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UN chief says global refugee picture changing fast, new approaches needed

News Stories, 8 December 2010

GENEVA, December 8 (UNHCR) – UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres warned on Wednesday of growing gaps in the global framework for protecting the world's millions of forcibly displaced and stateless people, and appealed to the international community to urgently adapt and respond.



The opening of the High Commissioner's Dialogue in Geneva today.

In a speech to governmental and other delegates in Geneva for the annual High Commissioner's Dialogue, a landmark policy gathering held behind closed doors, Guterres said the certainties of the post-World War II and Cold War periods were no longer sufficient to ensure that everyone needing international protection gets it.

"Today's challenges are interconnected and complex," Guterres said. "Population growth, urbanization, climate change, water scarcity and food and energy insecurity are exacerbating conflict and combining in other ways that oblige people to flee their countries."

The High Commissioner, speaking just days before UNHCR's 60th birthday next Tuesday, identified three areas as demanding particular attention in the coming year and beyond: "protection gaps" in the international system for protecting displaced people; the disproportionate burden of responsibility for helping refugees that falls on poor countries; and failures by many states to tackle statelessness – a scourge depriving millions of people around the world of nationalities and other human rights.

With protection gaps, Guterres said these stemmed from inadequate implementation of existing treaties, insufficient accessions to relevant instruments, and holes in the international protection framework.

He also pointed to the need for action on an expanding list of displacement problems for which no agreed international solutions currently exist, including natural disasters, climate change, economic and other man-made calamities, gang violence and vulnerability arising from the uncertainty of post-conflict situations.

With burden sharing, the High Commissioner repeated his appeal of October this year for a "new deal" geared towards ensuring that front-line countries of asylum are not left alone in dealing with displacement from neighbouring states. Currently, developing nations host around 80 per cent of the world's refugees.

Guterres said models for improved burden sharing already existed, and he pointed to regional efforts in Latin America and Asia, including South America's "solidarity cities" initiative that promotes self-sufficiency among refugees, its "borders of solidarity" initiative which is designed to ensure that mass influx situations are not damaging to the interests of the host population, and, in Asia, the Bali process which promotes a broad-based approach to complex population and refugee movements.

On statelessness, Guterres said the top priority was to ensure that more countries accede to, and implement, the two key statelessness conventions. Currently, and despite the half century or more that has passed since they were created, the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons has only 65 signatories, while just 37 countries are party to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

"The lack of nationality represents the denial of a fundamental human right in itself," Guterres said. "But people unable to exercise this right inevitably find as a consequence a range of other rights impaired. They may not be able to work legally or travel. They may not be able to access health care or obtain education for themselves or their children."

The High Commissioner said UNHCR was looking to states to work together with it during 2011 with a view to achieving demonstrable progress in all these areas in time for a proposed ministerial-level meeting on international protection in December 2011. This included, he said, pledging to accede to the conventions or withdrawing reservations, introducing legislation to improve implementation of the conventions at national level, helping resolve particular protracted displacement or statelessness situations, and collaborating with other states to address regional challenges.

By Adrian Edwards in Geneva

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Opening Statement by UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, 2010 Dialogue on Protection Gaps and Responses

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The High Commissioner

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