebuild Afghanistan.

forward to end the civil war in Sudan in which another two million people have been killed and four million homeless people continue to roam the northern desert wastes and southern savannah grasslands of Africa's largest country. Liberia's despotic ruler Charles Taylor was forced to step down and a tenuous peace was re-established in neighboring Côte d'Ivoire which had been ripped apart by internal conflict.

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers reported that after several lean years, funding for UNHCR's operations improved and several initiatives to strengthen the global refugee protection regime had been welcomed by the broader international community (*interview page 8*). The U.N. General Assembly extended Lubbers term as High Commissioner for two more years through the end of 2005.

The agency conducted the first ever global survey on the plight of an estimated nine million stateless persons—people who do not have a country they can officially call home—and the information will be used to help states tackle a little understood and little publicized problem.

This generally upbeat scenario, particularly the ongoing returns home, was reflected in the latest global statistics. While the overall number of people the UN refugee agency was caring for at the start of the year remained relatively stable at 20.6 million—the emphasis between specific groups changed significantly.

The number of newly created refugees and other groups receiving emergency or life sustaining support dropped from around 18.3 million in 2001 to 16 million at the start of 2003, while at the other and more positive end of the operational scale, the number of people being helped to return home and restart their lives jumped from less than 500,000 to nearly 2.5 million in the same period.

PROBLEMS AHEAD

To be sure, there were also major problems. The number of people forced to flee their homes in Colombia dropped significantly last year compared with 2002, but as many as three million people have been uprooted in less than two decades. Many people flooded into Bogotá, the capital, their numbers increasing by 140 percent in 2002. The ongoing multi-sided civil conflict remained the worst humanitarian disaster in the Western Hemisphere.

Hundreds of thousands of longtime Burundi and Somali refugees were caught in long-term limbo because of the fragile military and political situations in their respective areas. There was little progress in resolving the futures of more than 534,000 uprooted peoples living in Serbia and Montenegro in southern Europe, or the 112,000 refugees from Bhutan squatting for more than a decade in camps in neighboring Nepal. The situation in Chechnya was similarly intractable.

An estimated 25 million people, nearly six million of them assisted by UNHCR, remained uprooted within their own countries as so-called internally displaced persons.

On an almost daily basis, dozens of people trying to reach a safer environment continued to lose their lives in drowning incidents on the high seas between Africa and Europe, the Horn of Africa and Yemen and other places.

UNHCR's protection officers expressed concerns that in the new era of a global war on terrorism with governments fixated on their own domestic security concerns, there was little focus on the security needs of refugees, who are among the world's most vulnerable people, or the aid officials trying to help them. Instead, there were increased detentions of would-be asylum seekers, more official interceptions of people on the move and the in-



UNHCR/S. HOPPER/DP/DIC-2003

Geneva Refugee Convention as a treaty whose “values are timeless.” More recently he declared that “The Geneva Convention is completely out of date.” Between those two pronouncements, Britain was among more than 100 nations which had unanimously endorsed the treaty and their “commitment to implement our obligations under the 1951 Convention fully and effectively.”

It was in this climate of major achievement, ongoing problems and most worrying of all, the future shape of humanitarian operations after Baghdad, that Lubbers declared 2003 “A good year in a bad world.”

NIGHTMARES

The Baghdad massacre was the darkest moment in U.N. history. Three years earlier, UNHCR had faced its own worst nightmare. On 6 September 2000, a carefully orchestrated mob of militia gunmen stormed the agency’s office in the West Timor town of Atambua, slashed to death three staff members and then burned their bodies. Days later, a half a world away in the African state of Guinea, field officer Mensah Kpogon was killed by armed rebels.

“Words fail us at times like this,” then High Commissioner Sadako Ogata said. “Why are innocent, unarmed humanitarians being struck down in the most brutal way? How do we balance the risks involved in caring for hundreds of thousands of refugees who desperately need our help? And what more should we and the international community be doing to protect all of those good people in bad places?”

At the time, political inquests were held, security and operational reforms promised. After Baghdad, three years later, the same questions and the same public agonizing remained.

Mark Malloch Brown, the head of the U.N. Development Program, underlined both the United Nations and the humanitarian dilemma and the damage done by Baghdad. “Even before this, there was concern,” he said at the time. “But there was also a desire to operate in as normal way as possible, not live within a perimeter of guns and barbed wire. The U.N. is a people organization. If we lose that thread, if that gets cut, it’s more than an umbilical cord. It’s the core of the trust and legitimacy and moral authority of the blue flag.”

But if Baghdad was a wake-up call, it was a belated one. There had been ample warnings before that what has been described as the ‘moral shield’ enjoyed by aid workers was being systematically ripped apart.

