

# The Secretary-General: Message to the African Union Special Summit of Heads of State and Government on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, Kampala, 22 October 2009, Delivered by Mr. António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

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HC Statements, 22 October 2009

I commend the African Union for organizing this Special Summit generously hosted by the Government of Uganda. I salute African leadership and determination to address the challenge of displacement.

The number of refugees in Africa today is about one-fifth its peak in the mid-1990s, a welcome decline. But there are nearly 12 million people forcibly displaced by conflict within their own countries in Africa -- nearly five times the number of refugees. When persons displaced by causes other than conflict are included, this figure is even higher.

Everyone displaced by conflict or natural disaster is an individual. A person, likely a woman or child, who may be undernourished and living in fear of recruitment or rape. A person whose potential remains unrealized, with dreams unfulfilled and contributions forgone. You have come together to forge a better future.

I commend the Summit's emphasis on addressing root causes and preventing the conflicts that give rise to displacement. At the same time, let us remember that disasters, particularly slow-onset disasters such as drought, are also a major cause of internal displacement. And although Africa may not be a major contributor to climate change, it is especially vulnerable to its effects. An agreement at Copenhagen must provide for adaptation measures that address the heightened vulnerability of Africans to climate-change-induced displacement.

In seeking to bring peace and prevent conflict across the continent, the African Union is an indispensable partner of the United Nations. Together, we must work harder to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights law; and to implement conflict prevention and resolution measures, particularly in the face of politically motivated violence.

We must invest in disaster risk reduction and incorporate the needs of the internally displaced in poverty reduction strategies to ensure their full and active participation in these processes.

While prevention of displacement is important, so, too, is protection of the displaced. Millions remain in protracted displacement for years, and even generations, after they have fled their homes. Finding durable solutions for them is one of the greatest challenges in post-crisis situations.

Reconstruction and development, and the reestablishment of law and order, are critical for the displaced to successfully reintegrate with safety and dignity. Investments in disaster-risk reduction and increased resiliency must also be a priority.

Responding to forced displacement in today's complex world is challenging at best. Contemporary conflicts involve many actors, including those who do not respect humanitarian principles or the safety of humanitarian staff. The increased presence of non-state actors makes it more urgent for humanitarian actors to engage with such groups to seek their compliance with the law and unhindered access to those in need.

The United Nations system and others at the global level have taken many initiatives to strengthen our response. We must continue to build on these efforts.

Forty years ago, the Organization of African Unity adopted the OAU Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa. This was an African response to the challenges facing African nations. At this Special Summit, you will consider a new Convention on the Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons. Once again, Africa is leading the way forward.

The political, socioeconomic, developmental and external causes of displacement require a wide range of responses. Taking action on these many fronts, and preserving Africa's long tradition of hospitality to the displaced, will require courage and creativity. And it will require solidarity and burden-sharing from the international community as we renew our commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and reducing the number of internally displaced in Africa by 2015. This is our collective goal.

Please accept my best wishes for this historic gathering.