

Check against delivery

“The changing face of global displacement: responses and responsibilities”

**Address to the Lowy Institute for International Policy
Sydney
14 February 2012**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and privilege for me to be with you today.

Less than two months ago, UNHCR concluded a year-long campaign to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Inevitably, these anniversaries have led us to reflect on the state of the 43.7 million people worldwide – about twice the population of Australia – who have been forcibly displaced from their homes by conflict and persecution. To meet their protection needs in the next decade will require a sound understanding of the changing dynamics of displacement, and the responses available to the international community.

UNHCR was created sixty-one years ago to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. Today, only about one-third of our people of concern – 10.5 million – are refugees. More than twice as many others are displaced within their own countries by conflict and violence. Some 3.5 million persons under our mandate are stateless, although estimates go as high as 12 million stateless people world-wide.

But none of these figures, as daunting as they may be, can convey the full scale and complexity of forced displacement today. In an increasingly imbalanced world, violence and persecution are multiplying, as the large displacement crises of 2011 have shown in Côte d’Ivoire, North Africa and the Middle East, Somalia and Sudan. Nearly 800,000 people became refugees last year as a result of these events. While many Ivorian and Libyan refugees have since gone back, return remains a distant hope for those who were uprooted from their communities in Somalia and in the Blue Nile and South Kordofan states of Sudan. Nearly a quarter of Somalia’s population is now displaced, and more than five million people are affected by displacement in and around Sudan and South Sudan.

But as new crises multiply, old ones seem to never die. Conflicts are becoming more intractable, and sustainable political solutions are rare, leaving millions of refugees unable to return home to places like Afghanistan, Iraq or the eastern DRC. Durable solutions have become difficult to attain, and more than two-thirds of the refugees under UNHCR's mandate now live in protracted situations of exile, having left their country of origin more than five years ago. Voluntary repatriation opportunities are scarce, with the number of annual returns in the last two years having dropped by 80% from the average of one million returnees per year over the past two decades. Similarly, the global total of available resettlement spaces – some 80,000 every year – covers only one in every ten refugees in need of this solution.

In addition to forced displacement affecting more people, and for longer periods of time, than only a decade ago, it is also growing in complexity. Conflict and upheaval, the traditional drivers of displacement, are increasingly compounded, if not exacerbated, by a number of inter-related and mutually reinforcing global trends. These include population growth, urbanization, food and water scarcity, and, most dramatically, the effects of climate change.

Climate change touches on almost all spheres of life on earth. This is also true for displacement, where it has a multiplying effect on all other factors that drive people from their homes. There is increasing evidence confirming the close link between climate change and the growing frequency and intensity of natural disasters. Such disasters are already proving their capacity to displace as many people as the conflict-related movements UNHCR has more traditionally been engaged with. But although they attract less media attention, the slow-onset effects of climate change, like drought, desertification, rising sea levels and shrinking agricultural productivity will likely also contribute to hundreds of thousands being forced to abandon their homes in the future.

But while humanitarian action is more and more needed, it faces a clear shrinking of humanitarian space. There are three dimensions to this: the changing nature of conflict, the tougher line taken by some states on national sovereignty at the detriment of the protection of human rights, and a blurring of traditional distinctions between civilian and military spheres.

Today's conflicts are fought by a multiplicity of actors, many of whom have no respect for the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality, or indeed for the safety of humanitarian staff. In theatres of conflict today, one may find national and possibly foreign armies, ethnic- or religious-based militias, insurgent groups and bandits. All of these actors have been responsible for serious human rights violations. Providing humanitarian relief in such an unpredictable environment is both difficult and dangerous, with increasingly limited access to the people in need.

At the same time, a few governments, for political reasons, have refused to allow humanitarian agencies in. Others have expelled them, despite the adverse impact of such expulsions on the protection and assistance available to their citizens. The responsibility to protect is far from being a reality in many circumstances.

