

# Foreword by the High Commissioner

For the humanitarian community, the year was ushered in by the tsunami that devastated Indonesia and Sri Lanka on 26 December 2004. The ensuing relief effort proved exceedingly difficult, with the extent of the damage and scale of the affected area complicating every phase of the response.

UNHCR immediately responded to the Secretary-General's call for a massive UN relief effort. It was an obvious decision given the overwhelming needs, our presence in the affected areas and experience in emergency response. The Office rushed emergency teams to Sumatra and mounted a shelter operation on the hard-hit island, while expanding existing operations to assist affected areas of Sri Lanka and Somalia. In all, UNHCR helped over 600,000 people with urgently needed shelter and aid.

Our engagement in the tsunami relief effort, where people were victims of a natural disaster rather than war or human rights abuses, was one of the several significant developments in the context of humanitarian action and within the Office itself.

One of the most important of these came in September, when the Inter-Agency Standing Committee acted to bring hope to the internally displaced, for too long neglected by the international community. The proposal made by the agencies was the culmination of a broad consultation process led by the Emergency Relief Coordinator and was motivated by a shared desire for a more predictable and effective response. Responsibilities for key areas of action, or 'clusters', were delineated by agency, taking the collaborative approach further, in a system which will be applied in future crises involving internal displacement. UNHCR was asked to lead clusters on protection, camp coordination and management, and emergency shelter in situations of internal displacement caused by conflict. With this more proactive approach comes a sense that this enduring gap in humanitarian action is finally closing.

While the cluster approach was first introduced in three African countries – the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Liberia – the most extensive practical experience with it came in Pakistan, where it was used to guide the inter-agency response to the October 2005 South Asia earthquake. The disaster leveled hundreds of villages, producing truly shocking ruin and despair throughout Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Here also, UNHCR's decision to assist was based on our ability to rapidly mobilize staff and deliver quantities of urgently-needed relief items, as well as the obligation to come to the aid of Pakistan, host to millions of Afghan refugees for two decades, in a moment of tremendous need.

The earthquake response was a true test of our emergency response capacity. UNHCR mounted an airlift to transport vast quantities of relief items to Pakistan, helped manage camps for people made homeless by the disaster and worked with a range of partners to provide shelter for thousands of families. The relief effort was also a test of the ability of the international community to respond in a coherent and coordinated way. Thanks to the concerted efforts and outstanding cooperation by NGOs, UN agencies, the Government of Pakistan and donor governments, the great majority of earthquake survivors had adequate shelter and care as the harsh winter set in.

In stark contrast to the unexpected natural catastrophes in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, the man-made disaster in Darfur evolved in a way that was as predictable as it is tragic. At times the peace process provided a glimmer of hope. But this would quickly prove unjustified: conditions for internally displaced, civilians and aid workers worsened over the year. And despite the widely recognized threat that the conflict in Darfur might spread, with no political solution in sight the world's most complex humanitarian situation remains just that, now engulfing over two million people.

While instability grew in Darfur, 2005 saw peace agreements signed between protagonists in the long-running civil conflicts in Burundi and South Sudan, raising prospects for two of Africa's largest refugee populations. Following national elections in Burundi, voluntary returns from the United Republic of Tanzania surged to over 10,000 people a month, momentum that UNHCR will attempt to regain in 2006 if conditions permit. In South Sudan, UNHCR established several offices in main return areas and invested available resources in community-based projects. Decades of war have left



UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres contemplates the destruction caused by the South Asia earthquake in Balakot town in Pakistan. *UNHCR / V. Tan*

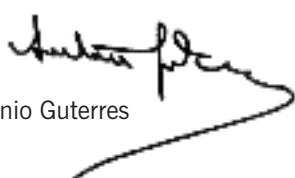
South Sudan with almost no health services or education, and all of 14 kilometres of paved road. By the end of the year, it was clear that tens of thousands of internally displaced people had come back to the South from Khartoum but that many refugees, anxious about the lack of infrastructure, were delaying their return.

Within the organization, many changes centred on protection. The Office took a purposeful decision to raise the profile of protection across the full range of our activities, from emergency response to long-term solutions. To accomplish this, and to strengthen the relationship between protection guidance and delivery, UNHCR created the post of Assistant High Commissioner for Protection and has undertaken a thorough reorganization of our support services for both protection and operations.

During 2005 UNHCR faced several instances when groups of asylum-seekers were returned against their will to their countries of origin. Here, as in increasingly complex migration flows, including the highly conspicuous routes across the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Aden, it is crucial that UNHCR be present, both to ensure asylum-seekers have access to proper procedures and in order to find solutions for them. The continuing decline in asylum-seekers registered by countries of refuge is good news – in 2005 these reached their lowest level in almost 25 years – but the smaller numbers should reflect expanding solutions, not shrinking asylum space.

Beyond rededicating the Office to protection, we have made a long-term commitment to institutional reform. UNHCR faces a new and challenging environment in the context of broader UN reform and our expanded responsibilities within the international humanitarian system. Our structures and working methods must be adapted to maximize the protection, assistance and solutions for the people we are mandated to help. The guiding principle of the reform will be to ensure UNHCR has the flexibility and efficiency to provide programmes of the highest quality. Beginning in 2006, a comprehensive structural and management review will lay the groundwork for a multi-year effort that will make these ambitions a reality.

This note would be incomplete without a word of gratitude to all our donors for their steadfast and generous support. My colleagues and I count on that continued generosity, as well as on our strong relationships with operational partners, as we look to meet the challenges ahead. The people we care for depend on this.

  
António Guterres