

Now that she can move into the Ifo Camp extension near Dadaab, Kenya, Somali refugee Shamsha Adan is gathering sticks to construct a shelter.



WE WOULD ALL HAVE WISHED for the 60th anniversary year of the 1951 Refugee Convention to be a calmer, more peaceful one. Instead, 2011 was the most tumultuous since I became High Commissioner,

marked by a rapid and uninterrupted succession of large-scale humanitarian crises against a backdrop of political, social and economic turmoil. It was also another tragic year for UNHCR, with four of our colleagues killed in South Sudan and Afghanistan. Dozens of other staff from humanitarian partner agencies fell victim to violent attacks or kidnappings, in another stark illustration of the dangers we are exposed to when humanitarian space is under threat and the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality are not respected.

The year had barely started when hundreds of thousands of people were forced to abandon their homes as violence erupted in Côte d'Ivoire and Libya. Meanwhile, the Somali conflict, already 20 years old, degenerated further and, combined with the worst drought in decades, drove close to 300,000 refugees into neighbouring Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Yemen. Exhausted and often severely malnourished new arrivals joined others who had left Somalia in previous years, bringing the total number of Somali refugees in the region to some 950,000 by the end of 2011. UNHCR's emergency response to that crisis was in full swing when an upsurge in fighting in the South Kordofan and Blue Nile states of Sudan resulted in an influx of nearly 100,000 new refugees into South Sudan and Ethiopia. Population movements have continued unabated throughout the year and into 2012.

A person in a red and black patterned garment is shown from the side, holding a wooden staff. The background is a dry, dusty landscape with sparse, dead-looking vegetation under a cloudy sky. The overall tone is somber and evocative of displacement.

Reaffirming our Responsibilities

by António Guterres

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ELUSIVE SOLUTIONS

While new situations of conflict continued to multiply in 2011, old ones failed to be resolved, such as in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Iraq. As a result, durable solutions have remained elusive for a large number of refugees under UNHCR's mandate. Over two-thirds of them, or 7.2 million, are now living in protracted situations of exile. Although more people were able to repatriate voluntarily in 2011 than during the previous year, this was mainly thanks to large return movements to Libya and Côte d'Ivoire after those situations stabilized. Resettlement figures decreased further, with the number of UNHCR submissions (90,000) at a five-year low. Especially worrying has been the declining trend in the number of resettlement departures (61,400), which for the second year in a row remained far below the annual global capacity of

80,000 persons. This was mainly due to volatile security in some key operations such as those in the Syrian Arab Republic and Kenya, hampering the ability of resettlement countries and UNHCR to process cases. Tightened security screening by resettlement countries has led to a decline in departures, affecting in particular Iraqi and Somali refugees, as well as limited reception capacity.

Nonetheless, 2011 also brought some hope of achieving progress on several protracted situations. In the Western Balkans, four countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia (and Kosovo: Security Council resolution 1244 (1999)) – drew up a common programme to close the region's 20-year-old refugee chapter. UNHCR played a catalytic role in this process, which aims to bring about durable solutions for the 73,000 remaining refugees from the 1991-1995 conflicts in the region.

In South-West Asia, innovative responses by governments hosting Afghan refugees created new opportunities, through the comprehensive Management and Repatriation Strategy for Afghan Refugees in Pakistan, or the provision of work permits and health insurance coverage to registered Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Nepal, the large-scale resettlement programme started in late 2007 has provided a durable solution for some 60,000 refugees from Bhutan and created the momentum to introduce an inter-agency community-based development programme to assist the remaining refugees, as well as host communities, in their efforts to attain self-reliance and sustainable development.

CELEBRATION, REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE: COMMEMORATING THE CONVENTIONS

Throughout 2011, UNHCR celebrated key anniversaries of two of its cornerstone conventions – the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. As part of the commemorations process, a series of expert meetings and roundtables explored initiatives to address protection gaps facing forcibly displaced people. These included the development of a framework for international cooperation and burden-sharing at a roundtable in Amman, and an operational template for rescue-at-sea operations, which was the focus of a similar meeting in Djibouti. At the Nansen Conference on climate change and displacement in Oslo, a set of principles was drawn up to guide States in addressing the needs of those who cross borders owing to the effects of climate change and other environmental hazards.

This year-long process culminated in an intergovernmental event at the ministerial level which UNHCR organized in Geneva in December 2011. One hundred and fifty-five States attended the conference, and more than 90 made concrete pledges on measures to improve the protection of displaced and stateless persons, both internationally and domestically. These commitments have established an important momentum for improving national refugee protection frameworks and creating more potential for durable solutions.