Following the Atambua murders, then Assistant High Commissioner Soren Jessen Petersen had underlined the precarious nature of aid work in a new environment. “The risks taken by unarmed aid workers go

(Continued on page 10)

roduction of tighter immigration and security measures by many countries.

In this harsh environment, programs to resettle the world’s most vulnerable refugees in new countries, a major plank in UNHCR’s program to find permanent solutions for them, were severely hit, numbers tumbling by more than 50 percent overall.

European states grappled with harmonizing their asylum procedures, but it was an agonizing, tortuous and sometimes contradictory process to try to win the hearts and minds not only of skeptical politicians but of skittish electorates.

Demonstrating these twists and turns, several years ago British Prime Minister Tony Blair had hailed the 1951

Returning to
Angola.

IN THE FEW DARK, SHOCKING MOMENTS IT TOOK TO TRIGGER THE BOMB, THE IMMEDIATE NEEDS OF NOT ONLY MILLIONS OF NEEDY IRAQI CIVILIANS, BUT ALSO THE GLOBAL ROLE OF THE U.N. AND THE SHAPE OF FUTURE HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS EVERYWHERE WERE CALLED INTO QUESTION.

2003 “A good year

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers reviews 2003: the ongoing repatriation in Afghanistan, breakthroughs in Angola and Liberia, but also the ramifications of the bombing of U.N. headquarters in Baghdad

REFUGEES: How would you characterize 2003 overall?

LUBBERS: It was a positive year, tainted by the Baghdad tragedy. We continued both repatriation and reintegration operations in Afghanistan despite the problems which persist there. In Africa, a major repatriation operation began in Angola, a similar program continued in Eritrea, there were continuing discussions to solve the Congo crisis and in Liberia we saw the departure of (President) Charles Taylor and renewed hope for that country.

You also began a series of political initiatives to broaden and strengthen the agency's activities.

Yes, there was support among member states which approve UNHCR's activities (*The 64-member Executive Committee*) for our Convention Plus policy (*an initiative to help strengthen the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention by improving protection, so-called 'burden sharing' between donors, countries of asylum and poorer states which host the bulk of the world's displaced persons, and a more vigorous search for permanent solutions for the world's uprooted people*). A draft resolution was presented for approval to the General Assembly on the UNHCR 2004 process (*a review of its capacity to carry out its mandate with recommendations for the agency's next 5-year mandate period*).

Any other good news?

Yes, we were better funded (*after several years of difficult budgetary constraints*).

But all of these positive accomplishments were overshadowed by the Baghdad bombing?

There was the personal tragedy of losing so many colleagues. But there were also the broader security ramifications going forward and how to deal with all these new dilemmas and pressures—the increasing anti-Americanism in the region, the anti-U.N. feeling, the overall security concerns for an agency like UNHCR which does the bulk of its work in the field. All in all, however, it was a good year in a bad world.

So how can UNHCR forge a distinct and separate identity which will allow it to continue its field work in such a dangerous environment?

We must of course work closely with the overall U.N. security apparatus, but we also need to forge a distinct identity of our own. I cannot see where all the U.N. is in the same kettle and that kettle is seen as an American kettle. We need our own eyes and ears on the ground and do our own homework. We must show our face and be 'out there' for everyone. In Afghanistan, for example, we talk to those with power on the ground as well as the government and other actors. We are not part of this overall government and international machinery. We have a different role. We are an operational field agency, but we must have the field intelligence to be able to judge not only when to go into operational zones, but also when not to go.

Following the Baghdad bombing you said UNHCR could not work 'out of a fortress.' All U.N. international staff were subsequently withdrawn. What now?

Heads of agencies were recently asked what should be our priorities. I told the Secretary-General we must diminish the divide between Islam and the rest of the world. We have to be aware there is a schism in the Middle East, and this legitimizes violence in the eyes of many other people against the humanitarian community in other parts of the globe. That's why I say we live in a bad world.

Are we looking at an indefinite stalemate in Iraq vis-à-vis humanitarian operations?

Our hands are tied currently, but we must exploit all possibilities. We must continue to train our local staff and take every opportunity to liaise with Iraqi authorities. We can maintain our contacts with local operations from Kuwait in the south and maybe we can do the same thing via Turkey in the Kurdish north.

Until the 1990s, the majority of UNHCR operations were conducted on the periphery of conflicts rather than at their center as is often the case today. If the security situation continues to deteriorate, can you foresee a situation where operations are again confined to so-called safe countries?

I do not see a situation where we can allow ourselves to be on the periphery. We do have to be prudent and minimize the

in a bad world”

risks. In Liberia, for instance, international staff were briefly withdrawn for safety reasons. But they are now back hard at work and this type of operation is a key mission for UNHCR.

