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**Background Paper
Commemorations Session**

**SURVIVORS, PROTECTORS, PROVIDERS:
UNHCR Regional Dialogues with Women and Girls**

Wednesday 29 June 2011, 14:00 - 15:45, Room 3

UNHCR's series of regional dialogues with refugee women and girls have produced lively, thoughtful and pertinent debate. Each meeting has had its own unique flavour, but all have helped to highlight the problems and challenges that women and girls face after being forced from their homes by violence or persecution. Recommendations from the dialogues will feed into a ministerial-level meeting to be held in Geneva in December 2011. A brief resumé of the seven dialogues follows.

New Delhi, India

The first regional dialogue was held in New Delhi from November 8-23, 2010, and gathered almost 200 refugee women, girls and men from Afghanistan, Myanmar and Somalia. The women shared dramatic tales of survival as well as their experiences and difficulties living in a populous urban environment. They described the daily problems they face with documentation, access to basic services and the high cost of living as well as the risks of sexual and gender-based violence. Women experience wage and sexual exploitation in the workplace and at home, but have limited means of pressing for legal redress.

The participants stressed that protection challenges are often interrelated. Sexual- and gender-based violence, for example, can result from a combination of factors such as unsafe housing, exploitative work conditions, family tensions and discrimination.

The participants also focused on how to resolve the problems they face, often in modest but achievable ways. They also made recommendations to the government, UNHCR and its implementing partners. A key message was that refugees are capable of addressing their own problems if given access to adequate information and resources. They consistently asked to be involved in devising solutions and to have their expertise and knowledge used.

Medellin, Colombia

The second regional dialogue was held in Colombia's second largest city, Medellin, from January 24 to February 9, 2011, and gathered more than 80 displaced women, girls and men. Almost 200,000 internally displaced people live in the city, including more than 11,000 who have been forced to flee from one part of Medellin to another. The tone for the meeting was set when one of the female participants claimed that when a displaced woman arrives in Medellin, "She has three choices: prostitution, begging or starvation."

Participants told of the numerous threats faced by displaced women and girls in Medellin and other urban areas, including violence, insecurity and the presence of armed gangs. Many women and girls have to sell sex to survive. Most of the displaced are poor, live in deprived areas and need assistance. The women taking part said they wanted more vocational training courses and access to better education for their children to help them escape the spiral of poverty, violence and injustice. They called for effective strategies to tackle sexual- and gender-based violence and access to psychological care and trauma counselling. They also proposed the establishment of a community-based women's centre, where they can help and learn from each other. Despite their difficult situation, the participants were optimistic about the future.

Amman, Jordan

The third regional dialogue was held in the Jordanian capital, Amman, from February 7-22, 2011. Some 80 refugee women and 50 refugee men from Iraq, Somalia and Sudan attended the meeting. The participants thanked Jordan for providing them with shelter at a time when it faced many problems of its own. They also described the multiple problems they and their families face, including discrimination and abuse, especially towards children.

Many of the refugees said they were dependent on aid because they lacked money and were unable to work. With limited financial resources, they said, they could only rent sub-standard housing and this affected their health and led to family problems, including domestic abuse, arguments and depression. Medical issues were highlighted as a particular challenge, given the high cost of treatment. The dialogue also gave participants the opportunity to propose solutions to their problems.

Kyangwali, Uganda

Unlike the first three dialogues, the fourth meeting in Uganda from March 7-18, 2011, was held in the field. More than 70 refugee women and 40 refugee men from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and South Sudan gathered in the Kyangwali refugee settlement beside Lake Albert to discuss a wide range of issues. While grateful for the land donated by the government, the participants said they faced many difficulties and challenges in their daily lives. Several said that because of the lack in income-generation opportunities, some women and girls were forced to engage in survival sex, while children often had to perform heavy labour. Women and girls also faced the risk of rape when fetching water or firewood. Rape victims often did not receive the medical, psychosocial and legal assistance they needed.

