



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Addis Ababa, Friday 17 November 2006

Revitalizing the AU Coordinating Committee on Assistance to Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons-a timely agenda

Members of the African Union Coordinating Committee on Assistance and Protection to Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced People (CCAR) recently adopted revised Rules of Procedure and Terms of Reference. The measure was seen by participants as a significant step forward in revitalizing the long-inactive advisory body on the problem of forced displacement in the continent. The latest meeting, which happened to be the CCAR's 28th ordinary session, took place at the meeting hall of the African Union on Thursday 9 November 2006.

Establishment

The establishment of the CCAR is closely linked to the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the struggle of African states for independence as well as resistance to the then increasingly entrenched apartheid regime in South Africa. These struggles and resistance movements inevitably resulted in mass population displacements across the continent- a problem which called for the immediate attention of the new pan-African body in looking for ways of addressing it.

As part of the search for a solution, the OAU established in 1964 the "OAU Commission of Ten" which later evolved into the Commission on Refugees, presently known as the AU Permanent Representatives' Committee, Sub-Committee on Refugees (PRC Sub-Committee on Refugees). However, the need for practical arrangements and for a strategy to organize and coordinate programmes to protect and assist the growing tide of refugees and displaced persons on the continent remained. Thus, in 1968 the OAU's Council of Ministers established the CCAR to assume the functions of co-ordinating and harmonizing the disparate efforts of the many actors in the field.

The majority of refugees at the time originated from countries such as Namibia, Rhodesia, Angola, South Africa and Guinea Bissau; and the CCAR's priority area of intervention in those days were educational programmes, meant to prepare those refugees to assume national responsibilities once they return home in the future.

The Coordinating Committee, moreover, provided the channel through which the



operational programmes and common objectives of the OAU, NGOs and the international community were coordinated and harmonized.

Many agree that the CCAR had accomplished many noteworthy activities in its early years, but gradually failed to adapt to the changing situations, particularly the outbreak of numerous internal conflicts resulting in massive forced displacement.

UNHCR's Regional Liaison Representative, Mr. Ilunga Ngandu, who is also chairperson of the CCAR, praises the old CCAR as playing a "crucial role in focussing attention to the plight of African refugees, mobilizing international support and assistance and in finding durable solutions to many situations of forced displacement in the continent". He nonetheless admits that there have been long periods of inactivity between its meetings-such as between 1998 and 2001 and lately between 2001 and 2005.

Reactivation

To make the CCAR a body that effectively responds to the changing circumstances in the continent, the African Union and current members of the CCAR felt the need to revitalize this important organ and transform it into a more pragmatic institution, assisting the continent to solving not only the outstanding challenges in the protection and assistance for refugees and internally displaced persons, but also in finding a lasting solution to their problems. In the words of Mr. Ngandu, the revitalization exercise is meant to transform the CCAR into a "unique body that brings together the AU Commission, its Member States, UN agencies, NGOs and other actors involved in the protection and assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, returnees and IDPs, as well as other displaced persons such as abductees, separated children and ex-child soldiers."

The newly revised and adopted Rules of Procedure envisage an enhanced structure and a broader and more representative membership, among other changes. The enhanced structure would entail an expanded role in the CCAR which includes: the promotion of more positive policies on refugees, returnees and IDPs; proposing projects and mobilizing the resources needed for their implementation; serving as a forum to bring matters requiring the urgent attention of the AU decision making organs through the PRC Sub-Committee, and commissioning studies in order to better advise the PRC Sub-Committee on Refugees.

Membership

The revised Rules of Procedure also advocate for a more inclusive approach towards membership. Accordingly, membership should include those organisations that are actively engaged in refugee, returnee and IDP activities in Africa, whereas the number of African NGO Members and Observers will increase. More importantly, Refugee Commissioners or officials of member states closely working with refugee affairs would be admitted on a rotating membership basis.

As of 1997, Membership of the CCAR included the following institutions: OAU, UNHCR, ILO, ECA, UNDP, WHO, UNESCO, All Africa Conference of Churches, Amnesty International, Catholic Relief Services, CARITAS International, Lutheran World Federation, World Council of Churches, World

University Services, International Council of Voluntary Agencies, Commonwealth Secretariat and the Association of African Universities.

The CCAR chairperson described the AU Commission's move to reinvigorate the CCAR as yet another demonstration of commitment by the continental body to addressing the problem of forced population displacement in the continent and its far-reaching repercussions.

He mentioned a series of major steps taken by the African Union including the convening of the Second AU Ministerial Conference on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons last May in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and its crucial recommendations, as well as the decision to convene the first ever AU Summit on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons to be held in 2008, as milestones in Africa's drive to reduce and ultimately eliminate the phenomenon of forced displacement. "The recommendations and declarations of the Ministerial Conference as well as the decisions of the Banjul Summit [June 2006], when effectively implemented, could go a long way in improving the situation on the ground."

The November 9th meeting was chaired by Ambassador Bruno N.Zidouemba, Ambassador of Burkina Faso to Ethiopia, in his capacity as the Chairperson of the PRC-Sub-Committee on Refugees.

According to the Rules of Procedure, the revitalized CCAR will have a bureau, consisting of a Chairperson, two Vice-Chairpersons, and a Rapporteur. It will also set up a Working Group, made up of Addis-based CCAR members, with the Secretariat to be provided by the Humanitarian Affairs, Refugees and Displaced Persons Division (HARDP) of the AU Commission.

Africa is host to more than 17 million refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, internally displaced people, and other displaced populations such as separated children, abductees and victims of trafficking and ex-child soldiers. In spite of positive progresses in several countries, the displacement and uprooting of innocents continues unabated in several other parts of Africa. The human tragedy and suffering in the Darfur region of Sudan continues to displace a large number of people and prevent the return of the region's more than 2.2 million refugees and IDPs. Instability in the Central African Republic and Somalia alone has displaced thousands of refugees in 2006. The influx of Senegalese refugees to the Gambia fleeing the escalation of conflict in their country has exceeded 6,000. Seen against this background, the ongoing effort to create a more potent continental body can only be termed as a timely agenda.

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