There is a great deal of uncertainty about the future direction of Afghanistan. The number of people returning home this year, for instance, is lower than UNHCR's predictions.

The number of returnees is below our target, but is still substantial. I'm not disappointed. And we will change our approach next year to a more regional solution. Afghans will still go back home, but also Afghans may be allowed to stay permanently in Pakistan and Iran. I do not think these two countries will push out all Afghans as long as there is a continuing effort on our part to repatriate everyone who wishes to go home. *(There are still an estimated 2.4 million Afghans in the two countries).* Remember, Pakistan's Pashtun population are originally from Afghanistan and they are productive members of society there.

You recently suggested a new approach to help the estimated 112,000 refugees from Bhutan living in Nepal. But some international agencies accused you of assisting Bhutan, which does not want the majority of these people back, in so-called ethnic cleansing.

We do not help these people by just continuing year after year to assist them in a refugee camp, no matter how exemplary the operation may be. So step by step we will diminish our assistance to these camps. Therefore, we also aim to maximize returns under a bilateral process between Nepal and Bhutan, though we are not a direct party to this process. We need to find permanent solutions for these people, and we need to keep our eye on that ball.

European countries are continuing to try to harmonize their asylum policies. Are you concerned that the overall end result

may be a lowering of safeguards?

There is some anti-foreigner sentiment in Europe and a downward trend, but let us also acknowledge the positives. The number of asylum claimants is going down and that's good. It reflects that other permanent solutions are being found for people. We are trying to improve the overall climate by agreeing that manifestly unfounded asylum claims cannot be accepted and we can be instrumental in finding solutions. There is more understanding that development assistance can be effective in regions of origin, helping host communities and refugees and therefore reducing the asylum pressure in Europe. And one country after another is starting to embrace the idea of accepting increasing numbers of people for their labor markets. So let's add refugee resettlement places to their immigration quotas.

But globally, the number of resettlement places for refugees is down sharply.

Yes. There is a long way to go. The Ambassador of Chile was here recently and he proudly described the resettlement of Afghans in his country. I asked how many. Five. This is encouraging, although just a drop in the ocean.

The United States takes by far the largest number of resettlement cases, but since the terrorist attacks there, the number of actual acceptances is far below the official targets set.

The United States is concentrating on security considerations for now. But there are a lot of opinions in Washington and I can only applaud the Americans for continuing to hold to their stated ambitions of accepting around 70,000 persons annually. *(Last year, the U.S. accepted 26,300).* Let's hope they live up to their own promises.

Resettlement is a major plank in your efforts to find permanent solutions for the world's refugees. Last year some 41,000 were resettled. What is a realistic global goal in the future?



Renewed hope in Angola as people return home after decades of war.

In five years time, I would like to see 150,000 per year.

Last year you said UNHCR expected to stay in Bosnia-Herzegovina for perhaps another year and in Serbia for a little longer. What is the situation in the Balkans today?

Things are going well in Bosnia and in Croatia. But ethnic Serbs are still not returning to Kosovo. We now know that quite a few ethnic Serbs currently living in Serbia cannot return. We need to promote their integration in Serbia. But I'm disappointed with the attention of European countries to this issue. It's too limited. It's not fair.

What is the overall situation for refugee operations in Africa?

Less bad than a year ago, but not particularly good. Our recent appeal for new funding was not well received. Angola, for instance, is under-funded. Donors say Angola is oil-rich and can fund itself. But Iraq is also rich in oil and they don't say the same thing there. There remains a double standard.

What will be the agency's major challenge in the next 12 months?

To continue to try to solve longtime crises such as those in Afghanistan, Africa and Nepal and help the estimated 20 million people of concern to us to restart their lives. ■



AP/SCHALK VAN ZUYDAM

2003: YEAR IN REVIEW

Patching Liberia together again.

Sudanese civilians fled to Chad in Africa's largest exodus of 2003.

way beyond what any military would tolerate," he said at the time.

In a little over a decade, at least 240 U.N. civilian workers were killed in addition to an unknown number of aid workers from non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Six nurses from the International Committee of the Red Cross were bludgeoned to death in Chechnya in 1996. In late July of 2003, 11 local aid workers were taken hostage and then murdered in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Afghanistan, four local employees of a Danish aid organization working on water projects were deliberately targeted and executed by gunmen who told them before they were tied up and shot that they had been warned not to work for foreign agencies.

Sixty-year-old Annalena Tonelli had devoted 33 years of her life to helping thousands of hapless victims in the failed state of Somalia. In June she was awarded the 2003 Nansen Refugee Award by UNHCR for her work. In October she was murdered by a lone gunman in the grounds of her hospital where she had helped so many.

