

REFUGEES

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Life is increasingly hazardous for refugees and relief workers alike

Too high a price?



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REFUGEES

N° 121 - 2000

2 EDITORIAL

The 'invisible shield' protecting aid workers has disappeared in a dangerous new era.

4 COVER STORY

Humanitarian agencies consider new ways to combat rising violence against their staff and refugees.

By Ray Wilkinson

Burundi

A peaceful assessment mission turns deadly.

By Christoph Hamm

Vladikavkaz

Kidnapped for nearly one year.

View from the field

New measures to protect principles, mandates and lives.

By Kilian Kleinschmidt

The camps

Daily life in a refugee camp is a harrowing experience.

Goma

A siege in eastern Zaire.

By Panos Moutzisz

Timor

"My next post needs to be a tropical island without jungle fever and mad warriors."

22 DANGEROUS WORK

The outside world rarely hears about the daily dangers in the field—beatings, death threats, robberies and rape.

27 VOLUNTEER HELP

The United Nations Volunteers send experts to all corners of the world to help.

By Richard Nyberg

28 AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan faces more fighting and yet another fresh crisis.

By Yusuf Hassan

30 PEOPLE AND PLACES

31 QUOTE UNQUOTE



UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN

4 For years aid workers were able to operate in comparative safety. Today, working conditions and a threat to personal safety are much more pronounced for humanitarian personnel and refugees.



UNHCR / A. MAHECIC

22 Even routine humanitarian work can now be extremely dangerous with robberies, beatings and other violence on the increase against both aid workers and refugees.



UNHCR / Y. HASSAN

28 Afghans still comprise the world's largest single group of refugees. Fighting has continued in that country for 21 years and a devastating drought has only added to their woes.

The 'invisible shield' of protection disappears...

The job of helping others has always been inherently dangerous.

But for years, the great majority of humanitarian workers appeared to be protected from the obvious risks of their profession by an almost invisible shield.

Effectively, belligerents in conflicts across the globe

Countries and organizations most directly involved were aware of this deteriorating situation, but for years there was a regime of self-denial—this can't really be happening; this particular atrocity is a one-off; things will get better.

Only now that the toll among displaced persons and relief officials is rising alarmingly, has the wider international community begun to pay serious attention to redressing the situation.

UNHCR and private agencies began urgent reappraisals of field operations. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan asked for a massive increase in funding for global security programs and said safety was not a 'luxury' but a necessary part of continuing the business of saving lives.

But even if such measures are put into place, they will be only the first tentative steps towards reorganizing the global humanitarian landscape.

More complex issues must also be tackled. How can millions of so-called internally displaced persons around the world who currently enjoy only minimal protection be more effectively protected? What about the safety of local employees of aid organizations who often undertake the most hazardous jobs, but receive minimal help in perilous situations? Should aid agencies work with military organizations—perhaps compromising their neutrality and safety—in return for vital logistical support?

Refugees are most in need of assistance at the very same moment when relief officials are most exposed to personal danger. Unless many of the above problems are resolved, the operations of humanitarian agencies will suffer and millions of uprooted persons will not receive the assistance they deserve.



The security risks for humanitarian officials and millions of displaced people, including these Rwandan refugees in Central Africa, have grown significantly in the last decade.

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came to a tacit agreement that while they would continue to shoot at each other, relief workers could pursue their work in relative safety amid the booming guns, assisting hapless civilian victims.

There is almost a whiff of innocence, a touch of chivalry about that earlier period.

The situation changed sharply with the end of the cold war when the world community looked forward to an era of greater personal freedoms and social progress. In the event, superpower stalemate was replaced by a series of nasty ethnic, religious and other conflicts. The old rules of the game were jettisoned by groups with little respect or use for the existing agreements.

Civilians became deliberate targets of terror or human pawns in a political endgame. Aid officials became 'allies' and 'spies' of opposing forces and as such, targets of political, military or material gain.



“WE ARE VERY CLOSE”

As security conditions for aid workers deteriorated, UNHCR's headquarters in Geneva were briefly occupied by Kurdish demonstrators in 1999. The Swiss government responded by surrounding the building and the nearby Palais des Nations with barbed wire and soldiers.

...E TO THE LIMIT”

After a new wave of killings, the humanitarian world agonizes over the price it must pay to help the world's needy

by Ray Wilkinson

The situation was tense near the eastern Congolese town of Bukavu as François Preziosi and a United Nations colleague set out to visit refugees in the region. Preziosi, an Italian and head of the local UNHCR office, was anxious to smooth out difficulties between the authorities and his Rwandan ‘charges’. And even when the local driver noticed men hiding in the bushes armed with automatic weapons and machetes, the U.N. officials apparently felt comfortable that their role as humanitarian workers would protect them from any trouble. After all, aid officials had been operating for years in the world’s trouble spots, and an often unwritten agreement between warring sides had allowed them to continue their work unharmed.

An official cable, based on the eyewitness account of driver Yogolero Georges Corneille, described what happened next: “Five hundred yards further on, the car was stopped by a mob of Congolese

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Turn to page 6 ►





The international debate recently focused on the safety of aid workers. But increasingly, refugees such as these Rwandans near the Zaire town of Kisangani in 1997, are being deliberately targeted by warring factions.

► and Tutsi refugees. The car was surrounded on all sides. The Congolese had automatic weapons. The refugees had machetes and spears. The mob started to scream.

“Yogolero was the first to step out of the car, waving a white handkerchief. He explained that the car’s passengers had come to help the refugees. The mob ordered him to shut up. Five Congolese searched the car. Two others searched Preziosi and the second U.N. official, Mr. Plicque.

“The crowd started hitting them with all kinds of arms, in particular with ma-

chetes. Plicque shouted: ‘The only reason we are here is to help you.’ Yogolero, taking advantage of the fact no one was paying any attention to him, moved away... but one rebel wounded his left forearm with a machete. While running away, he saw a Congolese aiming at him with a submachine gun. He fired 12 times.” The driver managed to escape, but the two Europeans were killed.

That incident took place in August, 1964 and Preziosi became the first high-level fatality in an organization which had been created 14 years earlier to help the world’s refugees. His killing highlighted

the extremely fragile and contradictory environment in which relief officials were working even in those early days.

The safety of all humanitarian workers—United Nations and Red Cross personnel and officials from the private sector, the non-governmental organizations—relied principally on an often tacit and unspoken agreement between all groups involved in a conflict to respect their neutrality. But a decision by any party to ignore this understanding could plunge the civilians into the gravest danger.

For a time at least, the death of Preziosi and Plicque appeared to be an exception



treated, some world statesmen predicted an era of sustained peace and economic prosperity.

Instead, a series of long simmering ethnic, religious and other conflicts erupted, often within states rather than between states. The rules governing humanitarian work and the fate of those needing help began to change spectacularly. Until then, governments had been primarily responsible for the security of aid officials and refugees alike. But in these new style insurrections, state capitals were often incapable of, or sometimes, simply refused to intervene to help them. Officials and refugees became deliberate targets for one side or another rather than occasional, accidental victims.

UNHCR field staff had generally worked on the fringes of war, assisting refugees once they had reached safety in a second country. But in northern Iraq, the Balkans, Central Africa and many other areas in the 1990s, the agency's personnel began working in the very eye of the storm.

The number of private relief agencies proliferated. They worked in some of the

most hazardous and remote conditions, often without the protection offered by huge international organizations to their own staff, and became further targets of opportunity. The International Committee of the Red Cross had been operating in difficult war zones for many years, but that agency too, noted a deterioration in conditions and the increased, deliberate targeting of its staff.

The safety of humanitarian workers relied principally on an often tacit agreement between all warring groups to respect their neutrality.

To be sure, the international community was still welcomed in crisis areas—but often for the wrong reasons. Aid agencies were the only organizations which could help hundreds of thousands of uprooted peoples. But they—and their supplies such as ve-

hicles, food, and radio equipment—increasingly became lucrative prizes in themselves. Describing swaggering teenage gunmen in one operation, an aid official memorably said: “The AK47 rifle is their version of the credit card. They can get anything they want with it, and they don’t hesitate to do so.”

DOWNSIDE RISK

The ebb and flow of United Nations peacekeeping operations had several un- ▶

The results can be horrendous.



which proved the rule. This protection code generally continued to work throughout the latter half of the 20th century, even as the number of refugees and other uprooted persons spiralled from around one million people to tens of millions.

THE AGREEMENT UNRAVELS

Ironically, it began to unravel disastrously just at the time the world looked forward to what later proved to be a false dawn of hope. In the era of superpower rivalry, the global nightmare centered on the threat of nuclear holocaust. The problems of smaller client states were largely kept in check. And as the cold war ended and the threat of nuclear conflagration re-

Journey into darkness

It began as a simple assessment mission...

by **Christoph Hamm**

The scene appeared peaceful enough as we arrived at an encampment for displaced persons deep in the Burundi countryside.

A group of women were gathered in the shade, plaiting their hair as our convoy, containing six United Nations and three local officials on an assessment mission, stopped in front of the communal office.

Without warning, gunfire exploded and a group of armed men in tattered uniforms rushed toward us.

“Go back into the car,” a colleague yelled, but I cursed myself as I lay on the backseat and heard the thud of bullets passing through the body of the vehicle. Suddenly I felt warm blood streaming down my neck from my head.

I remembered that there allegedly is no pain when one is in shock. I waited for the pain, or fading consciousness or death. But nothing happened; only a very dry feeling in my mouth.

When I scrambled from the car, I saw

Saskia crouched against the back wheel, crying. I lay flat on my belly and peering underneath the car I saw a Burundi official, still moving, but apparently dying. Next to him lay a young girl, already dead.

I remember only a few thoughts then: “What the hell am I doing here? This is a military operation.” And later: “So, after all this is how dying is, ugly and dirty and painful—nothing heroic or idealistic about it at all.”

