

- DRAFT -

REPORT OF THE
CHAIRMAN OF THE EXECUTIVE
COMMITTEE

H.E. AMBASSADOR
HERNAN ESCUDERO MARTINEZ

ON HIS VISIT TO CHAD AND SUDAN
(WEST DARFUR)

29 JANUARY – 6 FEBRUARY, 2005

GENEVA – MARCH 2005

A. Visit to Chad, 30 January – 2 February, 2005

Arrival, first briefings and general comments

Continuing the tradition of an annual mission by the Chairman of the Executive Committee to visit UNHCR operations in the field, Ambassador Hernán Escudero Martínez decided to visit Chad and Sudan, where UNHCR is currently engaged in one of its largest and most critical operations, as a result of the crisis in the Darfur region. For the first time during such a visit, a representative of non-governmental organizations accompanied the Chairman, in the person of Ms. Manisha Thomas from the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). The Chairman was also accompanied from Geneva by Counsellor Arturo Cabrera of the Permanent Mission of Ecuador, and for part of the journey by the Secretary of the Executive Committee.

On the day of Ambassador Escudero Martínez' arrival in N'Djamena (30 January), he received a detailed briefing on operations by the Representative and staff of the UNHCR country office. The briefing highlighted the need for continuing support and attention to the Chad operation, as there were no signs yet of a political solution to the root causes of the refugees' presence in Chad. Despite the fact that the operation has been continuing for more than one year, the office felt it was appropriate that it should continue to be a Supplementary Programme for at least one more year.

The geographical conditions of the country and the poor infrastructure create serious logistic problems for the operation, which not only takes care of refugees from Sudan but also from the Central African Republic (as well as from other countries, among the urban refugees). While several means of delivery and alternative corridors are in use, the cost of transportation of basic necessities (food commodities, non-food items, potable water to some camps) continues to be extremely high, especially in the rainy season.¹ Security threats, the depletion of contingency stocks, lack of resources and environmental deterioration are other problems that the staff of UNHCR and its partners in Chad have to face, in very difficult working conditions. Although more staff, including senior experienced staff, is required, the 314 UNHCR staff in Chad, of which 24% are international, demonstrate an extraordinary human compassion and great professionalism. The important role of the NGOs must be also emphasised. They account for some 250 staff at present in Chad. Several improvements have been made in coordination between UNHCR and the NGOs, but there is still a need for more concerted efforts to ensure collaborative work between UNHCR and NGOs on monitoring and analysing the security situation. In addition, there is still a need for more focused and collaborative approaches to protection. As with UNHCR, there is, amongst the NGO community, a need of more senior experienced staff, particularly with knowledge of protection issues.

Addressing the impact of massive refugee flows on the local populations, as strongly promoted by the High Commissioner, is an important part of the work of UNHCR in Chad. Approximately five percent of programme funds benefit the Chadian population. Nevertheless, the local population continues to express fear for the future of its scarce natural resources such as water, grazing land and fuel wood, as well as for its security, as a result of the refugee presence and the proximity of the conflict.

¹ Each 20-ton truck costs approx. US\$ 6000 to rent in the rainy season. Airlift is several times more costly.

Press conference and meeting with UN agencies

A press conference was held on the same day, attended by numerous local and international journalists. The discussion was very open and wide-ranging, touching on the peace process in Sudan, the funding situation, prospects for repatriation, assistance to affected host populations, the recent bombings in Darfur and the relative lack of world interest in the situation of the Central African Republic refugees in southern Chad.

In the evening, a working dinner hosted by the UNHCR Representative gave the opportunity for the Chairman to meet and discuss with the United Nations Resident Coordinator a.i. and the Humanitarian Coordinator a.i., as well as with the other UN agencies represented in the Chad, especially on the issue of assistance to the local population.

Meetings with Government and Ambassadors in N'Djamena

On the second day in N'Djamena, the Chairman held meetings with the United States of America and French Ambassadors to Chad, and with the Minister of Territorial Administration.