Also in October, a wave of suicide bombings hit Baghdad. One major target was the lightly guarded headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross. An ambulance packed with explosives gate-crashed the compound, blowing a six-foot deep crater into the compacted earth and killing 12 people.

In November, 29-year-old Bettina Goislard was riding in a clearly marked UNHCR vehicle in Ghazni city, 100 kilometers south of the Afghan capital of Kabul when two men on a motorcycle drew alongside and opened fire with a pistol. Goislard, a French national, was pronounced dead on arrival at a local hospital.

She was the first U.N. staff member to be killed in Afghanistan since the United Nations resumed operations following the fall of the Taliban two years ago, and the fifth UNHCR person to be killed in the field since the year 2000.

WAR CRIMES

The humanitarian community was now paying a deep price in trying to keep close to the civilians it was trying to help, while at the same time maintaining a balance between its civilian and neutral mandate and the highly volatile wars in which field staff increasingly operate.

Conflicts have become messier. There are often no conventional front lines. Many warring parties ignore international laws and the old unwritten agreements, including the so-called 'moral shield,' which had protected aid workers for decades.

New approaches and a new attitude by world governments were needed. And although some progress has been made in recent years far more was obviously necessary.

A 40-page independent report issued following the Baghdad bombing was scathing of U.N. security arrangements, calling them "dysfunctional" providing "little guarantee of security to U.N. staff in Iraq or other high-risk environments." The report's author insisted, "We need to tighten the ship dramatically."

The U.N. staff union said the report was a "damning indictment" which pointed "to gross negligence and massive shortcomings (but)... fails to hold anyone accountable."

IT WAS IN THIS CLIMATE OF MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT, ONGOING PROBLEMS AND MOST WORRYINGLY, THE FUTURE



UNHCR/C.WAND/DP/TCD•2003

SIMON MAINA/AFR/GETTY IMAGES

Secretary-General Kofi Annan subsequently announced the formation of an independent team of experts to assess responsibility for the security lapses.

Five years earlier, Annan had established a trust fund to train U.N. personnel in security issues to help meet these new challenges and asked for global contributions. Worryingly, the fund still only has an estimated \$2 million, virtually all of it contributed by one nation—Japan.

The 1994 Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel came into force in 1999. Sixty-nine countries have acceded to the Convention, but crucially it does not cover U.N. humanitarian workers in most situations.

Separately, and displaying an increased sense of urgency, the U.N. Security Council did adopt a unanimous resolution after Baghdad declaring that attacks on U.N. workers “constitute war crimes.”

WHAT TO DO?

Increasingly, aid agencies must work alongside, or with militaries who are themselves directly involved in the conflict, as in Kosovo and Iraq. How close—or how distinctly separate—can or should these groups be to regular armies which may be the only organizations able to provide effective security?

Should agencies like UNHCR work on the periphery rather than at the center of conflicts, as the refugee organization generally did before the 1990s? In his interview, High Commissioner Lubbers ruled out that idea, insisting that though “we do have to be prudent and minimize the risks” in hazardous situations, UNHCR could not allow itself to work simply on the edges of crises.

Perhaps future humanitarian operations should be ‘de-westernized’ and more prominence given to local

non-governmental organizations and their workers? It is troubling, however, that in Afghanistan and other countries, these same agencies and workers have already become deliberate targets alongside their foreign colleagues.

Too, while the Red Cross’ modus operandi—maintaining a low profile, keeping channels open to all parties involved and trying to resolve security issues before they became dangerous—has been lavishly praised by other organizations, including UNHCR, in the new reality, even the rigidly neutral Swiss-based organization appeared as much a target as any other humanitarian agency.

The bottom line could be that whatever these agencies decide to do will be less critical than the policies adopted by the irregular militias and armies involved in global hot spots. Should they continue to ignore humanitarian considerations in favor of what they obviously believe to be political and military advantages in attacking aid workers, it could be difficult to devise compromise strategies which allow humanitarian officials to work effectively in even a minimally safe environment.

CONSOLIDATION

The year 2002 was a watershed of sorts. Several of the world’s worst ‘protracted crises’—bureaucratic parlance for emergencies which festered for years or decades and seemed impossible to solve—suddenly showed signs of movement.

Last year, 2003, was a period of consolidation in these operations. But Volker Turk, head of UNHCR’s protection policy and legal advice team, called the renewed attention being paid to these crises one of the major protection breakthroughs in the last year.

“There is a lot more hard work to be done,” he said. “It still seems to be a western club. The developing states

Massacre survivors in the Democratic Republic of Congo. But there is hope for renewed peace in that country.