The armed men eventually rounded us up and forced us to sit down against the wall of a house, Luis, Saskia, myself, Katheleen, Guy and Leocadie.*

My sunglasses were stained with the blood dripping from my head. I had a sharp headache and fear of losing consciousness. I saw our cars burning with thick black smoke and the sound of explosions.

There were around 30 men armed to the teeth. Some were very young, boys of 16 who were especially agitated and shouted at me. One had taken Saskia’s spectacles and she couldn’t see anymore. I talked to him and he gave them back, but

not her boots. The last words I heard from her were ones of disbelief: “They have even taken my shoes.”

The armed men started to withdraw. Another explosion and then I don’t remember events clearly anymore. I heard a loud, single shot very near me. I jumped up and ran, past three colleagues on my left, and around the corner of the house.

FATALITIES

I looked back and saw Saskia on her left side, blood soaking out of her blond hair. Luis was lying dead beside her.

A moment later another U.N. colleague, Guy, came around the corner. I said to him, “This is the end.” I felt death at that moment, a deep fear and a black emptiness. He disappeared and, incredibly, came back in another moment with two other colleagues.

He shouted ‘run.’ We ran. Across an open market, down a slope, across the road, all the time expecting to be shot in the back. We took cover behind a rock. A young village boy crawled past us on his belly, holding his plastic slippers in his

► intended negative effects on humanitarian organizations. While in the first four decades of its existence, there were 13 U.N. peacekeeping missions, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, this number accelerated dramatically to 21. Suddenly the distinction between soldiers with weapons and relief workers at their side became blurred in the eyes of some combatants who lumped everyone together dangerously as ‘the U.N.’

When the number of peacekeeping operations again declined following events in Somalia in the mid-1990s, humanitarian organizations were caught in the down-draft. This time there was tremendous pressure on them to pick up the slack from the departing soldiers and ‘do something’ in global crises, even at considerable personal risk.

Increasingly, they faced life or death dilemmas. In Central Africa, for instance, field people were acutely aware of the de-

“The AK47 rifle is their version of the credit card. Teenage gunmen can get anything they want with it, and use it.”

liberate slaughter of many Hutus escaping through the rain forests in 1996. But how much could they tell to the outside

world without endangering both their own lives and an ongoing operation to save tens of thousands of other persons, aware that they were surrounded by, and at the mercy of, trigger-happy gunmen who enjoyed instant access to satellite news?

The number of attacks increased. Some made world headlines—the cold-blooded murder of six Red Cross officials working in a hospital in Chechnya in 1996, the death of French NGO aid worker Karen Mane in Tajikistan in 1997 or the nearly year-long kidnap of UNHCR’s Vincent Cochetel in 1998. Even the normally placid city of Geneva was shocked in 1999 when Kurdish protestors briefly seized the UNHCR headquarters building and parts of the nearby Palais des Nations. The Swiss military threw barbed wire barricades around the buildings and drafted in



UNHCR / F. DEL MUNDO

Conditions in refugee camps can often be difficult and dangerous. A relief worker surrounded by anxious civilians contacts base office via a field telephone.

hands. We crawled after him.

Leo was wounded in her breast and couldn't run any longer. I held her and we followed Guy and Kathleen at a distance. At the first homestead we reached, a family gave us water. I had lost quite a lot of blood and was at the end of my strength.

I had left Leo under a tree, but when I returned with the family we could not find her. I had led them to the wrong tree. Gun-

fire erupted again. The farmer urged me to run. Eventually I caught up again with Guy and Kathleen and crossed a river where I felt safer.

More and more villagers came out of the field. Nobody talked to us. The men looked at us with empty eyes. Women stared at my blood-soaked clothes with fear and pity. I will never forget that walk across the fields—among people fleeing

their homes, having lost families or left behind, like us, dead friends.

Having crossed several sugar plantations, we reached a factory and safety. We were taken to a villa with a beautiful garden overlooking the plains of Tanzania, sunlight, birds and the branches of trees. Life.

Guy went back with the army to recover the bodies of Saskia, Luis and the Burundi assistant factory director. They also brought back Leo who had been found by farmers. In a local dispensary her wound was dressed and glass and bullet fragments were plucked from my skull.

We flew home with the bodies of our friends in body bags in the aisle of the aircraft.

I thought: "It's just so simple... that the light which is a person is put out. We survivors had put one foot into darkness that day and the experience remains a haunting and disturbing one. And the sadness for colleagues who have gone beyond remains."

Burundi, October 12, 1999

**Luis Zuniga, Country Representative, UNICEF; Saskia Van Meijnenfeld, chief of logistics, WFP, Burundi; Christoph Hamm, repatriation officer, UNHCR; Kathleen Cravero-Kristofferson, UNDP Resident Representative; Guy Wagenhaere, field security officer; UNDP; Leocadie Nibizi, program assistant, UNDP.*

troops to guard against further attacks.

But the great majority of incidents, often in remote and dangerous field regions, never made the news. Aid officials across the spectrum began to run a gauntlet of almost daily harassment. Some were bombed from the air, others were sexually molested, arrested, beaten up or robbed at gunpoint. Offices were invaded and sometimes sacked and officials held hostage. One aid worker narrowly escaped being immolated by a deranged would-be refugee intent on killing himself and taking the aid worker with him. Field personnel were evacuated from regions such as West Timor, Kosovo and Central Africa (see page 18) as the risk factor became too high, compromising relief efforts and endangering the very people they had come to help.

ROUTINE DANGER

Danger became embedded in the daily lives of workers with unpredictable re-

Civilian workers were now seen as potential spies or simply as 'the enemy.' Increasingly, they faced life or death dilemmas.

sults. Some found it difficult to cope not only with appalling 'routine' working conditions in overcrowded refugee camps, but

also with the added personal threat. Others appeared oblivious to or simply ignored impending warning signals of trouble. The psychological impact on personnel was widespread.

UNHCR's worst nightmare in 50 years of humanitarian work came in September, 2000. On the sixth of that month, a carefully orchestrated mob of militia gunmen stormed the organization's Atambua office in West Timor and slashed to death three staff members, Carlos Caceres, a 33-year-old American protection officer, 44-year-old Ethiopian supply officer Samson Aregaegn and Pero Simundza, 29, a telecommunications operator from Croatia.

Their bodies were dragged into the street and burned. Shortly before the tragedy Caceres eerily wrote a friend in an e-mail: "We sit here like bait, unarmed, ►



Rebels ambush humanitarian workers during a simulated security exercise for aid officials.

► waiting for the wave to hit. These guys (militias) act without thinking and can kill a human as easily as I kill mosquitos in my room.” His last words were: “I need to go now. I hear screaming outside.”

Days later and a world away in Guinea, West Africa, Mensah Kpognon, head of the UNHCR office in the town of Macenta, was killed by armed rebels during a raid on the town and a second worker, Ms. Sapeu Laurence Djeya, was abducted for several days.

“Words fail us at times like this,” 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?”

QUESTIONING ITSELF

The world had actually been asking itself those questions for several years, but

the response was totally dwarfed by the burgeoning threat.

“The risks taken by unarmed aid workers go way beyond what any military would tolerate,” Assistant High Commissioner Soren Jessen-Petersen has said. “UNHCR and other agencies may have already crossed the threshold of acceptable risk, having had to strike a balance between the safety of its own staff and the life or death needs of the victims. It’s not beyond the realm of possibility that sooner or later we could just say ‘no’ when asked



UNHCR / K. ROCHAMONON

to go into these dangerous situations without better protection. We are very close to the limit of what we as humanitarians can do.”

Those observations were made several years ago during an earlier security crisis. In a recent interview the Assistant High Commissioner put those comments into the perspective of what happened in the intervening years: “We have been trying to enhance our security and have made some progress. But the overall situation in which we work has deteriorated far more rapidly than the progress we have been able to make in protecting our staff. Inadvertently, perhaps, we have crossed the threshold which was in evidence four years ago and we did not say ‘no.’ The threat has far outstripped our efforts to enhance security. The bottom line is: if we are going to save the lives of others, then we too must be alive—it’s melodramatic but true.”

Secretary-General Kofi Annan acknowledged that current U.N. security arrangements relied on “unpredictable and piecemeal funding and outdated, cumbersome and complex procedures.”

KICK START

The deteriorating security situation has kick-started another round of both global and internal UNHCR discussions on how to improve the safety of aid workers, but this latest debate has only served to underline how precarious conditions have become and how little positive response there has been.

In a report issued in October, 2000, Annan reported that since January, 1992, a total of 198 U.N. civilian employees had been killed and a further 240 kidnapped or taken hostage. Yet criminals had been brought

“I was just waiting for the shot in the back of the neck”

As Vincent Cochetel unlocked the door of his apartment in the northern Caucasian city of Vladikavkaz in January, 1998, three gunmen, each armed with two pistols, their faces covered in heavy masks, rushed from the darkness. Cochetel was forced to kneel on the floor of his kitchen with a gun jammed into his neck—“I was just waiting for the shot in the back of the neck”—before being dragged out of the building and into a terrifying kidnap ordeal which lasted for 317 days before he was rescued.

The Frenchman was head of UNHCR’s office in the north Caucasus region at the time. His experience was not only a tale of personal horror, but as in all such major security incidents involving humanitarian workers, had a

in the ongoing quagmire.

Cochetel was stuffed into the boot of a car for three days, was regularly beaten, manacled virtually the whole period of his imprisonment and underwent several mock executions. One attempt to free him backfired at the last minute and for nine months he was kept in a series of cellars and saw natural daylight only once during the entire period. He was always chained to his metal bed by handcuffs and a one meter long cable. That allowed him to walk exactly four steps. “I always dreamed of making that additional fifth step,” he recalled after his release.