The Chairman thanked Ambassador Mark MacGowan Wall of the United States for the continuous support of his country to the Chad/Darfur operation and its generous financial contribution. Among other things, the US Ambassador mentioned reports from the other side of the border on the deteriorating situation in Darfur and the possible new influx to Chad of refugees from Sudan. In this regard, the US Ambassador indicated satisfaction with the state of UNHCR's preparedness in Chad. The operation is receiving many visits from different branches of the US Government. According to the Ambassador, UNHCR is handling the operation in Chad the way it should be handled, considering that it is logistically the most challenging faced by UNHCR in the world. The provision of assistance to the local population was also identified as an important factor in protection.

Issues including the need to locate camps away from the border, mis-registration of Chadian citizens as refugees and the key role of the African Union in any solution of the conflict in Darfur were also discussed.

At the French Embassy, the Chairman thanked Ambassador Jean-Pierre Bercot for the important logistical and other support by France to the humanitarian operations. The Ambassador voiced his concern about the potential deterioration of the conflict in Darfur that could have a very serious impact on the whole region. He expressed his country's appreciation for what UNHCR had achieved with limited resources. On the African Union role, he believed they were doing a very good job and should be encouraged and supported. However, more international involvement and financial help will be necessary.

The meeting with the Minister of Territorial Administration Mahamat Zene Bada was the last one before the Chairman departed for Abeche. The Minister said that it was possible the refugees would not go back in the near future, and therefore Chad will need the support of the international community for some time to come. He expressed his satisfaction with the Consolidated Appeal for 2005 and for UNHCR's part in it. He then conveyed to the Chairman his appreciation of the work UNHCR is doing in Chad and the good quality of the relationship between his administration and UNHCR.

The Chairman took the opportunity to discuss with the Minister the forthcoming registration and profiling exercise of the refugee population in Chad and the efforts of UNHCR to increase the capacity of the Commission Nationale d'Accueil et de Réinsertion des Réfugiés (CNAR) to carry out its functions as the national institution in charge of refugee issues. He concluded the meeting by promising to convey the concerns of the Government to EXCOM members and expressed his hope that his visit to Chad will help to mobilize more resources for the operation. He expressed to the Minister his appreciation for the meeting and the openness of the discussions.

Visit to UNHCR operation in Bahai and Oure Cassoni refugee camp

After a courtesy visit to the prefecture of Bahai, Ambassador Escudero Martínez and his delegation visited the UNHCR operation in the Bahai region of north-eastern Chad, and from there the Oure Cassoni refugee camp, which is now home to some 25,000 of the more than 200,000 Sudanese refugees who have fled across the border from Darfur. Refugee leaders told Ambassador Escudero Martínez that they feel safe in the camp and that they do not want to return to Sudan at this point because of the ongoing insecurity in Darfur.

Oure Cassoni is one of eleven refugee sites established in the arid region of eastern Chad since January 2004. As the northernmost of the camps, Oure Cassoni has the most extreme desert conditions. Despite the difficult environment, non-governmental organizations, UNHCR and other UN agencies have put in place shelters, services such as health clinics, and water and sanitation facilities for many tens of thousands of refugees. The Chairman was impressed by the organization of the camp and the strength of the refugees, especially after the violence which these women, men and children had experienced in their country.

Refugee women in Oure Cassoni also stressed they felt safe in the camp, noting that they regularly received food and other assistance and that clinics and community centres were in place and functioning. But they also wanted UNHCR and the other international agencies to improve the schooling provided to the children in the camp.

Meetings in Abeche and visit to the Governor

Back in Abeche, the delegation participated in a coordination meeting with international NGOs and UN agencies. Health and education were the most important issues discussed. On the first issue, the representative of the World Health Organization reported the completion of a meningitis vaccination campaign in all the camps, following a recent outbreak of the disease.

