

Statement of Mr. António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, African Union Special Summit of Heads of State and Government on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, Kampala, Uganda, 22 October 2009

By António Guterres | 22 October 2009

(Delivered immediately following Secretary-General's statement)

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

If I may briefly continue, I would like to add a few words in my capacity as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

African nations host some 2.3 million refugees today. Their numbers have steadily declined over the past several years. Working together, we have helped literally millions of refugees to find solutions and restart their lives. But let us not be complacent. 98 percent of the remaining refugees have spent five years or more in exile.

Still more staggering are the statistics relating to internal displacement. Refugees and people displaced internally by conflict or natural disasters often live side by side, facing the same hardship, misery and threats to their security and basic human dignity.

Many stay in camps, but more and more today, refugees and IDPs are settling in Africa's burgeoning cities, where they compete with poorer locals for very limited economic opportunities and scarce services. Often lacking documentation and a legal identity, they are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Living exposed in fragile shelters, doctors, medicine, education and other essential services may also be beyond their reach.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We cannot be and we are not indifferent to their fate. Africa's future depends upon meeting the challenge of forced displacement in all its dimensions and finding lasting solutions.

First and foremost, we need your will, your courage and your leadership. Let us draw inspiration from those African leaders who have refused to accept perpetual displacement as an inevitable reality in their countries and have acted boldly to bring it to an end. Refugee status and internal displacement must not be an inheritance that is handed down from one generation to the next.

Second, we need the international community to demonstrate in very concrete ways the greatest solidarity with Africa. Displacement is undeniably a global concern, and a global responsibility. But too great a share of the burden falls upon the countries having the fewest economic resources and upon communities - often very poor communities - who share their land and lives with refugees and the displaced.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Lasting solutions require the sense of confidence that peace and security bring. Lasting solutions are built upon hope - the hope that grows when children are back in school, when families can grow or earn enough to live decently and when neighbours reconcile, stop living in the past and begin looking to the future. People across Africa who have been uprooted by conflict and calamity are looking to you - their leaders - to give them confidence and hope.

As daunting as the challenges may seem, I am an optimist. Wars that seemed endless and intractable a decade ago are now part of history. Together with you, we have brought refugee situations to an end in every region of this vast and beautiful continent. UNHCR is now working closely with the concerned governments to develop roadmaps for closing the painful refugee chapters in the histories of Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia and Angola, leading to the cessation of refugee status in a dignified and protection-sensitive way.

There is no humanitarian solution for a humanitarian problem. The solution is always political. First and foremost, conflicts should be prevented. When that fails, we should stop them and work to consolidate peace and build trust between communities.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me conclude by saluting you - the assembled Heads of State and Government of the African Union - for your readiness to demonstrate the same remarkable global leadership shown by your predecessors when adopting the OAU Refugee Convention four decades ago. I am sure this will not be just another convention. The African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa will be a human rights landmark achievement, giving this Summit and all of you a place in history.

On a personal note, I am often shocked at ways some people speak about human rights in Africa in a patronizing way. Speaking as a Portuguese citizen, I lived the first part of my life under a dictatorship that oppressed our people and the people of several African nations. Human rights convictions in my country were re-established thanks to the struggle of the African movements in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. It was this struggle that forced the Portuguese army to overthrow the dictatorship in Portugal. It was this struggle which led to the establishment of the democracy and respect for the human rights I now enjoy.

The Convention you will consider establishes a new equilibrium between the dignity of human beings and the sovereignty of the State. It is a gift, a priceless African gift, to future generations across the world.

Thank you.