

The High Commissioner's Global Initiative on Somali Refugees (GISR)

Summary report on High Level Panel

Shobha Das

Introduction

As part of the High Commissioner's Global Initiative on Somali Refugees (GISR), a High Level Panel met in Geneva on 13-14 November 2013. The meeting brought together a group of 24 experts, including members of the Somali diaspora, civil society leaders from the region, academics, businessmen, former diplomats and senior UN officials. The High Commissioner was supported by the Deputy High Commissioner and the Director of the Regional Bureau for Africa to facilitate the discussions.

The deliberations

The Panel recognized that the situation of Somali refugees as it stands today is unacceptable. One million lives are lived in a state of suspension, in addition to a further one million Internally Displaced Persons within Somalia. While recent developments in Somalia have raised hope of finding solutions to the 23-year old refugee situation, there still remain considerable challenges in governance, security, infrastructure, service provision and livelihood opportunities. The dangers of hasty or forced repatriation under these circumstances were noted and the need to actively pursue other creative solutions was highlighted. There was consensus that Somali refugees still need asylum space as long as the situation on the ground does not allow them to return to their homes safely, voluntarily, and in dignity. Further, the Panel agreed that while in asylum, self-reliance and development of human potential for refugees should be the norm, not the exception.

Key messages

The key messages from the Panel were:

1. The international community must offer full and continuing support in the search for solutions for Somali refugees.
2. Even as we begin to consider the possibility of repatriation in the coming years, we must strive to keep asylum space open for Somali refugees. Host states will need support and encouragement in this regard.
3. Asylum should evolve from a "care and maintenance" approach to one where human potential could be fully realized, and suffering, stagnation and marginalization reversed. This will mean a significant reconceptualization of the refugee experience with a view to making it a positive and transformative one through a focus on self-reliance, skill-building and access to livelihoods opportunities. This may in fact help to transform the situation within Somalia, and will certainly help prepare refugees for eventual return.
4. There is an urgent need to engage more closely with the Somali diaspora as well as the private sector and other new actors, to help address the situation of refugees in asylum countries, as well as the situation within Somalia.

Guiding principles

The Panel agreed the core principles which would underpin UNHCR's future action in regard to Somali refugees:

1. Solutions for Somali refugees will be differentiated according to their diverse needs.
2. International protection must be offered to Somali refugees as long as they need it.
3. Refugee camps should be opened up through increased mobility and livelihood opportunities.
4. Refugee participation will be maximised in all actions.

5. Refugees are assets, not burdens; self-reliance activities can help achieve their potential and also prepare them for eventual return.
6. Return must always be voluntary, safe and dignified. A realistic repatriation programme will be piloted, and implemented where conditions permit.
7. Help will be offered to refugee communities, host communities, and communities to which refugees will return.
8. New actors will be engaged in finding solutions: including the private sector, the Somali diaspora, women's groups, and development agencies; their contributions may be in asylum countries as well as in areas of return in Somalia.
9. The Somali Federal Government's commitment will be encouraged, at the same time as engaging regional administrations within Somalia.
10. Modern forms of communications will be used to enhance refugee lives.
11. Resettlement opportunities must be expanded.
12. Naturalization should be considered for long-staying refugees.
13. There should be an adequate interlink between solutions for refugees and IDPs.
14. The xenophobia faced by Somali refugees around the world needs to be challenged.

Next steps

UNHCR will take forward the above recommendations through a regional comprehensive plan of action. This document will include a set of guiding principles as agreed at the High Level Panel, as well as a regionally-oriented plan and customized plans for each country.

UNHCR will *inter alia* continue to advocate to keep asylum space open in the region, clarify to refugees that returns under the recent Tripartite Agreement will be voluntary, have on-going dialogue with affected States, map the skills required within Somalia in the coming years, design education, vocational and livelihood training programmes to meet these needs, join forces with others towards improving conditions in Somalia, consider ways of significantly increasing refugee self-reliance, start closer dialogues with the diaspora and private sector to frame their forward engagement, and start a pilot voluntary repatriation programme to safe areas.

UNHCR will organize a regional dialogue in Spring 2014 with affected states, and work towards a global dialogue on Somali refugees in 2014 to agree a plan of action with the international community. This latter will focus global attention on the continuing search for solutions. The dialogue will bring together diverse stakeholders including core group States (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, Yemen), donors, the Somali diaspora, the private sector, civil society, existing and potential resettlement countries, host communities, development actors, the media, the African Union, IGAD (Inter-Governmental Authority on Development), and international organizations. Smaller consultation meetings will be organized in the lead-up to the global dialogue.

A full report on the deliberations and recommendations of the High Level Panel will follow soon.