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Fifty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 620th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 7 October 2008, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. VAN EENENNAAM (Netherlands)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 4) (continued)

1. Mr. LOULICHKI (Morocco), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, emphasized that, in his statement the previous day, he had sought only to recall in legal and neutral terms the responsibility of Algeria for the Saharans in the Tindouf refugee camps. He asked whether the imposition of a double security and military cordon around each camp and the ban on movement between them did not amount to illegal confinement. Algeria would appear to be prepared to meet its obligations under the 1951 Convention by conducting a census, but for the fact that it linked the census to the implementation of a settlement plan declared inapplicable by the United Nations and obsolete in view of the Moroccan proposal for autonomy. He recalled that the Identification Commission of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) had officially identified not 135,000 but 45,000 Saharans in the southern province of Morocco and 34,000 in Tindouf. Morocco hoped that Algeria would take the humanitarian situation in Tindouf seriously by allowing the census to take place and lifting the blockade. The respective human rights records of Morocco and Algeria had been documented by the Human Rights Committee, in recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review of 2007 and in documents of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

2. Mr. JAZAIRY (Algeria), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that although Morocco invoked the principle of territorial integrity to counter the right of Saharans to self-determination, the concept of territorial integrity did not apply to Western Sahara, which the United Nations classified as a non-autonomous territory and not as part of Morocco. The General Assembly dealt with Western Sahara every year as a decolonization issue, which was not a matter for UNHCR. The High Commissioner's report on his visit to Tindouf in 2006 allocated responsibility for violations of the rights of the Saharan people; Morocco's attempts to prevent publication of the report were eloquent. Moreover, while Morocco had laid landmines along the sand wall built to defend Moroccan-controlled territory in Western Sahara ("the berm"), Algeria had worked to clear mines from its borders. The fact that MINURSO remained in place showed that it was not obsolete and that the referendum and the settlement plan remained on the agenda.

3. Mr. LOULICHKI (Morocco), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that the right to self-determination was limited. The principle of territorial integrity was just as valid and self-determination could not be invoked to infringe the territorial integrity of States. His country had laid mines to protect itself from acts of violence, including from the Algerian army. In the early 1990s, it had cleared a number of mines and hoped that the mine clearance on both sides foreshadowed more open borders, in the interests of restoring unity in the Maghreb.

4. Mr. JAZAIRY (Algeria), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that no agency in the field had denounced the situation of refugees in Tindouf as illegal confinement. On the other hand, peaceful demonstrations held in Smara in September 2008, on the right to self-determination had been crushed by the occupying forces, and Morocco continued to detain Mohamed Dadach, the Saharan Mandela, after more than 20 years, for claiming the right to freedom. The Moroccan representative repeatedly invoked the Tindouf issue to serve Morocco's domestic political ends but the issue was not relevant in the present forum and distracted UNHCR from its humanitarian priorities.

