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44TH STANDING COMMITTEE

THURSDAY 5 MARCH 2009

RESPONSE BY GEORGE OKOTH-OBBO, DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION SERVICES TO MEMBER STATES' INTERVENTIONS ON ORAL UPDATE ON THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S 2008 DIALOGUE ON PROTRACTED REFUGEE SITUATIONS, AGENDA ITEM 4(C)

Thank you Mme Chair.

Let me, first of all, thank the Member States for their extended and positive responses we have heard yesterday and this morning to the Second High Commissioner's Dialogue that I reported on yesterday.

The Member States have urged the High Commissioner to continue this process of consulting with and involving all stakeholders in reflecting together on the policy, protection, operational and solutions challenges and tasks of the Office. I would like to reiterate that the High Commissioner shares this same vision of the importance of the Dialogue process.

We are also pleased to have heard in the feedback a reiteration by Member States of their very strong interest in the subject of protracted refugee situations and the work which UNHCR is pressing forward on this major organizational priority.

With reference to the interest that a number of delegations, including France this morning, have expressed in the follow-up to the results of last year's Dialogue, as I indicated yesterday, we will be sharing in due course with Permanent Missions and other stakeholders an update report which will provide information on the work plan that the Office has elaborated in following-up on the recommendations made by the Dialogue and the steps and activities which are actually under way. While being comprehensive, that report will also highlight progress on the five situations of the High Commissioner's Special Initiative that are known to Delegations, including on Croatian and Bosnian refugees in Serbia to which the distinguished representative of Serbia drew special attention yesterday. The delegation of Sudan which has a short while ago asked about specific strategies to address questions such as self-sufficiency and access by refugees to services will also find the relevant information in this report.

Mme Chair,

Many of the interventions expressed interest in and support for the modality of core groups as an instrument for focusing efforts on protracted situations.

To Zambia, which has urged the establishment of this mechanism to deal with the residual Angolan refugee situation in that country on a regional basis within the SADC region, I would like, first, to thank that delegation for expressing its readiness even to play a lead role in such a process and,

secondly, to assure it of UNHCR's own interest and readiness to pursue this idea with both Zambia itself and the other Stakeholders in the region.

I have the same assurance for the Africa group, on whose behalf Ethiopia pledged the availability and readiness of the African Union for a similar process of consultations for the refugee and displacement situations on that Continent as a whole.

In speaking in this same vein of interest in the methodology, Bangladesh reminded us of the context in which the Dialogue itself viewed the Core Group methodology, namely that each situation is unique. Indeed. For, as the High Commissioner put it in his Chairman's Summary at the end of the Dialogue last year, "no one solution fits" all and "while we need a common approach, each case requires an objective analysis".

Therefore, in regard to the interest that a number of delegations have expressed in having the Terms of Reference for the core groups, while there will probably be commonly-applicable elements in those TORs, it is clear that those specially applicable for each situation would have to be elaborated accordingly. Information on such terms of reference will be included in the forthcoming update report.

Canada and the United States have also expressed in their respective statements both support for the mechanism and interest in the actual situations for which it would be used, the United States adding its further interest in and commending to all the "whole of Government" approach which Canada presented at the Dialogue. To both those delegations, and indeed all others, I can promise again that we will be including information of developments and progress on this issue in the upcoming update.

Moving on to other highlights of the debate, Canada, has reminded us that simple subsistence support in protracted situations is not sufficient and sought information on where we stand on the follow-up on the relief to development linkages within the inter-agency context which the Dialogue underlined.

We have continued the various efforts you have heard the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, the Bureau Directors and the Director of the Division of Operational Support explain on Tuesday and yesterday, for instance in relation to Delivering as One. There is however much more yet to be done, including raising the issue of Protracted situations even more systematically in the IASC context and with OECD/DAC, PBSO, World Bank and other development partners.

Mme Chair,

There are two points made initially by Bangladesh in its intervention yesterday, and one of which has been echoed today by other delegations that deserve specific replies.

For the first of those points, which Bangladesh has indeed stressed consistently in other contacts with the Office both in Dhaka and here in Geneva, we agree fully that the references to Rohingyas in that country should not jeopardize at all their refugee character or, even more critically, their rights as citizens in respect to Myanmar. Obviously, this is an infinitely very complex issue, the several dimensions of which are perhaps not adequately captured by any single terminology.

The second point raised by Bangladesh was that my report did not give enough emphasis, or accent as the distinguished delegate of Bangladesh put it, on the importance of voluntary repatriation. Iran and Pakistan have this morning joined Bangladesh in emphasizing this point and both have further elaborated that local integration should not be focused on as a solution to protracted refugee situations, but rather resettlement.

Any appearance that importance is not given to voluntary repatriation is an unintended impression because of course, let me repeat, not only did the Dialogue itself emphasize this importance, UNHCR demonstrates in its work daily the importance that it has assigned to this solution. The delegations of Iran and Pakistan will be very aware of this work from having observed the unyielding efforts the Office has invested over many years in working to facilitate the return home of millions of Afghan refugees from those two countries.

I think I should recall again the “no one size fits all” standard of the Dialogue, and, in this context, thank the Ethiopian delegation for reminding us of the other situations in which other solutions, namely local integration or indeed even the grant of citizenship to refugees, as is going on in Tanzania today, have been the priority options. The statement we heard from Australia in referring to its resettlement programme and approach was yet another example of an important solution, resettlement, and I would indeed like to thank both Australia and our other key partners for the resettlement places they continue to provide the Office to find both protection and strategic solutions. As the Dialogue stressed, in the context of Protracted Situations, more such places have to be sought, and we will continue to work with these Governments and partners for this purpose accordingly. I would agree with Pakistan that, in such efforts, priority attention should be given to those situations in which the needs are greatest, even if the idea proposed by that delegation that resettlement places should be allocated on a pro-rata basis is probably likely to receive no broad acceptance.

In its intervention, the United States, in referring to the encouragement by the Dialogue for all other non-refugee channels, including in the migration field, to be explored in the search for solutions, wished to know the developments in this regard. This is an approach that the Office is pursuing broadly on a global basis. The Tanzanian decision to offer the opportunity of its citizenship to over 170,000 Burundian refugees is well known. The ECOWAS framework in West Africa is another situation in which both UNHCR and the countries of that region have focused attention in reference to Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees many of whom will switch to the residential, mobility and work arrangements of that framework in the context of the cessation of their refugee status.

Mme Chair, in words which we were echoed by other delegations, Zambia expressed its pleasure that the next High Commissioner’s Dialogue will focus on a subject with which Zambia, as indeed other countries, including Sudan which also made the same point this morning, has been beset as the distinguished delegate of Zambia put it. As I said yesterday, information will be shared with you in due course on the preparations for that meeting which, let me repeat, is scheduled to take place on 9 and 10 December 2009. We look forward very much to seeing you at that Dialogue.

Thank you Mme Chair.