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Organization of African Unity

ADDRESS BY H.E. THE SECRETARY GENERAL,
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OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSION
FOR REFUGEES

Geneva, Switzerland

16 October 1995

Mr. Chairman,
Madam High Commissioner for Refugees,
Members of the Executive Committee,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured and privileged to have this opportunity to address the Forty-six Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Allow me at the outset to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mrs. Sadako Ogata, for inviting me to speak before this August Assembly. Allow me also to take this opportunity to congratulate you, Mr. Chairman and the other members of the bureau, for being elected to steer the deliberations of this session of the Executive Committee.

Mr. Chairman,

Africa has the misfortune of having the greatest number of refugees and displaced persons in the world now standing at around seven and twenty million respectively. It is by no means an accident but a result of the economic, social, political and natural factors which

have combined to create unstable security environments which have led to mass displacements and refugees. Naturally, the UNHCR has responded, in fulfillment of its humanitarian mission by ensuring that the regimes of refugee protection, relief provision and where possible, of repatriation are strengthened and periodically adjusted and aligned to the needs of the hour.

The African refugee is typically a rural, undernourished poor and largely uneducated, and the overwhelming majority of whom are women, children and the old. As such therefore, they are most vulnerable not only because of their weakened physical state, they are susceptible to disease, but also because they are traumatized by the process of displacement and are ignorant of their rights. Sometimes these refugees are victims of irresponsible elements in the asylum countries, of rigid local government regulations and even of relief agencies.

For this reason, the work of the UNHCR in Africa has assumed an added dimension of complexity and difficulty. The Protection Mission of the UNHCR should therefore be strengthened with particular attention being given to the continual elaboration of the rights and responsibilities of the refugees and of the receiving countries and communities. The right to sustenance and to life is central to any

protection regime. The physical safety of the refugees and their enjoyment of their basic right of asylum must be strengthened by getting the full cooperation of the receiving countries and to convince them to be vigilant where these rights are denied or violated. The right to non-forcible return to their countries of origin and that of protection while in asylum must also be strengthened along with the enjoyment of the fundamental freedoms inherent in human rights.

At the same time, the obligation of refugees to conduct themselves in a manner consistent with their status must also be underlined. Refugees cannot expect welcome and consideration if they violate their status by terrorizing their hosts and engage in criminal or political activities. It is on the whole, an exercise of balancing rights and obligations on the part of refugees and of the receiving communities. We need to continue and deepen the process of awareness building as a means of strengthening the regime of protection, and building an enabling environment in which the refugees can exist.

Mr. Chairman,

Beyond the protection of the refugees in the camps is the provision of relief and humanitarian assistance. The provision of food, education, health facilities, shelter and water as well as other facilities is necessary to ensure that the refugees achieve the basic level of livable conditions. It is not enough to say these will be provided. It is necessary to ensure that adequate and timely relief is provided to the refugees. At the same time the issue of relief and assistance, should be looked at globally taking into account not only the needs of the refugees but also of those of the recipient countries.

The influx of refugees has exerted tremendous pressure on the countries of asylum. Yet, these countries have continued to make huge sacrifices to meet the basic needs of the refugees. In recent years, however, we have been noticing disturbing signals, in some instances, involving misunderstanding and tension between the refugees on one hand, and local population and authorities on the other. In some cases, the origin of the tension which sometime degenerated into serious incidents is related to the behaviour and attitude of some refugees. These incidents raise problems of security in the refugee camps and have posed a serious challenge to the host countries and the international community at large.

More importantly, the emergence of this new phenomenon of misunderstanding and tension between refugees and local populations is a clear manifestation of the impact of massive influx of refugees on the already precarious socio-economic situation of the countries of asylum. This situation should not be allowed to escalate further as it would, in the long run, erode the very fabric of our tradition of hospitality, of brotherhood and solidarity and generate tension and instability in the Continent.

One of the consequences of hosting refugees and displaced persons is ecology destruction and environmental degradation which the host countries suffer as refugees and displaced persons foliage for firewood causing severe loss of vegetation cover and depletion of the carrying capacity of the land. The long term effect of this in terms of ecological destruction including deforestation and land degradation as well as the impact on the conservation of nature and natural resources is quite enormous and will remain in the countries of asylum long after the problem of refugees is over.

Moreover, hosting refugees for whom no contingency plans have been made in the countries of asylum means sharing the scarce resources available for the local population. These creates immense social and economic pressures within the receiving societies, a matter

which requires serious consideration by the UNHCR and the international community to see how this burden of hosting refugee populations can be shared more equitably.

