

Oral update by George Okoth-Obbo, Director, Regional Bureau for Africa, on UNHCR's Operational Strategies in Africa for the 56<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme  
Conference Room XVII, Palais des Nations  
Tuesday 5 March 2013

Madam Chairperson,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Good Morning.

I trust that distinguished delegates will have seen by now the oral update we have submitted for this meeting of the Standing Committee on UNHCR's Operational Strategies in the region covered by the Regional Bureau for Africa.

To introduce that update, I will overview the three principal themes around which the report is framed and highlight briefly the main issues we would commend for the attention of the Committee.

Madam Chairperson,

What the update highlights is, first, that **emergencies have unfortunately remained the most defining feature of the Africa refugee operations.**

As we meet here today, over 5,000 new refugees have entered Uganda from the continuing crisis in Eastern DRC. In all, this crisis has produced more than 70,000 new refugees in Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and Zambia since last year. In just the period since M23 first entered Goma in November last year, there have also been thousands of newly displaced IDPs.

From Mali, we have, since this year, seen another 23,000 new refugees for the overall total of 170,000 we have today in Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger.

In South Sudan, the influx of refugees from Blue Nile and South Kordofan which we had feared would follow the rain season initially did not occur on a massive scale.

Refugees are nevertheless still arriving in Unity and Upper Nile States with numbers at times reaching some 700 a day.

The response to this humanitarian situation as a whole continues decidedly on an emergency footing. In a few months' time, the arrival of the rainy season, which will compound operational conditions, will make the humanitarian state of affairs even direr.

What we would like to highlight for the attention of the Committee is, first, that, as emergencies unavoidably draw the decisive part of the resources, other likewise compelling needs get comparatively, or even absolutely, starved of the financial support they require.

Later, I will allude to the dilemma that we face with durable solutions. For now, let me highlight that other, "off-the-map" so-called protracted situations, such as in Cameroon, are more and more declining to emergency-like conditions as far as nutrition, shelter, education health care or other

essential services are concerned. Of course, self-sufficiency and other livelihood opportunities become even more difficult to assure.

Secondly, I want to be transparent about the challenges in these cases of effectively standing up emergency response in often very difficult operating conditions.

With people arriving in already very fragile physical condition, what we often see is a heart-wrenching drama of morbidity and even mortality in especially the first phases of the response as UNHCR and the other actors gear up.

While the Organization has always fundamentally succeeded in reversing and stabilizing these trends, critical conditions and even the potential for recession continue to linger, especially if, as I have just resumed, further outflows take place.

Moreover, all these emergencies come accompanied by testing protection challenges, whether in regard to the civilian and humanitarian character of refugee camps, sexual and gender-based violence, other forms of insecurity, local host community pressures and others all of which we have witnessed in the on-going emergencies in our region.

We recognize that we must continue to improve, especially, our technical capacity and excellence.

Yet, the time has come to highlight yet again that the frequency, pace, enormity and multiplicity of these emergencies typically now test, as the High Commissioner has underlined, the very limits, capacity and instruments of institutional humanitarian response.

Thus, our dialogue on how to improve our capabilities and capacity needs now to be matched and reinforced by a no less urgent discussion of how the factors that feed an endless pipeline of population displacement can and must be mitigated.

Madam Chairperson,

The second set of the most compelling features of the Africa UNHCR operations are rooted in the **asylum and protection domain**.

Thankfully, States, Governments and peoples in the region are sustaining stellar hospitality to and do their humanitarian duty of extending safety, solidarity and comfort to refugees and asylum-seekers.

On the other hand, we are witnessing some quite dramatic and preoccupying shifts in the protection landscape in the region. We have summarized a number of these in the update, from which I would like to draw and highlight five.

The first and most exercising of all these developments has occurred in Kenya where, in December last year, the Government issued a new directive for the registration and documentation of refugees and asylum-seekers in the urban centres to be stopped and for all of them to be relocated to Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps.