Four days before Cochetel was dramatically released in a blizzard of gunfire by Russian special forces, four other foreign hostages had been brutally mur-



© KEYSTONE

UNHCR official Vincent Cochetel was kidnapped in southern Russia and held for nearly a year before his release. Such incidents not only endanger the lives of aid workers, but undermine programs to help civilian victims.

profound influence on the course of UNHCR and other humanitarian activities to help hundreds of thousands of uprooted peoples in the region. International and western agencies became wary of being too deeply involved

dered in Chechnya and one of Cochetel’s first reactions was, “Why did I survive and other hostages didn’t?” After a period of convalescence with his family, Cochetel has returned to his humanitarian work with UNHCR. ■

► to justice on only three occasions. The International Council of Voluntary Agencies said an ‘unknown number’ of NGO workers were killed in the same period.

Benon Sevan, an Under-Secretary General whose duties include the security of U.N. employees, said perpetrators could attack U.N. personnel with virtual impunity. “We are good targets and soft targets, because there is no protection,” he said. “Civilian staff are there before peacekeeping operations start. They remain behind after everyone thinks it is too difficult for peacekeeping troops to stay.”

Yet as Secretary-General Annan said, the current U.N. security system was designed to meet the more benign conditions which existed two decades earlier. Benon

“Staff security is not a luxury. It is not an option. It is a necessity and an essential part of the cost of doing business.”

Sevan’s office, for instance, has a staff of eight people to manage security for 70,000 U.N. employees and their dependents in more than 150 overseas duty stations, half of them considered high-risk zones.

Despite the gathering storm clouds, since Kofi Annan established a trust fund in 1998 to help train U.N. personnel in security issues, only four nations responded with donations. Japan gave \$1 million, Finland \$102,000, Norway \$100,000 and tiny Monaco \$8,500.

The 1994 Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel, which did not come into force until 1999 and to which only 31 states have acceded, does offer a limited degree of protection. But it is inadequate for the needs of a new and more dangerous millennium.

The Convention covers only personnel engaged in operations specifically authorized by the Security Council or the General Assembly, resulting in bizarre situa-



Sarajevo: In addition to safety worries, working and living conditions in the field are often extremely difficult.

A time for reflection

by Kilian Kleinschmidt

When reflecting about security, I look back and I try to remember the first time in my life when I felt frightened, or all the moments I thought that this, what I was doing, was not worth it.

And I realize that I have personally been climbing a deadly ladder, accepting increasing, and more and more uncontrollable risks in my life and work.

I wonder what has been my own personal responsibility in this spiral of danger, which part was institutionalized and finally what was the impact of an increasingly chaotic world?

After 12 years of humanitarian work mostly in dangerous areas, my fascination with excitement or the unknown, which led me to take unnecessary risks in the first place, has calmed down. But it has been replaced by the institutional drive to be on site, to be the first in and the last out, and other considerations such as the impact on the media, donors and governments.

This approach was fine a few years ago when certain rules were respected by the belligerents. Incidents were accidents, not deliberate and targeted actions. The big powers could switch conflicts on and off as needed and it was clear to all, who could work where, when and how.

tions where military personnel receive protection but not civilians engaged in normal humanitarian activities. There are moves to adopt a protocol to the Convention encompassing all U.N. civilian and non-governmental organization employees.

The statute of the International Criminal Court adopted in Rome in July, 1998, is also limited, noting that attacks which are part of a large scale policy of violence against U.N. personnel and committed in situations of protracted armed conflict could be considered war crimes. But 'normal' humanitarian operations where civilians are just as likely to be targeted, were not included.

Today our symbols and flags are not respected anymore—who cares for blue and white U.N. signs or for red crosses? How often do we need to hide our humanitarian identity to avoid becoming a target? How often do we betray our principles and mandates by, for instance, working under military escort only?

Directing relief operations in one of the most chaotic areas of the world, I am daily faced with the same dilemma: walking a fine line between helping the needy and avoiding exposing field teams to unacceptable risk.

UNNECESSARY DEATHS

In the past 10 years so many colleagues have already died, not as a result of banditry, but because of their affiliation to an organization. But as long as agencies have to respond to external pressures from governments or the media, as long as competition persists among humanitarian groups themselves, the job will remain dangerous.

UNHCR has already developed a set of assistance standards. It carries out security training and deploys field safety advisors to problem areas. But we urgently need to agree on basic 'rules of engagement,' and minimum working, living and staffing conditions.

High profile operations receive funding, equipment, emergency teams, secu-

rity officers and sometimes even U.N. guards. Risks are reduced. But most of us work in forgotten corners of the disaster world.

How do you explain out there to refugees that the food ration has been reduced yet again to a few hundred calories because of budgetary problems, why children cannot go to secondary school and why there are no funds for treatment of chronic diseases?

Many of us sit for days at a time stuck in the mud with vehicles without winches and a faulty antenna which prevents us from raising the alarm. Don't we all know how it feels to share one computer for a whole office, share three walkie-talkies amongst 10 staff and suffer boring evenings in the bush, once the five-year-old generator has broken down again? Persistent low level, but potentially deadly, insecurity is the result of under-funded, ill-equipped operations.

We need to urgently reflect on measures to protect principles, mandates and the lives of staff. Acceptable thresholds and rules of intervention must be agreed. A concerted donor and media campaign is necessary and we need to stand firm. Assistance programs should not be launched without the necessary resources and security in place – not only for our own safety but also that of the people we are trying to help. ■

In an address to UNHCR staff in Geneva in the wake of the most recent killings, Kofi Annan signalled that it could no longer be business as usual. "Staff security is not a luxury. It is not an option," he said. "It is a necessity and an essential part of the cost of doing business."

Staff agreed. Reflecting their growing concern and anger, thousands of U.N. personnel worldwide signed a petition demanding that the Security Council address security problems. Assistant High Commissioner Jessen-Petersen said in the immediate aftermath of the most recent killings, the staff mood was so black that UNHCR "had been in danger of losing

our soul, our mandate, our mission. There was a mood of taking absolutely no risk at all."

AN OVERHAUL

Kofi Annan proposed an overhaul of the creaking U.N. security system and asked the General Assembly for \$30 million annually during the budget period 2002-3 to beef up staff both in the field and at New York headquarters. There was a flurry of other ideas including the strengthening of existing legal instruments such as the 1994 Safety Convention and greater cooperation between so-called frontline agencies such as UNHCR, other ►

“The drums of war were heard...”

Daily life in a refugee camp is a harrowing experience



UNHCR / E. EYSTER

Women are at daily risk even doing routine chores such as collecting firewood.

The world of the refugee is an inherently violent one. Civilians are uprooted by war, political, religious or other persecution. Their flight may take them thousands of miles across battlefields, new continents and oceans, without official documents and with little money, their fate decided by the whim of an unscrupulous trafficking middleman, a border guard or an immigration official. And even when they reach the apparent safety of an official reception center or camp, they can still face bureaucratic harassment, imprisonment, physical beatings or rape.

The plight of specific groups has been well documented. In the full glare of the international media, nearly one million ethnic Albanians fled or were forced from Kosovo by Serbian units following the start of the 1999 allied bombing offensive

there. Hundreds of thousands of Rwandan Hutus and East Timorese abandoned their homes or were herded into exile by armed militias and political mafiosi during the 1990s. Unknown numbers were brutally murdered in the process.

But plotting an accurate picture of the security problems faced by the great majority of the world's uprooted peoples—UNHCR currently cares for more than 22 million people and there are an equal number of largely unassisted internally displaced civilians—whether their plight is getting worse, and how best to help them, has proved far more complex.

Contrary to perceived conventional wisdom, for instance, Sarah Kenyon Lischer reported in a UNHCR working paper that the number of refugees affected by so-called 'political violence' dropped dramatically from around eight million in 1987 to

4.3 million in 1998, principally because of the reduction in hostilities between the former Soviet Union and Afghanistan and in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

More than 100 countries at any one time normally host refugees, but 95 percent of all violence usually takes place in fewer than 15 states, with African nations accounting for up to 70 percent of incidents at the end of the last century, the report said. It added, "The real puzzle is why refugee situations, steeped in fear and animosity, so rarely lead to violence."

The working paper characterized 'political violence' as attacks involving refugees and forces from their own nations or receiving states, internal violence in receiving countries, interstate war or ethnic conflict among refugees. It did not cover other, often more pervasive forms of threat such as domestic or criminal in-

cidents perpetrated against or among refugees.

Jeff Crisp, head of UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, studied the security problems facing more than 200,000 refugees living in Kenya's two main camps, at Kakuma in the northwest of the country and Dadaab in the northeast.

HARROWING STORY

His 32-page report painted a harrowing tale of entire communities under siege: age-old societies, their customs and laws breaking down under the weight of exile and life in remote and overcrowded refugee 'cities'; violence as a daily way of life including widespread sexual abuse, criminal attacks by so-called 'bandits', and clashes between different ethnic groups from the same country, refugees from different states or refugees and local citizens.

Government authorities—who bear the major responsibility for refugee security—were either unable or unwilling to seriously tackle the problem, according to the report, and humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR had to constantly battle internal constraints such as limited funding and deeply ingrained root causes beyond their control to try to make a difference.

Though Crisp's report dealt specifically with the Kenyan camps, the various scenarios outlined, to a greater or lesser degree, are present in many other refugee situations around the world, according to field workers, though not as well documented.

The report also underlined a conclusion drawn in other dispatches in this issue of REFUGEES: that once security threats against refugees become so pervasive, aid workers are unable to do their own tasks effectively (they are confined to their compounds in Dadaab and Kakuma from dusk to dawn), security problems become more intractable, and the vicious cycle perpetuates itself.

Though the type of almost 'routine' violence outlined in the report is rarely reported in the media, Crisp quoted one experienced aid worker as saying that life in Dadaab camp was "in many ways more depressing and dangerous" than more 'visible' conflicts in West Africa or the Great Lakes. A UNHCR security officer described Dadaab at one point as "probably worse than the situation in Kosovo."

