

**World Refugee Day  
20 June 2008, Akranes, Iceland**

**Statement of  
Mr. Thomas Straub, Regional Protection Officer,  
UNHCR Regional Office for the Baltic and Nordic Countries**

I) Let me welcome you to this annual celebration of World Refugee Day, a day on which we pay tribute to those who, despite having lost everything, never lose hope. World Refugee Day is the occasion to stand still and commemorate the millions of refugees and other displaced around the world and their urgent needs – from water and shelter to protection and tolerance. No matter whether you are finding shelter in a remote refugee camp or whether you have arrived here in Iceland as a resettled refugee, World Refugee Day is a truly global event for all refugees and displaced around the world. We commemorate the incredible courage, strength and stamina of those who were forced to flee from their homes by conflict or persecution, who try to rebuild their lives in safety and dignity.

II) The world is a vastly different and more complex place today than it was in 1951 when the UN High Commissioner for Refugees began to operate. In an age of increasing globalization, when more and more people are on the move, refugees are not unique because they are away from home. What sets them apart is that they cannot return there. UNHCR has chosen “protection” as the theme of this year’s World Refugee Day, because providing international protection to refugees is the core of our mandate. Refugee protection is, on a universal level, governed by the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. More than 140 States, including Iceland, are parties to these two international legal instruments. The prime documents to provide guidance on their interpretation are the UNHCR Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, UNHCR’s Guidelines and Recommendations as well as the Conclusions of UNHCR’s Executive Committee. Today we celebrate the launch of the Icelandic version of UNHCR’s Handbook and I would like to thank those involved for taking on the meticulous and challenging task of translating it. The Handbook will serve as a valuable guide to government officials concerned with the determination of refugee status as well as refugee lawyers, NGOs and all others concerned with refugee matters.

Refugee protection includes ensuring that those fleeing violence and persecution are given access to safety and life-saving assistance, as well as long term support during exile and eventual durable solutions for them to be able to rebuild their lives. But our work is becoming increasingly difficult in many parts of the world. In some countries efforts to control illegal migration are failing to make a proper distinction between those who choose to move and those who are forced to flee because of persecution and violence. And all too often, we see refugees turned away at the borders of countries where they had hoped to find safety and asylum.

By the end of 2007, there were 11.4 million refugees outside their countries and 26 million others displaced inside their countries. Among refugees the biggest groups were Afghans (around 3 million, mainly in Pakistan and Iran) and Iraqis (around 2 million, mainly in Syria and Jordan). In 2007, 42 persons sought asylum in Iceland. These might be modest numbers in the global context, but each and every person has a different story, and each and every person is important.

III) Besides with providing international protection, UNHCR is tasked with seeking durable solutions for refugees. These durable solutions include voluntary repatriation once conditions in the countries of origin allow; integration in countries of first asylum; or resettlement to a third country. More than 700,000 refugees were able to go home under voluntary repatriation programs in 2007. Less than 1 percent of the world's refugee population is resettled to third countries to find protection which they are not adequately provided with in their first country of asylum. Iceland has received most of its refugee population through resettlement, over the last ten years some 200 persons. This year, this very municipality of Akranes will receive 30 refugees as new members of the community and I would like to thank the municipality and its citizens for their generosity to do so.

Resettlement is a complex and difficult process, which does not end when a refugee steps off the plane in his or her new country, which often is thousands of kilometres away and where the culture, climate, language and social structure are unfamiliar. That is just when the integration challenge starts. Helping refugees to adapt to these new circumstances and to establish themselves in their new country and community is of crucial importance. Therefore, UNHCR calls upon states to put in place policies to ensure that resettlement runs in tandem with a vigorous integration policy. Language training, education, vocational training, employment, support for family reunification – these and many other activities are the building blocks of integration.

Iceland has a well-established integration program for resettled refugees. Newly arrived refugees are provided with housing, and the first six to twelve months are dedicated to learning the language and adjusting to the new environment. Refugees also receive vocational training and help in finding employment after completing the integration program. The Red Cross program to arrange several Icelandic support families for each refugee family is a very important factor for integration. Support families help refugees with everyday errands, such as showing where to shop, find banks, informing about customs and traditions - and most importantly: “to be there”. Support families give access to a social network and thus to the Icelandic society, providing a warm welcome for the resettled refugees to their new home, where they can start rebuilding their life in safety and dignity, and make important contributions to their new society.

IV) When I ask you to provide a warm welcome to refugees, all of us need to remember that refugees are victims of serious human rights abuses towards whom we have a collective responsibility. Those in industrialized countries should also remember that the majority of the world's refugees are to be found in developing countries. Many developing countries show enormous generosity in accepting refugees and deserve more

acknowledgment, support and solidarity from the international community in a spirit of true responsibility-sharing.

On this World Refugee Day, I would like to invite you to pay tribute to all of those who have been forcibly uprooted and to the many humanitarians who help them. Refugees show incredible courage and perseverance in overcoming enormous odds to rebuild their lives. Ensuring that they get the protection they deserve is a noble cause because refugee rights are human rights – and rights that belong to us all.

Thank you.