The directive would affect up to 60,000 registered urban refugees in Kenya although, in actual fact, the number of people who could become caught up in its implementation could be higher.

Apart from the registration and documentation of asylum-seekers in the urban centres having already ceased forthwith, the directive has thus far not been formally implemented. UNHCR has made a number of interventions with the Government, both through its Representation in Nairobi and also supported by UNHCR Headquarters including by the High Commissioner himself and myself when I travelled to the country last month, to urge that an asylum and protection policy which allows protection to be realized in urban settings should be avoided. It has also called for the policy not to be implemented in a manner that causes harm or suffering.

Unfortunately, harm has already been done. The documentation thus far held by the refugees and asylum-seekers are not being respected. There has been an upsurge in their abusive arrest, detention, harassment and extortion by rogue law enforcement and security enforcement elements.

UNHCR has ramped up its monitoring and other protection interventions. But we have here the potential for a protection crisis which would be averted principally only at national legal, policy, political and compliance levels.

Therefore, the interest in this matter by all friends of protection, including through what I would call humanitarian diplomacy, will continue to be well appreciated.

The second question in the protection sphere that I can mention briefly is the return to Somalia of the more than half a million Somali refugees in Kenya which the directive explicitly stated as the ultimate objective of the relocation of the refugees to the camps from the urban areas.

Madam Chairperson,

UNHCR recognizes that there have been important positive changes inside Somalia in the period since July 2011 when AMISOM started to exert a decisive push against Al Shabaab and later last year when a new political and constitutional dispensation took root in Mogadishu.

As have other actors and agencies, UNHCR has re-positioned itself and its operations, including a return of its Office now to Mogadishu, to take advantage of these dispensations in the appropriate ways.

Key among UNHCR's objectives is to facilitate the return of IDPs from Mogadishu to their normal places of origin in a safe, dignified and sustainable manner.

In Kenya, the Office has also launched an exercise to verify the Somali refugee population in the camps. It will juxtapose this data analytically and dynamically against the respective areas of origin to allow it determine how the question of return could be taken forward properly.

In the meantime, the position of the Office is that conditions in especially Central/South Somalia, the main region of origin for the refugees in Kenya and Ethiopia – above all the continuing presence and impact of Al Shabaab - are not yet so sufficiently and sustainably changed that there is no longer need for protection.

The forcible return of refugees to these areas against their will would thus amount to refoulement, which it is the duty of the Organization to provide protection against.

What we seek is thus both a responsible response to the changed situation inside Somalia, including with regard to the issue of return, and support for asylum and protection for thousands of Somalis.

Turning to a third issue, Madam Chairperson, it is also an active protection stance that we have continued to direct to the human smuggling, abductions and trafficking of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers which are occurring in our operations in Eastern Sudan, a problem which stretches all the way through to the Sinai Desert.

Severe forms of abuse, suffering and even the killing of people are taking place. We are working through all the means available to us at the protection and programming levels, and, particularly, seeking the strongest role possible of the authorities in enhancing law enforcement.

This is however a much bigger regional and even global problem that will require a well-joined up transnational effort that links not only the States in the line of mobility all the way to Egypt through to Israel, but even also the country of origin itself. We have already started working up an approach of this nature, including liaising with the African Union, and will benefit from all such support that we can receive through this Committee.

For my next set of pre-occupations in the protection domain, Madame Chairperson, allow me to draw the attention of this Committee to the Southern Africa region where we are witnessing a range of policies, practices and even steps for legal reform all designed to restrict access to asylum and protection space, especially to persons who would be considered as so-called secondary or irregular movers who thus should have sought asylum in other countries further up or who in any case already have or should have had safe countries of asylum.

Here, too, there is a lot that the Office is doing in its normal protection delivery and work including in tackling the negative impacts for asylum and protection from the migration problematic. More broadly than this, I once again will call for a reinforcement of all the advocacy and initiatives that will speak in favour of a positive and dynamic asylum system continuing to be available in Southern Africa as indeed elsewhere on the Continent.

