

The year in review

In 2003, the High Commissioner's term of office was extended by the United Nations General Assembly for another two years until 2005. During the year, he undertook a number of fundamental initiatives, with the backing of ExCom, to strengthen UNHCR's activities. Two of these initiatives are closely related. The first was the culmination of the UNHCR 2004 process through the submission to the General Assembly of the report "Strengthening the Capacity of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees to Carry Out its Mandate". The subsequent General Assembly's resolution included the endorsement of a proposal for a more multilateral approach to supporting UNHCR's work in the 21st century, as well as the lifting of the time limitation on the continuation of the organization. UNHCR is thus tasked to pursue its efforts "until the refugee problem is solved". The second initiative was the launching of "Convention Plus", which aims to reinforce the 1951 Refugee Convention. Convention Plus is designed to enable States to undertake a more vigorous search for permanent solutions for the world's refugees and other displaced persons. This includes the drawing up of special agreements to facilitate burden sharing amongst donors and countries of asylum, taking into account those countries hosting large numbers of refugees for protracted periods.

The Framework for Durable Solutions was another initiative to find solutions for refugees. This comprises: better identification and targeting of development assistance for countries and communities hosting large numbers of refugees for protracted periods; the establishment of "4Rs" programmes in post-conflict situations, aimed at ensuring an integrated approach to repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction; and the promotion of development strategies driven by local integration of refugees, where this is a viable option. These initiatives led to the implementation of projects in Afghanistan, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Zambia and helped the organization to identify new sources of funding.

Early and predictable pledges at the annual pledging conference in 2002 allowed the Office to pursue its

programme without disruption in the first quarter of 2003. Measures taken by the High Commissioner early in the year helped to avert a possible shortfall by the end of the year. Overall, donor contributions showed an upward trend compared to 2002. There were positive responses to efforts to expand the donor base, to access complementary sources of funding and to forge stronger partnerships among donors, UN agencies, UNHCR and NGOs in order to assess and meet the needs of refugees. Some USD 20 million was also raised through private sector initiatives.

UNHCR undertook successful repatriation and reintegration operations in Afghanistan, Africa and elsewhere. Despite the security problems which persisted in parts of Afghanistan, almost half a million Afghan refugees and over 80,000 internally displaced persons returned to their homes with the help of UNHCR and its partners. By year's end, over three million persons had received assistance to return home since December 2001.

In Africa, major repatriation operations began in Angola and similar operations were ongoing in Eritrea, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. Positive developments to resolve political crises in Burundi, the Congos, Liberia and Sudan led to intensive planning for refugee returns. All the while, UNHCR was engaged in providing assistance in response to the largest single exodus of the year. An estimated 110,000 Sudanese took refuge in neighbouring Chad to escape fighting between government forces and Southern Sudanese rebels.

All in all, there is hope that the resolution of conflicts and successful peace negotiations could lead, in the next few years, to the voluntary repatriation of up to two million refugees and several million internally displaced persons.

In June 2003, the High Commissioner announced new measures to try to find permanent solutions for the estimated 100,000 Bhutanese refugees who have been living in camps in Nepal for over 12 years.

UNHCR was actively engaged in China, where it followed with concern the plight of North Koreans



During 2003, the voluntary repatriation and reintegration operations in Eritrea were considered successful. Here, returnees are registering for ID cards at the Tesseney Reception Centre. *UNHCR/E. Parsons*

leaving their country illegally. Similarly, the Office remained concerned over the situation of the Chechens in Ingushetia, the ethnic Serbs unable to return to their homes in Kosovo and elsewhere in former Yugoslavia, as well as the internally displaced persons in Colombia whose numbers have now increased to over two million.

During the early part of 2003, UNHCR and other agencies had devoted considerable time and resources to preparing for the crises likely to be precipitated by the war in Iraq. Workers, tents and emergency supplies had been put in place in neighbouring countries. In the end, the refugee crisis did not materialize and only very few sought safety outside the country's borders. After the war officially ended in May, humanitarian efforts concentrated on helping one million Iraqis internally displaced from their homes by the old regime, and on encouraging others who had left the country to return home.

On 19 August, however, all efforts came to a dramatic halt when the UN headquarters building at the Canal Hotel was destroyed by a huge bomb explosion. Twenty-two people lost their lives, including the Secretary-General's Special Representative, the

High Commissioner for Human Rights and UNHCR's former Assistant High Commissioner, Sergio Vieira de Mello. This tragedy had a deeply traumatic effect on the humanitarian community. Following the attack, international staff were withdrawn and UNHCR's activities curtailed. Since then, national staff have maintained essential activities, with support from a core group of international staff in Jordan and Kuwait.

Another shocking event for humanitarian workers was the brutal killing of Bettina Goislard, a UNHCR Protection Officer who was working in Afghanistan. These losses, coupled with other killings of humanitarian workers in different countries, were stark reminders of the increasing dangers to which UN personnel are now exposed. Increasingly, aid agencies have to work alongside military forces in conflict zones, as in Colombia, Kosovo, Iraq and elsewhere.

Against a worrying backdrop of growing anti-foreigner sentiment in Europe, the 15 nations of the European Union have been working on harmonization of their asylum policies. At the same time, the number of asylum claimants has fallen over the years – suggesting that other solutions are being

found for would-be asylum-seekers. During the first nine months of the year, asylum applications fell by 20 per cent. Meanwhile, countries are starting to revise their selection criteria and this may be an opportunity to increase the number of resettlement places, thereby creating durable solutions for persons of concern to the Office.

Nevertheless, since the events of 11 September 2001, the number of persons accepted for resettlement has been far below the official targets set. Many of the traditional resettlement countries have been preoccupied with tighter controls of both security and immigration, often tackled as if they were a single issue. Unfortunately, this approach was also in evidence in several new resettlement countries. In

2003, countries took only half the number accepted in 2002.

If refugee problems are to be resolved in the long term, the international community must become more actively involved in supporting, building and keeping the peace. Peace-building in the post conflict period is a weak link in the chain of international cooperation. Fragile peace accords could quickly unravel without sustained international support, giving rise to new displacement. This situation led UNHCR to foster partnerships among humanitarian agencies, civil society, the private sector and, increasingly, with the military to raise awareness of refugee problems, preserve the institution of asylum and improve the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