5. Mr. VICENTE (Observer for the Dominican Republic) said that new challenges related to the food crisis, the economic slowdown and natural disasters had added to existing refugee challenges in the Caribbean for which additional humanitarian aid was needed. His Government welcomed the efforts of UNHCR to increase humanitarian assistance for the most vulnerable in the subregion, supported the Global Needs Assessment process, which it hoped would continue in a consistent manner and welcomed the initiatives taken under the Resettlement in Solidarity pillar of the Mexico Action Plan.
6. The Group of Latin American and Caribbean Countries wished to reiterate the importance of the Plan, which relied on the political will of countries to find sustainable solutions to the complex humanitarian situations in the region, to face the growing problems of refugees and internally displaced persons and to recognize the many underlying causes of the problems involved. Considerable progress had been made in implementing the Plan in Central America; Nicaragua had recently adopted important refugee protection legislation and Costa Rica had recently signed a cooperation agreement with UNHCR that would expand its capacity for determining refugee status and help improve its asylum system. Nevertheless, some Governments in the region had expressed concern over increasingly restrictive migration measures in some countries and called on the Governments concerned to refrain from applying measures that might jeopardize the protection and rights of refugees.
7. Mr. HESSOU (Benin) said that Benin was honoured to be part of the Executive Committee, committed to the humanitarian cause and to refugees and proud to be considered a leading country with respect to international refugee protection standards.
8. The number of refugees and asylum-seekers in Benin had fallen dramatically since 1992, partly because some regional tensions had eased. The proGres registration software used by UNHCR had greatly facilitated the management of refugee populations in the region and was a valuable tool that should be widely used. For those in protracted refugee situations, solutions should be sought with local representatives through information sharing, exchanges of experience and evaluation of tried and tested measures to create the conditions needed to allow people searching for a peaceful haven to flourish.
9. Mr. ETEBARI (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) said that over 5 million Afghan refugees had returned home since 2003. His Government remained committed to assisting the voluntary return and sustainable reintegration of the remaining 3 million in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, and would work with UNHCR and the host countries towards that end.
10. Security remained a primary concern as it caused internal displacement and discouraged repatriation. His Government was ready to assist Pakistan in its efforts to deal with terrorism, and was working with international partners to assist Pakistanis fleeing from fighting in the area of Bajaur to Afghanistan. Security, together with economic factors, clearly exercised the most influence over population movements and displacement of Afghans.
11. His Government was pleased by the strong support that donors at the 2008 Paris Conference had expressed for the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and, with UNHCR, was organizing an international conference on return and reintegration to be held in Kabul in November 2008. A sustainable refugee return and reintegration strategy must meet a range of challenges, and hence take a realistic view of return and reintegration prospects. His

Government would present its return and reintegration programme budget at the Kabul conference and indicate which programmes and projects needed further support for implementation. For example, financing and technical expertise were of crucial importance for the land allocation scheme.

12. His Government viewed gradual and voluntary repatriation as the best guarantee of sustainable return. In that connection, it was grateful to the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan for their generosity to Afghan refugees over the years and to UNHCR and international NGOs for their dedication and support.

13. Mr. SAMARASINGHE (Observer for Sri Lanka) said that since June 2007, 95 per cent of those displaced during the liberation of eastern Sri Lanka had been resettled in their original places of residence. His Government had worked closely with UNHCR to enable community leaders to make informed choices about resettlement, which had been entirely voluntary. The current challenge was to provide livelihood opportunities to ensure that resettlement was sustainable. Meanwhile, essential food continued to be distributed to those in need, while non-food items would be added to the existing daily provision of assorted other goods and supplies in coming weeks. His Government's policy was to seek the cooperation of international organizations and agencies in providing humanitarian assistance to affected persons.

14. The Sri Lankan Government considered the supply of humanitarian relief to its people as its prime responsibility. It was also committed to finding durable solutions for some 300,000 internally displaced persons affected by conflict, and had held a national consultation on a policy and action plan to address their needs, in follow-up to the visit, in December 2007, of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons. The Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights had also spearheaded a comprehensive strategy on confidence-building and stabilization measures for conflict-affected communities. He was convinced, however, that in order to assist internally displaced persons, it was vital to address the critical areas of security, development and human rights in a holistic manner.

15. Mr. MASHA (United Republic of Tanzania) said that, during a visit to the United Republic of Tanzania in March 2008, the High Commissioner had provided valuable support for its efforts to find durable solutions for refugee caseloads, in particular the 1972 Burundi caseload. His Government intended to resolve all the outstanding caseloads before the end of the decade so that it would no longer have any refugees in its territory. Return to the country of origin once peace was restored was a sovereign right. Since the signing of the Arusha Peace Accord, an enabling environment for return had been established in Burundi, and his Government therefore intended to close one of the two remaining refugee camps by the end of 2008.

16. His Government had naturalized the majority of refugees from 1972 and facilitated the voluntary return of the remainder. He requested the help of the international community in filling the funding shortfall of US\$ 10.9 million for implementation of the Comprehensive Solutions Strategy, and said that his Government was drawing up a budget for final local integration, which had yet to be funded.

17. Peace alone might not be a sufficient incentive to return to post-war areas that were often more impoverished than refugee camps. The international community might, therefore, consider supporting UNHCR in the delivery of durable solutions by providing limited development assistance in areas of return, installing basic infrastructure comparable to that in refugee camps and assisting national bodies and institutions in countries of origin with ensuring reintegration.