Finally, our protection activities are, as the Committee knows, not limited to only refugees but also extend to the problem of statelessness and benefit IDPS as well.

In the update, we have highlighted some of the progress that has been made in supporting citizenship rights, particularly in Sudan and Southern Sudan in regard to some of the problems in this respect that followed the independence of South Sudan in July 2011.

With regard to IDPs, allow me to limit myself to only what we obviously consider as the good news of the entry into force on 6 December last year of the Kampala Convention for the Protection and Assistance of IDPs in Africa when the Kingdom of Swaziland deposited the 15<sup>th</sup> ratification which thereby fulfilled the requirements for its entry into force.

Let me turn now to the final overriding feature of the Africa operations that we have highlighted in the update which concerns **durable solutions**.

Madam Chairperson,

There are two dimensions to the situation in the region in this regard, one positive the other less so.

The positive picture concerns the progress which has continued to be realized broadly in the solutions domain since last year.

This includes the 20,000 Angolan refugees who have been assisted to return home from the DRC (15,300); Namibia (2,745); Zambia (773); and Republic of Congo (183).

From Republic of Congo, no less than 45,000 Congolese refugees returned home.

From Cameroon, almost all the close to 2,000 Chadian refugees in Langui Camp in the north of the country have repatriated home, allowing UNHCR to move now to close the camp.

Talking of “closures”, the Governments of Tanzania and Burundi, UNHCR and several partners finally brought to closure Mtabila Refugee Camp in Tanzania at the end of last year when 35,000 Burundian Former Refugees were assisted to return home in a special operation. We recognize that this operation generated a lot of controversy and even misunderstanding and continues to require our efforts to explain and make sure it is properly understood.

UNHCR has also announced the formal end of the repatriation of Liberian refugees.

What all this shows, Madam Chairperson, is that the efforts of the Office, working in concert with Governments and all other partners, in resolving protracted refugee situations are bearing positive results.

The bad news is however that there are even more opportunities for further solutions which remain unrealized.

Today, 107,000 Angolans remain in exile even after cessation of their refugee status came into force in June last year.

The Governments in the region have indicated their readiness to provide local integration for 65,000 of these, yet this solution is so far not possible to drive forward decidedly principally because of resource constraints.

Resource limitations are also a key, although not only, reason for why the return of a large number of these refugees, especially in the DRC, has not been accomplished. Return is yet to be fully completed from Zambia too.

Elsewhere in the region, efforts are also still required to deliver on the local integration of the Liberian refugees who remain in exile in countries such as Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana.

Moreover, this is the key year for the Rwandese Comprehensive Durable Solutions Strategy. The strategy foresees that the 100,000 or so Rwandese refugees still in several asylum countries in Africa including DRC, Uganda, Malawi and South Africa would have been assisted to return home, or secured local integration before their refugee status would come to an end as of June 2013.

Madam Chairperson,

I would like to recognize that resettlement to third countries remains a key measure of solutions and to renew our gratitude to the resettlement countries with which, as one key example, we are working on a strategy that would see the resettlement of some 50,000 Congolese refugees over a period of five years in all.

But the needs and, particularly, the urgency for solutions remain compelling.

For this solution, as indeed all the other Organizational activities I have resumed already, UNHCR extends its warm and earnest appreciation to the host countries and peoples for continuing to provide safety solidarity and support for the refugees and to the donor countries which financially support our Operations on the Continent.

In all, our requirements for 2013 thus far stand at a total of US\$1.83 Billion.

As, especially, emergencies continue, these needs also continue to mount. Only this morning, my colleague here, Ms Liz Ahua, presented yet another supplementary programme for the “Congolese Situation” of some US\$ 70 Million.

So, every dollar, no, every cent, we receive is in reality a life-saver.

We appreciate very much all that we have received and continue to receive. You will understand if I ask you to sustain and expand that support.

Thank you!

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