

The Regional Conference on Refugees

It was in this context that the OAU [Organization of African Unity] and the UNHCR organized a major conference – the Regional Conference on Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons in the Great Lakes Region. The purpose of the Conference, which took place between February 15 and 17, was to make it easier for the refugees to return. It sought to obtain firm commitments on measures to cope with the humanitarian and security problems in the region. The Conference approved certain basic principles such as respect for private property, the right of refugees to leave voluntarily in safety, and respect by governments of the principle of non-refoulement, that is, that refugees must not be forcibly expelled to their country of origin. The Conference adopted an action plan outlining the roles and responsibilities of the countries of origin, the host countries and the international community.

The countries of origin have a fundamental role consisting essentially of creating a climate of confidence to encourage the refugees to return voluntarily. In this respect, the Rwandan government, which has already taken measures in favour of national reconciliation, is being encouraged to continue its efforts. In both Rwanda and Burundi, impunity must no longer be tolerated if having people take the law into their own hands is to be avoided. The national judicial system must be restored. The International Tribunal for Rwanda can play a crucial role through establishing respect for impartial justice and implementing the principle that crimes cannot be committed with impunity. It is essential that innocent people be able to return freely to their country, without fear of reprisals.

As for the host countries, consisting mainly of Tanzania, Zaire and Burundi, they were asked by the Conference to restore public order in the camps and to ensure respect for individual freedoms. In addition, a regional summit held in Nairobi on January 7, 1995, called for the separation of those responsible for genocide and those faultless, which itself is no mean undertaking. As for the international community, the Conference has asked it to promote national reconciliation by contributing to the restoration of infrastructures.

Canadian Participation

It was my task to lead the Canadian delegation to the Bujumbura Conference. In my speech, I reaffirmed the principles that must underlie the work of the Conference, such as the voluntary return of the refugees as a confidence-building measure, while pointing out that the international community would not be able to sustain the status quo indefinitely. I then mentioned the incentives put forward by Canada to encourage the return of the refugees. In addition to helping organize the Conference (we contributed \$50 000), Canada has helped Rwanda to restore its infrastructures and the operating