A rape counsellor documented 192 cases of sexual assault in the first seven

months of her assignment in 1993. (There were 80 reported cases of sexual violence in 2000). Female genital mutilation is still widely practised and domestic violence "has been accepted as normal by the majority of Somali refugees."

In Kakuma in January 1999, six Sudanese refugees were killed, around 300 were injured, 400 houses were burned to the ground and thousands of other civilians fled after men from the Dinka and Didinga groups fought a running battle with spears and swords. A UNHCR field worker reported that the "drums of war were heard from the Dinka community, and young men with spears and arrows were sighted..."

Deadly incidents, fueled by national dislikes or even the crushing boredom of camp life, result from even the smallest problem. When two Somalis riding a bicycle knocked over several jerrycans belonging to a group of Sudanese boys, it flared into a mini gang war in which one person was killed and 24 injured.

TACKLING THE PROBLEM

UNHCR and other humanitarian programs addressed the problem by integrating their programs, combining key

especially for vulnerable women and girls. A project funded by Ted Turner, founder of CNN, to enhance the awareness of sexual violence amongst refugees, was launched. Local communities were 'sensitized' and other programs were launched to discourage youngsters from becoming involved in crime.

The projects made an impact. But success at a local level was often imperiled by problems beyond the control of field workers such as a continuing shortage of funds for educational and other programs (the United States recently gave UNHCR around \$660,000 to improve camp security) and deeply rooted causes of the security dilemma, including the physical circumstances of the refugee populations and overall national refugee policy.

Occasionally there was even some unexpected fallout from these programs. The report noted that while many women were encouraged to take on new responsibilities and actively participate in decision-making processes, it quoted one former refugee as saying "most of the elders and people who had the authority back in Somalia have now lost their powers. The population has lost confidence in their leadership and views them with suspicion." Crisp added, "As this quotation suggests, the respective roles of men and women have been subject to particular changes, a factor which may help to explain the high levels of domestic and sexual violence in the camps."

The report noted the two camps were 'highly dysfunctional entities,' populated by people living

in extremely trying circumstances and who are 'traumatized' 'aggressive' 'highly stressed' and suffering from 'emotional and behavioral problems,' conditions which apply around the world. Despite that dispiriting picture, it is also true that more than 200,000 people who fled wartime conditions have been given asylum in a neighboring state and have not been forced to return to their still chaotic homelands. ■



A camp hospital at Dadaab.

UNHCR / L. TAYLOR

functions such as protection, assistance, camp management, education and community services. The agency reinforced the efficiency of local security forces, both inside and outside the camps, with financial, material and technical support.

Community self management, with an emphasis on law and order, was introduced. In Dadaab, more than 150 kilometers of live 'impenetrable' thornbush fencing was planted to enhance security, es-



Military units, either from individual countries or forming part of a U.N. peacekeeping force have helped in many humanitarian operations. In this photo, a UNHCR official cooperates with an Ethiopian U.N. soldier to help refugees.

► U.N. organizations and non-governmental organizations.

UNHCR established a task force on staff security under Jessen-Petersen. After reviewing the agency's existing security policies, Juan Amunategui, UNHCR's former inspector general, submitted a 15-page report entitled *Enhancing Staff Security*, outlining various measures to strengthen the organization.

In a preamble, it sketched the stark environment in which humanitarian workers now operate: "The number of armed conflicts has risen sharply (during the past decade), most of them characterized by intense violence, committed by regular armies, militias, warlords, guerrilla and bandit groups and in which civilian populations were deliberately targeted.

"Parties to armed conflicts increasingly expect aid organizations to care for the victims of war," it added. "At the same time, those parties have increasingly subjected humanitarian personnel to intimidation

and violence... A political, legal and security void clearly aggravates risk to humanitarian personnel.

"Humanitarian agencies were caught largely unprepared for these developments and are now struggling to define an adequate response," the report said, adding that UNHCR itself had had difficulty in funding important security functions and had failed to integrate staff security into management practices, procedures and culture.

It recommended three main steps, which were quickly approved:

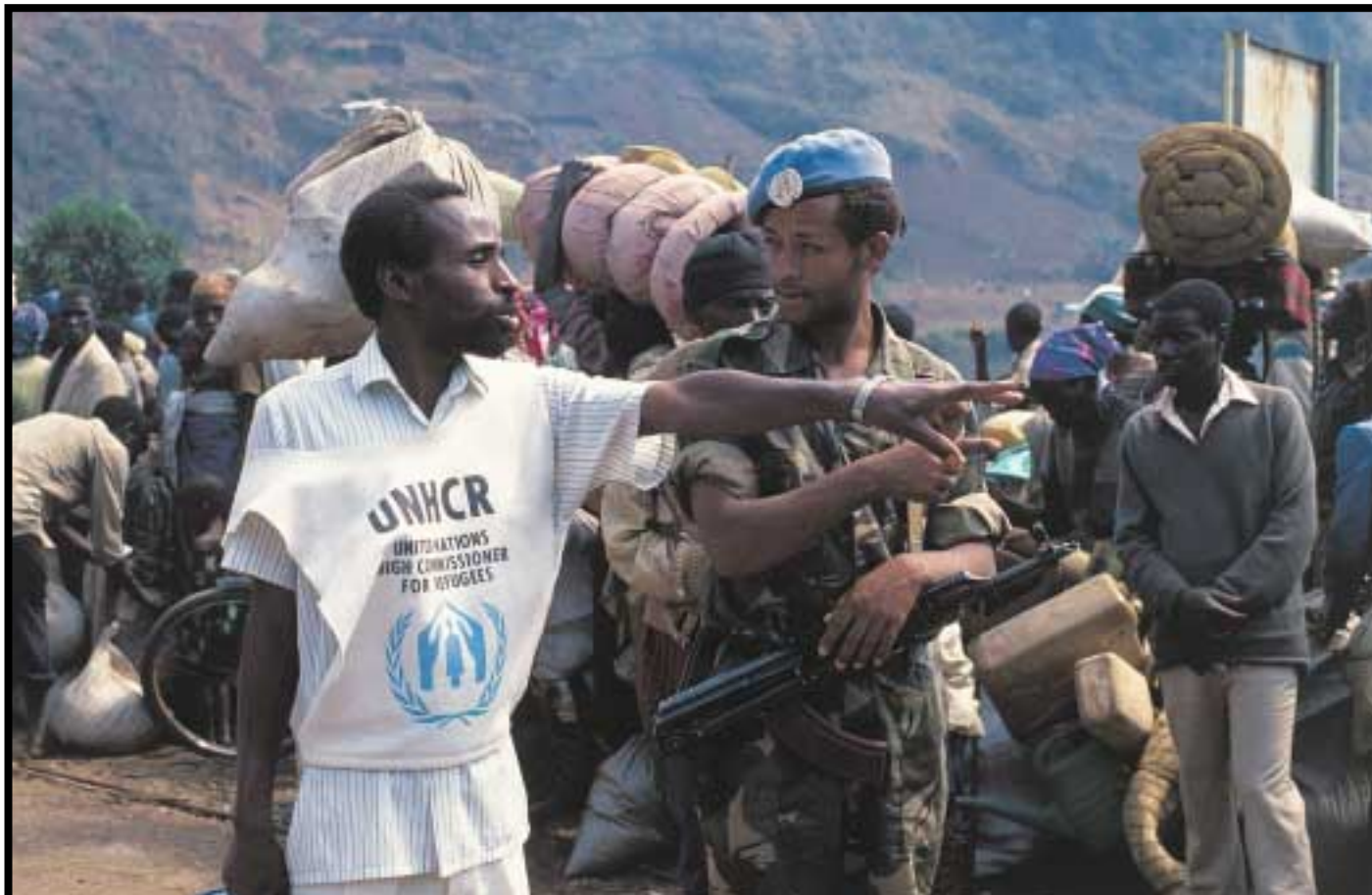
- Security functions will be integrated into the mainstream management of all future operations.
- Security considerations will be included in all phases of any operation including planning, budgeting, implementation, review and oversight.
- UNHCR will pursue an active rather than reactive approach to all security strategies.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

In practical terms this will include such measures as increasing and specifically 'dedicating' funds for security programs, strengthening and repositioning existing security operations, reinforcing other areas such as telecommunications, medical and staff welfare, and improving ties with other U.N. agencies.

Amunategui said particular attention would be paid in future to improving staff training for difficult field assignments. "This is absolutely critical," he said. "Ideally no one should go to the field without a thorough grounding in security issues, be it for the staff in general or representatives in particular."

Some recommendations closely follow security procedures which the Red Cross, with its far longer exposure to direct conflict areas, follows. For instance, security programs have always been integrated into overall operational planning rather than being treated as a separate category.



UNHCR / H.J. DAVIES

operations, though their roles are controversial. French U.N. troops in Sarajevo help civilians try to dodge a sniper as they cross a road. In Zaire,

Each Red Cross head of delegation in a specific emergency is responsible for security. Under the new UNHCR guidelines, the agency's equivalent, the Representative, will establish and oversee local 'security protocols' covering such things as general security conditions and the compliance of all staff members with recommended guidelines. Amunategui underlined that any changes and improvements and the adoption of new protocols will be worked out and integrated within an overall United Nations framework.

An important element will be an increased emphasis on explaining to and receiving acceptance by all sides in any con-

A political, legal and security void clearly aggravates risk to humanitarian personnel.

flict of UNHCR's mandate and the presence of its personnel on the ground. That may appear an obvious point, but as reported earlier, the agency's *raison d'être* has, on occasion, become extremely blurred.

A clear mandate and acceptance by all groups is a key to Red Cross operations. "All parties must accept our presence," says Red Cross security delegate Rene Walther. "As soon as there is any doubt, we begin talks. We don't authorize ourselves to take risks beyond this acceptance level. If there is a doubt on either side, this is quickly clarified."

Many of the recommendations contained in the report *Enhancing Staff Security* were underlined in separate internal

inquiries into the deaths of UNHCR staff in West Timor and Guinea. These two reports detailed events leading up to the killings, decisions taken during that period and their rationale at the time, how some things went wrong and what can be done in the future to try to limit the hazards.