Most importantly, the process has resulted in a giant step forward in combating statelessness. Affecting an estimated 12 million people worldwide, statelessness had until very recently been one of the most neglected issues on the international human rights agenda. The commemorations process represented a turning point in this respect, with eight countries acceding to one or both of the statelessness conventions during the year, and another 26 future accessions announced at the December meeting.

The ministerial meeting also created an opening for future dialogue to explore protection gaps in relation to cross-border displacement not covered by international refugee instruments. A number of States pledged to move forward with regional initiatives to obtain a better understanding of such cross-border movements, in cooperation with other interested States and UNHCR.

RECONFIRMING KEY PRINCIPLES

The spate of emergencies we faced during 2011 illustrated a number of important points for UNHCR and the international community. First, they made it clear that the key principles of refugee protection still run strong in today's world. All the countries neighbouring last year's crisis zones in Africa and the Middle East kept their borders open as tens of thousands – often in the space of just a few weeks – arrived on their territories seeking shelter from violence and conflict. The Governments and peoples of Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, South Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen deserve particular praise and gratitude for their hospitality and generosity.

Second, 2011 affirmed the value of UNHCR's increased investment in its emergency response capacity in recent years, as part of the Office's overall efforts to strengthen its ability to deliver. Never before had the organization come under so much stress simultaneously. Some 620 emergency staff had to be deployed to over 40 UNHCR operations: two and a half times as many as in previous years. Our newly consolidated network of seven emergency stockpiles in Europe, Africa and the Middle East ran at top speed throughout its first year in operation, airlifting an average of 57 tons of relief items every week – nearly quadrupling the volume dispatched in 2010.

Third, the enormous challenges of 2011 have proven once again that effective partnership is the key to success in humanitarian response situations. Based on lessons learned from real-time evaluations, UNHCR launched several initiatives in an effort to make its engagement with partners in refugee emergencies more predictable and inclusive. The Office set up operational data web portals in all of the major crisis operations, allowing partners to access updated registration information and maps, and to share data on sectorial needs identified and assistance provided. At the same time, UNHCR initiated a dialogue with several key NGO consortia and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, to identify ways to enhance our joint response and make our partnerships more transparent, strategic and effective. In addition, the Office has been giving its full support to the reform agenda of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, which aims



In what was formerly an Afghan refugee village near Nowshera, Pakistan, High Commissioner António Guterres charts the course of the devastating floods.

UNHCR / J. TANNER

at strengthened leadership, improved strategic planning and better accountability to affected communities, governments and donors. Together with WFP, UNICEF and several NGO partners, UNHCR's focus in this process has been to ensure that the system can better enable operational effectiveness and delivery.

FUNDING AND REFORM

Despite global financial and economic upheavals, donors supported UNHCR's work generously throughout 2011. Voluntary contributions rose for the fifth consecutive year, passing the USD 2 billion mark for the first time in our history.

The reform initiatives of recent years have helped the Office to enhance its efficiency and effectiveness. Far from aiming at structural reform as an end in itself, these investments focused on improving our ability to deliver, notably by strengthening protection and emergency response capacity.

During 2011, UNHCR created over 40 new structural protection positions across the globe in areas such as resettlement, refugee status determination, statelessness and cluster leadership. Protection learning was also strengthened, with a dozen new or updated courses for UNHCR and partner staff created.

Last year also saw the full implementation of UNHCR's global stock management system, a key feature of its strengthened emergency response capacity. The new network of supply hubs has enabled us to make significant savings on airlifts and, together with a 20 per cent increase in stock levels of relief items, now allows us to respond within 72 hours to

simultaneous emergencies of up over 500,000 persons.

After the successful reforms of recent years, we are set to continue on this path in the future. Fully conscious of the responsibility which our donors' high level of confidence brings for assuring the quality of UNHCR's financial and programme management, since late 2011, we have been taking a number of new measures to reinforce the Office's capacity in this regard, and to enhance our accountability to donors and persons of concern alike. We will continue to improve our organizational response to emergencies, through quicker and more predictable staff deployment mechanisms and faster resource allocation procedures.

Likewise, first steps were taken to reinforce coordination and support capacities to facilitate a more predictable and accountable inter-agency engagement in refugee outflows. A robust investment in UNHCR's information-management capabilities is another key factor in this respect which we began to address in late 2011.

SHARED COMMITMENT

The volatile year that lies behind us was proof that, after more than six decades, UNHCR's mandate to protect and assist refugees and other forcibly displaced people is as relevant as ever, and its work ever more challenging. My Office stands ready to take on these challenges, together with States, communities and people of concern. It is fundamental that the international community recognize its shared responsibility to maintain and improve protection, and that we all exercise our shared commitment to achieve this goal. ■