Finally, lines that used to clearly separate civilian and military spheres in the actions of the international community are increasingly becoming blurred. In situations where peacekeepers are

deployed to where there is no peace to keep, they risk becoming parties to the conflict. On the other hand, militaries are more and more often undertaking so-called "humanitarian" work in an effort to win hearts and minds of the population in conflict zones. The resulting confusion is cynically and brutally exploited by some belligerents to target humanitarian workers. These actions undermine not only the operations in question, but the very foundations of humanitarian action.

The changing nature of forced displacement is testing the international humanitarian system, and indeed the international community as a whole, in unprecedented ways. Meeting these challenges requires a number of commitments. I will speak about two of them today – more international solidarity, and a recommitment to the fundamental tenets of protection, to enable the international community to face the present and future realities of global displacement.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Australia, like most other developed countries, is fortunate to be far from the main sources of conflict and displacement I have mentioned here today. The overwhelming majority of the hundreds of thousands of new refugees uprooted by the many crises of 2011 found shelter and protection in countries neighboring their own. All of those countries kept their borders open – from Liberia and Ghana, to Tunisia and Egypt, and from Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon to Kenya and Ethiopia.

On the whole, more than 80 per cent of the world's refugees are hosted by developing countries. Many of them show a generosity that is well beyond their own means. They do not have the capacity to manage this pressure on their own. Nor should they have to.

Let me give you only one example – Pakistan, the last country I visited. The world's largest refugee-hosting country, it has sheltered millions of refugees for decades. After large voluntary return movements since 2002, some 1.7 million registered Afghan refugees still receive protection and assistance in Pakistan today, not counting many more who are undocumented. This means 710 refugees to every US dollar of Pakistan's per capita GDP – a burden that is hard to imagine. The developed country that is highest on this list is Germany, in 25th place, with 17 refugees for one US dollar of its GDP per capita.

Countries in the developed world can and must show more solidarity to help shoulder this burden. This should include broadening development cooperation to target refugee-hosting and returnee areas, so that solutions can become sustainable. More resettlement is another vital form of burden-sharing. And ultimately, such measures could be complemented with mobility through managed migration policies.

In times like these, when international solidarity is more important than ever, I deeply appreciate the role that Australia plays in supporting development and humanitarian efforts in the Asia Pacific region and worldwide. Your Government's decision to increase its overseas development aid to 0.5% of GNI by 2015-16, with bipartisan support, is an important example of this commitment.

Australia is a generous contributor to UNHCR's programmes and emergency appeals, providing more than 50 million Australian dollars last year. The Australian Government's contribution has nearly quadrupled since I first became High Commissioner. In addition, during 2011, ordinary Australians gave 17 million dollars from their own pockets towards UNHCR's relief efforts for refugees in other parts of the world. This funding allows us to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance to some of the most vulnerable people in the most dangerous and insecure regions of the world.

I am also encouraged to see growing awareness in Australia of the need to support transitional programmes in return areas, and development actions targeting refugees and their host communities, particularly in protracted situations such as East Sudan or Nepal. Your Government's financial support to a joint initiative of UNHCR and UNDP, aimed at facilitating transitional solutions for long-standing refugees in several protracted situations, would be an important signal of solidarity with countries which have hosted so many refugees for decades.

Australia also makes a crucial contribution to burden-sharing by resettling large numbers of refugees from across the world. In the 65 years since the humanitarian resettlement programme first started, more than 750,000 people have found a new home in this country. Australia's continued commitment to taking in thousands of refugees each year, often from some of the most protracted situations in Africa and Asia, is to be commended. On a per-capita basis, Australia is UNHCR's biggest resettlement country.

However, I earlier noted the large gap globally between resettlement needs and places, and we of course would like all of our resettlement countries to do more if they have the means. In this context I was pleased to be able to discuss with the Minister this week his aspiration – publicly expressed late last year – over time, to increase the Humanitarian Program to 20,000 annual places should circumstances permit. I very much hope this can be achieved.

Beyond the mere numbers, one of the notable features of Australia's resettlement programme is the excellent standard of settlement services provided to new arrivals, something by which I was deeply impressed already during my first visit in 2009 and again this week. NGOs, community and faith-based groups, as well as central and local authorities, undertake essential and meaningful work toward helping new arrivals to integrate and settle into Australian society so that they can begin productive lives in this country. They provide housing, training, and education, giving refugees optimum opportunities to fully establish themselves and their families in Australia. Integration is the most challenging aspect of creating a truly durable solution, and Australian society achieves impressive results in this regard.