SHAPE OF HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS, THAT LUBBERS DECLARED 2003 “A GOOD YEAR IN A BAD WORLD.”



AP/LUIS BENAVIDES



Civilians continue to flee the Western Hemisphere's worst humanitarian crisis in Colombia.

Europe struggles to harmonize its asylum policies as desperate people, including these Africans arriving in Italy, try to gain entry.

have adopted a wait and see attitude. But overall it is an encouraging development.”

Following the fall of the Taliban and the installation of an interim government in Kabul, more than two million exiles using every conceivable form of transport returned to their shattered homes in Afghanistan in 2002, the largest repatriation of refugees in three decades. In 2003, the numbers going back dropped sharply, but overall by year's end the total number of returnees topped three million. Assistant High Commissioner Kamel Morjane described the operation as “the most important in the history of UNHCR.” High Commissioner Lubbers put the decrease into perspective when he said, “It remains the largest return movement anywhere in the world. This is a remarkable achievement particularly when one considers the worsening security situation and the fact that much of the country is still in ruins after decades of war.”

Further south, there was a similar situation in Sri Lanka, an island once described as the Pearl of the Indian Ocean. Following a February 2002 cease-fire between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels to try to end a quarter century of conflict, more than 260,000 persons flooded home in a few months. That figure dropped to some 50,000 in the first half of 2003, amid worries about the cease-fire's durability. An estimated 400,000 civilians remained homeless.

In Africa, refugees continued to return home to Sierra Leone, a few years ago one of the most benighted places on earth where armies of young children were tutored in the art of slashing off the limbs of civilians,

sometimes including their own parents. By the time that repatriation ends next year, some 400,000 civilians will have been given the chance to restart their lives in their old villages.

More than one million people were killed, four million others forced from their homes into the surrounding bush and an additional 500,000 fled further afield during Angola's three decades-long civil war. When the shooting finally stopped in April 2002, as many as 1.5 million internally displaced persons and 100,000 refugees did not wait for any official help, but returned home ‘spontaneously.’ In 2003, more than 67,000 additional refugees were helped by UNHCR and other agencies on the long road home from neighboring states.

If the return figures dropped last year, it was nevertheless an encouraging situation in a continent which appeared from the outside to be permanently wracked by crises involving millions of victims. In fact, the largest single exodus in 2003 involved the flight of an estimated 65,000 Sudanese into neighboring Chad as they tried to escape fighting between government forces and southern Sudanese rebels.

“What is very exciting are the various peace processes underway, in Sudan, in the Congo and elsewhere,” according to David Lambo, head of UNHCR's Africa bureau. “Preventing conflicts from developing, burden sharing among states, are becoming very important and real policies.”

At the beginning of the year, he added, “I could see a glimmer of hope at the end of the tunnel. At the end of

IF BAGHDAD WAS A WAKE-UP CALL, IT WAS A BELATED ONE. THERE HAD BEEN AMPLE WARNINGS BEFORE THAT WHAT HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS THE ‘MORAL SHIELD’ ENJOYED BY AID WORKERS WAS BEING SYSTEMATICALLY RIPPED APART.

the year, the sun appears to be coming out from behind the clouds and shining on Africa.”

To be sure, the continent remains beset with problems. There are 33 million refugees and millions of other uprooted peoples living in their own countries. Conditions can be so appalling, thousands prefer to face almost certain death in trying to escape to a better life.

In October, an Italian fishing vessel spotted a drifting boat near Sicily. Only 15 of the 28 persons aboard were still alive after being adrift for 13 days following an engine failure. The survivors said they had already tossed 50 corpses overboard and were using the remaining cadavers that they had been too weak to get rid of as protection against the sea. They were even too enfeebled to open food thrown to them.

EUROPE

Those Somali boat people were headed for Europe, part of a vast, uncoordinated flotilla of rusting tramp ships, motor boats and even flimsy sailboats which annually try to gate-crash the continent and reach the ‘promised land’ via its soft underbelly of Mediterranean countries.

Many never make it, but the constant headlines thrown up by such incidents and the movements of groups of economic migrants and trafficked civilians convinced some politicians, journalists and publics that their countries were literally under siege and in imminent danger.

Europe, the cradle of much of the world’s humanitarian law and assistance, does face genuine challenges. It is

far more accessible to most of the world’s uprooted people than the Americas or Oceania. For centuries it has been a refuge for millions of people and at times the cumulative burden can trigger social unease. The 15-nation European Union has been struggling for five years to ‘harmonize’ its approach to immigration and asylum, and that challenge will only grow when 10 new members are admitted in 2004.