The reports noted that as long as UNHCR tries to fully implement its mandate, its staff will be called upon to operate in highly insecure and complex situations with potentially high security risks. In West Timor for instance, the inquiry team said the situation had been far more complex than they had first imagined and that overall why the tragedy 'happened was less obvious, and less the result of simple failures, than we expected.'

The two reports detailed two very different types of security threats faced by humanitarian workers. In West Timor, UNHCR's office was deliberately targeted and attacked in overwhelming force with one aim— physical and human de- ▶

A million thoughts went through my mind. Was I going to come out of this alive?

by Panos Moutzis

The first hint of trouble began as mortars and gunfire were lobbed toward the town of Goma from the nearby Rwandan border. There was immediate panic among hundreds of thousands of refugees in huge camps in the region. Who was attacking them and why?

As we drove back towards UNHCR's headquarters terror spread through the town. Shop owners rolled down their shutters. Children rushed home and trucks packed with government soldiers sped through the streets.

Most of the estimated 100 expatriate relief workers from some 30 organizations gathered at one house on the outskirts of Goma. Eight of us stayed in the basement of the UNHCR office which became both the nerve center and contact with the outside world via one solitary working satellite phone.

The first night we spent destroying sensitive files on asylum seekers, fearful their lives would be endangered if the information fell into the wrong hands.

The next morning Geneva headquarters decided to evacuate all relief workers. I had been in Goma in 1994 when more than one million people fled to eastern Zaire. Now, two years later, they were being left unprotected once more as pawns in this ongoing civil conflict.

We decided the next day not to join government troops withdrawing in the face of a rebel advance, fearing we could become human shields.

But within a few hours soldiers stormed the office demanding keys for some of the 20 cars in the compound. One soldier fired into the ceiling. Outside, we could hear firing all over town.

The soldiers took four cars, but as we

looked on, one of the cars was hit by a shell and four troops were killed.

UNDER FIRE

Later in the afternoon, a mortar churned up the ground a few yards away, shaking the building. It was clear we were now being targeted by both sides. We were aware of our vulnerability. Government troops could easily have killed us and blamed the Tutsi rebels.

Many civilians trying to escape the town were killed. We lost all contact with the refugees.

Only months before, I had enjoyed the most beautiful marriage and honeymoon and my wife was now two months pregnant. How to stay calm and reassure her when I was also giving live interviews to the media for what had become a major international story?

A million thoughts went through my



The military sometimes escorts civilian aid workers. But many private organizations believe such cooperation infringes on their neutrality and increasingly makes them targets for the warring sides.

struction. In Guinea, the death of Mensah Kpognon in Macenta was, tragically, almost accidental. His house happened to be in the path of retreating rebels who earlier had attacked a military post in the town, and he was eventually shot after he and his attackers had been unable to start his official vehicle which they wanted to use to make good their escape.

In neither case were UNHCR personnel given adequate information, early warning or physical protection from government police and troops who were stationed nearby. That fact underscored that in future security planning, humanitarian organizations must take into consideration and plan to compensate for the drop in the level of 'official protection' on which they have traditionally relied in the past.



UNHCR / P. MOUNTZIS

Hundreds of thousands of terrified Hutus streamed into the Zaire town of Goma within a matter of days in 1994, abandoning weapons and machetes as they arrived. Two years later, as fighting engulfed the town, aid workers undertook a dangerous escape.

mind. Would I come out alive? Should I start writing a letter to my wife? What about the new child? Should I write her a letter? And what about my parents? I saw other colleagues writing, too.

That night the firing came closer to our building. Minutes later we heard steps in the office. Our security adviser said it could be minutes before they would find us and possibly kill us. I removed the satellite phone receiver just in case it would ring and reveal our hiding place. The intruders finally left.

On the second day relief workers at the 'safe house' said that several soldiers who had

been guarding them had been killed in front of the building.

There were false alarms. We received one telephone call, apparently from the French embassy in Kinshasa, and we wondered if this presaged a rescue attempt by nearby French foreign legionnaires. Nothing happened.

Geneva then informed us that a Captain John would make contact and escort us towards the Rwandan border only three tantalizing kilometers away. We placed a white flag outside the door to identify our location but nobody came calling.

After a fourth evening we decided to gamble—driving first to the safe house and then making a dash for the frontier. There were still pockets of resistance in Goma, but we commandeered two cars and drove at speed through empty streets filled with burning tires and the bodies of civilians and soldiers. There was also the risk of mines.

We reached the Rwandan border without incident. I felt my life had been miraculously extended. Four years on I saw the e-mail written by Carlos Caceres minutes before he was killed. I was reminded that it is only luck that I am alive today.

Mountzis was a UNHCR spokesman in eastern Zaire in both 1994 and 1996 following the genocide in neighboring Rwanda.

MODEST FIRST STEP

The current proposals, even if adopted, would be only a modest first step toward creating a more hospitable climate for aid workers and refugees alike.

Many more complex issues also need to be addressed.

The safety of refugees, as well as aid workers, deteriorated sharply in recent years. Entire groups were subject to widespread killings or genocide as happened in Rwanda in 1994. Even when they reached

apparent safety in a neighboring state, refugees were often subjected to military, political and sexual harassment.

Asylum procedures were tightened in Europe and other regions of the world, helping create a dangerous, degrading but lucrative multi-billion dollar trade in human trafficking.

An estimated 20-25 million so-called internally displaced persons have been uprooted from their homes, but because they were forced into 'internal'

rather than 'external' exile, they have received less international attention or legal protection than refugees. The international community only recently began to focus on how more effectively it could help this group of people.

An increasingly emotional issue is the fate of local employees of U.N. and other agencies, especially when emergencies become dangerous. They generally make up the majority of aid officials in a given operation and undertake the most dangerous tasks. But though international staff ultimately can expect to be extricated from a difficult situation, national staff either cannot be evacuated because of U.N. rules or local laws or must refuse because they have families in the region. Some of these employees have paid the 'ultimate penalty' ▶

"In the last few years we have been trying to enhance our security and have made some progress."

© S. SALGADO



Despite increasing danger to both sides, the work of feeding and protecting hundreds of thousands of refugees continues.

► but their sacrifice is rarely addressed. How to help families of these victims has never been officially resolved and the only compensation they have received on occasion has been private donations from other, luckier colleagues.

United Nations and literally hundreds of non-governmental organizations work side by side in major operations, and often cooperate on an ad hoc basis on the ground. But attempts to formalize and strengthen agreements have foundered. No NGO headquarters unit, for instance, has initialed a binding 1996-7 Memorandum of Understanding with the U.N. because of its perceived major shortcomings.

A meeting in Geneva in late 2000 on security issues noted there was an “assumption... that collaboration in security is an asset in humanitarian action.”

But in many circumstances, it added, NGOs might want to “refrain from security collaboration for reasons of principle... or to avoid identification by association. The ongoing debate among humanitar-

The current proposals would be a modest first step toward creating a more hospitable climate for aid workers and refugees alike.

ian agencies about using armed peacekeeper escorts for humanitarian assistance highlights some of the dilemmas faced by independent agencies. There are also times when NGOs need to emphasize an image of impartiality for reasons of access and security, and are forced to distance themselves from the U.N. and its coordination mechanisms.”

NEUTRALITY

One of the most controversial issues in

the humanitarian world is this question of ‘neutrality’ and how closely civilian aid workers should work with military units. Many NGOs insist that no matter how logistically advantageous such an arrangement might be, this type of cooperation fatally undermines an organization’s neutrality and humanitarian nature.

This is increasingly important in today’s environment where many groups of insurgents are not bound by the traditional rules of behavior and where it is up to humanitarian officials to ‘prove’ their bona fide rather than simply assuming that they will be protected by their job title.

For its part, UNHCR has worked with U.N. peacekeepers in Bosnia and other places and with the armed forces of friendly countries in Central Africa where they supplied the type of heavy-lift logistical capability civilian groups would be incapable of providing for huge numbers of people.

This difference of philosophy and approach was never more evident than in Kosovo in 1999 where many NGOs criti-

“These guys can kill a human as easily as I kill mosquitos in my room...”

Thirty-three-year-old Carlos Caceres had arrived in Indonesia in March to serve as a protection officer for refugees in West Timor. The Cornell University Law School graduate had previously worked for UNHCR in Moscow, but his new posting in the town of Atambua was at the cutting edge of humanitarian work. The American was both thrilled at the experience of working on the very frontline of refugee assistance, but increasingly apprehensive about the dangers it posed. There had been talk of an impending demonstration by armed and unfriendly militias as Carlos Caceres typed out the following e-mail to a friend:

My next post needs to be in a tropical island without jungle fever and mad warriors.

At this very moment, we are barricaded in the office. A militia leader was murdered last night. Atambua suddenly shut down when news spread that trucks and buses full of militias were coming... The town suddenly deserted and all the shops were boarded up in a matter of minutes. I'm glad that a couple of weeks ago we bought rolls and rolls of barbed wire.

I was in the office when news came that a wave of violence would soon pound Atambua. We sent most of the staff home. I just heard someone on the radio saying that they are praying for us in the office. The militias are on the way and I am sure they will do their best to demolish this office. These guys act without thinking and can kill a human as easily as I kill mosquitos in my room.

You should see this office. Plywood on the

windows, staff peering out through openings in the curtains hastily installed a few minutes ago. We are waiting for this enemy, we sit here like bait, unarmed, waiting for the wave to hit. I am glad to be leaving this island for three weeks. I just hope I will be able to leave tomorrow.

As I wait for the militias to do their business, I will draft the agenda for tomorrow's meeting in Kupang. The purpose of the meeting: to discuss how we are to proceed with this operation.

