

20 June 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,
on World Refugee Day**

There are more than 40 million displaced people worldwide - about half of them children. Uprooted from their homes and either “internally displaced” within their own countries or forced to flee as refugees to other states, these people are caught in the difficult limbo between a turbulent past and an uncertain future. On this third World Refugee Day, we salute the world’s displaced people. We salute them for the courage and strength they demonstrate as they strive toward better lives. And, since this year’s celebration is dedicated to refugee youth, we salute young refugees for the vital role they play in preserving the nuclear family, in contributing to refugee camp life, and in building their local communities, whether they return home or begin a new life in a new country.

On this day we look back on a year that saw positive developments in the lives of many refugees. After decades of civil war, two million refugees returned to Afghanistan and a quarter million to their homes in Sri Lanka. In Angola, too, the trickle of returnees has begun.

But in other parts of the world, the situation for refugees worsened. It was particularly dire in West Africa, where wars in Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone sent tens of thousands of refugees shuttling from one conflict zone to another.

This refugee existence is particularly difficult for children. Often separated from their families, children become vulnerable to military recruitment and sexual exploitation. Today, more than 300,000 youths are forced to serve as child soldiers or sexual slaves.

A further hardship specific to young refugees is the loss of the educational opportunities. I commend the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for its efforts to mitigate this hardship. An impressive one million refugee children are currently enrolled in UNHCR-supported educational programs. Numerous Non-Governmental Organizations and bilateral donor countries also make significant contributions to refugee education. Still, many eligible children are without access to this basic human right, particularly at the level of secondary education.

I would like to take the occasion of World Refugee Day to urge all United Nations Member States to live up to their obligation, as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, to protect the rights of refugees seeking asylum.

I also urge states to be sensitive to the special needs of young refugees. Immigration officials in Canada and the United States have issued specific guidelines for dealing with child refugee claims. These guidelines should serve as a model for future child-sensitive refugee procedures.

Lastly, I urge donor countries to support UNHCR and other refugee agencies in their attempts to keep pace with the world's refugee crises.

Today, we must recommit ourselves to helping displaced people, the world over, move beyond lives of hardship and uncertainty toward lives of stability and promise.