At the same time, I have this week seen the wide range of civil society organizations passionately advocating for the legal rights of asylum-seekers and also directly supporting those asylum-seekers who are living in the community.

It is a great credit to this country that, despite the heated political debate, when refugees and asylum-seekers are actually living next door to Australians, it causes very little consternation at the community level. This is no doubt aided by strong community activities and networks that

aim at facilitating and enhancing cross-cultural understanding and tolerance. Again, I commend Australia and its people for this achievement.

I am also very impressed by the work of the Refugee Council of Australia and the Settlement Council of Australia and all of those individual agencies and coalitions working to improve the lives of refugees and asylum-seekers in this country. Also, not forgetting the key work volunteers contribute throughout this process – it is crucial that these efforts do not go unnoticed and be praised.

Today's societies are all becoming multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious – which is a good thing, and inevitable. Australians understood this very early on, and have been very successful at building a tolerant and harmonious society.

This country represents a reassuring example, more necessary than ever when we see the unfortunate developments of racism and xenophobia in so many parts of the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

After solidarity, the second element of response to today's challenges of forced displacement is a reaffirmation of the fundamental principles of protection. Australia also plays an important role in this regard, as demonstrated in its leadership as co-chair of a ministerial conference which UNHCR organized in December last year to commemorate the anniversaries of our cornerstone Convention.

With more than 800 registered participants from 155 countries, including 72 delegations represented at the ministerial level, this was the largest meeting ever dedicated to the protection of refugees and stateless persons. Most states made concrete pledges to improve their protection – including Australia, which promised among other things to continue its generous funding for refugee programmes worldwide, promote increased opportunities for refugee resettlement, and improve integration.

The meeting was a real breakthrough in particular for statelessness, which had been a neglected issue on the global human rights agenda for decades. Over thirty states either acceded to one or both of the statelessness conventions, or announced they would do so in the near future. Given that the 1961 Convention had only been ratified by 37 states during the first 49 years of existence, this was an enormous step forward.

The success of this meeting has shown us that indeed, there is a strong commitment to the basic tenets of protection across the international community. I am grateful to Minister Bowen and the Australian Ambassador in Geneva, Peter Woolcott, who, together with their colleagues from Sweden and Egypt, ably helped to steer this complex intergovernmental process toward remarkably positive and concrete outcomes for improving refugee protection in the years ahead.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am aware that the maritime movement of people in dangerous boat journeys is a problem that preoccupies many governments in this region, including your own. I know that boat arrivals have been the subject of intense debate in Australia, including the possibility of ‘off-shore processing’ and a proposed transfer arrangement with Malaysia.

Compared to the refugee problems in other regions of the world, it is my belief that this debate has been very politicized and is out of proportion in relation to the real dimension of the issue, as the numbers of people coming to Australia are small by global standards.

This is why UNHCR has always been advocating for countries to grant access to their territory for people in need of protection, no matter how they arrive, and to ensure a fair treatment of their asylum claims.

Yemen, one of the world’s poorest countries and shaken by internal conflict and political turmoil for several years, received more than 100,000 asylum-seekers and migrants in 2011 who crossed the Gulf of Aden from the Horn of Africa by boat. In keeping with Yemen’s generous asylum policy, the Somalis among them were given *prima facie* refugee status upon arrival.

The Mediterranean, where more than 57,000 people arrived by boat in Italy and Malta last year, has become the world’s deadliest stretch of water for migrants and refugees, claiming an estimated 1,500 lives in 2011.

I do believe that boat arrivals can be discussed in a less polarized manner. Fundamental humanitarian and protection principles and human rights must always be placed at the heart of any response.

In this context, four things should be recognized:

Firstly, the importance of regional cooperation – this holds true in this region as it does elsewhere in the world where states face similar challenges. Unilateral measures that divert or deflect asylum-seekers away from borders do not address the deeper issues of human insecurity and protection. Unless managed carefully, they can also affect relations between states.

