

Part I: Executive Committee Summary

(a) Context and Beneficiary Population(s)

UNHCR's operations in the United States of America are based on the recognition that the US is a major donor to UNHCR, has the largest resettlement program, is a traditional supporter of refugee protection, and is a major destination for asylum seekers worldwide. The Regional Office in Washington D.C. (ROW) continues to focus on maintaining and enhancing political and financial support from the US Government and civil society for UNHCR's activities in providing refugee protection, assistance and durable solutions. UNHCR also works to strengthen, improve and preserve the asylum and resettlement systems in the US, and to promote public awareness about refugees and UNHCR by interacting with the public and the media. UNHCR's objective for the 12 Caribbean countries it covers is to continue working toward establishing self-sustaining refugee protection and awareness systems in the region.

Protection: There are almost 400,000 asylum applications pending in the US asylum system, and over 62,000 asylum applications expected to be submitted annually to US authorities for 2001 and 2002. In order to provide information and advice for an asylum system of this magnitude and complexity, ROW works closely with the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the State Department, numerous NGOs, lawyers, and others involved in the asylum process. ROW's aim is to enhance protection for refugees and asylum seekers through advocacy and monitoring of US adherence to standards of international refugee law.

In the 12 Caribbean countries under its responsibility, ROW has established and supports a network of pro-bono representatives who monitor the general situation and follow up on asylum and refugee issues. Through this system of local experts, ROW focuses on promoting accession to international refugee law; building the capacity of national refugee systems in signatory countries; and monitoring and developing contingency plans in the region. To strengthen this system becomes increasingly important, particularly in light of the continuous deterioration of the situation in Haiti. While still relatively low, asylum applications of Haitians have risen during the second half of 2001 in the Dominican Republic and elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Resettlement: ROW's resettlement work benefits all refugees under UNHCR's mandate who have been identified as needing resettlement due to protection concerns, special needs, family reunification, or opportunities for local integration. Resettlement holds a prominent place in the US historically (one out of every 120 persons is a resettled refugee), and is a highly visible activity. The US resettles more people annually than all other resettlement countries combined. During the year 2000, the US resettled more than 72,000 refugees. The US expects to resettle some 76,000 people for 2001.

Public Information: Refugees worldwide benefit from ROW's public information activities. ROW provides material and information to journalists, NGOs, think tanks, decision-makers, academics, private-sector donors and the general public. Through these activities, ROW ensures that refugees and asylum seekers receive more attention and support thanks to a better-informed public.

External Relations: ROW's external relations activities are designed to have UNHCR and the rights of refugees better understood and supported. ROW staff participate in and cover a wide range of meetings, conferences, Congressional hearings, and briefings. In these different fora, ROW offers information on the situation and notes the restraints imposed on UNHCR programmes by host governments, the security situation, or insufficient resources. Through such efforts, ROW has been able to build support for UNHCR's humanitarian programs.

(b) Main Programme Goals and Principal Objectives

Protection: ROW will continue to provide advice and comments on legislative efforts to revise the US 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act by removing provisions that present major challenges to refugee protection. These challenges include i) the mandatory and long-term detention of asylum seekers, refugees and stateless persons; ii) aspects of the expedited removal process for asylum-seekers arriving at ports of entry; and iii) the legislative expansion of exclusionary bars to asylum and withholding of removal, including through the significant expansion of the category of crimes defined as an "aggravated felony". Also, ROW will systematically monitor detention facilities and jails holding asylum-seekers and refugees throughout the country, and provide on-going feedback to INS about facilities with inadequate conditions. ROW will encourage INS to promote self-help materials in every detention facility so those asylum seekers with no counsel can do more to help themselves. ROW expects that NGOs can increasingly provide more country-of-origin materials to asylum seekers, allowing UNHCR to phase out this activity. ROW will work towards establishing a consolidated approach with the US Government on its policy regarding interdiction on the high seas and treatment of boat arrivals intercepted in territorial waters. ROW also will consolidate an approach in the emerging area of gender-based asylum claims, particularly claims based on domestic violence. Within the context of this range of activities, ROW will continue to comment on US legislation and policies impacting refugee protection; draft and disseminate UNHCR policy, as deemed appropriate; provide advice to the INS Asylum Office, General Counsel's office and Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) on issues of international refugee law; train legal service providers and government officials in the US and Caribbean; and research and draft advisory opinions for use in asylum adjudications.