Raymond Hall, head of UNHCR’s Europe bureau, described 2003 as a “worrying year” with countries introducing increasingly restrictive measures and shrill rhetoric sometimes drowning out rational debate.

Britain’s shadow Home Secretary Oliver Letwin, for instance, insisted that if his opposition Conservative Party won the next general election, it would deport all asylum seekers to a “far offshore processing island” even though he didn’t have the “slightest idea” where that would be.

Switzerland’s Swiss People’s Party won 26.6 percent of the popular vote in that country’s general election, partly on the strength of a poster campaign, one illustration showing a black face with the slogan “The Swiss are becoming Negroes” and another announcing “Pampered criminals. Shameless asylum seekers. Brutal Albanian Mafia.”

The British tabloid press became so shrill, the country’s press watchdog commission issued guidelines on reporting refugee and asylum issues—which the media promptly ignored.

A Belgian writer castigated High Commissioner Lubbers for “still believing in asylum seekers. The two rea-

Palestinian refugees trapped in the aftermath of the war in Iraq are processed at a UNHCR center in Baghdad.



sons why they come to Europe are 1. To install Islam. 2. To have free housing, food, health care etc. UNHCR should be liquidated in order to give Europe a brighter future.”

This, despite the fact that the number of asylum claims in Europe has dropped steadily, and during the second and third quarters of 2003 were the lowest since UNHCR started collecting quarterly data in 1999. Throughout the industrialized world during the first nine months of the year, all applications fell by 20 percent.

And it was not all one way complaints against new arrivals. Locals on the small North Sea island of Ameland complained when the Dutch government decided to close a hostel housing asylum seekers, not only because of the economic impact of the departure of the immigrants, but as town clerk Jan van der Pruik explained: “Some families have real bonds of friendship. The children of Ameland families go to the same school as those of asylum seekers. People become friends if they spend three years as part of our small community.” The asylum seekers were removed anyway.

Governments responded to popular pressure and

code of conduct for aid workers was introduced and new projects were put into place to better protect girls and women.

Legal experts worked with governments across the world, on both sides of the European Union's soon to be expanded borders, in states such as Colombia, Ecuador and Costa Rica and throughout South America and Asia to establish stronger asylum systems, laws and databases.

In the United States, which led the global war on terrorism and made sweeping changes to its own immigration system by incorporating it into a newly established Department of Homeland Security, UNHCR officials worked with private organizations and Congress to promote specific legislation such as an Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act of 2003.

On a lighter note, in conjunction with the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, athletes attending the games will be asked to donate surplus athletic clothing to refugees and Greek competitors will personally visit some camps. In Prague, waiters at a fast-food chain calling itself Pizzeria Einstein and founded by refugees, now

THE BOTTOM LINE COULD BE THAT WHATEVER AID AGENCIES DECIDE TO DO WILL BE LESS CRITICAL THAN THE POLICIES ADOPTED BY THE IRREGULAR MILITIAS AND ARMIES INVOLVED IN GLOBAL HOT SPOTS.

their own worries by introducing a raft of legislation cutting social and legal benefits and restricting family reunifications. Greece reduced its recognition rate for asylum applicants from more than 22 percent to just 1.1 percent in a year. Austria went from being one of the most liberal asylum regimes in Europe to one of the toughest.

Among other measures, Britain proposed that people arriving without proper papers could be jailed for two years. Some asylum seekers arriving in the United States were prosecuted for trying to enter the country illegally. Aware that many refugees could not escape in the first place with their own identity papers, the 1967 Protocol to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention—acceded to by both countries—prohibits the punishment of refugees for unlawful entry in certain circumstances.

Raymond Hall worried that a paradox had been created in Europe: “While governments recognize that the only way to effectively tackle asylum issues is collectively, they feel themselves under so much pressure, it is very difficult to surrender any sovereignty to the common cause.”

There are fears that instead of striving for high protection norms, Europe's eventual harmonization could reflect the lowest common denominator, incorporating the toughest, most restrictive policies of individual countries into Union legislation. Or as one official fretted: “In a worse case scenario, governments could simply panic and pull the plug on harmonization totally.”

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Away from ‘glamorous’ crises, UNHCR's bread and butter programs continued. Following earlier reports of sexual abuse in some refugee camps in West Africa, a

wear UNHCR Einstein t-shirts to publicize refugee issues. In Côte d'Ivoire the agency sponsored CDs by local artists, a television soap opera and radio and TV ads in an effort to combat xenophobia.

LOOKING AHEAD

Security problems bedeviled humanitarian operations in 2003 and the future remains uncertain.

