Refugees in a globalized world

Delivered by His Excellency Ruud Lubbers, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

HE Dr Ruud Lubbers was appointed United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in January 2001. Prior to being appointed High Commissioner for Refugees he was head of the World Wide Fund for Nature. Dr Lubbers was Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1982-1994, having served in Dutch Governments since 1973. After leaving politics in 1994 he was Vice Chair of the Independent World Commission on Oceans and Chair of Globus, the Institute for Globalisation and Development.

Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure, and a great privilege, to be invited to give the Annual Lecture at the Ditchley Foundation. I would like to thank the organizers, and particularly my friend John Major, for giving me this opportunity.

I have been asked to talk about refugees in a globalized world. I will begin, therefore, by looking at the changing nature of the asylum and migration landscape. I will then focus on asylum issues in the specifically European context, and the need for global governance of refugees.

Globalization has two sides. People, goods and capital now circulate around the globe with greater ease than ever before. On the other hand, for the more vulnerable strata of society, including refugees and asylum seekers, the consequences of globalization are often less positive.

Over the last decade, many countries have experienced increased immigration pressure. This has been the case not only in Western Europe and North America, but in many other parts of the world as well, including regional economic hubs like Thailand, Malaysia, South Africa and Mexico. All of these have found themselves struggling to deal with the unauthorized entry of people coming from their poorer and often unstable neighbours.

Governments – particularly in the industrialized countries – have responded to this increased immigration pressure by introducing a range of measures to control and restrict access to their territory. A major challenge for countries today is the management of complex flows of refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and other people on the move. Strategies are needed that distinguish fairly and effectively between people with well-founded fears of persecution and those with economic or other motivations for seeking entry.

Smuggling and trafficking of people is on the rise. With regular arrival routes closed, many refugees turn to smugglers to reach safety, in spite of the dangers and the financial costs involved. Other migrants present themselves as asylum seekers to overcome immigration barriers. The result is a blurring of the distinction between these different categories of people on the move, and a general stigmatization of refugees and asylum seekers as people trying to break
the law. The challenge is to manage migratory movements in a way that upholds human rights and humanitarian principles while at the same time addressing the legitimate concerns of states regarding irregular migration. The challenge is also to stop politicians and people in receiving countries from stereotyping all asylum seekers as “phony” or “bogus”, if not criminals.

As I stressed recently when European Union countries were preparing for the Seville summit, effective solutions to these problems are not beyond our grasp. But they can only be effective if the whole chain of displacement is addressed. In the case of Europe, it is not enough to concentrate on policy measures within the European Union and on its borders. Solutions must be found in regions of origin and transit, and these need to be politically and financially supported. Failing that, refugees will continue to go on the move. An effective migration and asylum policy must, therefore, address both the domestic and external dimension of the refugee issue.

Over the last two years, UNHCR has organized a process of Global Consultations. These have provided a forum for constructive discussion of these issues and dilemmas, and I hope that they will lead to an improved system of global governance of refugees. The “Agenda for Protection” that has resulted from this process makes wide ranging recommendations as to how they may best be tackled. Two of the main themes of the Agenda are the need for durable solutions for refugees and the need for improved burden sharing.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Let me turn first to the situation in Europe, where governments’ efforts to manage the complicated mix of refugees and other migrants is causing major headaches and making daily headlines. Recent election results in Denmark, the Netherlands and France have put the issue of asylum and migration at the top of the European political agenda. It is not surprising that this was the main issue discussed at the recent European Council Seville summit. Indeed, more and more Europeans are concerned – and sometimes angry – over what they perceive to be weak policies in handling illegal migration.

What can be done? Some politicians think European borders can simply be sealed. But this will never work. A globalized world does not work that way. Trying to seal borders will be no more effective now than it was 70 years ago when prohibition failed to stop liquor flowing in the United States. Today’s human smugglers are smart. You close one route and they will soon open another.

To be effective, we need strict and workable policies to help sort the economic migrants from those people who are in need of international protection. One measure sought by EU countries is better policing, especially on their periphery. I see no objection to strengthening Europe’s outer borders, provided that arriving refugees still have access to a fair and fast asylum procedure. The last thing any of us want to see is a refugee sent back to persecution, imprisonment, torture or death under a dictatorial regime. Even one such case would be one too many. So if governments are going to be stricter in policing their countries’ borders, we need to ensure that this is done properly with highly trained staff. UNHCR is already providing such training in some situations.

Along with stricter controls, Europe needs legal channels of entry, including refugee resettlement schemes. Currently, only illegal channels exist for economic migrants. What is needed is a system which is controlled by governments under a set of EU-wide immigration policies. This
makes sense in a lot of ways. With its ageing population, Europe’s labour needs are growing. Managed migration is a logical way to help satisfy those needs, while providing a safe and legal channel that can help break the grip of smuggling networks. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that the lack of legal channels has the perverse effect of encouraging human smuggling.

