

12 December 2001

**Statement of H.E. Dr. Han Seung-soo,
President of the 56th Session of the General Assembly,
at the first formal meeting of States Parties to the 1951 Convention
relating to the Status of Refugees and/or to its 1967 Protocol**

Madame Chairperson, Mr. High Commissioner,
Her Excellency President of Latvia, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and
Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to join the Distinguished Ministers and Delegates of States Parties to the
Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the
Convention.

First of all, I would like to extend my appreciation to the Swiss Federal Council and the United
Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for inviting me to address this historic meeting in my
capacity as President of the General Assembly, representing the 189 Member States of the United
Nations.

Let me begin by recalling the images of refugees over fifty years ago. Through black and white
photographs or through the living memories of those who witnessed first-hand, the stark and
bleak images of refugees remain vivid: tens of thousands of people wandering aimlessly, mainly
in Europe, in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Though this refugee crisis was mostly confined to Europe, the international community could not
turn a blind eye when the tragedy unfolded.

It was against this backdrop that the UN General Assembly established the Office of the High
Commissioner for Refugees and organized a Conference in July 1951 to tackle the refugee issue.

At the UN Conference held here in Geneva, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees
was adopted by representatives of 26 States to provide shelter to those who were left without
protection amidst the ruins of war.

Often dubbed the "Magna Carta" of international refugee law, the Convention has, for the past 50
years, remained the cornerstone of the international community's efforts to provide protection and
assistance to refugees around the world.

Today, some 142 States have acceded to either the Convention or its Protocol of 1967, or both of
them.

The refugee issue, as we have recently witnessed in Afghanistan, West Africa, East Timor, Kosovo and the Great Lakes Region of Africa, which once was deemed to be resolvable within a short period of time, has become long and protracted.

The number of refugees, together with others of concern to UNHCR in refugee-like situations, has increased more than ten fold since 1951, from 2 million to 22 million and has proliferated throughout the world. This problem has become a widespread global tragedy, leaving no region unaffected.

The issue has also become more complex and multi-dimensional, ranging from individual applications for asylum to the mass influx of refugees and other persons with economic or other motivations.

Madame Chairperson,

The United Nations was founded on universal, humanistic values, with a solemn determination to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights and the dignity and worth of the human being, as the UN Charter clearly states.

The principles enshrined in the UN Charter are the common legacy of humankind and form the basis of the modern international community. When those principles are violated, all human beings suffer, but none more so than refugees.

Refugees are the victims of violation of the United Nations principles and their growing numbers is a constant and painful reminder that concerted efforts are still needed to ensure the realization of the ideals of the United Nations.

We should have the courage and political will to join together to resolve the refugee issue. In this great effort, the UN and UNHCR are the leading players, but need to walk hand in hand with States.

At last year's Millennium Summit, the resulting declaration included the key goal of "protecting the vulnerable."

I would like to take this opportunity to remind Member States and UN agencies that the fostering of a culture of protection through the use of international humanitarian law is the next essential step to protect refugees and internally displaced persons.

The protection of refugees can also be ensured by strengthening the rule of law and taking action against transnational crime. To this end, States are encouraged to ratify treaties and harmonize their domestic laws with international obligations.

In addition, improvement of the protection of refugees and reduction of the refugee phenomenon can also be achieved through measures to be collectively adopted in the context of the

development of "Human Rights, Democracy and Good Governance," as contained in the Millennium Declaration.

At this juncture, I would like to commend High Commissioner Lubbers and his staff for their continued efforts to enhance the efficiency and capability of their Office.

UNHCR has reminded the international community of the protracted or often forgotten refugee situations in different parts of the world, drawing its attention to the need of burden-sharing towards durable solutions for all refugees and the displaced.

UNHCR deserves praise for its efforts to strengthen emergency preparedness in the face of newly arising emergencies, as we have witnessed in East Timor and, more recently, in Afghanistan and its neighboring countries.

In this regard, I would like to appeal to the UN member countries to extend their full support and cooperation to UNHCR in all of its activities.

Mr. Lubbers' first address to the General Assembly preceded a unanimous adoption, on 28 November, in the Third Committee, of the resolution entitled "Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees" with 112 co-sponsors, expected to be adopted in the Plenary of the General Assembly this month.

The Resolution "welcomes the process of the Global Consultations and acknowledges their importance as a forum for open discussion on complex legal and operational protection issues," and requests the High Commissioner to include the results of the Consultations in the report on his activities to the General Assembly at its next session.

I am pleased to report that the General Assembly will give close consideration to the findings and recommendations of the process, of which this meeting is an integral part, and will continue to follow up on the results.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Two days ago, the United Nations and its Secretary-General were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I believe that the Norwegian Nobel Committee acted on behalf of the entire international community in recognizing the UN's achievements.

UNHCR, as an agency of the United Nations, can rightly take a share of the credit for this award. But UNHCR can take even greater pride in the fact that on two previous occasions it received the Nobel Peace Prize in its own right.

UNHCR has proven itself to be one of the most efficient UN agencies, and I am confident that it will continue to go from strength to strength under the leadership of High Commissioner Lubbers.

I know we all look forward to hearing Mr. Lubbers present his own vision of how to develop a stronger global governance of the refugee phenomenon.

Moreover, I sincerely hope that this meeting will be an opportunity for States Parties to discuss and explore ways to further strengthen the current international regime for the protection of refugees, based on the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

Let me thank the Swiss Government and people for their support of this conference and also for their generosity, over the years, in assisting the UN's work for refugees.

In closing, I would like to wish you all a very successful conference, which, I am sure, will constitute a milestone in the history of international refugee protection.

Thank you.