

**Address by Ms Erika Feller
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***International Conference on the Reception and Integration
of Resettled Refugees
Norrköping, Sweden, 25 April 2001***

Mr Chairman, Madame Minister, Mr Director-General, Distinguished Colleagues and Participants,

UNHCR has been honoured to facilitate the planning process of this important International Conference and we are very grateful to the Government of Sweden, and specifically the Swedish Integration Board, for their generous hosting and support. Let me take this early opportunity to thank them, together with, more generally, the Nordic Countries, the United States and Canada for their significant contribution to making this Conference happen.

Our congratulations go to the Steering Group and Executive Committee of the Conference, who have been very effectively led by Mr Andreas Carlgren, the Director General of the Swedish Integration Office, and the Working Chair, Mr Erik Stenstrom, with the able assistance of Ms Deborah de Winter, who is, unfortunately, only temporarily with UNHCR.

The planning process for this Conference has been unique. It has involved the identification and recruitment of specialists in the resettlement countries from a variety of sectors including grassroots refugee and community-based organisations engaged in the reception and integration of resettled refugees. It has also directly implicated those of you with policy-making and day to day implementation responsibility in a rather elaborate and certainly productive collaborative effort with counterparts around the world. You have been markedly successful in securing private foundation support, through the generosity of the German Marshall Fund USA, and Ford Foundation, which has made possible the participation of refugees and non-governmental colleagues.

UNHCR has been particularly pleased that so many of you present today and actively engaged in the planning process are, yourselves, former refugees. Your contributions are the "reality check" in efforts to promote and expand the opportunity of resettlement to more refugees. The planning process overall has already helped to strengthen contacts, indeed partnerships, among all concerned with the resettlement effort, which will undoubtedly prove an important contribution to enhancing resettlement and integration prospects for the future.

One of the primary goals of this Conference is to promote resettlement by improving programmes in the traditional resettlement countries, and by strengthening their links with the newer partners. Over the last 5 years we have increased participation in the resettlement programme to 18 countries. There are representatives here today from the newer or non-traditional countries of: Argentina, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Chile, Iceland, Ireland and Spain. At the same time, we wish to acknowledge the contributions of the *ad hoc* resettlement countries present, including Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom.

Mr Chairman,

New Directions of resettlement policy and practice

Previous years have seen considerable efforts to rationalise resettlement policy, improve operational delivery, and most recently to address vulnerability inherent in the resettlement process which make it susceptible to some misuse. We are well aware of our own limitations as regards delivery of resettlement services. We have staffing and resources constraints and have much appreciated the close collaboration we enjoy with both governmental and non-governmental partners in the resettlement effort. UNHCR's policy places emphasis on anchoring resettlement as part of comprehensive protection and durable solutions strategies. It cannot stand alone. Our goal is to realise the full potential of resettlement as a tool of international protection, as a durable solution, and also as a means of responsibility sharing.

Let me though also be clear, and upfront, about what resettlement is not. While it is indeed a multi-faceted response mechanism, it is not the panacea for all problems besetting asylum systems today, particularly those related to widespread illegal migration. It has to be understood that the persons who meet resettlement criteria might well be different from asylum seekers who move on from a country of first asylum and who enter a third country in an irregular manner, much less those seeking to bypass migration controls by using the asylum channel. Some have criticised the 1951 Convention for not doing something it was never intended to do – i.e. function as a migration management tool. It would be similarly inappropriate to distort the functions of resettlement by planning it around managing migration, particularly where this is at the expense of the right to seek asylum.

Resettlement: A complement to asylum

Recently there has been a renewed interest in resettlement in quite a number of countries, which has coincided with large scale arrivals of would-be migrants. This has fuelled the interests of some European governments in an EU-wide resettlement programme. The range of possible benefits of so-called "off shore" processing for resettlement certainly can be examined in this context. Key to any such examination, however, has to be recognition that resettlement is only one available tool of protection within the whole governance structure for refugees. It must, in UNHCR's view, continue to function as a complement to other protection and asylum efforts, and not in effect become a substitute for the right to seek asylum. Resettlement and asylum are two distinct and separate possibilities. It is therefore critical to the integrity of the international protection system that resettlement processing and the promotion of asylum are pursued in tandem and not be used to work against each other.

Any use of resettlement to restrict further the admission of individual asylum-seekers would undermine the right to seek asylum, which is anchored in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and is at the very core of the protection regime for refugees. With this caveat, we do welcome any initiative to expand resettlement opportunities and in this context also encourage governments to demonstrate greater flexibility in accepting UNHCR's criteria. This is particularly important for refugees who have been in limbo for many years, or for refugees from within prima facie populations who have particularly pressing protection needs in the country of asylum even while they may not, at that point, fulfil all the requirements of the 1951 Convention.