18. Mr. GAUZE (Côte d'Ivoire), noting the progress made by his Government in implementing the Ouagadougou political Agreement of 4 March 2007, and effecting national reconciliation, said that his Government had concluded a tripartite repatriation agreement with UNHCR and Liberia aimed at rehabilitating infrastructure in the refugee hosting areas. He urged UNHCR to continue to support efforts to secure funding for the rehabilitation projects.

19. The Liberian Government was also pursuing programmes for local integration of refugees, and intended to establish a legal framework to protect the rights of internally displaced persons. It had established a national reintegration fund, a national committee for the return of property under the Ouagadougou Agreement and a national assistance programme for voluntary return, training and reintegration. The latter programme had not yet been implemented because of a lack of resources. While Côte d'Ivoire was no longer experiencing a humanitarian crisis, it still faced many serious humanitarian challenges and only with the help of the international community would it be able to address them.

20. Ms. NGHIDINWA (Namibia), said that, in keeping with its constitutional and international treaty obligations, the Government of Namibia had hosted more than 20,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, many of whom had been voluntarily repatriated. It was currently host to some 7,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly Angolans.

21. A national refugee centre had been established, providing education, health care and activities for women and young persons, and refugee children were guaranteed access to education from the preschool to the university stage. In addition, refugees and asylum-seekers had full access to health facilities and medicine, including antiretroviral drugs. A number of them worked and contributed greatly to the growth of the economy. Women, in particular, who made up a large share of the refugee community, were encouraged to work.

22. Her Government had entered into bilateral arrangements with neighbouring countries to implement the key areas of the 10-Point Plan of Action. Since it was destined to assume additional responsibilities for refugees in the light of rationalization of UNHCR staffing, it furthermore urged UNHCR to continue to provide it with financial and capacity-building assistance to ensure the continuity of basic services delivery. Financial assistance was also needed for local integration in the context of considerable challenges such as natural disasters and youth unemployment.

23. Her Government remained committed to the voluntary repatriation of all refugees in Namibia and welcomed the forthcoming African Union Special Summit on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons to be held in Kampala in 2009.

24. Mr. DAMBA (Guinea), commending UNHCR for its reform efforts and fruitful cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), said that his Government had launched a local integration programme for approximately 60,000 refugees who wished to remain in Guinea. Despite the considerable burden imposed by the refugee presence, his Government was committed to promoting local integration, in cooperation with UNHCR, through field assessments, awareness-raising among host populations, self-reliance initiatives and legislative measures. In that regard, it had conducted refugee censuses to provide refugees with the documents that they needed for their stay in Guinea.

25. He noted with appreciation the assistance provided by UNHCR to rehabilitate host areas by, constructing basic infrastructure and to address the concerns of host communities. Nevertheless, greater resources were needed to create the conditions for successful integration acceptable to both refugees and host communities.

26. The application of the cessation clause to Sierra Leonean refugees was another important activity under way in Guinea. In that connection, his Government reserved the right to review any request for exemption from the clause. With regard to environmental degradation in refugee-hosting areas in Guinea, particularly in the forest region, and the prevention of an environmental catastrophe in Guinea, his Government relied on UNHCR and other international organizations and development partners to mobilize the necessary resources for environmental rehabilitation projects.

27. Mr. MAFUNDJI (Democratic Republic of the Congo), said that the Democratic Republic of the Congo had repatriated more than 1,000 persons since signing the Nairobi Communiqué on security measures with Rwanda. His Government was firmly committed to establishing peace in the Great Lakes region and the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in particular. It had held a conference in Goma in January 2008 on peace, security and development in the North and South Kivu provinces, which had resulted in the signing of the Goma act of engagement by all parties concerned. Regrettably, one signatory, the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple, refused to cooperate in implementing the act and chose instead to pursue a belligerent course, aggravating an already precarious situation for some 1.5 million internally displaced persons and undermining efforts to repatriate nationals of the Democratic Republic of the Congo who had sought asylum in Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda.

28. His Government called on the international community to bring pressure to bear on the party concerned to abide by the disengagement plan and also to provide the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) with the necessary means to bring peace to the eastern part of the country.