Carlos

As his friend on the other side of the world was reading this e-mail, Carlos Caceres and two UNHCR colleagues were being hacked to death in their office and their bodies later burned.

cized UNHCR for its decision not only to work with the military, but specifically to cooperate with one party, NATO, that was actually a direct party to the conflict.

While there is agreement that civilian aid workers should not be armed, should they nevertheless be accompanied by armed escorts and when? The Red Cross for the first time, and very reluctantly, agreed that their delegates needed armed protectors in the chaos that was Somalia in 1992.

When two United Nations staff were murdered by Hutu extremists in Burundi in 1999, some officials said later there may have been even more deaths had not an accompanying official been armed. However, in the incident involving François Preziosi reported at the beginning of this article, the Congolese gunmen and Tutsi refugees increased their frenzied attacks on the two civilians after they discovered a handgun in their possession.

There is a dangerous security contradiction in all humanitarian work these days. Refugees are most in need of assistance at the very moment when relief workers are most exposed to danger. In East Timor in 1999 humanitarian officials suc-



In the aftermath of the killing of UNHCR field workers in September, 2000, colleagues stage a protest rally in Geneva. Thousands of people worldwide signed a petition demanding the Security Council address the issue of security.

cessfully resisted headquarters' demands that they pull out of the capital, Dili, insisting that action would trigger a massacre of civilians crowded into their compound. They undoubtedly saved many lives.

But events in West Timor almost exactly a year later showed how razor thin the line is between making a right decision in treacherous circumstances or paying the ultimate price. ■

“NO TIME TO WRITE A LAST LETTER;

Security problems have become an everyday headache for humanitarian workers, whether from huge international organizations or small, private agencies. The outside world hears about the worst of these incidents, the high profile killings



UNHCR / M. KOBAYASHI

SRI LANKA: Relief workers must often cross dangerous no man’s land between government troops and Tamil guerrillas to reach internally displaced civilians.

SRI LANKA, 1997

Boy, it’s hot—in these blue flakjackets with the heavy plates in front and back—sweat is pearly down our backs from the white helmets.

Forty-five or 50 Celsius, who knows, who cares, who dares to breathe anyway?

Pitch dark—there is the abandoned farm half way; the little Hindu shrine with all the colored little bands, broken coconuts, where the truck drivers pray during the day crossing no man’s land.

The palm trees with their tops shot away by artillery.

Big Dany driver is so quiet, hiding behind his wheel and driving so slowly—crawling, inching—and so are the five empty trucks behind. Waiting for the bang which will tell us, for a fraction of a second, that we are dead and will never make it home, which will tell us that the mine got us.

No time to write a last letter; no time to cry and scream. Advancing carefully—another 500 yards, 400 – 300 – 200 – 100. Gosh – made it. Totally wet! Soaked! Wrecked!

Greeted by this little black clothed fighter with his big gun at the rebel check-

point.

Dany, I am hungry; let’s have the hottest curry in this wrecked truckers place, some coconut milk – replace lost salt and water and get this adrenaline level down again. Do our legs still work?

My decision to try to get back from rebel territory through the frontlines. Didn’t my friend the brigadier promise to let me ‘in’ and open the barriers in the bunker line even at night coming back from rebel land?

Didn’t I tell my friend, the rebel check-point commander, that we would be al-

NO TIME TO CRY AND SCREAM.”

or kidnappings, but rarely about the more numerous ‘run of the mill’ problems which can include beatings, death threats, robberies, crossing disputed territory and sometimes dealing with just the bizarre:

lowed to cross by the army, even late at night?

Didn't he reply that if our convoy crossed there would be no return—he would mine the no man's land for the night, attack any moving object?

Wasn't I responsible for Dany, five truck drivers, five turnboys and for myself?

The army didn't open the barrier. We had to return through no man's land.

The mine didn't rip us into little chunks. They didn't shoot.

The curry was the hottest on earth.

– KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT



KOSOVO, 1999

On the main Pristina-Podujevo road, Kosovo. Had arrived only the previous day and this was my first mission into the countryside.

Heavily armed Serb troops, tanks and personnel carriers to our right. We can hear sporadic gunfire from the hills to our left.

Without warning, the Serbs open up with everything they had, across the main road and traffic. We can hear 20mm cannon fire ripping the air just above our vehicle.

Shelter in a nearby brick-built garage for an hour until the firing subsides. Eventually we just carry on and complete the mission.

Returning to Pristina we encounter members of the Kosovo Verification Mission, under cover and wearing protective clothing, because the Kosovo Liberation Army has started to return fire against the Serbs.

A mission member tells us there is an Albanian in a nearby village who requires dialysis in Pristina or he will die. “Can you help us?”

We turn around, drive through the danger again, pick up patient and son. At the Pristina hospital the son asks, “You going to wait and take us back again, aren't you?” A colleague's reply was unprintable. I ask him, “Is it like this every day?” He just smiles.

– BRIAN GOLESWORTHY



MALI

We were returning to our land cruiser in northern Mali after meeting with a Tuareg returnee leader when two turbaned masked men brandishing Kalashnikov rifles burst from an abandoned building.



UNHCR / C. SHIRLEY

MALI: Returnees en route to market.

Shots were fired, but before I had a chance to feel afraid or run, they entered the vehicle and drove off. It wasn't until the car disappeared that I realized my driver had been shot. He did not lose his life, but his evacuation was terribly long and painful.

We were lucky to find a Red Cross mission with a vehicle and radio. But a difference in frequencies and our inability to contact the nearest UNHCR office made communications difficult. We finally alerted the police through an office in the capital, 1,600 kilometers away.

The direct impact of this incident was minimal for the refugees and returnees. But they did worry this would lead to a pullout of international organizations.

We reviewed our security arrangements and opted to use armed gendarme escorts for field missions. It took quite a bit of convincing for the refugees to accept them. Their memories of armed struggle with government forces was still very vivid.

– CAROLYN WAND



UNHCR / L. SENNGALLIES

KOSOVO: Life was extremely dangerous in Kosovo even before NATO forces intervened in 1999 and UNHCR field teams regularly monitored the conditions of the province's civilians and provided assistance.



© S. SALGADO

TURKEY: Kurdish refugees in the Turkish mountains near Iraq in 1997.



TURKEY, 1991

There was no heating in the room in the Turkish town where I was conducting interviews with asylum seekers and refugees and I was wearing my coat. One person, whose claim had already been rejected, was focusing all his misadventures, problems and frustrations on me. All the evil that he had experienced in his life was the fault of the official standing in front of him.

He suddenly left the room and I had the feeling I faced danger. I closed my laptop and for no apparent reason unbuttoned my coat. The man rushed into the room with a bottle full of gasoline, started sprinkling the liquid over both of us and set us ablaze. He embraced me so that we would be immolated together in a macabre dance of death. I escaped by slipping out of my coat, leaving him with my coat in his arms and one of his legs on fire. Days later he wrote me a letter from his hospital bed: "Dear Mr. Quintero, I wanted to kill you, but please help me now."

— ROBERTO QUINTERO MARIÑO

He embraced me so that we would be immolated in a macabre dance of death.



KIGALI, 1997

As I drove into the compound of my home I noticed two men dressed in military uniforms carrying AK47 rifles fitted with bayonets. They were joined by what I thought was my domestic security guard and they took my car keys, radio handset and wallet. I was pushed into a corner of the compound and felt the poke of a bayonet on my thigh.

They blindfolded me, tied my hands at the back with a rope and I was thrown to the ground with my face to the soil. I thought they were going to shoot me.

They eventually drove away in my car. I walked to my house with my hands still behind my back and attempted to cut the rope with a knife from the kitchen. The pain in my shoulders was excruciating. I went to the bathroom and, looking through the mirror, attempted to cut the rope again. My real domestic guard had been attacked earlier and tied up in the same way. A security patrol eventually freed us. The next day I went back to work.

Sequel: I was advised to put barbed wire around the compound wall at a cost of some \$400. I was told later I could only be reimbursed for putting bars on windows and not deploying barbed wire at my home.

— ABRAHAM ABRAHAM



CONGO, 2000

“I will hold any attack until 6:30 a.m.,” says this man in civilian clothes who claims to be the rebel guerrilla zone commander. “We have been ordered to begin operations tomorrow.”

“Hold your fire until 7 a.m.” we ask. He agrees.

We have come with our motorized canoes, our doctors, our blue plastic sheeting and not enough of everything else for 5,000 desperate refugees to this small village of 400 people. It is along this big river, the highway in the rain forest, the sanctuary for so many who had decided to cross the river to reach apparent safety in another country.

The rebel gives us 12 hours to work. We have arrived with the sunset, passing an island full of government soldiers looking for him and only 500 yards away. We have an armed escort from another country who are so frightened they sing silly songs.

There we are at night, establishing lists, inventing distribution lists, trying to make everyone happy—producing an impact—but knowing we won’t be there for long and we won’t be back. We, NGOs and UN-HCR people, work the whole night: 600 patients, mostly diarrhea patients, treated; 4,000 receive plastic sheeting and all at least some tools, soap or jerrycans.

We stop the distribution when our hurricane lanterns run out of fuel. A horrible coffee, packing the canoes in a hurry and pushing off.

Please, whoever guards the river, let us pass through the low water where you have to slow the canoes.

Just six weeks ago at this spot they took our friends and colleagues prisoner, even with an armed escort and even though they were flying the U.N. flag. The team of seven were beaten, threatened with death, treated as mercenaries and spies.

Their ordeal lasted two weeks.

This is where suddenly I don’t want to be in this canoe surrounded by a beautiful paradise of rain forest and rivers full of fish, birds and game. Instead I think of being a scholar, a researcher, a teacher.

— KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT



ZAIRE: Refugees in the rain forests of Central Africa in desperate need of help.

◆◆◆
ZAIRE, 1997

Hundreds of thousands of Rwandan refugees were hiding in the forests and evidence began to accumulate that refugees, including women and children, were being slaughtered.