In the case of the asylum channel, there are already complex national systems, but they are in need of harmonization. Sangatte is a good example of this. The dispute over what to do with the asylum seekers currently in Sangatte is one of the primary factors driving the current asylum debate in the United Kingdom.

The current EU harmonization process, if well carried out, would solve a lot of our problems. With harmonized reception standards, procedures and definitions across Europe, many of the reasons for people to keep shifting from one country to the next in search of better treatment would be removed. Indeed, we have to stop “asylum shopping.” UNHCR has provided advice to governments throughout this crucial process of harmonization, and we continue to offer our services in this regard. I welcome the new impetus given to the process of harmonizing European asylum policies by the Seville summit.

Asylum procedures in some European countries should be made faster and fairer, and better mechanisms should be put in place to quickly return those asylum seekers who are found not to be in need of international protection. If the quality of the decision-making process remains high, I have no problem with governments deporting failed asylum-seekers as long as their needs have been properly assessed. Indeed, the fundamental credibility of the asylum system depends on it.

There is also a need for increased efforts to assist both immigrants and refugees to integrate into their new societies, and to become citizens who are proud of their new countries. Integration is key if we are to prevent refugees from becoming a source of social and political tension in our societies.

Looking ahead, it would be good to move beyond the concept of harmonization, to a single European Union asylum policy. Consideration should also be given to the idea of setting up a European Refugee Board. With assistance from UNHCR, this would help EU countries to be consistent in ensuring that asylum seekers are screened in a fast, strict and fair way, and that measures are taken to send back those who are not considered to be in need of international protection.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Europe’s asylum problem cannot be addressed in Europe alone. It is in refugees’ regions of origin that real solutions and the proper governance of refugees begins. Here UNHCR plays an important role. With over 5,000 staff in 120 countries across the world, we have a wealth of experience to draw on. If UNHCR’s field work gets the support it needs, there is no doubt that we will see fewer people on the move. Without it, desperate people will continue to take desperate measures, including resorting to human smugglers to get to where they want to go.

Unfortunately, governments often fail to recognize the important role that UNHCR can play in helping them to address refugee issues. As a former Prime Minister, I know that taxpayers want rational, cost-effective programs. So I really wonder how governments can justify spending millions on reinforcing borders, on all kinds of deterrence measures, on custody and detention
centers, and on so many other costly domestic approaches, while refusing to invest in tackling the problem at source, where solutions should begin. It seems quite irrational. UNHCR is working with refugees and the internally displaced in their regions of origin. Governments should see it in their interests to fund us, strengthen us and use us. Helping refugees in their regions of origin – through UNHCR – is a lot cheaper than it is to help them only when they get here. I may be biased, but I think every European taxpayer should insist on a well-funded UNHCR, because we can offer real solutions. These solutions include enabling people to go home, or at least to stay as close to home as possible.

The truth, however, is that UNHCR is not getting the support that it needs. Neither are many of the other large multilateral organizations such as the UN World Food Programme and the International Organization for Migration. Instead, governments are increasingly focusing on bilateral aid and support to their own NGOs, which can be effective but which operate on a far smaller scale. If more resources were being channeled through multilateral organizations like UNHCR – which has a global mandate given to it by governments – the problems that Europe is facing today might well be on a much smaller scale.

Let us look at the example of Afghanistan, where UNHCR has worked for more than 20 years. For much of the past decade, UNHCR struggled to find solutions for millions of Afghans, largely out of sight and out of mind of the rest of the world. At one point in the early 1990s, there were over six million Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries, making them by far the largest refugee population in the world. After many years of conflict and deprivation in Afghanistan, we saw five years of disastrous Taliban rule. At the same time, we saw the international community lose interest, funding for refugee programs plummet, local economies decline, a prolonged drought settle over the region, and the welcome mat wear thin in neighbouring asylum countries. In desperation, many Afghans left the region in search of a future in other parts of the world. They had made a simple choice. Since they could not find adequate protection, assistance and solutions in the region, they set off to find help elsewhere. Last year, Afghans accounted for 11 percent of all asylum applications in Europe, with over 51,000 applications. Over 9,000 of these applications were in the United Kingdom alone.

Today, Afghanistan is on the mend; people are going back so rapidly that we have increased our projections for refugee returns this year from 1.25 million to 2 million. Since the beginning of March, UNHCR has helped over a million Afghans go home, out of a refugee population which at the beginning of this year stood at over 3.5 million. The effects of this return operation are being felt in many parts of the world, including Europe. New statistics for the first quarter of 2002 show a sharp plunge in Afghans seeking asylum – down 33 percent across Europe as a whole, and 24 percent within European Union countries.