I am, therefore, convinced of the need to put in place modalities to ensure that the activities of both the refugees and the local community are mutually supportive of each other. To this end, it is advisable to explore the possibility of establishing a mechanism to promote mutual assistance, cooperation and trust between refugees and local communities within the countries of asylum. Indeed, the refugees should, where necessary and as appropriate, benefit from Aid and medical facilities along with their hosts. In other words, the local population should also benefit from the assistance and facilities which the aid organizations places at the disposal of the refugees.

Equally in the relief and humanitarian assistance aspects, there is need to strengthen the capacity of the UNHCR and other cooperating organizations as well as of the receiving communities to provide that aid. It means therefore that more resources in the form of food, medicines and in money for infrastructure development to a level sufficient enough to sustain the refugee populations in their areas of settlement.

If enough is available in the camps, the refugees can be stabilized there and avoid the likelihood that these would move into the indigenous populations with all the attendant tension which this breeds.

Mr. Chairman,

The refugees in Africa are the more numerous and quite often the least provided. It is understandable, that due to their numbers, and the socio-economic environment in which they often settle in exile, it is difficult to bring the quality and quantity of relief to certain levels. Yet I believe that there is urgent need to address this issue even within the limitations of the resources available, so that the refugees in Africa can also receive adequate and quality assistance.

Equally, the level and rapidity of response to refugee emergencies in Africa must be made comparable with those in the rest of the world. I say so because there is now a perception rightly or wrongly, that there is selective application of standards of humanitarian relief and different response levels where African refugee emergencies are concerned as compared to other regions of the world facing similar problems.

Mr. Chairman,

In the Great Lakes region of Central Africa, we have a refugee crisis of monumental proportions. It is not only the numbers involved. It is also the nature of some of those refugees and the underlying political difficulties which not only complicate the management of the refugees but also pose the biggest challenge in the elaboration of a comprehensive and lasting solution to the problem.

In Zaire, there are one and a half million Rwandese refugees, most of them innocent men, women and children, and many trapped in venomous propaganda and armed violence of some of the former Rwandese Government forces and militia (the Intarahamwe). Politics and resource constraints have obviously not facilitated the process of repatriation and are in fact compromising the very regime of protection of the refugees. In Tanzania, a further seven hundred thousand Rwandese refugees have attached a very heavy burden on the local communities.

We have repeatedly said that however we may wish to believe, it will not be possible to begin even a modest programme of voluntary repatriation of the bulk of these refugees as long as they continue to be subjected to the propaganda, manipulation and violence

of the political and armed elements amongst them. This is why it is important that as we seek to provide adequate relief, we should also endeavour to separate the innocent from those who hold them captive so that those willing to return home can freely do so. Equally important is the responsibility of the Government of Rwanda to continue to do everything possible to create favourable conditions for the refugees to be able to return without fear as well as to provide for their re-settlement and rehabilitation. But on the issue of re-settlement and rehabilitation, the role of the international community is pivotal. Without adequate and timely assistance the efforts of the Government of Rwanda will not be able to meet this enormous challenge.

Mr. Chairman,

Governments have responsibilities arising from their adherence to the International Conventions protecting refugees and human rights. In Africa, Governments have taken this responsibility quite seriously sometimes at great social and economic cost to their own people. And this cost has not been quantified in monetary terms. Over the years, we have witnessed this commitment being strengthened by the generosity of the people of the asylum countries, who have been willing to welcome refugees and share with them their food, facilities and even land.

We saw this in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa where millions of Mozambican, Angolan and South African refugees found home. In East Africa and the Horn of Africa where millions of refugees have been welcomed and in countries of West Africa where Liberian and now Sierra Leonians have found refuge. More examples of African generosity and caring abound in the Continent. But I am afraid, that apparent permanency of the refugees and the mounting economic problems in asylum countries is beginning to place that sense of generosity and sacrifice under severe strain. What was taken for granted in the past as an automatic act of African generosity is now assuming political dimensions and Governments have to respond.

For example, the Rwandese and Burundian refugees are exerting enormous pressures on the resources and social harmony in their asylum communities in both Zaire and Tanzania. Yes these two asylum countries have tried and are trying to shoulder such burden without the requisite resources. What we need to do now is not simply to criticize those countries which find themselves under severe strain but to understand the enormity of the problems and come up with added assistance. For it is unrealistic to think that these countries can continue to shoulder the burden unassisted and fight against the

compassion fatigue amongst their people much longer without both the increased support of the international community and a structured programme for the progressive repatriation of the refugees.

Mr. Chairman,

The OAU is doing its utmost in cooperation with the countries of the region and indeed the UNHCR to see how the refugee problem in that part of Africa can be dealt with comprehensively. We are working within the framework of the Action Programme of the Bujumbura Conference on refugees and displaced persons in the Great Lakes region dealing with all the aspects of the problem. But beyond this we need to see how the larger international community can be sensitized and brought in, particularly in the long term and resource-demanding aspects of repatriation, resettlement and reconstruction of the region.

