

Refugee security, UNHCR practice

Outside the framework of major regional and international peacekeeping operations, UNHCR has often found itself alone grappling with the issue of security. A good example is the unfolding of the refugee tragedy in Zaire immediately following the violent death of the Rwandan President in 1994. A mixed group of approximately one million Rwandans, including an important number of armed elements fled into Zaire and settled in camps close to the Rwandan border. A few months into this crisis, humanitarian organisations alerted the international community that the civilian and humanitarian character of these camps was compromised and that the implementation of humanitarian programmes was becoming increasingly difficult.

The Secretary General then proposed the creation of an international peacekeeping force and approached 60 countries for assistance. Out of these 60 countries, only one country responded and the effort had to be abandoned. Later attempts to create a pool of police and military trainers for the Zairian army had to be abandoned for the same reason. Eventually, UNHCR had no choice but to respond positively to the Secretary-General's request to negotiate the creation of a special security contingent for the camps with the Zairian government.

Based on that experience, a similar approach was followed in the refugee camps in northern Kenya and in western Tanzania. More recently, UNHCR has proposed to assist the Guinean authorities in providing basic law and order in newly created refugee camps in the centre of the country.

In the absence of a co-ordinated humanitarian security management approach, shared by States and other actors, UNHCR is becoming increasingly involved with issues of a purely law and order and military nature. This is an involvement by default. UNHCR, however, as a humanitarian organisation and managed by civilians, lacks the necessary skills to manage refugee security all by itself.

This seminar is timely and my colleagues and I do hope that we will be able to engage in a constructive discussion on the role of the military in refugee camp security. We would, in particular, welcome a discussion on how the military and UNHCR staff could jointly manage refugee security situations by marrying policing and military principles with those of international refugee protection. Furthermore, we would invite an exchange of ideas on how DPKO and UNHCR could improve their liaison and co-operation in the field.

During the preparatory discussions with the Canadian and UK delegations we expressed our sincere hope that we would not only discuss 'principles' but concrete strategies and actions as well. We very much welcome your insight, thinking, suggestions and contributions on the increasingly important issue of 'refugee security'.

Thank you.