Mr Chairman,

The decision to resettle refugees should not be approached in too discretionary a manner; this point is fundamental to the proper operation of UNHCR's protection mandate which is pursued in the area of resettlement on the basis of criteria jointly agreed by States. The mandate is undermined when States are able in effect to opt in and opt out of resettlement responsibilities because of considerations de-linked from protection needs or other relevant humanitarian considerations such as family ties. There must not only be sufficient places available for the resettlement of refugees, but also systems and procedures which are responsive in addressing the increasing diversity of resettlement needs, including in mass influx situations. In particular individuals or groups of concern to UNHCR who have been identified as being in need of resettlement, should not be denied this possibility because of the perception of what has been called "integration potential." The integrity of resettlement will be defined by its responsiveness to the profile of the cases, their urgency and special need for resettlement, as well as the speed of the resettlement response.

Mr. Chairman,

The most appropriate way to pursue resettlement is to ensure that resettlement policies and criteria are applied in a consistent and transparent fashion throughout every region of the world, always being careful to strike a balance in resettlement planning between meeting needs and addressing quota related issues. In this context, we must be mindful of avoiding magnet effects, just as we have to dispel the perception on the part of some host countries that resettlement is an automatic alternative to their provision of asylum. It will be necessary therefore to develop in parallel other forms of effective protection intervention in first countries of asylum so as to enhance solution strategies there, and to offer refugees genuine possibilities for leading their lives where they are.

Complementary benefits of resettlement programmes

Mr. Chairman,

Let me explore this idea a little further. Countries of refuge do need to appreciate that the resettlement of refugees on their territory cannot provide solutions to all the challenges they may face. It is interesting that the considerations sometimes used by States to limit resettlement, (for example, their physical, demographic and socio-economic problems, together with the potential culture shock and problems of adjustment for resettled refugees), also mirror the concerns of host States unwilling to facilitate local integration. The ultimate consequence is a real absence of solutions in a reasonable time frame.

There is a critical need to conduct a comprehensive analysis of each situation in order to determine the most appropriate durable solution available for a refugee population, or for groups and individuals within it. The potential for positive supplementary benefits through resettlement may be realised if used in a consciously strategic manner. Often, a combination of solutions, each specifically addressing the particular circumstances and needs of the various constituencies within the same refugee population, is the most effective way to achieve a lasting resolution in the interests both of the refugees and of the affected States.

Giving the right signal – Using resettlement to enhance asylum

Amongst the challenges which remain, there is the question of how best to realise, to the full, the complementary nature of the three durable solutions. In discussions to take place in the context of the Global Consultations on International Protection, UNHCR is promoting closer attention being paid, in this context, to "rehabilitating" local integration, which has fallen into some disuse, while at the same time more actively employing resettlement as a burden sharing or responsibility sharing mechanism.

Sharing the "burden" – Sharing the responsibility

In the years following the Second World War, the UN General Assembly reiterated that permanent solutions should be sought through voluntary repatriation and assimilation within new communities, either locally, in countries of refuge, or in third countries. It was emphasised that while the initial "burden" might fall upon the receiving country, ultimate solutions were to be the responsibility of the international community at large. In recognition of this fact, over recent years the concept of "burden sharing" has been transposed into the more positive formulation of *responsibility* sharing.

This reformulation recognises that countries of refuge are often the least equipped financially and logistically to assist refugees in situations of mass influx, not least those of a protracted nature. It has to be acknowledged that, in addition to ensuring the protection of refugees and providing them a durable solution, resettlement does serve as a "safety valve" helping to relieve the strain on countries of refuge. Whether in quantitative or in political terms, the positive impact of resettlement can assist countries of refuge in coping with the sudden and sometimes large-scale arrival of refugees. In this respect, resettlement for the few can act as a positive motivator to maintain asylum for the many. Resettlement can be a particularly useful responsibility sharing mechanism where there are groups of refugees whose presence in a country of asylum is not well tolerated for security or other reasons particular to that country. It also has a role in helping to avoid any one country becoming a magnet for the majority of an asylum caseload. Finally it serves as recognition of the fact that the accident of geographic proximity to a refugee producing situation cannot be the only, or ultimate, determinant of where responsibilities for a problem which is international in scope should fairly fall.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, just a word about the future. This Conference serves as but the mid-point, and not the end, of the integration initiative of which it is a part. A momentum has begun which we hope will be capitalised upon to lead to enhanced links, both formal and informal, between the resettlement countries. We anticipate, for example, that among the tangible outcomes of the Conference will be the forging of "sister" relationships between resettlement countries which could eventually lead to personnel exchanges and joint training initiatives.

In addition to the impressive array of materials that have been provided by you for this Conference, we hope it will generate some commonly endorsed principles for the more successful integration of resettled refugees. By the end of this year, we plan to place in your hands a reception and integration addendum to the *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook*, based on the conclusions and recommendations of this Conference.

This Conference is a milestone in advancing both resettlement and integration processes and procedures. We hope it will also prove the occasion for our resettlement partners to give some careful thought to future directions for the resettlement solution, even as you work to streamline the process itself. UNHCR has been quite taken by the extent to which resettlement has entered into the policy planning of States confronted by complicated asylum challenges and migration dilemmas. How much further should resettlement now move from being the exceptional response in specific individual situations to which it was relegated post-the Indo-Chinese refugee experience? This is an important open question for UNHCR on which we would also appreciate guidance through this conference process. Thank you.