

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I offer congratulations to the OAU [Organization of African Unity] and the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] for organizing this conference, and my thanks to the Government of Burundi for hosting it. Of all the issues that confront the Great Lakes Region, the situation of the refugees is the one that merits the closest attention and most urgent action by all the governments and organizations represented here. We also view with urgency the situation here in Burundi given the present circumstances, which could provoke another tragedy similar to that which occurred in October 1993. However the scale of the human tragedy in Rwanda dwarfs the many other humanitarian crises that challenge the international community at this time.

It is the Rwandan people who have suffered most grievously from the genocide, but many of those who fomented ethnic hatred preach the same message from the safety of the refugee camps, a message that would prolong the plight of the refugees, destabilize the countries of origin and asylum, and consign the region to a cycle of instability, war and human tragedy. This must be stopped.

We must commend the countries of asylum - Burundi, Tanzania and Zaire - for receiving the massive influx of Rwandan refugees despite their limited resources and the economic, social and environmental consequences they have had to face. We should remember and reaffirm some principles which can guide the deliberations of the conference:

- Voluntary repatriation of displaced persons and refugees - as those are defined by the UN Convention - is universally recognized as the only feasible and durable solution. We all face a huge challenge to implement the principle.
- However, the principle of voluntary repatriation must not become an alibi for the status quo or become an opportunity for criminal extremists to regroup and resume hostilities. The international community will not be able to sustain the status quo indefinitely.
- All states are accountable for upholding universal standards of human rights - above all, to protect the lives and property of their own citizens. The acts of extremists in Rwanda, in flagrant defiance of this principle, fomented the crisis we now face. Other extremists now threaten similar acts in Burundi, the host country of this conference. Obviously, the solution to the refugee crisis requires that these options be renounced. Instead, there must be an engagement towards good governance and the rule of law which will allow displaced persons and refugees to return home without fear for their safety.
- The larger international community should facilitate the process of finding a solution through its support of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UNHCR's efforts in support of voluntary repatriation.