The delegation visited the Governor, who thanked the Chairman for the support of the international community and assured him that Chadians were committed to hosting the refugees until solutions are found for them. The inclusion of the conflict in the agenda of the recent meeting of the African Union in Abudja and the areas proposed by the Chadian Government for resettlement of camps close to the border were also discussed.

B. Visit to West Darfur (Sudan) 2 – 5 February, 2005

Arrival in El Geneina and meeting with the local authorities

On Wednesday, 2 February, the Chairman continued his mission, heading across the border to El Geneina, the capital of Sudan's West Darfur state.

At a courtesy meeting with the Governor of West Darfur, discussion centred on the key issue of security. The Governor described the situation in his State as being good in this regard, and mentioned with satisfaction the coordination taking place with the African Union mission. He informed that humanitarian assistance was provided to all seven localities of displaced persons thanks to the existing security, and that the plan developed by Sudan with the Special Representative of the Secretary General was being implemented. The Governor emphasized that the international community should be encouraged to provide aid to Sudan in the solution of the crisis.

Coincidentally, two days before, a Letter of Understanding was signed in Khartoum by the Sudanese Government and UNHCR, formalizing UNHCR's role in West Darfur as it concerns the voluntary return of IDPs to and within West Darfur. The LoU was referred to in the meeting as a very good instrument to define and coordinate humanitarian efforts as well as to clarify competences in the different regions of Darfur. The so-called "North-South Agreements" were also mentioned as an element that may spread peace in the whole country.

During a briefing provided by UNHCR staff, the Chairman was informed that return of refugees and IDPs is not yet an option. In most cases where people have tried to return, not from refugee camps but from the border pockets where many stay, they have ended up in other villages or IDP camps. The main challenges were the insecurity that continues to be the most important problem; the lack of Professional staff; the distance to many of the camps; and maintaining adequate coordination with other humanitarian actors in the field.

The UNHCR operation in El Geneina was being expanded to other parts of West Darfur, with the urgent objective of being able to reach all affected populations. Pilot projects related mainly to villages of origin and return are also being developed. The Chairman considered that UNHCR staff in the field are responding with a high degree of creative initiative, responsibility and commitment. He considered it to be an admirable effort in relation to the number of staff deployed.

Visit to Kurti village and Dorti camp.

The delegation visited the village of Kurti near El Geneina, where many people displaced by the conflict had sought refuge. Presently, the displaced people in Kurti said they felt relatively safe, but they lacked some services. After a meeting with the leaders, the Chairman and his delegation were invited to visit a nearby village that had been burned to the ground some time ago.

The delegation then visited Dorti camp, also in the vicinity of El Geneina, and spent time in one of several Women's Centres established by UNHCR, where women find peer support and

engage in handicraft-making as a source of income. The women talked about security concerns and said that if they ventured out of the village to collect firewood to sell, they risked being attacked. In order to partly tackle this problem, fuel-efficient stoves were being made in the camp to reduce the amount of firewood to be collected. The displaced people in Dorti camp and their sheikhs, or traditional leaders, said that insecurity remained a problem.

The Chairman also met with representatives of civil society, teachers, local staff of aid organisations, religious leaders, etc. They spoke about the economic consequences of the conflict, and their views on a politically sustainable solution in which the disarmament of all irregular armed parties by the Government would be an imperative. Some felt that traditional tribal-conflict resolution approaches should be followed, while others were of the opinion that the context was not one of tribal conflict since the Government was a party.

A meeting with non-governmental organisations was held, in which issues around camp coordination, security, and the related difficulties that NGOs face in relation with free movement, and protection were the main topics. The need for an UNSECOORD representative was noted, as the position was vacant at the time. Some improvements in the co-ordination on protection issues were also discussed, but there was a question as to how effective the various discussions around protection had been in terms of making improvement. A remark was made that UNHCR's role was now clear, but the role of some other actors may require more definition. There was also mention made of the need to ensure that programmes did not exclusively focus only on the displaced, but also took into account the needs of conflict-affected populations, as there was a feeling that certain populations had been neglected.

