

Statement of Mr. Sanda Kimbimbi,  
UNHCR Regional Representatives for Southern Africa  
at the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly – 18<sup>th</sup> Session

Luanda, Angola – 1 December 2009

Honourable Co-Presidents of the Joint Parliamentary Assembly

~~\_\_\_\_\_~~  
Distinguished Delegates,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. António Guterres, let me express UNHCR's profound gratitude for the invitation to address this unique gathering of parliamentarians from so many countries.

The High Commissioner has asked me to convey to you his deep ~~disappointment~~<sup>regret</sup> at being unable to join you here in Luanda. He has the highest regard for this honourable Assembly and its efforts to promote human rights, democracy and the common values of humanity. I would also like to take this opportunity to convey the High Commissioner's appreciation for the support that the nations you represent extend to refugees and to the work of UNHCR.

The Joint Parliamentary Assembly asked ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~<sup>we</sup> to present on the topic refugees and climate change. Please allow me to begin, however, by highlighting the importance that we at UNHCR place on our collaboration with parliamentarians around the world. Members of parliament are indispensable partners in efforts to build a favourable environment for the protection of refugees and in finding lasting solutions for them.

Parliamentarians enact the laws that give the international refugee protection regime life and force at the national level. In their capacity as lawmakers, parliamentarians make it possible for refugees to ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ seek and enjoy asylum and, in some cases, eventually to integrate as citizens of their host country. Parliamentarians appropriate the resources needed to run national institutions and to provide services benefiting refugees. They also give concrete expression to international solidarity by approving funding for the international programmes implemented by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies.

Perhaps most importantly, as parliamentarians, you all have a key role – and responsibility – in promoting understanding and acceptance of refugees living in the communities you represent. You must be leaders in the fight against intolerance and xenophobia. Expressing solidarity and standing beside refugees is not always easy, particularly in times of economic crisis. Too often, refugees are seen simply as competitors for scarce jobs and limited services.

Together we must build greater understanding that refugees are people who need protection from persecution and conflict. ~~Presenting this, containing the following features in the work of UNHCR.~~ We need your help and engagement. With the Inter-Parliamentary Union,

UNHCR has developed a handbook specifically for parliamentarians entitled *Refugee Protection: A Guide to International Law*. I have shared some copies of this publication with the Secretariat, and it is also available on the UNHCR website.<sup>1</sup>

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Parliamentarians must also be leaders in national and global efforts to address the enormous challenges posed by climate change. The High Commissioner has identified climate change as being among the five global "megatrends" creating new dynamics in our world and increasing the complexity of human displacement. Drawing from the High Commissioner's recent statement before the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, let me outline briefly these five phenomena before focusing in more precisely on the challenge of climate change.

First, population growth: At present, there are approximately 6.7 billion people on earth. By 2050, we are expected to surpass nine billion. Almost all of the population growth will come in the developing world, placing further strains on the environment and limited economic and natural resources.

Second, urbanization: Already a majority of all the people in the world live in cities. By 2050, the proportion is expected to reach 70 percent. Refugees and other displaced populations are increasingly found in urban areas, challenging the stereotypical image of refugees living in rural camps. The urbanization of forced displacement brings a myriad of new challenges to governments and to UNHCR.

Third, migration: More than 200 million migrants are living outside their home countries today. Demographics and economics are the principle factors driving migration, as noted recently in a speech by the Director-General of the International Organization for Migration. Environmental degradation is also an increasingly relevant push factor.

Fourth, food, energy and water insecurity: More than a billion people are likely to suffer from hunger and malnutrition by the end of this year. World food prices have dropped from their peaks, but the food crisis continues in many poorer countries. ~~In addition, 1.4 billion people are expected to lack access to safe water by 2050. A billion more people will lack access to electricity by 2050.~~ ~~By 2050, severe water shortages will threaten 250 million people. Energy demand is expected to increase by fifty percent over the next 20 years, and most of these needs will likely still be met by fossil fuels, further contributing to global warming.~~

Fifth, climate change: Global warming threatens to contribute to massive displacement. Extreme weather events and accompanying natural disasters occur roughly twice as frequently today as twenty years ago. ~~A study released last week in the United States found that climate change specifically higher temperatures is a major driver of conflict worldwide.~~

The High Commissioner has argued that efforts to address these trends in an isolated manner are doomed to fail. They are interrelated. Trends in population growth; urbanization; migration; food, energy and water insecurity; and climate change reinforce each other and have the potential to create negative synergies, exacerbating underlying social and political tensions, provoking conflicts and driving displacement within countries and across borders.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=3d4aba564&query=parliamentarians handbook](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=3d4aba564&query=parliamentarians%20handbook)

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

With the UN Climate Change Conference opening next week in Copenhagen, we have good reason to focus on global warming and its consequences among these other phenomena. Natural disasters are already occurring more often and with greater intensity and destructive force. Last year, some 36 million people were suddenly uprooted by natural disasters. Less evident – but certainly much larger – is the number of people whose ability to survive and sustain themselves is being eroded progressively by climatic changes in the places they live.

