

*My Ten Years as UN High Commissioner for Refugees:  
Lessons for the Future*

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April 8, 2002

Director Hamilton, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is my great pleasure to have the occasion to look back on my ten years working for refugees, and share with you some of the lessons I have learned. I think they may be relevant to the world that continues to go through turbulent times.

When I became High Commissioner in 1991, the Cold War had just ended and people spoke of a new world order. The changes for the better were extraordinary. Democracy spread across Central and Eastern Europe and nearly all of Latin America. Apartheid in South Africa was defeated.

But within weeks after my arrival as High Commissioner, almost two million Iraqi Kurds fled to Iran and Turkey. Soon we moved into Northern Iraq, and for the first time worked closely with international military forces to bring back the people to safety. In the following years, especially in the former Yugoslavia, and Central Africa, we were

constantly challenged to rethink our protection, assistance and solution strategies. These were times when massive outflow of people took place across borders. These were also the period marked by internal conflicts, with large scale displacement of people within borders.

The foundation of refugee protection remained legal, but ensuring protection increasingly became an operational, practical, hands-on activity. UNHCR was on the frontlines, often in war situations. We became much more active in countries of origin, particularly when helping returnees reintegrate. The times also demanded innovative approaches to asylum. We broke new ground – and together saved many lives – by promoting temporary protection for refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

If I were to give you a ten year balance sheet of the work of my office, UNHCR, I think I can claim successes. The most important is that millions of refugees repatriated. Starting with the return of the African National Congress exiles to post-apartheid South Africa, the most significant case that followed was that of Mozambique, where a twenty-year war had uprooted more than a third of the population. We worked hard and by 1995 all 1.7 million refugees were back home and, more importantly, they stayed home.

There were successes in Asia and Latin America, too. In Cambodia, we helped 400,000 refugees return home. The completion of repatriation from Thailand to Laos and the closure of the Vietnamese Pillar Point centre in Hong Kong in 2000, signalled the end of the 25 year-old Indochinese refugee saga. I travelled to Mexico in 1999 to witness the formal closure of the Guatemalan refugee camps and repatriation operation, which put an end to decades of refugee crises in Central America.

Solutions to refugee problems take time. This is a lesson I learned over the years. But the success stories demonstrate that even very complex refugee problems can be solved when governments are committed and resources are available. Formal peace agreements certainly provide the best basis for repatriation of refugees. At the same time, a combination of innovative and comprehensive approaches has also proven to produce unexpected results. The Mozambique peace settlement was realized through the quiet efforts of a small religious organization, and then supervised and implemented by the United Nation. The Vietnamese refugee problem was settled through UNHCR sponsored Comprehensive Plan of Action, which combined refugee resettlement, non-refugee return

and migration outlet. Mexico provided refugees with asylum opportunities as well as staying on in the country as migrants or citizens.

Let me also refer to a few unresolved refugee situations, but with hopeful signs. For example, after years of ethnic conflict during which UNHCR had to cope with almost four million refugees, internally displaced and affected civilians. But five years after Dayton, minority returns are finally becoming a reality both in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in Croatia. Serb refugees are returning to Croatia or integrating in Serbia, and the displaced persons in Bosnia are even returning to towns that were virtually synonymous with ethnic cleansing. I would give credit to the continuing presence of international peace-keeping forces, IFOR succeeded by SFOR. They have brought forth a secure environment for people to make choices to return or to resettle elsewhere. Today, obstacles to solve the displacement problems are more practical than political. More money is needed now to build houses and create jobs that will anchor returns. Kosovo is moving towards normalcy, but continued presence of international peace-keeping will remain key to the return of minorities --- now the Serbs and the Romas.

Rwanda has also made progress. After the genocide and the large-scale killings in Zaire in the course of the rebellion, UNHCR undertook the

most difficult rescue operation. Today the refugees are largely back, and gradually reintegrating. UNHCR's work in Rwanda is winding down. What the country needs is new development investments to consolidate returns and foster reconciliation. The government must have the political will to resolve the fundamental problems of power sharing and democratisation. The future of Rwanda is linked with the stability of the Great Lakes region, and the situation of Congo in particular.

In Congo, the theatre of a complex clash of political, military and economic interests, people are still suffering. I want to repeat this loud and clear: millions of people are suffering, and little is done to address their plight. It is a paradox that while Congolese continue to seek refuge outside the country, and 1.8 million are displaced internally, over 300,000 people from neighbouring countries have sought refuge in the Congo itself! This shows the regional dimension of the crisis, but reflects the lack of sufficient international attention to confront the profound despair of people seeking safety and to invest enough resources --- military, humanitarian, developmental.