The majority of foreign U.N. staff were withdrawn from Iraq following the Baghdad bombing and follow-up incidents. Non-governmental agencies reduced their own staffs. Ambitious plans to encourage the return of hundreds of thousands of people were put on ice and it was unclear when things would improve in the Middle East.

In parts of Afghanistan and other locales, programs were shelved or reduced and wider travel restrictions were imposed on field workers. Donors queried continued support for some projects. Dedicated aid officials wondered whether it was worth venturing into volatile regions and one British doctor with 10 years work in war zones warned *The Times* newspaper “We are all targets now.”

This period of uncertainty was likely to persist in the coming year as the U.N. and NGOs tried to find innovative ways to overcome the security threat.

Though Afghanistan has been a major success, Assistant High Commissioner Morjane admitted that “we now face a more complex set of problems” as the agency, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, attempt to keep the momentum of refugee return moving ahead, simultaneously plan for their permanent reintegration and try to work

out how to accommodate a sizeable Afghan exile population which does not want to go back home.

At a recent meeting in Geneva, representatives from all three countries worried that the international community might simply walk away in the near future and an Iranian minister warned, "If aid is cut off prematurely, then everything we have accomplished until now will have been useless."

With peace talks in difficulties, Sri Lanka and its still huge displaced population also faced a troubling future again, as did the displaced populations from Chechnya and Kosovo.

The situation surrounding the 112,000 refugees from Bhutan continued to simmer into the new year. High Commissioner Lubbers tried to break the stalemate and jump-start a settlement by announcing there would no longer be any business as usual. He proposed phasing out a decade-long UNHCR assistance program to refugee camps, facilitating local integration and supporting resettlement programs for particularly vulnerable people. Some agencies denounced the proposals as effectively aiding the ethnic cleansing of the refugees who were expelled from Bhutan in the early 1990s.

A major challenge in Europe in 2004 will be the accession of 10 new states to the European Union. Situated as they are on the fringes of the Union, the main burden of assessing asylum and immigration claims for the entire community may fall on them even though they are the least equipped to handle such a challenge.

"There must be widespread burden sharing among European countries rather than burden shifting," Raymond Hall said. "Otherwise fragile asylum systems could implode or countries might simply close their borders."

But the rehabilitation of Angola remained on course. Though there was continued sporadic violence across the Congo, a U.N. official described it as "the dying gasps of a

spent war." Contingency plans were in place to begin sending home a half million Sudanese refugees if peace talks there progress. The permanent resettlement of vulnerable refugees was expected to increase again in the United States toward an annual target of 70,000. Britain for the first time accepted a limited number of people under the same resettlement project.

Perhaps as UNHCR's David Lambo said, the sun had really begun to shine on at least some of the world's most vulnerable people. But the shadow of the Baghdad bombings and the ongoing killings of aid workers still cast a very long shadow over everything. ■

A disabled Sri Lankan soldier competes at a sports event as that country struggled to maintain an uneasy truce accord.



AP/GENUINI AMARASINGHE

NEW APPROACHES AND A NEW ATTITUDE BY WORLD GOVERNMENTS WERE CLEARLY NEEDED. AND ALTHOUGH SOME PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE IN RECENT YEARS, FAR MORE WAS OBVIOUSLY NECESSARY.





AFGHANISTAN

The most important operation

War ravaged the land for more than a quarter century. Kings and presidents, mullahs and militias and the world's superpowers came and went. The country's schools, hospitals, roads, factories and farms were destroyed. One of the worst droughts of the century compounded the agony of a devastated nation. At one time or another, virtually all of the country's people were uprooted from their towns and villages. At the height of a seemingly unending exodus, more than six million civilians sought refuge in neighboring states. The international community was alternately solicitous and then forgetful of the world's biggest ongoing humanitarian disaster. Billions of dollars flooded in, helping to keep afloat, barely, some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. When the Taliban rulers were overthrown and a new interim government installed in December 2001, a new dawn finally beckoned for Afghanistan. In the next few months more than two million people flooded back to begin rebuilding their lives. By the end of 2003 more than three million people had returned to their homes. Though the pace of the repatriation dropped dramatically, much of the country remained in ruins, insecurity was widespread and the future uncertain, Assistant High Commissioner Kamel Morjane nevertheless described the operation as "the most important in the history of UNHCR." In the following remarkable photo essay, a young Afghan photographer, Zalmai, intimately captures the mood of a country trying to overcome its nightmare.

PESHAWAR, PAKISTAN

*Climbing aboard a local truck
and heading home.*





KANDAHAR
Rebuilding the future.



