

20 June 2004

## **WORLD REFUGEE DAY MARKED AROUND THE GLOBE**

GENEVA -- As UN refugee agency staff in more than 100 countries marked World Refugee Day and this year's theme of "home," UNHCR teams in Burundi scrambled Sunday to provide help to thousands of new refugees fleeing their homes in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Up to 4,000 Congolese from the Kivu area of the eastern DRC have reportedly crossed over into Burundi in the last few days, bringing to 30,000 the number of refugees estimated by local authorities to have fled across the border since fighting erupted near the town of Bukavu on May 26. Many more displaced people are believed to be still on the DRC side of the border. In recent days, some refugees have been spotted floating across the border river using plastic jerrycans as floats.

In World Refugee Day remarks, High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers expressed growing concern over the new exodus from the DRC, a country that had already suffered through a decade of brutal conflict.

According to new UNHCR global refugee figures up to the end of 2003, the DRC accounted for 453,400 refugees in neighbouring countries even before the recent upsurge in fighting in the east. Another 3 million people were estimated to be displaced internally within the DRC at the end of 2003.

Lubbers noted that while this year's World Refugee Day theme of "A Place to Call Home" was a fitting one because of the large numbers of refugees and displaced who have been able to repatriate in recent years, there are still too many conflicts generating new displacement.

The total population of concern to UNHCR worldwide fell by 18 percent to 17.1 million, in 2003, from 20.8 million the previous year, according to new statistics released Thursday. Much of the decline was attributable to repatriation and finding other lasting solutions for refugees, including resettlement or integration in countries of first asylum.

"Nearly 5 million people over the past few years have been able to either go home or to find a new place to rebuild their lives," Lubbers said of the declining numbers since he took office in 2001. "For them these dry statistics reflect a special reality; the end of long years of exile and the start of a new life with renewed hope."

### **Public Information Unit**

swest@unhcr.ch

UNHCR  
Ynglingagatan 14,  
6<sup>th</sup> floor  
SE-113 47  
Stockholm  
Sweden

Tel.:  
(46 8) 457 48 80

Fax:  
(46 8) 457 48 97

But Lubbers said that continuing strife in places like eastern DRC and the Darfur region of western Sudan still pose the threat of even more refugee outflows in the coming months.

More than a million people are estimated to have been internally displaced in fighting in the Darfur region, and over 150,000 have already fled across the border to neighbouring Chad. UNHCR recently increased its planning figures for Sudanese refugees in Chad to 200,000, and has been deploying large amounts of aid to the region. It is also rushing to relocate tens of thousands of refugees away from the insecure Chad-Sudan border before the onset of seasonal rains renders roads impassable to its trucks. As of Friday, more than 106,000 Sudanese refugees had been moved to eight camps further inland in eastern Chad.

High Commissioner Lubbers marked World Refugee Day during two days of events in Barcelona, Spain, where he joined UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie as part of the "Universal Forum of Cultures." At a special ceremony on Sunday evening, the annual Nansen Refugee Award will be given to the Russian Memorial Human Rights Centre for their outstanding contribution towards protecting the rights of refugees and displaced persons in the Russian Federation.

Among other World Refugee Day highlights, Italy will hold an art auction, Australia will plant handmade hearts for "Field of Hearts" installations in major cities, while Ecuador will present a festival of films directed by refugees like Billy Wilder and Milos Forman. Young refugees in Jordan were handed disposable cameras to capture their view of life in exile, while refugee students will march through the streets of Sierra Leone to raise awareness of their situation.

For more information on UNHCR's global World Refugee Day activities, please visit our website at [www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch)

**Media Relations  
Public Information  
Service**

[hqpi00@unhcr.ch](mailto:hqpi00@unhcr.ch)

HQPI00  
P.O. Box 2500  
1211 Geneva 2

Tel.:  
(41 22) 739 85 02

Fax:  
(41 22) 739 73 15

[www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch)

Media Relations & Public Information Service  
HQPI00  
P.O. Box 2500  
CH-1211 Geneva 2

Tel: 41 22 739 8502  
Fax: 41 22 739 7314  
Email: [hqpi00@unhcr.ch](mailto:hqpi00@unhcr.ch)  
Website: [www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch)

Website Sweden: [www.unhcr.se](http://www.unhcr.se)