While none among us can escape the consequences of climate change, we can project that the hardest hit will be communities that have the fewest resources and people who are already living in poverty – people who have done the least to cause global warming. These consequences are already real for subsistence farmers eking out a living from increasingly infertile land and herders grazing their livestock in dry and shrinking pastures. In many parts of Africa, farmers and pastoralists find themselves in an increasingly tense competition for scarce land and water.

When war erupts in these situations and people are displaced internally or across borders as refugees, the headlines tend to highlight ethnic tensions, human rights abuses and poor governance as being at the root of the conflicts, and rightly so. In many of these situations, however, climate change is arguably acting as a multiplier and accelerator of the factors causing displacement.

Climate change is certain to generate larger and more complex population movements. Rising sea levels are already encroaching on low-lying island States, ~~which may become uninhabitable in the foreseeable future.~~ The possibility that some States, as territorial entities, may disappear entirely raises very profound questions regarding identity and culture. The legal dimension is equally complex. It is not simply a practical matter of finding another place to live but also one of statehood, nationality and, potentially, statelessness.

UNHCR is the UN agency tasked with helping to reduce the incidence of statelessness and assisting stateless persons in securing an effective nationality. This is another area where we look to parliamentarians as key partners. UNHCR and the Inter-Parliamentary Union have collaborated on a second publication, entitled *Nationality and Statelessness: A Handbook for Parliamentarians*. The Secretariat has some copies of this handbook, which you may also find on the UNHCR website.<sup>2</sup>

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Global warming presents an unprecedented global challenge, and we will need new concepts, legal frameworks and understandings. The Assembly has recognized this gap when adopting a resolution on the social and environmental consequences of climate change in Prague last April. That resolution calls upon the international community “to address the legal shortfalls that exist in respect of the protection of environmental refugees . . . .”

UNHCR welcomes and encourages your engagement and your leadership. If I may make a plea, however, we would seek your understanding in avoiding the use of terminology such as “environmental refugees” or “climate refugees.” International law has given the term “refugee” a precise meaning as a person who is outside his or her country of origin or

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/436774c62.html>

residence and is unable or unwilling to receive protection from that country because of a fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. The 1969 Organization of African Unity Refugee Convention expanded that definition on this continent to include refugees fleeing external aggression, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in their country.

People uprooted by climate change will have special needs that must be addressed, including a need for human rights protections. We are concerned, however, that calling them "refugees" may introduce confusion and weaken the framework of international refugee law and the institution of asylum that has been built so painstakingly and maintained for six decades now.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Natural disasters and climate change – directly or indirectly – are already precipitating the movement of people across international borders. We should recognize, however, that most forced displacement – whether induced by conflict, natural disasters or other causes – takes place within national borders. As States bear the primary responsibility for their citizens, new approaches are also needed to deal effectively with internal displacement.

The African Union has placed itself at the leading edge of these efforts by adopting a groundbreaking new Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa in Kampala in October. The Kampala Convention broadly addresses both conflict-related displacement and displacement resulting from natural disasters. ~~The Kampala Convention also addresses displacement resulting from natural disasters.~~

Global action is also needed to complement such admirable regional efforts. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol do not address the specific protection or other needs of people affected by climate change. The focus has been on mitigation and adaptation, with a view to slowing the process of global warming and managing the consequences that are already unavoidable.

Mitigating the impact of climate change by reducing carbon emissions and supporting communities to adapt to climate change must remain at the centre of our efforts. In addition to these goals, however, UNHCR would call for greater support and a coherent response to the needs of people uprooted from their homes and forced to flee by climate change, whether directly and or indirectly as a catalyst and driver of other causes of forced displacement.

UNHCR sees the need for enhanced humanitarian response capacities are at the national and international levels. We are ready to play our role within such efforts. But let us also reflect. Billions are spent annually mounting massive humanitarian responses to natural and man-made disasters. Uncounted billions will be needed in the future. This raises questions. Could we be less reactive? Could our vision be broader?

We would urge the international community to consider what could be achieved by investing in development-oriented approaches before disaster strikes. Improving access to livelihoods, services and security for the excluded, the marginalized and the vulnerable will help them become stronger and more resilient. Those most affected by climate change must necessarily be participants in our response to it. And we must help them. It is our shared responsibility.

Thank you.