29. His Government was grateful for the assistance given by UNHCR in helping to repatriate its citizens. Nevertheless, the destruction of social and economic infrastructure and lack of adequate assistance were considerable obstacles to reintegration of returnees. His delegation therefore called on the international community and the Office to continue to support both the reintegration process and the local integration of refugees who had chosen the Democratic Republic of the Congo as their adoptive country.

30. Ms. JOVOVIĆ (Montenegro) said that her Government had provided shelter, health care, education and other services to some 140,000 displaced persons from the former Yugoslavia, regardless of their religion or nationality. The national strategy on refugees and displaced persons provided for social and economic integration through the construction of residence units for displaced persons, for example, and repatriation, where conditions in the home country allowed. Furthermore, new national legislation allowed for the reconsideration of the status of displaced persons from the former Yugoslav Republics and registration of displaced persons from Kosovo, paving the way for durable and sustainable solutions in keeping with the Sarajevo Declaration.

31. Cooperation such as that envisaged in the “Delivering as One” initiative, would further the success of integration and repatriation projects. The only way to confront emerging global challenges was through global action and partnership, to which Montenegro remained fully committed.

32. Mr. GUTERRES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that he understood the migratory pressures on the Government of the Dominican Republic. UNHCR stood ready to work with it to provide protection to persons of concern. Turning to the statement made by the representative of Benin, he said that the Government of Benin had adopted an exemplary refugee protection policy and he commended it on its successful hosting of Togolese refugees and voluntary repatriation programme for them. He also expressed solidarity with the representative of Afghanistan and said that he looked forward to the conference on return and reintegration in November 2008 in Kabul. He agreed that the conference must focus on specific projects and credible prospects for refugee return and reintegration.

33. With regard to the long-standing partnership between UNHCR and Sri Lanka, he acknowledged the challenges in guaranteeing human rights and humanitarian access in conflict areas and welcomed the national consultations on protracted displacement and the Government’s commitment to a confidence-building strategy. He also noted with appreciation the efforts of the Tanzanian Government to ensure that the United Republic of Tanzania, which hosted approximately 500,000 refugees remained an important asylum space. He was encouraged by the Tanzanian Government’s voluntary repatriation programmes and the granting of citizenship to a large number of Burundian refugees. The United Nations country team must now support the Tanzanian Government with local reintegration.

34. He commended the commitment of the Government of Namibia to the welfare of women and girl refugees, in particular the efforts to provide them with access to the labour market. Employment brought empowerment - a key element of refugee protection. The international community should indeed do more to support Namibia’s local integration programme.

35. The Guinean Government had displayed great solidarity over the years towards other African countries, as was borne out by its asylum policies. Its plans for local integration of large numbers of residual refugees from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d’Ivoire should galvanize the international community to contribute not only to local integration projects but also to the rehabilitation of the region as a whole. In addition, the interpretation of the cessation clause given by the representative of Guinea was correct and should be followed by all States.

36. He shared the concerns expressed by the representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo regarding recent developments in the eastern part of the country, and gave his assurance that UNHCR would do its utmost to assist displaced persons there. Regrettably, the scale of the humanitarian problems caused by the conflict was not fully recognized by the international community and UNHCR alone could only do so much. It was strengthening its field presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, deploying a senior staff member to Kinshasa and making new arrangements to build partnerships with the Government and other stakeholders in order to deal with the situation.

37. Mr. JARAMILLO REY (Colombia) said that the Colombian Government remained committed to finding solutions for the many Colombians who had been displaced internally as a result of violence between armed groups. There had been considerable progress in registering displaced persons in order to facilitate their integration and access to social services. On 1 October 2008, the UNHCR office in Colombia and the Colombian Government had formulated an operating plan for the period 2008-2009, in line with the Mexico Plan of Action and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. In April 2008, legislation had been enacted to coordinate efforts to increase budgetary allocations for internally displaced persons, involve internally displaced persons more in the design of programmes for their benefit and design and implement gender-based programmes for them.

38. Colombia's Constitutional Court had ordered the establishment of 13 specific programmes to ensure that the impact of forced displacement did not fall disproportionately on women. All those programmes were being carried out jointly by the Government, civil society and international partners, as recommended in the Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons. The Colombian Government wished to thank its neighbours for the valuable humanitarian assistance that they were providing to Colombians forced to cross the border. It also wished to thank UNHCR for the technical and institutional assistance that it had provided.

