

OSCE HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING
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Working session 11: Humanitarian issues and other commitments I,
including:

Refugees and displaced persons

Mr. Moderator,

Canadian philosopher Howard Adelman called the 20th century the “century of refugees”. This description can also relate to the 21st century or at least to its beginning. It once again convinces us that today the questions of protection of rights and well-being of refugees, as well as responsibility for addressing their needs and concerns, still persist and remain as important as they were before.

In 2011, we will commemorate the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 150th anniversary of the birth of Fridtjof Nansen, the first High Commissioner for Refugees. These anniversaries are important reminders of historic commitments undertaken by States and the international community as a whole. Armenia was one of the first among CIS countries to become a State Party to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol – the most fundamental instruments regulating the treatment of refugees.

The name of Nansen has special significance for Armenia and the Armenian people. In the beginning of the 20th century when the very physical survival of Armenians was under question, the League of Nations and Fridtjof Nansen personally have done the utmost to reduce human sufferings of hundreds of thousands of Armenian refugees seeking asylum in different countries around the world. With the aim of resettlement of Armenian refugees Nansen in 1925 visited Armenia, and in 1928 he traveled to the United States to organize fundraising.

This year the Armenian Government has set up a state commission which will oversee the preparation of Fridtjof Nansen’s anniversary. The commission has prepared an action plan to be carried out during 2011 in commemoration of the anniversary of this great humanist, politician and diplomat. Undoubtedly, Nansen’s humanitarian work further contributed to the formation of visions and policies pertaining to refugees within the framework of the United Nations, and ultimately lead to adherence to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness by many States.

Since 1988, Armenia sheltered more than 400.000 refugees exiled from Azerbaijan. According to UNHCR report, till 2005 Armenia was on the top of the list of countries with

the highest amount of refugees on per capita basis (per 1000 residents). Unfortunately, the question of voluntarily return of Armenian refugees to their former places of residence till remains open because of absence of security guarantees from Azerbaijan. Majority of them, having lost any hope of ever returning to their homes, have acquired Armenian citizenship.

Mr. Moderator,

The situation of refugees in Armenia is under constant and continuous attention of my Government from first days of receiving and rendering the urgent needs. The Government started implementation of policy aimed at full integration of refugees into Armenian society. One of the important evidences of this, is the fact, that the number of refugees from Azerbaijan obtaining Armenian citizenship reached 85.000 by the end of 2010. The UNHCR called it “one of the most successful voluntary naturalizations of refugees...”.

Also, the Government of Armenia has carried out wide range of activities related to the housing and other most urgent issues that refugees settled in Armenia face. Nevertheless, the issue of housing still remains the most acute problem faced by refugees. In order to solve this problem and raise the required financial resources, the Government of Armenia organized an International Donors’ Conference which was held on 17 May 2011 in Yerevan with the objective to direct the secured financial resources and pledges received during the Conference towards the solution of housing issue for those refugee families who currently live in temporary shelters.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Mr. Antonio Guterres who participated in the Conference, called it “timely and significant in seeking to generate support for a solution to a situation of displacement...”. He also expressed hope “to see these families included in the national development programmes of the Government, and international development agencies and financial institutions”.

Mr. Moderator,

In certain situation when legal status of territories is not clearly defined, whole group of IDPs can be effectively deprived of international protection. It is not always a case when states exercise their sovereignty as responsibility and some of them also in OSCE region invoke their sovereignty only to hinder the access of international protection system including UNHCR and special procedures of Human Rights Council to the IDPs and other displaced population. We consider the inability of relevant international actors to deal with all IDP situation as a real challenge which needs to be addressed at the level of implementation of already assumed obligations rather than creating new ones. Access to the IDPs is a basic requirement and if some states cannot fulfill this requirement then the sincerity of their stance to expand obligations in this field should be firmly questioned. Here, I would like to particularly refer to the situation of 30 thousand Armenian IDPs (2008 report of Walter Kailin on IDPs in Azerbaijan) in Nagorno Karabakh who deprived of any international protection and access by Azerbaijan.

Mr. Moderator,

I would like to firmly reject attempt to manipulate the issues of displaced persons for clear propagandistic aims. Sometimes these manipulations are done even in the form of hate speech dissemination. This was case today when at the side event of Human Rights Without Frontiers

on Nagorno Karabakh, IDPs, booklets containing hate speech against Armenians were distributed.

Finally, Mr. Moderator, I would like to note that, despite the fact that resolving refugee problems requires significant time and efforts, we should be persistent and work in a more co-ordinated fashion, taking into account different aspects of this issue. This is why we support the idea, reflected in the Recommendations of Special Thematic Event on Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees which took place in May this year, that we should “approach forced displacement in a comprehensive and cross-dimensional manner”.

Thank you