

This discussion within the UN system culminated in November 1998 with a Security Council Resolution.⁹ Soon after, the UN Department of Peace Keeping Operations (DPKO) was assigned the lead role in following up on Recommendation 9 of this Resolution, which urges the establishment of an international mechanism to assist host governments in maintaining the security and neutrality of refugee camps and settlements. UNHCR was assigned the lead role in following up on Recommendations 21 and 22, which urge that efforts be made to ensure that all refugees and internally displaced persons are adequately protected and provided for, and that refugees be settled at a reasonable distance from any border and in camps of limited size, respectively.

Currently, there is much debate about how the security and physical protection of refugees and those associated with them can be improved. A window of opportunity is open now, with some interest from the international community, both the UN and the US and other western donors, to promote positive changes. However, policy making and a focus on solutions should be accompanied by an understanding of the larger political, social and legal context in which security and protection problems arise. Before making policy, we should have some understanding of, and answers to the following kinds of questions:

- why do particular kinds of security threats arise in different situations, and, why do certain kinds of responses to these threats occur and not others?
- what are the interests, commitments and obligations (including historical ones) of the main actors involved in RPAs?
- what is (or could be) the impact of aid programs and other kinds of international interventions on the political economy and security of an RPA?
- do refugee camps and other forms of assistance aggravate security problems, and how?

Our task in this workshop is to explore both the nature of security threats to refugees and refugee-affected areas, and the political and historical context in which these threats occur.

2. Why explore the political context of the RPA?

Understanding the political context of a RPA is important for a number of reasons. First, key aspects of the host government's implementation of policy towards refugees, particularly those that affect the refugees' security (such as the location of camps, the freedom of movement of refugees and other rights, and the use of security forces in RPAs, either against or to protect refugees) are likely to reflect the host government's political, economic and security concerns. As pointed out by Guy Goodwin Gill:

The political aspects of today's refugee problems signal, in particular, the policy dimensions, and the choices that must be made by governments and international organizations. Those choices include whether to abide by international obligations; whether to follow established principles, or to respond *ad hoc* to situations; whether to promote the development of new international instruments or agencies; whether to refine national responses to refugee flows, by changing laws

humanitarian principles, support for host states, measures to improve security and access, safety of humanitarian personnel, etc.

⁹ Following a general review of the various recommendations emanating from the Secretary-General's Report on "The Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa" (13 April 1998), the Security Council adopted a resolution (S/RES/1208) on 19 November 1998, reaffirming the primary responsibility of host States in ensuring the security and civilian character of refugee camps, and calling for international action to support States in discharging that responsibility.