39. Mr. FEYDER (Luxembourg) said that he wished to thank the many Governments that had supported Luxembourg's successful candidacy as a member of the Executive Committee, and he pledged his Government's continuing support for the organizational reform at UNHCR.

40. The challenges facing UNHCR were constantly growing in number and complexity, and their successful resolution required close cooperation among humanitarian actors. In particular, Luxembourg encouraged UNHCR to take steps to ensure the harmonious transition between emergency humanitarian action and development, by engaging in close cooperation at an early stage with United Nations development actors in particular, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Resident Coordinator.

41. A political solution to the problems underlying many humanitarian crises was to be pursued relentlessly between the Governments concerned, with support from the international community and non-State actors. Camp life was, at best, a temporary solution, and the right to return must be guaranteed.

42. Luxembourg regularly adapted its humanitarian policy to take new circumstances into account, and was now focusing its attention on the areas of disaster risk prevention and reduction, emergency humanitarian aid and the transition from emergency to development. In that connection, in 2007, Luxembourg had made a multiannual commitment to UNHCR. It also pursued a policy of devoting special attention to “forgotten” conflicts, such as the one in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

43. One of the basic causes of humanitarian crises was poverty. All States should intensify their efforts to eliminate poverty in keeping with the Millennium Development Goals. The Government of Luxembourg, for its part, would continue to increase the level of Luxembourg’s international development assistance and its humanitarian aid, in particular that earmarked for UNHCR.

44. Mr. COSTEA (Romania) said that his Government wished not only to continue but also to diversify its successful cooperation with UNHCR. As it was determined to share the financial burden, in recent years it had begun to contribute to UNHCR programmes and projects in its region. He applauded UNHCR for its efforts to strengthen its protection mandate, to preserve the principle of non-refoulement and to combat any form of violence towards persons under its protection. He also commended the High Commissioner’s efforts to keep the issue of protracted refugee situations on the humanitarian agenda. In that connection, his Government had held talks with UNHCR to identify how it could contribute to solutions for those situations, and looked forward to the High Commissioner’s forthcoming Dialogue on Protection Challenges on that theme.

45. His Government was also helping to provide durable solutions for refugees. An evacuation transit facility for up to 200 people in urgent need of international protection had been set up in May 2008 in the city of Timisoara, while efforts had been made to bring Romanian refugee legislation and practice into line with European and international standards. His Government had fully implemented the European Union asylum acquis and favoured the expeditious establishment of a European asylum support office.

46. In December 2005, the Romanian Government had ratified the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. The principles of unhindered access to asylum and the right to a nationality would guide it in its efforts to combat discrimination against refugees and stateless persons. In that connection, as the protection challenges facing UNHCR continued to increase, his Government would continue to invest in protection, assistance and the search for solutions for refugees

47. Archbishop TOMASI (Holy See) said that the current financial crisis, which had a grave impact on vulnerable groups, highlighted the lack of equity in the contemporary world. Problems such as climate change, natural disasters and regional conflicts challenged the Office’s ability to provide the protection and assistance required. While political responses, immediate assistance and technical know-how were necessary, a clear ethical dimension must be placed at the centre of the protection debate. His delegation had participated with great interest in the UNHCR discussions on protection and had expressed support for the priority accorded to the topic in recent UNHCR initiatives.

48. As UNHCR had been mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to extend its protection capacity to include new groups, alerting States to new protection demands called for a pragmatic approach to the 1951 Convention and the Protocol thereto of 1967. In that connection, the general conclusion on international protection submitted for adoption at the current session pointed to the persistent failure to observe the rights of asylum-seekers, and stressed the importance of drawing upon relevant international humanitarian and human rights law as a point of reference.

49. There seemed to be an urgent need for reflection and statutory provisions that took account of local realities in States and changing situations of forced displacement. While there were international instruments to protect refugees and agreements to protect labour migrants and their families, millions of people forcibly uprooted by natural phenomena, oppression or human rights abuses were caught in a legal vacuum. Although they could not be classified as refugees or migrant workers, their plight must not be ignored. The question was how to formalize ways and means of assisting them. Existing best practices and human rights obligations could serve as a starting point for an international legal instrument, and since experience in the implementation of international instruments had shown the value of expert committees that advised on the interpretation of their provisions, perhaps a similar group could be established within the Office's existing structures.