The OAU recognizes that the refugee crisis in the Great Lakes region, as elsewhere in Africa is partly a result of political conflict. This is why we see the efforts at protecting refugees and arranging for their eventual voluntary repatriation as being closely linked to those at addressing the underlying political problems.

Rwanda needs our full support as it seeks to regain its feet after the genocide of last year. The Rwandese people need to reconcile with one another and reconstruct their country. We recognize that these measures of reconciliation and reconstruction are not feasible when a significant part of the Rwandese population remains outside the country and when cries of war still reverberate from across the borders.

Those who were victims of genocide need justice, the people of Rwanda need to reconcile and the refugees need to return and rebuild their land. Justice through the speedy operationalization of the International Tribunal, return through voluntary repatriation, reconciliation and reconstruction is what we see as a comprehensive strategy for long term peace and stability of Rwanda. Likewise in Burundi, we see the processes of political settlement and building confidence as being inextricably linked to that of repatriation of refugees, their resettlement and reconstruction of the country.

Mr. Chairman,

In Angola and Liberia we see the beginnings of a return to peace and stability. These are two countries which have been devastated by years of war and which now need to be assisted. The citizens of these countries who are now scattered in exile need to be

assisted to return home. I therefore hope that repatriation programmes will be put in place urgently so that those wishing to take advantage of an early opportunity to return to their homes can do so. Still, beyond being repatriated, these refugees do need assistance in the early stages of resettlement and even later on, in the reconstruction stage. I am aware that technically UNHCR may not have the mandate to go beyond protection and repatriation. Yet progressively we see the strong linkage between a successful repatriation programme and sound resettlement and reconstruction policies. Incidence of refugees who have been repatriated, drifting back to their erstwhile countries of asylum are increasing. We therefore need to see how UNHCR can assume an expanded role alone or in cooperation with other organizations and agencies, so as to link more firmly, the programmes of repatriation with those of resettlement and reconstruction.

The argument to go beyond legal technicalities and accept a more dynamic interpretation of the mandate of UNHCR is given further strength by the limited security role which the Commission has assumed in the Rwandese refugee camps in Zaire. While that is not a substitute for a more robust United Nations role in containing the armed former Rwandese Government forces, the UNHCR has nonetheless filled the vacuum. Of course I still see strong need for the United Nations Security Council to assume its security responsibilities,

so that UNHCR can be freed to concentrate on its protection, relief and repatriation functions. But, by assuming this limited role, UNHCR has demonstrated that where need is compelling, some adjustments in mandate become necessary. In my view it is therefore now evident that UNHCR needs to go beyond repatriation and loop into resettlement and reconstruction as an insurance against roll backs.

Of course, resource availability remains central not only to the execution of its traditional mandate but also to the taking on of additional roles. We need to move from managing emergencies to the long term issues of reconstruction and development. We therefore need also to see how these resources can be available, either independently to the UNHCR, or to tie in the resources of other agencies or programmes which deal with development and allowing this Commission to access them.

Mr. Chairman,

We in the OAU are concerned that the problem of displaced persons has not attracted the requisite attention of the international community. We are concerned about the silent millions of displaced persons whose suffering is no different from those of the refugees and who seem to have attracted the least attention of the international

community. Displaced persons are increasingly moving into marginal lands within their countries of origin and are settling in camps in great numbers. In some cases, the condition of such displaced persons are worse than those of refugees as they do not receive the same attention from either the UNHCR or the international community.

In my view, there is an imperative need to urgently consider extending the benefits of relief and humanitarian assistance to the millions of the internally displaced persons as those extended to the refugees. This is necessary considering the escalating number and mounting problems of the internally displaced persons mostly as a result of conflicts but also of the recurrent drought and famine.

Apart from the consideration of how to provide relief and humanitarian assistance to the displaced persons in Africa, I am also of the view that there is urgent need to give a sharper focus to the whole issue of the root causes of population displacement in Africa. This new phenomenon of economic and environmental refugees need to be closely examined and its implication to the broader problems of socio-economic development of Africa fully assessed.

I am also convinced that this issue of populations displacement should be analyzed in the context of the level of poverty existing in the Continent. Indeed, just as poverty beget conflicts, so too do conflicts breed poverty. The relationship between poverty and conflicts on one hand, and refugees and displaced persons on the other, implies that improvement in Africa's socio-economic situation depends very much on Africa's capacity to break the vicious circle of poverty, conflicts, refugees and the problem of displacement of populations. One cannot effectively tackle poverty and ignore conflicts, or address issues of refugees and displaced persons and ignore poverty and conflicts.