I was called to the governor's office during the night and during curfew. Dozens of heavily armed rebels were waiting. I was practically thrown inside the building and one rebel 'minister' yelled: "You are the

one who has written a confidential report claiming our soldiers are massacring refugees."

During the following three hours my colleagues and myself were repeatedly threatened with taunts: "We are a rebel movement and everything can happen. If you or your colleagues are killed or disappear, who will come to look for you in the middle of the war among these impenetrable forests?"

I was told to write a new report denying

my previous allegations. The rebels wanted to replace around 80 of our local staff with their own people. They threatened to close our office.

I was terrified and kept thinking: "Calm down man, you know rebels. Let them vent their anger. After that we will see."

At around midnight, the governor invited all of us to dinner. That probably saved my life.

— LINO BORDIN

◆◆◆
TANZANIA, 1995

Lumasi Camp in Tanzania houses around 110,000 mostly Rwandan Hutu refugees. Mid-Saturday afternoon. Football on the television. A buffalo has entered the camp creating mayhem. The population sees this as a meal on feet, but the buffalo has trampled and severely injured a little girl.

I was asked what to do and replied that as an ex-London copper (policeman), didn't have too many buffaloes in Oxford Street.

Around 6,000 excited people had gathered. The police opened fire on the animal with light automatic weapons, many of the bullets bouncing off and causing mayhem in the crowd.

Heard this from an NGO official on the scene who by this time was sounding like a sports commentator at the Grand National and could hear fire in the background.

Eventually the animal was slaughtered but what to do with the carcass? The police wanted it, but so did the refugees. Standoff, then a compromise was reached to dismember and distribute it on the spot.

Invited to a local dinner party the following day. Roast buffalo on the menu. The piece I had came complete with an AK47 round.

—BRIAN GOLESWORTHY

◆◆◆
MOZAMBIQUE, 1988

We had almost finished filming when I decided to make one final shot, of a 50-truck convoy carrying assistance for refugees returning to Mozambique. I was filming from the top of a truck when, through the lens, I saw a military officer gesticulating to me. I showed the nec-

essary official authorization, but he was clearly drunk.

We were tossed into a sort of bamboo cage for about seven hours. We could hear fighting going on nearby. We were alone, isolated, powerless. We tried to talk with our prison guards, but it was useless.

They had also arrested the Mozambique ambassador from neighboring Malawi, but they eventually released him. He managed to inform Geneva of our predicament and we were eventually released after seven hours, in the middle of the night with nowhere to go.

The lesson I learned that night is that even with proper identification you can end up at the mercy of a brutal despot with tragedy just a moment away.

— JEAN-BERNARD MOLLARD



GUATEMALA, 1995-98

One security paradox is that in certain situations, it may be more dangerous to work after a conflict than during a war situation. That was the case in Guatemala in the 1990s. The bulk of repatriation in that region took place during the actual conflict and returnees ran a very high risk.

Nevertheless UNHCR was respected by the armed actors, the Guatemalan army and the rebels. With peace and demobilization, the same mountain and jungle roads we had traveled in comparative safety became the scene of frequent attacks by gunmen who had no special respect for UNHCR. Our team was so vulnerable when the local people spread a rumor that the huge object in front of the car (the antenna) was a weapon, we didn't deny it because we thought it might prevent some attacks.

— ROBERTO MIGNONE



MOGADISHU, SOMALIA 1993

Mohammed—fast, fast, faster—drive through this. Sheik and Ali in darkened glasses with their weapons. Sheik on the front seat. Ali opening the back door ready to fire.

“We were tossed into a sort of bamboo cage for about seven hours. We could hear fighting going on nearby.”

Where are the gangs today? This looks fishy on the road ahead.

Who are those guys standing there?

Who do they want today?

“If you are not American they won't touch you,” I am told. “Just occasional drive by



WEST TIMOR, 1999

We began at the crack of dawn to pick up 300 refugees who were anxious to return home from West to East Timor, but their camp was



TIMOR: Civilians return to their homes in East Timor from West Timor.

shootings these days. Nothing serious.”

Why don't these flakjackets have protection on the side? My helmet is too small; why doesn't it cover my skull? Wasn't Kay, the young blond American, killed a few days ago in such a shooting?

The Pakistani checkpoint at the UN compound. Mohammed has made it once more.

“Sir, you are U.N.? Your ID sir,” from the Pakistani guards from behind their sandbags. Then plong, plong, plong. Bullets hit the wall near the checkpoint.

Damn, let us through.

“Your ID sir, please,” he insists.

Me waving something official looking and we are finally allowed through.

Five minutes later, the meeting. The official in charge comments that I am late... as usual.

infested with militia groups who were hell bent to stop anybody from going back.

A security glitch and then a mini-mob destroyed our good intentions. A police escort was not there when we arrived at the entrance to the camp with a convoy of trucks and buses.

Abruptly, militia gunmen surrounded the four of us. They yelled at us, shoved us around and ordered us to leave the site. The leader of the group suddenly lunged at my neck. I shoved him away and radioed for help with my handset.

He came at my neck again. His eyes held an anger deeper than any I had seen before. I stood there frozen and alone. My colleagues had, understandably, run for safety.

At that moment, the police arrived. The police commander gave a brotherly warning to the militia leader and warned us they could not ensure our safety if we continued the ‘extraction’ operation.

It was a close call. But I didn't fully grasp how close it was until much later, in the safety of my Geneva apartment. Not until our colleagues were killed almost a year later, also in West Timor, that it really hit me.

— TOM VARGAS

UNHCR / F. PAGETTI

MAKING A DIFFERENCE....

United Nations Volunteers on the frontline

by Richard Nyberg

Adam Rajab Odongo will never forget the look of agony on the face of the two-year-old refugee child as he toured a Tanzanian government hospital. The boy's right leg had been shattered by the same bullet which killed his mother as she carried him on her back. Other civilians fleeing the chaos of the Democratic Republic of Congo helped the toddler escape to the neighboring country, but he had lain in the hospital for three days without treatment.

"It was a very sad and difficult time for me since I could not compose myself," Odongo, a Ugandan said. "I burst into tears in front of all those refugees. I carried the crying boy, with me sobbing, and the refugees following. We walked into the doctor's office and questioned why this was happening." The doctor operated the same day, amputating the boy's leg, but saving his life. Odongo's intervention led to improved monitoring of refugee admissions and referrals in Tanzanian hospitals.

Odongo is a member of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program which was established in 1970 as the volunteer arm of the U.N. system. Each year it sends around 4,500 experts to some 150 countries where they participate in a wide variety of activities ranging from helping to organize elections, delivering emergency relief, promoting human rights and gender equality, to improving health facilities and protecting the environment.

An estimated 1,500 UNVs have specifically worked with UNHCR in the last decade, in jobs ranging from refugee reception and repatriation to camp management and transportation.

UNV's involvement played a crucial role in shaping the agency's 'emergency preparedness and response' programs, according to Marilyn Virrey-Raguin who helped coordinate the deployment of volunteers throughout the turbulent 1990s. Senior Emergency Officer Jo Hegenauer, who worked with a group of volunteers in Kosovo, agreed: "In my experience, the work of the UNVs is usually characterized

by their tremendous amount of enthusiasm and hard work," he said. "UNVs are often asked to perform new and complex tasks which have a positive result for the people we assist."

STRENGTHENING TIES

The two organizations further strengthened their ties in June, 2000, with an agreement to provide a stand-by roster



Volunteer Srdja Marotic at work in Tanzania.

of volunteer personnel for emergency and repatriation missions.

In the field, work continues at an unrelenting pace. Adam Rajab Odongo came across the two-year-old Congolese boy in his role as a field officer in Tanzania's Kigoma District which houses the Lugufu refugee camp, a temporary home for some 60,000 Congolese refugees. He has worked in the region for three years, caring for fresh waves of incoming refugees and helping at least some of them return home.

Fellow UNV Srdja Marotic, helps over-

see around 350 light vehicles and three chartered aircraft which relief agencies use to assist some 350,000 refugees in the region as well as helping to construct camps. Sometimes "you are up at 3 a.m. in the morning... and if you are lucky you might finish around 10 p.m. in the evening," he said.

Over the border in Democratic Congo, UNV program officer Giovanni Lepri had his own 'encounter' with another two-year-old at the town of Matanda. Modeste was hardly breathing and on the verge of starvation when Lepri, an Italian, saw him. "We had some high energy biscuits and water with us and we tried to feed the child," he said. "We decided to reach Goma (the nearest large town) as quickly as possible and we took the kid with us." The boy survived and is currently with a host family in Rwanda. For Lepri, who has already helped to repatriate 32,000 Rwandan refugees, care for displaced persons from Burundi, and initiated two road repair projects, it was all in a day's work.

Across the world in Baucau, East Timor, Anne Richier from France helps to shelter refugees, prepares them to go home and work on so-called 'quick impact' projects to improve conditions for refugees and local villagers alike. "UNVs are essential to UNHCR field work because we're the ones going out to the field on a daily basis," she says.

UNHCR agrees. To pay tribute to 'its' UNVs, the humanitarian organization recently awarded the volunteers a special Nansen Medal to honor their commitment to refugees (see page 30). And the U.N. General Assembly designed 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers to highlight their global work and encourage more people to voluntarily offer their own skills to help the world's needy. ■

Volunteers can contribute their skills anywhere in the world via :

<http://app.netaid.org/OV>

A NEW CATASTROPHE

Twenty-one years of war, and now a devastating drought...

by Yusuf Hassan

Afghanistan is in the clutches of yet another deadly calamity. Already holding the unenviable record of producing the single biggest and oldest refugee population in the world, the country is now in the grip of the worst drought in living memory which has left a trail of death and destruction in its wake.

Twelve million people have been affected, as many as four million severely. Crops have failed, fields and orchards withered, rivers, dams and wells dried up, and livestock herds, a source of livelihood for millions of Afghans, perished. Cereal production dropped by 50 percent and the country is short of a record 2.3 million tons of food.