50. Displacement was the result of political decisions, lack of prevention and unforeseen natural events and therefore fell within the responsibility of all States and the international community. An adequate response was not possible without concerted action among all actors. Although legal instruments were necessary, ultimately, a culture of solidarity and the elimination of the root causes of displacement would sustain the protection system.

51. Mr. CARACCIOLO DI VIETRI (Italy) said that he shared the concerns expressed about the rising number of forcibly displaced persons, and welcomed the expanded application of the Strengthening Protection Capacity Project, which should be mainstreamed. In order to tackle the refugee phenomenon effectively, more States should support international refugee instruments, starting with the 1951 Convention. He therefore encouraged those States that had not yet done so to ratify the Convention as soon as possible.

52. The link between movements of refugees and asylum-seekers and international migration had attracted considerable attention in the past decade. In that regard, a recent ministerial conference held in Paris had laid the foundations for the second phase of the Common European Asylum System and highlighted the need for greater harmonization of policies among European Union Member States. In that connection the new Italian Government had stepped up its cooperation with UNHCR and other agencies to upgrade its asylum and reception systems and provide more effective services. The reception facility established on the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2006 was an excellent example of European cooperation in that regard.

53. He commended UNHCR for its action during the recent crisis in Georgia, in particular its leading role in the United Nations country team. The High Commissioner's visit to Georgia and the Russian Federation had also contributed to securing the humanitarian space for displaced civilians.

54. Seeking durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons should remain a pillar of the Office's work. He hoped that the strengthened UNHCR presence in Iraq would be conducive to a large-scale voluntary repatriation at some stage. UNHCR must also continue to monitor the conflicts in the Central African Republic, Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as the crisis in Zimbabwe in order to provide timely assistance to refugees and avert a further deterioration in the situation. Italy, for its part, would continue to support activities in Afghanistan, where it had invested €54.34 million in 2007 alone.

55. The "Delivering as One" initiative provided a unique opportunity to engage the whole United Nations family in seeking appropriate solutions for refugees and persons of concern. He looked forward to the High Commissioner's forthcoming Dialogue on Protection Challenges and commended UNHCR for the success of its internal reform process, which should ensure even higher operational standards and make a real difference to beneficiaries.

56. Mr. QIAN Bo (China) said that in the past year UNHCR had achieved remarkable results in the areas of voluntary repatriation, local integration, structural reform and emergency response. It was difficult, however, to be optimistic when the number of refugees had risen so sharply. He hoped that UNHCR would keep the international protection of refugees as part of its core mandate and would promote the principles of international solidarity and burden sharing to assist developing countries with capacity-building in order to find durable solutions.

57. His Government enjoyed good cooperation with UNHCR and was grateful to its staff and the international community for their support in the aftermath of the recent earthquake in China. It would continue to contribute to UNHCR activities directly and would assist developing countries whenever possible. He was confident that under the High Commissioner's able leadership and with the cooperation of the international community, UNHCR would rise to the current challenges and more and more refugees would be returned home in safety and dignity.

58. Mr. NELSON MESSONE (Observer for Gabon) said that Gabon had long been engaged in welcoming refugees and currently hosted some 13,000 refugees and asylum-seekers of 21 different nationalities. As a result of its hospitality and stability, Gabon was the destination for an increasing number of persons wishing to leave their country, including those now arriving in Gabon by sea.

59. Gabon had enacted specific legislation on the status of refugees, and had conducted a census with the aim of better identifying refugees and asylum-seekers and issued identity cards to refugees. It had also taken steps to integrate refugees locally and avoid the creation of refugee ghettos. Such steps included naturalization, integration in the workforce and refugee access to cultivable land. In the area of education, moreover, refugee children enjoyed the right to non-discrimination and equal opportunity with regard to scholarships; in health, the State provided triple therapy for refugees with HIV/AIDS.