There are now new possibilities for facilitating the voluntary return of Afghan asylum seekers already in Europe. This includes a large number of Afghans whose asylum applications have been put on hold as a result of the rapidly evolving situation in Afghanistan. We estimate that there are at least 50,000 asylum applications in Europe which have yet to be adjudicated. Such returns need to be carried out in an organized way, to ensure that they are sustainable. Efforts to facilitate voluntary returns from Europe should go hand in hand with increased funding for rehabilitation and reintegration efforts in Afghanistan.
Our return and reintegration work for Afghans clearly shows results. It shows how UNHCR is part of the solution. But I am worried. Although we have raised our initial planning figure for the year from 1.25 to 2 million returnees, we are still US$ 75 million short of our budgeted needs of US$ 271 million for the region. As a result of this shortfall, we have already had to cut the shelter package we provide to returnees to help them rebuild their homes. Similarly, the World Food Programme is rapidly running out of food for the returnees, and the International Organization for Migration has had to cease its transport operation and other crucial work.

All of this work contributes to security and stability in Afghanistan. Without it, Afghans may once again conclude that they have been abandoned. Return to Afghanistan may turn into a revolving door and we may then see the graph of Afghans arriving in Europe starting to go up once more.

I cannot imagine countries in Europe turning their backs on the millions of Afghans who have suffered for so long and who now, finally, see a future for their families. Do we really want to say “no” to the children who have grown up in refugee camps and who have finally seen their homeland for the first time? If not, governments should put their money where their mouths are and help us to find lasting solutions for the world’s largest refugee population. They should help us to help the refugees to return, to rebuild their lives, and to rebuild peace in their country.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There have been a number of successful international peace-building efforts in recent years, in places like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone. In each case, the re-establishment of peace has been followed by large-scale returns of refugees and internally displaced people to their homes. There are now also hopeful signs in Angola that many people will at last be able to return to their homes after years of bitter conflict. But peace can be imperilled if the necessary resources are not available for rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

In Africa and elsewhere, humanitarian agencies are chronically short of funds, causing hardship for refugees and the poor nations that host them. Development aid is also lacking there. It is no wonder that refugees decide to leave these regions and move on. Millions of refugees and other displaced people live in the most degrading conditions of abject poverty. They are often accommodated in remote, economically marginalized and insecure areas, where they are given few opportunities for self-sufficiency and where they become almost entirely dependent on humanitarian aid. At the same time, governments are reducing the levels of assistance for refugee programmes.

The abominably low levels of assistance being provided by the richest countries to the most marginalized and vulnerable people in the world cannot be allowed to continue. As I said in my statement to the UN Commission on Human Rights earlier this year, I believe that we, in the international community, must ask ourselves whether we are not violating the human rights of refugees and other vulnerable people by not providing them with enough assistance for them to live with a minimum of dignity. It is bad enough that today one fifth of humanity consumes four-fifths of global income. But on top of this, to allow humanitarian programmes aimed at assisting some of the world’s most vulnerable people – refugees – to remain grossly under-funded year after year, is shameful.
I fully endorse the appeal which has been made by James Wolfensohn, the President of the World Bank, for a doubling of global development assistance. It is worth noting that this would cost a mere 0.2 percent of the income of rich countries. I have also called for development assistance to be used more flexibly, to include refugee-populated areas. At present, most development assistance excludes refugees. I see this as a big mistake. I do not believe that refugees can be dismissed as an issue peripheral to development. The productive potential of refugees is enormous. In many countries, I would venture to say, sustainable development will be very difficult to achieve if the productive capacities of refugees are ignored by host countries or by their own governments as they return home.

We therefore need to rethink the relationship of refugees to development. Rather than treating refugees simply as a burden, host governments and the international community should recognize that refugees can be “agents of development”. Refugees are often accommodated in remote areas which are poorly developed. In developing these areas and using the productive capacity of refugees, there can be benefits both for the local society and for the refugees themselves. One concrete example of where this approach has already been started is Zambia, where efforts to enable refugees to become self-sufficient, through activities aimed at supporting agricultural projects and small businesses, have had positive benefits for the local economy.

Although funding remains a problem, there are some hopeful signs that donor governments may be starting to appreciate the need to invest in finding solutions for refugees. I was encouraged by the clear reference to refugee work in the final statement of the G8’s recent summit meeting in Canada. Next week I will be attending the OAU Summit meeting in Durban, and I will pursue further with African leaders the issue of how to support those countries hosting large refugee populations. UNHCR is already working closely with the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD); a most welcome initiative taken by African leaders and now supported by the G8 countries. I hope that the United Kingdom – together with other G8 countries – will make more funds available for Africa, and that some of this will be used to empower refugees to become more self reliant and to achieve durable solutions.