The participants also noted that schools were overcrowded and there are not enough qualified teachers. Many children drop out after primary school because their parents cannot afford to buy uniforms or school materials. Girls leave school early when they get married or become pregnant. Health care is poor and medication is not always available. Many families do not have access to enough clean water as boreholes are far away or poorly maintained. Shelters are small, consisting often of only one room.

To improve their lives, the women and men taking part in the dialogue called for more vocational training to help improve their economic prospects. The women also requested more opportunities to participate in leadership structures and have a voice in the community.

Lusaka, Zambia

More than 100 refugee women, girls and men from Angola, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Ethiopia and Somalia gathered in the Zambian capital,

Lusaka, from April 6-11 to participate in the fifth dialogue. Sexual and gender-based violence was one of the major protection problems discussed. Women were particularly concerned about impunity for the perpetrators of crimes, especially those suspected of the rape of girls as young as four years old.

Women expressed their fears about leaving their children home alone, or sending their girls to overcrowded schools where protection cannot be guaranteed. They also described the problems posed by having limited freedom of movement, especially in urban areas, and inadequate access to medical care, staff and medicines. Some clinics are so far away that people die trying to reach them. According to one refugee, “there are so many forced teenage pregnancies but there is not enough medical care. Girls die on the way to the clinic, simply because their hips are not wide enough”.

All those present expressed their commitment to take the recommendations made by refugee women forward, and the UNHCR office will continue the dialogues and empowerment of women in the camps. One of UNHCR’s top officials, Erika Feller, was present and stressed that the dialogues model should be duplicated worldwide.

Umpium and Mae La Camps, Thailand

More than 50 per cent of the estimated 140,000 refugees living along the Thai-Myanmar border are unregistered, which is the source of many of the problems described by almost 200 refugee women and men from Myanmar who took part in the sixth regional dialogue. Between May 2 and 13, 2011, refugees in Umpium and Mae la camps in Thailand, spoke about their huge problems.

“I am not whole if I am not registered, I have no status, no rights” said an ethnic Karen woman, who has not been registered for seven years. The problems faced by unregistered refugees include lack of access to shelter, food and justice and constant fear of facing abuse or deportation. All unregistered women said they received no sanitary materials, making it difficult to go to school or work.

Life for the registered is not much better, participants said. Much of the food they get is of poor quality and in short supply, while access to advanced medical care is nearly impossible. Refugees who go outside the camps to seek employment risk arrest or exploitation. Single females heading households said they have no special help and are often forced into survival sex in exchange for food or a shelter for themselves and their children. Sexual abuse and domestic violence are major problems.

Many suggestions were made to improve the quality and dignity of life for the women in the camps, such as the provision of sanitary materials for all, better quality of food, proper monitoring of sexual and gender-based violence cases, the presence of women in leadership positions and the right to be registered or have documentation.

Helsinki, Finland

Many of the women taking part in the Helsinki Dialogues highlighted the difficulties they face attempting to integrate. Almost 50 refugee women from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Somalia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo and Sri Lanka met from May 20-23 in the Finnish capital for the last round of dialogues, held for the first time in a European resettlement country.

“Imagine a woman suffering from trauma and rape who is separated from her family and does not speak a word of Finnish, and has no idea about the culture and society,” said

Manchela from Sri Lanka, who arrived in Finland in the 1990s and now works in a refugee reception centre. “She is lost beyond words when she arrives here.”

The women were open and frank about the difficulties they face in society and at home, trying to get settled, dealing with culture shock and making a new life for themselves. As spaces in the municipalities are limited, new arrivals can stay for several years in the reception centres, where it is hard to integrate, learn Finnish and start a new life. Family reunification can also take a long time, adding to the anguish and isolation felt upon arrival.

The women expressed concern about negative attitudes towards foreigners, immigrants and refugees, which have become more prominent in recent months. Yet despite this, they highlighted their commitment to not being a burden on Finnish society, but to add value by offering their knowledge and enthusiasm to work.