60. His Government welcomed the High Commissioner's proposal to address the issue of refugee protection in the context of international migration. It should be noted that providing such protection strained Gabon's resources and compelled it to rely on UNHCR support. While

welcoming the commitment of UNHCR to dialogue and cooperation with States, his Government called on UNHCR also to help build the capacity of national NGOs to provide public information on the laws of receiving countries and possibilities for local integration. That would help Gabon to strengthen both its partnership with UNHCR and its own domestic structures.

61. Mr. ASHUROV (Observer for Tajikistan) said that, since acceding to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol thereto, his Government had introduced various measures to protect refugees and asylum-seekers. For example the Refugees Act of 2002 provided for cooperation among relevant government and local authorities and on protection issues. Since 2004, a representative from the UNHCR country office in Tajikistan had been allowed to attend meetings of the country's Refugee Status Determination Commission. That attested to the spirit of cooperation and mutual trust between his Government and UNHCR.

62. Under Tajik legislation special provision was made for vulnerable refugees, including orphans, torture victims and persons with disabilities. Refugees were allowed to work and had access to primary and secondary education and vocational training. His Government was currently examining a UNHCR proposal for the local integration of Afghan refugees who had been in Tajikistan since the 1990s, and a standing working group had been established for that purpose.

63. Between April and May 2008, a re-registration campaign for refugees and asylum-seekers had been conducted in Tajikistan. The results showed that there were 1,663 refugees and 443 asylum-seekers in Tajikistan. Also in April 2008, during his visit to Tajikistan, the High Commissioner had commended the Tajik Government on its recent work with refugees. His Government would continue to do its best for those persons, in keeping with the relevant international and national instruments.

64. Mr. ELMIBOUH (Observer for Djibouti) said that Djibouti had been faced with constant influxes of refugees for decades and, with the help of UNHCR, it had been able to cope with them. Djibouti's total refugee population now stood at 160,000, which placed a severe strain on the country's cities' limited infrastructure and resources. A group of Somali refugees had been voluntarily repatriated in 2007 and a similar exercise was scheduled for the end of 2008.

65. The Horn of Africa remained the scene of terrible human dramas, including a form of human trafficking in which individuals were divested of their savings, piled into makeshift boats and sent off on treacherous journeys across the Gulf of Aden, where many drowned. Genuine success in combating that phenomenon required much more resources than his Government could provide. Efforts had therefore been made to negotiate a ceasefire in Somalia, with the aim of allowing the United Nations to provide humanitarian assistance to the population. Progress had been gradual, and Djibouti was continuing its efforts to find a solution. Support, however, was sorely needed for the joint diplomatic efforts of his Government and the United Nations to restore peace in Somalia. The resources allocated to the UNHCR office in Djibouti should be increased to address the multiple challenges faced by his Government.

66. Mr. LEBEDEV (Russian Federation) said that his Government complied strictly with its international obligations for the protection of refugees, and intended to strengthen its cooperation with UNHCR. A recent example of mass population displacement had been seen during the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict. During his mission to the region the High Commissioner had made clear the Office's willingness to deal with the resulting humanitarian crisis. He thanked UNHCR for the assistance provided. It should be noted, however, that in Tskhinvali, in South Ossetia, far greater assistance had been provided by individual States, principally the Russian Federation, than by international organizations.

67. He stressed the need for prompt action to return the displaced persons. Although most refugees from the Russian Federation had already returned to South Ossetia, a growing number of persons belonging to national minorities, not from South Ossetia but from Georgia, had been seeking asylum in the Russian Federation since August 2008. The forced return of displaced persons without a proper political settlement would run counter to international norms. Any return operations must be undertaken in a planned and orderly fashion following the rehabilitation of the conflict zone and the provision of basic facilities, including housing. He hoped that the forthcoming consultations in Geneva on the situation in the southern Caucasus region would outline the modalities.

68. The reconstruction of South Ossetia must be carried out in cooperation with the South Ossetian authorities on the basis of the recommendations emanating from the recent humanitarian needs assessment mission in the Republic. There should be no further demands that might delay the start of the operation.

69. While welcoming the streamlining of headquarters functions, he expressed concern about the plan to transfer parts of the Europe Bureaux to Brussels; specialists in human rights and protection issues were usually based in Geneva, as was IOM.