This brings me to my final point. At the Seville summit, European Union leaders agreed that rather than focusing on sanctions against countries that are not co-operating in the return of those who arrive in Europe illegally and who are not in need of international protection, they should focus on improved cooperation with countries in the regions of origin. Here I would encourage European countries – including the United Kingdom – to increase aid to countries hosting large refugee populations, and to spend more on building up the reception, protection and integration capacities of countries of first asylum. These countries often face serious financial, political and security problems associated with the presence of large refugee populations. More support to these countries will help to avoid the need for further irregular movements.

At the International Conference on Financing for Development which took place in Monterrey in March this year, more development assistance was promised, but part of this should be focused on countries where refugees originate and in countries of first asylum. That is the way to prevent outflows from those regions, with fewer people arriving in Europe and elsewhere.

UNHCR plays a crucial role in regions of origin, not only assisting refugees in camps, but helping with the integration of some refugees in countries of first asylum, and where this is not
possible, helping to resettle them to third countries. Both resettlement and integration enable refugees to become socially valuable and economically productive. Without the promise of such solutions, people go on the move. Again, UNHCR needs financial support to do this work effectively.

Even where refugees do decide to move outside the region – for whatever reason – UNHCR has a role to play. For example, we can help to build up the capacities of those countries which do not yet have well developed asylum systems. Many countries between Europe and the world’s refugee crisis points have little or no capacity to help asylum seekers. If such structures are not available in those countries, asylum seekers will keep moving. We often hear talk about the need to send asylum seekers and refugees back to these countries. To achieve this, we must help to build up these countries’ capacities to provide effective protection to those who need it. It was disappointing that the conclusions of the Seville summit did not make this important point.

UNHCR has already done much work in building this capacity, particularly in Central Europe. These efforts are beginning to pay off. Last year, 47,000 asylum applications were lodged in Central European countries, compared to an average of just 2,000 to 3,000 annually in the first half of the 1990s. This increased asylum capacity in Central Europe may already have helped diminish pressure on the European Union by about 10 percent. Another key issue now is to build up the capacity of these countries to integrate refugees. UNHCR is also engaged in capacity-building work in the western part of the Commonwealth of Independent States – the countries on the new external border of the soon-to-be enlarged European Union. Given the necessary resources, we could do a lot more.

Ladies and gentlemen,
To conclude, asylum dilemmas in Europe will not be solved by focusing only on one part of the picture. The whole chain of migratory movements needs to be addressed, both with Europe and outside. Within, what is needed is faster and fairer procedures to distinguish between refugees and those who are not in need of international protection, and this should be based on common standards and an effective system of burden sharing. Outside, what is needed is more aid to help refugees and other migrants in their regions of origin. UNHCR stands ready to continue working in partnership with the European Union and individual member states to achieve this.

The way that Europe deals with the migration and asylum issue will have long-term implications for the social cohesion of those countries which have large ethnic or religious minorities. Most EU member states are net immigration countries, even if they do not see themselves as such. I hope, therefore, that any efforts to improve the asylum situation in Europe will start from the premise that Europe is urgently in need of a comprehensive immigration policy.

Besides a European immigration policy, a comprehensive European asylum and refugee policy is necessary. This would help to ensure more effective burden sharing among different European countries. The current situation in Europe, whereby countries continually compete in lowering their standards – often in the hope of inducing refugees to apply for asylum elsewhere – must end.

Let us remember that refugees can enrich our societies, as many have done in the past. A number of today’s world leaders were themselves refugees at one point in their lives. In the case of
Afghanistan, President Karzai was himself a refugee. Rather than marginalizing refugees, therefore, our challenge is to find ways of empowering them, so that each of them can contribute positively to the societies in which they live – whether this be in countries of asylum, countries that they return to, or countries of resettlement. Perhaps this is the most important point: to understand that refugees have the capacity to become valuable citizens. Not a burden; not a risk; but valuable citizens. Recognition of this is where good governance for refugees begins.

Finally, a word about security. In the post-September 11 environment, security issues – and particularly the need to combat criminality and terrorism – are once again at the top of the international political agenda. Genuine refugees are themselves the victims of persecution and terrorism, not its perpetrators. They should not, therefore, be confused with criminals and terrorists. Nevertheless, the link between refugees and international peace and security should not be underestimated. If the international community is not prepared to invest in finding durable solutions for refugees, it should not be surprised when desperate refugees take matters into their own hands, resorting to human smugglers and thereby fuelling criminal networks in their search for a decent future. To invest in ensuring good governance of refugees is to invest in peace and security.

Thank you.