BAMYAN

*Internally exiled
Afghans go home.*



BAMYAN

*The past and the future.
The destruction of the country's
famous Bamiyan Buddhas and
petroleum to fuel reconstruction.*







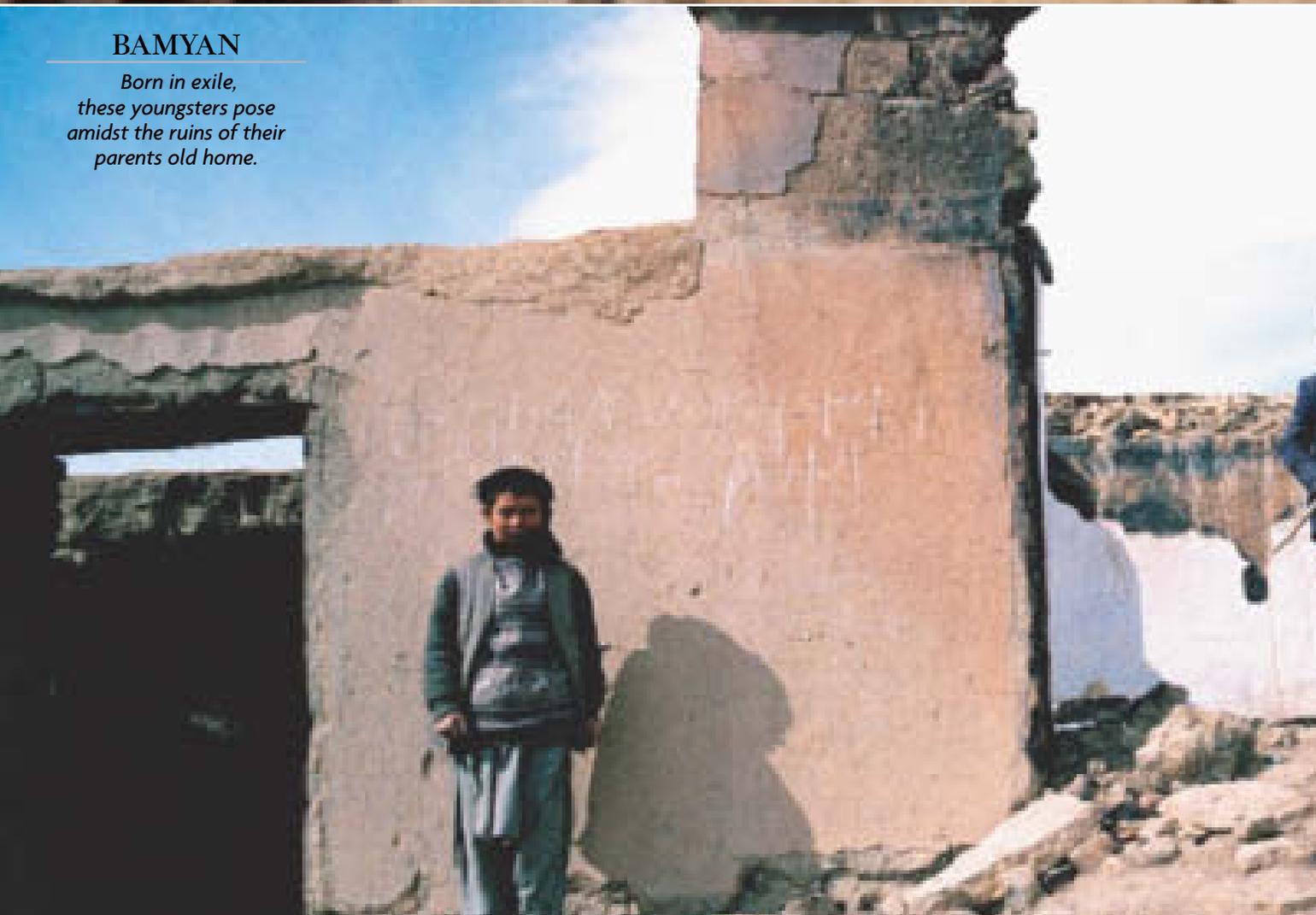
KANDAHAR

*Village elders view
the future.*



BAMYAN

*Born in exile,
these youngsters pose
amidst the ruins of their
parents old home.*





BAMYAN

*Returnees find Bamyan's
famous Buddhas
destroyed.*





QALA NAW

*The first harvest after
six years in exile in Iran.*



SHOMALI

*The first steps toward
rebuilding shattered homes.*



KABUL

*Feeding the nation.
At work in a bakery.*



KABUL

*Living in the ruins
of the capital.*



KABUL

*A nation needs to
rebuild, physically and
materially.*





AIBAK

After four years of exile, an entire village of several generations returns.



KANDAHAR

*Drought and a returnee.
"This was an animal that gave
me life. How can I restart my life
without my flock?"*



QALA NAW

Returning to the land.