The Chairman had a final meeting in El Geneina with the Field Commander and senior military staff of the African Union Mission in the Sudan (AMIS). Information on logistic and strategic issues was provided. Security concerns and the degree of cooperation with UNHCR in the area was also discussed, aiming to better understand the complex task of the AU and the need for further support of its delicate but vital mission, as well as the planned increase in the number of AMIS military personnel.

Visit to Khartoum

The last stop in the Chairman's mission was Khartoum, where the delegation met with the State Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister of the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), and the Commissioner for Refugees to discuss ways of increasing security, protection and assistance to the internally displaced.

Dr. Najeeb El Kheir, State Minister for Foreign Affairs reviewed the human rights situation in his country with Ambassador Escudero, who also serves as Vice-Chairman of the Human Rights Commission. The State Minister saw the situation in Darfur as consisting of a struggle over resources between sedentary farmers and nomadic tribes, rather than as an ethnic conflict. He believed that the solution for Darfur lay in establishing a healthy federal system.

Security issues in the IDP camps in Darfur, confidence building measures for voluntary repatriation, as well as judicial prosecution of alleged crime perpetrators were also raised in the meeting.

The State Minister questioned UNHCR's statistics in Chad, where the Government of Sudan believes the number of Sudanese refugees is only around 120,000. He also voiced concern over the proliferation in Darfur of illegal weapons coming from foreign countries. The Chairman explained that UNHCR is doing its best to keep maintain the civilian nature of refugee camps in Chad. He emphasised that while there might be a difference of opinion on statistics, the numbers involved were undoubtedly large. He emphasized his full support for the role of the African Union, especially after his meeting with the AU Commander in Darfur.

The Chairman commented with appreciation on the long standing relationship between the Government of Sudan and UNHCR, which dates back to 1968. He praised the recently signed Letter of Understanding (between HAC and UNHCR) on roles and responsibilities of UNHCR in West Darfur and stated that it was the right step towards solutions.

Eng. Ibrahim Mahmoud Hamid, Minister of Humanitarian Affairs, emphasised that in order to prepare for repatriation to the South, a very good survey is required and explained the role of National Statistics Centre for IDPs and Returnees. In this regard, he praised UNHCR for having agreed to assist the Government in conducting an IDP survey for the Khartoum area, as the majority of IDPs in Khartoum came from the South.

The UNHCR Director for Operations took this opportunity to note that he had just concluded a meeting with all UNHCR representatives in countries hosting Sudanese refugees from the South. He also outlined UNHCR's expanded presence in the South - in addition to existing offices in Juba, Rumbek and Yei, UNHCR plans to dispatch field units to Yambio, Tambura and Kajo Keji and additional staff with technical backgrounds will shortly be deployed to implement quick-impact community-based reintegration projects (CBRPs). Activities in water, shelter, health, education, community services and reconciliation projects are aimed at helping to create an environment conducive for sustainable return.

The Chairman asked for the Minister's views on the plan to rehabilitate 76 villages in West Darfur. A question arose as to whether people are going back to places of origin or not. The Minister explained that people are free to go wherever they like and that the Government is concentrating on the rehabilitation of basic facilities such as clinics and schools, in villages as well as in the larger towns.

Dr. Mohamed Ahmed Al Aghbash, Commissioner for Refugees, expressed concern that the international community has been concentrated only on Darfur and South Sudan and the situation in East Sudan has been neglected. There have been new arrivals of asylum-seekers in the East from Eritrea.

The Chairman reviewed with the Commissioner the impressions he had gained from his visit, emphasizing that confidence-building is required before repatriation can take place, and expressed his satisfaction at the conclusion of the Letter of Understanding between UNHCR and HAC on roles and responsibilities of UNHCR in West Darfur.