In the Caribbean region, ROW will encourage four remaining non-signatory countries under its responsibility to accede the 1951 Convention, namely Barbados, Grenada, St. Kitts & Nevis, and St. Lucia. In signatory countries, ROW will have strengthened in 2001 the expertise of the pro-bono representatives in each country by holding training workshops and a regional strategy-planning meeting. In addition, the Office will undertake systematic missions to key receiving countries, and signatory countries with nascent or developing asylum systems. The aim is to promote and develop comprehensive and practical implementing national legislation. ROW will continue its involvement in individual refugee status determination in countries that have not yet established refugee status determination procedures. Also, ROW will continue promoting the development of regional contingency plans to respond to possible population movements within and out of the region. This is particularly important given the continued political instability in Haiti.

Resettlement: ROW promotes admission of UNHCR-identified cases for resettlement to the US, and encourages the US to take a large percentage of UNHCR's global resettlement caseload. To maintain and build support for UNHCR's resettlement priorities and cases, ROW will focus significantly on the 9 national resettlement agencies and 400 affiliated local resettlement offices throughout the US. ROW conducts training and outreach activities with the US resettlement community to encourage greater awareness and support for UNHCR's resettlement criteria and caseloads. ROW also works with US authorities to achieve greater harmony among US and UNHCR criteria and better co-ordination of US and UNHCR processing procedures abroad. Another key element is providing UNHCR offices with relevant information and materials on the US resettlement program, and responding to inquiries from UNHCR offices to ensure that their cases are accepted by the US. In addition, ROW will work with US authorities to maintain support for UNHCR's global resettlement program, including establishing a roster of trained resettlement resource persons, deployment of NGO staff, implementation of the resettlement case tracking system (ERISS), and continuous US contributions in support of resettlement activities.

Public Information: ROW's main public information goal is to increase UNHCR visibility in the US media and among the general public. Through this visibility, UNHCR aims to increase support from the general public and US decision-makers for refugees. ROW continues to provide a credible source of information for the US press about refugee operations and UNHCR activities. ROW will implement UNHCR public awareness projects targeting specific sectors of the US public, including schools, academics, journalists, think tanks, and NGOs. ROW will continue its community outreach and speaking engagements to a variety of audiences, particularly to youth groups. Through its education-awareness project, ROW encourages teachers to expose their students to refugee issues through a network of 2,000 educators, and through partnerships with tens of thousands of additional schools. UNHCR will also continue the partnership with the US National Parks Service – Statue of Liberty, creating awareness about the work of UNHCR and reaching out to the Park's visitors. Furthermore, ROW will support USA for UNHCR's efforts to raise private sector funds via direct mail, corporations and foundations, board development and major gifts.

External Relations: ROW will continue to liaise with Congressional Committee members and their staff, briefing them and responding to ongoing queries about current refugee situations, UNHCR programs, and UNHCR's funding needs. ROW will also report on legislative and policy discussions that take place in Congress. In coordination with UNHCR Headquarters, ROW will advocate to repeal the current Congressional advance reporting requirement, which limits the ability of the US to provide timely contributions to UNHCR. In addition, ROW will liaise with and conduct outreach activities for a wide spectrum of NGOs, ranging from humanitarian, human rights, development, asylum, and advocacy groups, as well as and think tanks and academics. Many of these groups are represented by the 155-member InterAction coalition and the 12-member Refugee Council USA, which ROW will also continue working with to spur additional US Government financial and political support for UNHCR's work. Furthermore, ROW will continue to promote, organise and facilitate visits of senior UNHCR staff to the US, who play a key role in helping to answer questions from and provide information to influential Congressional, Government and NGO officials.