

PROMOTING LOCAL INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES

Background

As most of the over 300,000 refugees in the Southern African region originate from countries affected by serious conflict and instability, voluntary repatriation is not yet feasible for the majority of them. Resettlement is promoted for refugees for whom it is the only and most appropriate solution (about 350 persons were resettled from the region in 1999). The Office has therefore developed a strategy to facilitate local integration of refugees, pending a change in conditions in their home country which would allow them to freely choose to repatriate.

South Africa

There are no refugee camps in South Africa; refugees live in local communities, mainly in and around larger cities. UNHCR employs a three-pronged strategy to help create an environment conducive to local integration:

- **Attaining self-sufficiency:** The only way to break a pattern of dependence on UNHCR's assistance is for refugees to attain self-sufficiency. This entails helping refugees to compete in a very tight job market (with unemployment as high as 40 per cent in some areas). In 1999, UNHCR's local NGO partners provided vocational skills training, language and literacy courses and supported small business initiatives. As UNHCR's resources were limited, only a fraction of the most needy refugees could be helped to integrate. Three hundred refugee students attended vocational and language training and others were helped to have their previous qualifications validated in South Africa. About 250 refugees received small business loans of up to USD 400 for street-vending. UNHCR and its partners also offered guidance to refugees on vocational training, education and small businesses.
- **Legal and institutional capacity-building:** The existence of national refugee legislation and eligibility procedures lie at the heart of a sound environment for local integration. UNHCR therefore continued to advocate the implementation of rel-

evant legal instruments and helped government departments acquire expertise in dealing with refugee issues in a challenging environment. A network of legal counsellors has been established in each of the major urban centres in South Africa. In 1999, these counsellors continued to provide legal support and advice to refugees. UNHCR also supported the Regional Refugee Forums (RRFs), which co-ordinate assistance to refugees through local NGOs. The National Consortium on Refugee Affairs (NCRA), which lobbies for refugee rights, ensured consistency in policy and implementation at all levels.

- **Public awareness and information campaigns:** Refugees are often victims of xenophobia, which thwarts their efforts to integrate. UNHCR supports a number of public awareness initiatives in the country, the most important being the long-term, multi-faceted "Roll Back Xenophobia Campaign" launched jointly with the RRFs, the NCRA and the South African Human Rights Commission. The campaign aims to increase public understanding of refugees and their rights, and nurture a culture of peace and tolerance. In 1999, under the leadership of a co-ordinator appointed by NCRA, the campaign included radio programmes about refugee women and children broadcast on community radio in local languages, promotional materials (T-shirts and literature), workshops for representatives of the media, photo exhibitions, panel discussions, public debates at the community level and participation in national events related to human rights.

Other Countries

In Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe, the majority of the refugees reside in camps or settlements. With a view to their eventual local integration, UNHCR provided employment-related training and supported activities conducive to self-reliance.

In **Botswana**, UNHCR established a poultry-raising project and provided small business loans to refugees for various activities, including street-vending. Repayment of the loans will take time, as refugees were generally only just breaking even in the face of fierce competition from (better-funded) nationals. The problem was aggravated by delays in the issue of citizenship certificates and identity cards for refugees. UNHCR continued to support education and self-employment for refugees in the informal sector.

Refugees in **Malawi** are provided support for income-generating projects. However, restrictions on their movement and employment limit the scope and effectiveness of this support.

Activities to promote local integration in **Mozambique** were hampered by a lack of arable land in areas hosting refugees, growing xenophobia, lack of documentation, high unemployment, limited opportunities for higher education and a low level of commitment by the authorities. Training is urgently required for immigration officials to enable them to address questions relating to integration. Local journalists should be helped to acquire a more balanced view of refugees conducive to more objective reporting.

In **Namibia**, the lack of an experienced implementing partner precluded the establishment of a larger income-generating project. However, 20 refugee students attended vocational skills-training and tool kits were purchased for students of commerce.

Socio-economic difficulties exacerbating intolerance towards refugees in **Swaziland** underscored the need to educate civil society about the rights and responsibilities of refugees. UNHCR made substantial progress in supporting self-reliance through the signature of a Service Level Agreement with a financial institution. The latter advanced loans to refugees against the guarantee of an NGO partner, waived management fees and provided banking services.

In **Zambia**, the approach to local integration is to allow refugees generous access to farming land, which enables them to commence agricultural activities and attain self-sufficiency in food production within two years of their arrival. The vast majority of the refugees in the settlements no longer receive food assistance and are considered to be self-reliant in this respect. Local integration for refugees in urban areas revolves around indirect support measures aimed at facilitating self-reliance, such as access to micro-credit and skills training.

Refugees in **Zimbabwe's** Tongogara camp have access to small-scale agricultural opportunities, as well as micro-finance in support of other income-generating ventures.

UNHCR is currently working with these governments on amended national legislation to allow refugees increased freedom of movement and the right to seek employment. When these laws are in force, the aforementioned three-pronged strategy will be expanded to also include these countries.