In Burundi, the choice between peace and renewed conflict continues, and refugees are festering in the neighboring Congo and Tanzania. Elsewhere in Africa, whether in Sudan, the Horn, Sierra Leone, Liberia

--- conflicts continue and political actions taken have neither been conclusive nor consistent enough to provide the kind of stability that lead to the solution of refugee problems. Recent developments in Angola bring some hope for peace and alleviation of suffering for the vast number of refugees and internally displaced persons. In the course of the ten years that I served as High Commissioner, I made thirty-one visits to Africa. UNHCR has dedicated at least a third of its resources on Africa, but its claim to success may be more on the basis of ongoing efforts than conclusive results.

There are the “frozen” to “forgotten” conflicts which negatively impact on the refugees. Many victims of these conflicts --- South Caucasus, Western Sahara, Somalia --- have been left to languish; Bhutanese in Nepal or Chechens in Ingushetia may follow suit without decisive action. The 6.2 million Afghans were the world’s largest refugee caseload when I became High Commissioner in 1991. Two and a half million remained in exile when I left the office in the end of 2000 with international assistance constantly decreasing. Repatriation to Afghanistan was not considered a viable option because of the fundamentalist policies and practices of the Taliban regime. Had it not been for the terrible attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, they would have remained in the category of victims of “frozen” or “forgotten” conflicts. The world seems to have learned the

danger of allowing abandoned situations to become hotbeds of terrorist activities. On military, humanitarian and reconstruction fronts, efforts have been mobilized to build a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

Refugees and internally displaced people are beginning to return home. There is now a genuine chance for solving the problem of the world's largest group of refugees.

But surely, you will ask. Are there not better ways to tackle the refugee problems? Can you not solve them more efficiently, or better still, prevent them from suffering displacement to begin with? Given the kind of world we live in, I think UNHCR must continue to strengthen its emergency preparedness and response capacity. Moreover, it must increase its “surge capacity” through expanded stand-by arrangements, rosters of people trained and ready for rapid deployment, and the development of “kits” and packages” to meet field needs. UNHCR can definitely make a difference through effective emergency action.

However, when it comes to the question of generally available means to protect people and solve their problems, I have found gross inadequacies, and wish to raise three points as thoughts for the future.

First, the need for conflict resolution mechanisms appropriate to the issue on hand. Today's conflict resolution mechanisms are modelled from the

times of inter-state wars, while a more appropriate model may be sought from community conflict management. An added problem is the non-availability of military means appropriate or proportional to the security needs on hand. I once heard former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt say in the course of the Balkan War, that the world did not need missiles but better crowd control systems. It is not for me to judge the appropriateness of military measures applied in Bosnia, Kosovo or Afghanistan. But I could not help wondering whether bombs dropped from 15,000 feet, or missiles launched from thousands of miles away could solve the house-to-house fighting between communities that had lived together, separate but intertwined, for hundred of years. Besides, today's victims as well as targets of conflicts are mostly civilians, particularly comprising women and children. Should there not be at least a "ladder of options" developed, that could respond to low level communal strife to sub-regional conflicts and further on to international wars?

Second, the need for effective complimentary action of humanitarian and development assistance in the transition phase from war to peace.

Organizationally speaking, the international community has two separate compartments, humanitarian and development, to respond to war-torn societies. However, the needs of these societies do not fall into two neat

categories. The reality demands much more simultaneous relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction interventions. In January 1999, James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank and myself called for a round table meeting at the Brookings Institution to look for more pro-active and creative approaches to rehabilitate post-conflict societies. The existence of the “gap” between the two operations has been duly recognized. However, there is still a long ways to go in actually overcoming the different mode of operation, the speed of action and the coordination of funding. Coming after a clear recognition for convergence of efforts by the World Bank, UNDP and all concerned, the Afghan reconstruction will stand as a test case to bring our intentions to proven action.

Third, the need to promote sustained co-existence of peoples in divided communities. Again in situations of peace following war, refugees often return to live alongside the very people they fought with. From Bosnia to Rwanda, and from Timor to Kosovo, this was the pattern that persisted. UNHCR had to grapple with the difficulties of integrating people back to broken communities with lingering memories of hate and suspicion. With inspiration gained from a group of academics who had worked on reconciliation projects in violence-ridden American inner-cities, UNHCR

launched an initiative called “Imagine Co-existence.” The challenge is to come up with projects that necessarily bring people together for common survival purposes. The pilot projects in Bosnia and Rwanda have already introduced interesting job-sharing potentials to be applied in many other post–conflict societies. Education should also be examined in the context of co-existence. The co-existence impact might be slower to emerge, but should be longer in effect. From a post-conflict curative measure, it may bring insights into the causes of the breakdown of communities. It may actually lead to preventive action, which I consider to be the most difficult.

The approaches I have outlined, will certainly bring far reaching results on alleviating human suffering, especially of refugees and victims of conflicts. There is one crucial issue that must be addressed for which I have no conclusive answer. How to move the political will of governments and leaders to care and act on behalf of those who suffer. The cause of their flight and misery is largely political. How can you turn humanitarian compassion to political action? I would like to ask you all to join forces to think this point through.