In other words, meaningful development in Africa entails improvement in socio-economic conditions so that people do not have to leave their countries of origin and look for alternative livelihood elsewhere under the pretext that they are political refugees. In like manner, to ensure sustainable development in Africa, relentless efforts must be deployed to prevent conflict situations from erupting into full-fledged conflicts causing massive influx of populations from areas of conflicts to areas where peace and stability prevails.

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It was with this in mind that the 29th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government meeting in Cairo, in June 1993, decided to establish, within the OAU, a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. Indeed, in establishing the Mechanism the Heads of state and Government were also cognizant of the intrinsic relationship between conflicts and refugees. Furthermore, in establishing the Mechanism, the OAU Heads of State and Government were equally cognizant of the fact that prevention of conflicts had direct relation to efforts being deployed at the continental and global levels to address the problem of refugees and displaced persons.

The African leaders saw the opportunity to shift from the Ad Hoc modalities of conflict resolution of the past to a more permanent mechanism for the anticipation and resolution of conflicts. Indeed, the establishment of the Mechanism marked the emergence, within Africa, of a new institutional dynamism empowering Africa and situating the OAU at the centre of all efforts at conflict prevention, management and resolution in Africa. Its primary objective is

essentially the anticipation and prevention of conflicts. In circumstances where conflicts have occurred, the Mechanism has the responsibility of undertaking peacemaking and peace building functions in order to facilitate the resolution of potential or real conflicts.

The Mechanism is of course assisted by the fundamental transformations that are taking place in the political processes in Africa. Democratization is having a facilitating impact on our efforts as societies in Africa reorganize on a new basis and fostering political freedom and regard to human rights. This process of building democracy in the long run, along with economic development, are the long term foundations of peace and lasting panacea to the refugee problem.

Mr. Chairman,

In our efforts to deal with the scourge of conflicts on the Continent, we see ourselves in an abiding partnership with UNHCR. If conflicts beget refugees, how can we deal with conflicts in isolation of refugees or how can UNHCR deal with refugees in total isolation of the conflicts which breed them? The mandates of the OAU and UNHCR may differ but our roles coincide in many ways. In this coincidence of roles, we have cooperated and supported each other in

field operations. In this respect, I want to reiterate my gratitude to the High Commissioner and her staff for the operational logistical support they have given particularly to the OAU Mission in Burundi.

We need to strengthen these links of cooperation and expand on the areas of cooperation in a way as would enable UNHCR to bring greater and more effective support to the Continent's efforts at conflict resolution within the framework of the OAU Mechanism for conflict prevention, management and resolution.

Of course, greater focus would be in the resource and logistical areas but it being understood that where necessary, the Commission would not feel constrained to take on additional supportive and limited political roles. This duality would enable both ourselves and UNHCR to sustain the political and relief initiatives in developing the critical mass necessary to find solutions to political problems which involve mass human displacements.

Mr. Chairman,

While African Governments commit themselves to the eradication of the refugees problem on the Continent, a partnership must be forged between the international community, on the one hand

and the African people on the other. This partnership must be predicated upon principles of international solidarity, cooperation and commitment so that together as a community of nations, we can better face this tragic humanitarian challenge. For the purpose of achieving this objective, the OAU shall continue to sensitize and mobilize the support of the international community to show the requisite political will and respond more forcefully, to the needs and aspirations of African's uprooted communities.

Post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation is costly. Angola and Mozambique will require massive infusion of external resources for reconstruction and development. Moreover, the destruction of infrastructure in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Rwanda, Somalia and Burundi points to the imperative need for peace-making and peace-building if massive expenditures on reconstruction and rehabilitation are to be avoided. In this too Africa needs the solidarity and partnership of the international community.

Obviously, Africa is concerned about the diminishing external resources to immediately meet the needs of the refugees as well as of long term reconstruction and development. I realize that increasingly, the world is getting fatigued by the persistence and gravity of the problems of Africa; and that is why at times the resources we

need and seek may not always be forthcoming. At the same time, we need to overcome the donor fatigue if together we are to make a difference. This is more so now, when there are many other conflict situations, with equally compelling need for assistance.

There are too many problems chasing diminishing resources. Yet Africa's problems, in their gravity and magnitude, need special attention and resources. The Continent's problems are in the larger sense humanity's problems. In this shrinking world where we live in a global village, we need to act together. Africa needs global solidarity and global partnership.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, let me take this opportunity to reiterate my gratitude to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the support the Organization has given and continue to give to the African refugees, the OAU as well as the asylum countries in Africa. I should like to urge them to continue to give priority to the scourge of refugees and displaced persons in the Continent and increase their support in a manner commensurate with the magnitude of the plight.

I thank you.