

15 February 2006

UNHCR Regional Representative's Official Visit to Papua New Guinea

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Regional Representative for Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific, Mr. Neill Wright, visited Papua New Guinea from Saturday 11 to Tuesday 14 February 2006.

During his visit, Mr. Neill Wright took a field trip together with Ms. Wallaya Pura, UNHCR Representative for PNG, and Ms. Fadela Novak, Protection Officer, to the Government settlement of East Awin (Western Province), where 2,500 West Papuan refugees live. UNHCR assists the West Papuan refugees in East Awin through the Catholic Diocese of Daru-Kiunga and the Department of Border Affairs and Special Projects.

In remote East Awin, the UNHCR team held a meeting with the community leaders, who presented them with a petition, in which they ask for "human development programmes" to help lift them out of dependency and build a future for themselves and their children.

On return to Port Moresby, a briefing session was held on Tuesday 14 February 2006 with Government officials, members of the Diplomatic Corp and representatives from the international organisations.

Mr. Neill Wright thanked the PNG Government for the progress achieved since the UNHCR Office in Port Moresby was re-opened in February 2003. In the past three years, the PNG Government has issued Permissive Residency Permits to all West Papuan refugees residing in East Awin, and Birth Certificates to refugee children born in PNG including those living in the 17 settlements along the PNG-Indonesian border; and the West Papuan refugees who arrived in PNG in December 2000 were relocated to East Awin in September 2004.

Ms. Wallaya Pura also congratulated the Government for their move towards the formal lifting of the reservations expressed by PNG when it acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention in 1986. The UNHCR team also highlighted the importance of the closer working relationship with the Immigration and Citizenship Division and encouraged the Government of PNG to pass national refugee legislation in 2006.

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In remote East Awin, the refugees and local population are just surviving day after day, and all aspects of human security are deeply lacking. Efforts from development and humanitarian actors are urgently required to help the communities find sustainable solutions. Small scale self-help income-generation by youth and women, and capacity building to harness individual initiative for the wider benefit of the community were some of the issues raised by refugees during the visit.

Mr. Neill Wright said "the situation of the West Papuan refugees is now at a turning point". He added "I see an opportunity here, the opportunity to break the circle of dependency that the refugees and local population in East Awin are caught up in, where they are merely surviving. We either seize this opportunity for partnership to make a difference or we miss it".

UNHCR Representatives welcomed the interest in refugees and appealed to all donors and government agencies to seize this opportunity to work together to assist refugees and the local population in East Awin achieve self-reliance.

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