

Address by Jacqueline Parlevliet

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UK**

Before the

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

Edinburgh, Scotland

20th June 2007

INTRODUCTION:

I wish to thank the Scottish Parliament for the invitation to speak at this conference. It is a pleasure to be here. I am Jacqueline Parlevliet and I am the Deputy Representative at the UNHCR Office in London.

1. Mandate

UNHCR is mandated to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees as well as establishing durable solutions. It is further mandated to provide assistance to stateless persons and to help eliminate statelessness globally. The UN Refugee Agency cares for more than 30 million displaced people around the world, recalling the purpose of

why we are here today, which is to celebrate World Refugee Day. World Refugee Day is a day when the UN Refugee Agency asks for worldwide focus and attention on the plight of the millions of refugees and displaced people around the world. It is a day when UNHCR pays tribute to and thanks refugees for their contribution to their host communities. It is also an occasion when UNHCR appeals to governments and to the international community to uphold their obligations to respect and protect the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers as well as to do their part in the prevention and resolution of persisting global conflict and to do so from a unified front.

2. Iraq

I would like to draw your attention to the continuing need for assistance to Iraqi refugees. The combination of spiraling sectarian, political and criminal violence, dwindling basic services and loss of livelihoods has created the biggest urban refugee population UNHCR has ever dealt with.

There are currently more than 2 million internally displaced inside Iraq and 2.2 million refugees abroad, more than half of these uprooted since the Saddam period. Neighbouring states host the vast proportion of Iraqi exiles including 1.4 million in Syria, up to 750,000 in Jordan, 80, 000 in Egypt and some 200,000 in the Gulf region. Jordan's small population of 5.7 million hosts 750,000 – the equivalent of just under 8 million Iraqis for the UK. Jordan have now effectively closed their borders. The Syrian Arab Republic, Jordan and Lebanon, have received no funding to subsidise the provision of basic services such as health and public schooling to Iraqis. There is no option for the refugees to integrate, and they risk detention. UNHCR has begun to register refugees for resettlement, prioritising the most vulnerable. For example, Iraqi women of certain ethnicities and religions have found themselves targets of kidnapping, rape or other forms of sexual harassment and abuse, including forced prostitution and human trafficking in their host countries and at home.

UNHCR's main aims are to keep the borders in neighbouring countries open, to continue ensuring access to basic services and

provision of humanitarian assistance for refugees in these countries and to submit 20,000 persons for resettlement by the end of 2007.

Of all the European states, the UK has requested the highest number of Iraqis to return home and NGO's estimate that some 8,000 Iraqis are now facing destitution in the UK. UNHCR continues to call on EU countries, and others further afield, to receive Iraqis, allow them to stay in proper and decent conditions for as long as is warranted.

3. Gateway Programme (Scotland)

Scotland has had particular input in the Gateway Programme, a resettlement initiative that aims to settle 500 UNHCR recognised refugees within the UK each year. The Programme became operational in April 2003 and is aimed at augmenting the existing Mandate and 'Ten or More' Programme to resettle particularly vulnerable refugees. Gateway provides a durable solution of resettlement in a third country to refugees unable to return to their home countries. Resettlement to the UK also provides permanent protection to those who are in desperate need without forcing them to resort to illegal means and into such hands as people traffickers.

Resettlement is a responsibility-sharing exercise. Scotland has made a commendable start in resettling 40 Congolese refugees from Zambia to Motherwell and we look forward to resettlement continuing throughout Scotland and the rest of the UK.

4. Integration in Scotland

UNHCR congratulates the Scottish Executive's handling of devolved matters which impact on refugee and asylum seekers such as health, police protection, housing and education. The Executive has both recognised and mainstreamed into practice the equality issues of asylum seekers and refugees. There are currently approximately 10,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland and large amounts of money have been invested in their integration since 2001.

5. Conclusion

Effective integration policies have encouraged a reciprocal relationship in Scotland between locals and refugees. Refugees and asylum seekers add cultural diversity, both socially and economically, to host communities and they benefit from the vast scope of refugee

initiatives underway in Scotland, which are largely due to the work of the Scottish Refugee Integration Forum.

UNHCR hopes that this positive and unified relationship with you, our counterparts in Scotland, continues to prosper.