

7. Responding to the Needs of Displaced Children Within West Africa

A major impact of conflicts in West African has been the massive displacement of populations both within and across borders, as internally displaced persons (IDPs) and as refugees.

- **Refugees**

In general, West African countries have set an excellent example of solidarity, hospitality and support for refugees. In recent years, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire in particular have assumed a major responsibility for refugees. Guinea has been hosting more than a half a million people from Sierra Leone and Liberia who are officially registered with UNHCR, in addition to a significant number of unregistered persons who have also fled from the neighbouring countries. The population of officially registered refugees now constitutes more than 10 percent of the total population of Guinea. And yet during my visit there last year, I was struck by the excellent rapport between the local populations and refugees. The sheer magnitude of refugees in Guinea, however, has begun to cause significant stress on the economy, social services, environment and security.

The Accra Conference should call on the international and donor community to provide more support to host countries (like Guinea and others in the West African region) and UNHCR, in order to reduce the social-economic, environmental and security impact of refugee outflow within the sub-region.

- **Internally Displaced Persons**

During my visits to war-affected countries in the past two years, I have witnessed first hand the deeply distressing and precarious conditions of internally displaced persons, the vast majority of whom are children and women. The nature and scope of this problem has been well described in the important work and reports of Francis Deng, the Representative of the Secretary-General for Internally Displaced Persons.

I urge West African states to commit to providing, with the support of UN agencies and the donor community, fuller protection, relief and access to IDPs, within their countries.

Moreover, I believe that time has come for the international community to develop a more systematic response and framework for providing protection and practical support to internally displaced persons.

8. Taking Measures on the Ground to End Child Soldiering

I am delighted that after several years of negotiations, consensus agreement has finally been reached on raising the minimum age for recruitment and participation in conflict. The raising of the age limit for participation in hostilities from 15 to 18 is a victory for children