In this regard, Australia’s strengthened cooperation with its Asia-Pacific regional neighbours is key. The Regional Cooperation Framework agreed by Ministers through the Bali Process in March last year now provides a broad framework to address the complex issues of irregular movements in the region – including the protection needs of asylum-seekers and refugees. We need to build on this together.

Genuine cooperation between Australia and countries in South East Asia must be based on principles of burden-sharing and responsibility-sharing, and my Office is committed to working with states to build strong national asylum procedures.

From UNHCR’s unique vantage point, any regional arrangements must contain explicit protection safeguards, both in the letter of the arrangements and in their implementation. These safeguards should include, most importantly, the right to asylum and respect for the principle of *non-refoulement*; humane reception conditions, including protection against prolonged and arbitrary detention; and access to basic rights such as education, health care, and employment.

Special support for vulnerable people, particularly children, victims of torture and trauma and others suffering from disabilities is also fundamental, as are concrete efforts to find durable solutions for refugees.

Second, I fully acknowledge the dual challenge, in an era of growing ‘connectivity’ and human mobility, which all states must confront – of offering a hand of support and protection to those in need arriving at their borders whilst, at the same time, ensuring their own security.

States have the right, and indeed the obligation, to manage their borders responsibly. But this needs to be done in a way that is ‘protection sensitive’ and does not preclude those who need protection from seeking it.

Third, we must all be deeply concerned that so many innocent lives are lost at sea in tragedies like the ones off Christmas Island in December 2010, off Java at the end of last year, and most recently off the coast of Malaysia. UNHCR strongly supports the efforts by the international community to crack down on traffickers and smugglers, which is key in protecting their victims.

And *fourth*, let me assure you that my Office always stands ready to discuss concrete solutions to these complex issues for the region.

For UNHCR, the ultimate test of success is how far any arrangements are able to improve and expand the asylum space available to asylum-seekers and refugees in the region, including here in Australia. If protection space can be increased across the region, then asylum-seekers and refugees will be able to find greater levels of safety and security, other than through dangerous and exploitative boat journeys.

In this context, I have discussed my Office’s concerns about the impact of mandatory detention on the many asylum seekers and refugees affected by this longstanding policy in Australia. National security and health concerns might justify a limited period under which the movement of some asylum-seekers needs to be controlled. Nonetheless, the negative impact that prolonged, mandatory detention has on people is well known and documented.

There are alternatives to detention that can both satisfy legitimate security concerns and ensure that the health, welfare and human rights of asylum-seekers can be met in ‘community’ settings. In this context, I welcome the measures taken by the Minister of Immigration since late 2010 to release children and some other vulnerable asylum-seekers from detention. I was also briefed yesterday on recent steps to release more asylum-seekers into the community on Bridging Visa arrangements. These are positive and welcome changes that underscore Australia’s fundamental commitment to uphold the principles of refugee protection, including under challenging circumstances.

After my contacts in Canberra, I am looking forward to substantial progress in this area.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Refugee Convention is a contemporary and ‘living instrument’ that lies at the heart of protection for millions of refugees around the world today. Over six decades, it has shown remarkable adaptability and relevance to the now 148 states that have signed it, and I am convinced that the Convention will continue to have the same vitality and relevance in the future as it had for its founding members.

With its global perspective, UNHCR is urging States and non-State actors around the world to look at the broader picture of forced displacement and protection, to avoid simplistic or populist explanations for what are very complex and multi-dimensional issues.

Fears about projected ‘floods of refugees’ in industrialized countries are often vastly overblown or mistakenly conflated with issues of migration, and those fears can all too easily manifest into statements and acts of xenophobia against foreigners – be they refugees, migrants or others.

With that in mind, I encourage all of those involved in public discourse in this country to approach the issue of refugees and asylum-seekers with a sense of balance, perspective and compassion for those who are less fortunate.

As with any social issue of our times, there is always a need for strong moral leadership and community support for the basic values that underpin the system of asylum and refugee protection.

From what I have seen and heard during my visit to this wonderful country, I am encouraged by how so many people have shown their commitment to welcome and protect those less fortunate displaced by persecution and war.

Thank you very much.