70. Mr. BHATTARAI (Observer for Nepal) said that his Government supported the principles behind voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and rehabilitation of refugees. However, its efforts to resolve the protracted situation of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal had been met with the non-implementation of agreements and procrastination on the part of the Government of Bhutan.

71. As host to more than 107,000 Bhutanese refugees, Nepal provided shelter on humanitarian grounds and did everything to ensure peace and security in refugee camps at great cost to itself. Given the difficulties in repatriating the refugees, his Government had agreed to cooperate with the international community in opening up the option of voluntary third-country resettlement, on the understanding that the Bhutanese refugees' inherent right to return to Bhutan remained intact. Nepal considered resettlement to be an interim solution and a step towards the refugees' repatriation with full restitution of their land and property.

72. Nepal appreciated the proactive humanitarian initiative of the Core Working Group on Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal and had extended all necessary cooperation to facilitate voluntary resettlement of those refugees. His Government was grateful to the donor community, UNHCR, the World Food Programme (WFP) and other agencies for their support, which he hoped would continue until the problem was resolved.

73. Mr. GUTERRES (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that there was no doubt that Colombia had developed a highly advanced legislative framework to address the rights of internally displaced persons. The Office was working very closely with the Colombian Government and other national institutions to apply the framework on the ground. As for Luxembourg, it was the Member State that provided the highest level of support for UNHCR relative to its gross domestic product and per capita income. Luxembourg's humanitarian cooperation policies were indeed of noteworthy importance.

74. The establishment in Romania of an evacuation transit facility was a key development in handling resettlement procedures that were difficult to conduct in first asylum countries, and also had the potential to increase the protection capacity of UNHCR in extreme circumstances. The idea had originated in a lesson learned from the evacuation and resettlement of some 400 Uzbek refugees - a process that had been carried out with the generous cooperation of the Romanian Government.

75. He thanked the delegation of the Holy See for its active participation in UNHCR debates on protection policy development. The Holy See and His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI should be recognized for their role in promoting religious tolerance and humane and rights-based migration policies. The comments of the representative of the Holy See on the development of new legal instruments to protect non-refugees affected by forced displacement underscored the Holy See's commitment to finding solutions for vulnerable groups.

76. He said that he agreed with the representative of Italy that the Lampedusa reception mechanism was a best practice model, demonstrating that it was entirely possible to define a migration policy and manage borders responsibly, while maintaining a protection-sensitive attitude and guaranteeing access to asylum procedures and fair treatment of asylum claims.

77. UNHCR actively cooperated with the Chinese Government in the development of Chinese asylum legislation, which he hoped would be fully in conformity with the best international practices and would include all relevant principles, such as non-refoulement, and the civilian character of asylum.

78. He commended Gabon's refugee reception and local integration policy and agreed with the Gabonese representative about the need to support local NGOs. NGO capacity-building helped not only to develop a country's civil society but also to strengthen its cooperation with UNHCR. Without the support of NGOs, UNHCR would quite simply be unable to operate.

79. UNHCR was committed to the local integration of the Afghan refugees who had entered Tajikistan in the 1990s and reportedly had no real prospect of voluntary repatriation. He appreciated the generosity of the Tajik Government in considering the local integration option and respecting all the rights of refugees in its territory.

80. Djibouti had had to contend with population inflows that were out of proportion to the size of its own population. He agreed that a political solution to the Somali crisis was vital. Although international solidarity had not yet risen to the level required, efforts were being made to boost protection capacity on the southern shores of the Gulf of Aden.

81. There had been very positive developments in the Russian Federation's asylum system. In that regard, the Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations was currently one of the world's best emergency entities. He agreed that humanitarian assistance must be delivered in a way that eschewed politicization, and commended the Russian Government on its commitment to voluntary repatriation. The Government's concerns about the restructuring of UNHCR operations would be duly taken into consideration.

82. Lastly, he expressed his gratitude to the Government of Nepal for its generosity towards so many refugees for so long and for the openness with which it had accepted the prospect of a resettlement programme for those refugees. UNHCR remained deeply committed to a comprehensive solution that included voluntary repatriation, and believed that various aspects of the solution needed to be improved.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.