In a meeting with the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan, the latter praised the role of UNHCR and its implementing and operational partners in keeping people alive and in ensuring basic human dignity. He gave special importance to the North-South Agreements, and to the positive spill-over effect they could provide over the longer term with respect to the situation in Darfur and the steps that the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Sudan is taking to encourage a peaceful settlement. The delegation also met with the representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who commented on the

creation of a National Commission on Human Rights that would start working early this year, and who emphasised the importance of constitutional reform.

The Chairman had an opportunity to meet with NGOs in Khartoum to discuss the humanitarian response. There was appreciation expressed for the LoU finally being signed, which should provide greater clarity with regards to protection. At the same time, the role of UNHCR in North and South Darfur was seen as needing further clarification. On the Protection Working Groups, mention was made of the efforts to improve the working methods and the output of the groups, including the formation of a smaller Protection Steering Group. The recent inter-agency proposal on protection, which was elaborated in the context of the Protection Steering Group, was highlighted. It was hoped that the Chairman would point the EXCOM's attention to the proposal, which was seen to be a rather unique effort that should be supported by donors.

The programme of meetings concluded with a useful exchange of views with members of the diplomatic corps in Khartoum.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is necessary to continue increasing the awareness of the international community – this was indeed one of the main purposes of the Chairman's mission - on the crisis and the vast dimensions of the work that UNHCR and the broader humanitarian community has to accomplish in this region. This is especially true in view of the vulnerability of the UNHCR operation, in terms of resource flows, and the need for sustained international attention to the political as well as humanitarian crisis. The unique experiences gained in this region should be an element to consider in current and future UNHCR operations in Africa and other continents.

An adequate response is vital from the donor community to the appeal for a supplementary budget for Chad/Darfur. This situation should continue to be treated as an emergency programme for the time being. It is also necessary that donors fully understand the role of protection and its priorities. Some initiatives and pilot projects proposed by UNHCR in Darfur need to be considered and supported.

It is necessary to understand that any contingency plan in Chad has to take into account the physical limitations of the country to receive new influxes of refugees, but also the fact that repatriation will not be feasible until a political solution to the conflict in Sudan, and particularly in Darfur creates the conditions for voluntary return in safety and dignity, including the necessary guarantees for the life and livelihood of returnees.

More emphasis on income generating activities for refugees and IDPs should be encouraged. Quick impact projects aimed to this goal could be further developed.

While there has been progress in clarifying the mandates and competencies of all actors in the field, sometimes through ad hoc arrangements but also by more formal means such as the letter of understanding of 31 January 2005, this issue still deserves priority attention.

The “North-South Agreements” should play in favour of the situation in Darfur. Although there are different views on their potential impact, the international community should push for their best implementation in such a way that they could become a vehicle for peace in the whole country. The agreements could be a potential starting-point for the return of some IDPs and refugees, if security conditions are met.

The increasing and invaluable role of non-governmental organizations cannot be overemphasised. It would be simply not possible to reach many people in need of protection without the co-operation and partnership of the NGOs. This fact calls for a continuing improvement of the cooperation and collaboration between NGOs and UNHCR. It is necessary to ensure that there is collaboration and partnership not only on assistance programmes, but also in terms of protection responses. The continuing adoption of codes of conduct by all implementing partners should also be encouraged.

The origins of the tragic conflict in Darfur, and the unacceptable loss of life and suffering inflicted on the population there, are extremely complex. However, it is clear that a solution has to be a peaceful one, in which the Government and other parties play a basic role, with the participation of the African Union and the support of the international community.

UNHCR and its operational partners are doing an invaluable job with a direct impact on the life and dignity of hundreds of thousands of people in Chad and Darfur, under extremely difficult conditions and with very limited resources. To further support this work is an urgent responsibility of the international community.

The Chairman wishes to record his deep appreciation to the Governments of Chad and Sudan for their warm welcome to his mission, to African Union and to all the UNHCR and NGO colleagues in Chad and Sudan who assisted in the preparation and organization of his mission.