According to the United Nations "This has been an exceptionally difficult year for Afghans and in 2001, the scale of human misery is expected to surpass even that of this year" with millions threatened by starvation.

Tens of thousands of people took to the road, both within and beyond Afghanistan's borders, in a desperate attempt to ensure their survival. There was a steady exodus to the major towns of Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad. More than 50,000 persons fled the most affected provinces in western Afghanistan to the city of Herat, where the U.N. established several camps. In the north, the displaced encamped in makeshift shelters, schools and public buildings or stayed with local families. Significant numbers crossed into

Pakistan and Iran.

The drought sharply exacerbated the devastation of a country torn by 21 years of unremitting war which shows no sign of abating.

The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan precipitated the exodus of 6.2 million Afghans into neighboring Iran and Pakistan. The departure of the Soviet troops in 1989 and the fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992 briefly raised hopes for peace, but the victorious Mujahideen movement quickly fragmented into feuding factions.

The dramatic rise of the Taliban in 1994 failed to halt the country's slide into chaos and another bloody civil war.

Since taking the capital, Kabul, in 1996, the Taliban single-mindedly focused on defeating its principle adversary, the Northern Alliance led by Ahmed Shah Masoud, which controls the northeastern corner of Afghanistan. The two sides have been locked ever since in seesaw battles that perennially shift the front lines but have failed to deliver a decisive outcome for either party.

In September the Taliban captured the town of Taloqan which served as the political headquarters of the country's still officially recognized president, Burhanuddin Rabbani. It also seized control of major access routes to Tajikistan.

RENEWED FLIGHT

As many as 70,000 people fled the renewed fighting, in addition to those already trying to escape the ravages of the drought.

An estimated 10,000 civilians became trapped in freezing conditions on two spits of land in the Pyandj River which marks the border with Tajikistan after they were refused permission to enter that country.

Another 60,000 people fled to Pakistan before that country closed its borders in November, 2000, saying it was unable to cope with any more refugees in the absence of ongoing international financial support.

Though nearly 4.4 million of the more than six million Afghans who fled the original Soviet invasion have now returned (one of the largest repatriations of a single refugee group since UNHCR was established), between them Pakistan and Iran still host around 2.6 million Afghans. There are an unknown number of other civilians scattered in countries across the globe, making them both the 'largest' and 'oldest' single group of refugees in modern history.

There are, in addition, between 600,000-800,000 civilians internally displaced within the country.

The future, which has never been particularly hopeful, remains extremely bleak.

Host countries have begun to feel 'refugee fatigue' and there is a growing sense of xenophobia among their own populations against their visitors. As asylum opportunities deteriorate, Afghans entering their third decade in exile are beginning to feel they have overstayed their welcome.

"I distinctly remember the days when an unabating flow of dignitaries would visit refugee camps and talk about the need to



The effects of drought and war in Afghanistan.

alleviate human misery and sufferings,” recalls Hasim Utkan, UNHCR’s current Representative in Pakistan who also worked there in the 1980s. “These images now seem to be very distant and blurred. With shifting strategic concerns, the emergence of new refugee situations and declining media coverage, Afghan refugees have fallen out of fashion.”

ABANDONMENT

What makes Afghanistan’s situation seem particularly pernicious is its abrupt abandonment by the very countries which contributed to its instability in the first place including the old superpowers. At the end of the cold war, Afghanistan dropped from the global emergency radar and the world turned its attention to high profile crises elsewhere. It was no longer strategic enough to hold the center stage.

Contributions to UNHCR’s Afghan pro-

gram plummeted to an all-time low, forcing massive cuts in refugee assistance. Inside Afghanistan conditions have also continued to deteriorate because of the war, and now the drought.

Efforts to assist Afghan refugees to return home have been frustrated by severe economic pressure, breakdown of institutions, human rights violations and the policies and practices of the authorities.

According to a recent UNHCR survey of 4,025 returnee household heads, 24 percent did not hold any regular jobs, 41 percent returned to find their houses completely destroyed, 11 percent faced problems with land mines or unexploded ordnance, as many as 45 percent did not have access to any kind of health services and 79 percent could not send their children to school.

Afghan refugees and UNHCR face a double dilemma “between uncertain re-

turn and deteriorating asylum, both in the context of very limited resources,” says Mustafa Djemali, UNHCR’s director of the South West Asia region. To achieve a sustainable return, he said the international community needs to re-focus on Afghanistan and help in the reconstruction of its ruined infrastructure.

Successive attempts to find a political solution have come to nothing. The conflict features a complex interplay of internal, regional and global factors and cannot be considered purely as a civil war. The U.N. has accused ‘external players of various sorts’ on both sides for continuing to fuel the conflict.

There are no foreign witnesses or television cameras to capture the appalling tragedy of Afghanistan. The Afghan people continue to endure the destruction wrought by a hidden war which the world has chosen to ignore. ■



Outgoing High Commissioner Sadako Ogata and her successor, former Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, with other former High Commissioners, at December 14 ceremonies in Geneva to mark the 50th anniversary of UNHCR.

UNHCR / S. HOPPER

cial humanitarian agencies with a staff of more than 5,000 personnel worldwide who help an estimated 22.3 million people in more than 120 countries. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan had nominated Lubbers, saying he had brought with him “an extraordinary record of high-level accomplishment, not only as prime minister of 12 years, the longest-serving holder of that office in his country’s recent history, but also as a scholar—as a professor—and an active participant in work of various private sector and non-governmental organizations.” His last post was as head of the World Wide Fund for Nature. Mr. Lubbers said his appointment was “sort of a shock, but a pleasant one.” Lubbers was born on May 7, 1939 in Rotterdam and educated at the Canisius College in Nijmegen and the Netherlands School of Economics. After managing a family company, he began a long political career in 1973 when he joined the government as Minister for Economic Affairs. He served as Prime Minister continuously from 1982 to 1994, the longest-serving postwar premier. After leaving politics he taught university courses on globalization and sustainable development in the Netherlands and the United States. “I am really looking forward to serving the specific cause of people who are really in trouble and to applying my creativity there,” Mr. Lubbers said. “I hope that it will be a positive contribution.” ■

A new High Commissioner

Ruud Lubbers, a former Dutch Prime Minister, began his appointment as UNHCR’s new High Commissioner on January 1. The 61-year-old veteran politician, succeeded Mrs. Sadako Ogata, a Japanese diplomat and academic, who had

served since 1991. He is the organization’s 9th High Commissioner and takes office as the agency commemorates the 50th anniversary of its founding. High Commissioner Lubbers was appointed to a three year term to head one of the world’s prin-

Nansen Medal winners

A specialist United Nations agency and four refugees from four continents—Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America—have been awarded the Nansen Medal for the year 2000 for their work on behalf of refugees. The UNHCR award, launched in 1955, is normally awarded to only one person or organization, but in recognition of the agency’s 50th anniversary, it was decided to recognize the United Nations Volunteers and “four people from four continents whose own bitter experience of persecution and exile inspired them to help others,” according to High Commissioner Sadako Ogata who retired at the end of the year.

The U.N. Volunteers is an umbrella organization for some 4,500 professionals who work in various field operations around the globe. “Few deserve recognition more than these people who brave hardship and danger in some

of the toughest places,” Mrs. Ogata said. “Some of our finest staff started as U.N. volunteers.”

The individual awardees are:

His Holiness Abune Paulos, Orthodox Patriarch of Ethiopia, a former exile in the United States who has worked for reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Dr. Lao Mong Hay, a leading Cambodian intellectual and pro-democracy advocate who heads the Khmer Institute of Democracy in Phnom Penh after spending time in Britain as a refugee.

Bosnian film producer Jelena Silajdzic, who has worked with refugees from the Balkans.

Argentine pianist Miguel Angel Estrella, a former victim of the Argentine military junta exiled in Paris who has used his stature to promote refugee causes. ■



PRODUCED BY THE SUPPORT COMMITTEE FOR VINCENT COCHETEL

“I don’t know how Kofi Annan thought of me. But I’m packing my bags and tomorrow I go to New York.”

Former Dutch Premier Ruud Lubbers in describing his first reaction to being named the new U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

“The AK47 assault rifle is their version of the credit card. They can get anything they want with it and they don’t hesitate to do so.”

A Red Cross delegate describing youthful militias and their disdain for the safety of humanitarian workers.



“The staff of the United Nations system are deeply distressed that preventive and preparatory measures for staff safety and security have not become an integral part of the peacekeeping and

peace building efforts.”

Part of a petition signed by thousands of U.N. workers and presented to Secretary-General Kofi Annan in the wake of the latest killings of humanitarian workers.



“I am in a valley at sunset, waist deep in bodies, covered in blood.”

U.N. force commander General Romeo Dallaire, re-living the nightmare of the 1994 Rwanda genocide.



“From now on, the war will

be against poverty and for peace.”

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, signing a peace agreement with neighboring Eritrea.



“It is a new millennium, but we are like Indians in the Wild West; a metal can filled with wood burning outside to warm us up.”

A displaced person from Kosovo at a Serbian reception center.



“We are here because women have played a leadership role in the cause of

peace, but their efforts have not been recognized, supported or rewarded.”

A delegate at the first ever public U.N. Security Council debate on the role of women in peace and security.



“Our message to member states must be clear and unequivocal: ‘Enough is enough. We work to save lives on behalf of everyone. We cannot tolerate failure to honor security obligations to our staff.’”

Carolyn McAskie, interim Emergency Relief Coordinator in her address at the memorial service for the victims of the killings in Atambua.



“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?”

U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, upon learning the brutal killing of UNHCR field worker Mensah Kpognon in Guinea.



“It seems as if some barrier has been broken and anyone can be regarded as a target, even those bringing food to the hungry and medical care to the wounded.”

Mary Robinson, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights.



“History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives.”

Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski at a summit celebrating the end of a decade of Balkan wars.