

Statement to the Media
by the UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Operations
Mr. George Okoth-Obbo
following a six-day visit to the United Republic of Tanzania
Dar-Es-Salaam, Tanzania- 03 December 2019

I arrived in Tanzania five days ago to participate in the 21st meeting of the Tripartite Commission (TC) for the Voluntary Repatriation of Burundian Refugees in Tanzania held on the 29th of November. Following this, I also had the opportunity to visit camps hosting refugees from Burundi located in the North Western part of the country.

It was an honor and also very productive for me to have the opportunity to meet with the Tanzanian Minister of Home Affairs, H.E. Kangi Lugola, as well as the Burundian Minister of Interior, Patriotic Training and Local Development, H.E. Mr. Pascal Barandagiye, with whom I was able to discuss a number of issues of mutual interest and concern, including with respect to the voluntary repatriation of Burundian refugees. I am pleased to be able to report to you today that the TC concluded successfully with a Joint Communiqué, which we have available for you here today, underscoring a number of key commitments including that:

- Refugee returns to Burundi will remain voluntary, and the voluntariness of the decision on individual refugees to return will be verified;
- Those refugees who opt to return now will be assisted, while those who choose to wait will continue to benefit from international protection in Tanzania;
- Free and unhindered access to refugees and returnees will be facilitated for UNHCR and its partners in Tanzania and Burundi in order to carry out the program; and
- A renewed emphasis will be put on mobilizing more support for sustainable reintegration in Burundi.

We have also agreed with the two governments to maintain the capacity and preparedness to repatriate and receive in Burundi up to 2,000 persons per week, while underscoring the actual return numbers will be dictated by the numbers of refugees who have indicated a desire to return and have been through the verification process.

After the conclusion of the TC meeting, I traveled to Kigoma Region where I spent one day visiting Nduta and Mtendeli camps, together with the Tanzanian Director for Refugee Services, where I met and heard from refugees and held discussions with Government officials and other partners.

My first impression clearly is one of gratitude to the Government and the people of this country for continuing to host what today are some 246,000 refugees in all. Secondly, as I have already touched upon, one eminent dynamic at this moment of the refugee operation in Tanzania is that of voluntary repatriation to Burundi of the Burundian

refugees. On this particular point, first let me recall that we have collectively helped this far around 79,000 Burundian refugees who sought asylum in Tanzania from May 2015 to return home. When I was in Nduta camp, I met with a group that was signing up on that very day for the repatriation. UNHCR together with the Government will extend all of our support to facilitate the return of these and indeed other refugees who voluntarily decide to return home to Burundi to do so.

In this connection, I could see, hear about and understand much better the range of questions, issues and challenges, we have to work collectively on to ensure, as the Joint Communiqué underlined, the verified voluntary repatriation of the refugees that we have all committed to.

Obviously, most Burundian refugees have not at this point made the decision to return home. As noted, the TC Communiqué thus also recognized this and reiterated that and let me quote now: “while some refugees may opt to return now, others may still have well-founded reasons for not seeking to return at the present time, and will continue to benefit from international protection.” The Communiqué also went on to applaud, as the Tanzanian Minister of Home Affairs himself also underscored in his statement at the TC, Tanzania’s restatement of its policy and practice that: “in the pursuance of its international obligations, will continue to keep its doors open to those refugees who meet the relevant criteria of the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees read together with its 1967 Protocol and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.”

About the refugees who are today in and will continue to be in Tanzania, I could also see during my visit the other still quite important fundamental needs from protection through to basic assistance, and other needs that UNHCR and all other partners have to cater to at the same time. I have accordingly assured the authorities with whom I met (as also our partners) of UNHCR’s commitment to continue working and collaborating closely together. In my discussions with the authorities, I have also highlighted some very important questions that will consolidate that cooperation and collaboration even farther.

Finally, the crucial importance for the international community to continue strongly supporting the refugee programme in Tanzania has reaffirmed itself. In Tanzania, UNHCR needs USD 126 million. The funding we have available is just over one third of that. We are really grateful to our financial donors for all the support to date which has allowed to support an essential safety net for the refugees in Tanzania and deliver other outputs and outcomes. I must however appeal for much more and continuous support so that the objectives before us can be realized. Similarly, we will continue to appeal for more financial support for UNHCR and other partners, including development actors, to enable the sustainable reintegration of those Burundians who have made the choice to return home.

Thank you.