

Keynote Presentation by John Holmes, Emergency Relief Coordinator  
Oslo, 16 October 2008

11:15 a.m.

**The Relevance of the Guiding Principles When Addressing Internal  
Displacement Caused by Natural disasters and Climate Change**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to thank Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Store, and the NRC Secretary-General Elisabeth Rasmusson for organizing this important event and for giving me the opportunity to speak on internal displacement – an issue that is at the heart of my mandate as the Emergency Relief Coordinator.

This commemoration of the 10th Anniversary of the Guiding Principles is indeed an opportune moment for us to take stock of our progress and assess the continued and new challenges we face. Despite significant success in some areas of implementation of the Guiding Principles, the scale and complexity of displacement are perhaps greater than at any time since their publication in 1998. Today, the UN estimates that, in any year, close to 1 per cent of the world's 6.7 billion people are displaced within their own countries, forced to flee their homes by armed conflicts, violence, urbanization, development and natural disasters.

Having not crossed an international border, these people are not “refugees”, but their experiences are often equally, if not more, devastating, and in some ways harder to deal with because they are still within their own country.

In particular, the number of those displaced by natural disasters is on the increase. As many as 50 million people around the world are estimated to be displaced each year by hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, landslides, and flooding. In the 2004 Tsunami, approximately 2 million people were displaced in 11 countries. 4.4 million were displaced in Bangladesh last year due to Cyclone Sidr and floods. Sadly, this year has witnessed even greater tragedy - in May, Myanmar was hit by the worst natural disaster in its history when Cyclone Nargis devastated the

Ayeyarwady and Yangon Divisions. Some 2.4 million people were severely affected, of which up to 800,000 were displaced. Just a few days later in western China, approximately 15 million people were displaced by the Sichuan earthquake – displacement on an unprecedented scale.

Whilst this displacement can happen in a moment, its impact often lasts a lifetime – years after disasters have struck, millions can remain in poverty, facing discrimination, and continuing to suffer the physical and psychological impact of their experiences. Given the enormous scale of displacement from disasters, and the terrible suffering that those affected endure, are the Guiding Principles still being used, and relevant?

Before I try to answer this, we need to look at what we know of the future risks relating to natural disasters and displacement – a future that is almost certain to present even greater challenges because of climate change. Whilst further analysis is still required, one thing seems clear, climate change will have a major impact on migration flows. It will result in increased internal displacement. It is also likely to lead to the creation of a new category of ‘climate refugees’, whose status needs to be clarified before too long.

As we can all see only too clearly, climate change is already increasing the frequency and intensity of events such as floods, storms and droughts. The number of recorded disasters has doubled from approximately 200 to over 400 per year over the past two decades, and nine out of every ten disasters are now climate-related. These trends are consistent with projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The number of people forced from their homes due to serious environmental pressures including pollution, land degradation, droughts and disasters associated with natural hazards could rise to 200 million by 2050, a quadrupling of today’s estimate of the number of people displaced by natural disaster.

Millions will be affected over and over again, particularly those in flooding and

storm-prone areas. In Madagascar and Mozambique, the same communities were hit by five successive cyclones in just the four-month period between December 2006 and March 2007. In August and September this year, Haiti was hit by four consecutive major storms within just a few weeks. These repeated events compound vulnerabilities year after year, leaving little time for communities to recover from one devastating event and prepare for the next, and degrading irreversibly their ability to cope.

The intensification of climatic extremes will also increase the incidence, and the geographic reach, of drought. Drought alone does not necessarily cause displacement, but when combined with unsustainable land use, it will intensify desertification in already vulnerable areas. This “slow-onset” disaster, and the consequent desperate search for food and water, will surely be a significant contributor to the numbers of those displaced around the world.

Clearly, therefore, natural disaster-induced displacement presents an enormous challenge. How can the Guiding Principles assist us in responding appropriately?

Firstly, preventing displacement, including preparedness measures to minimize the impact of displacement necessary for the safety and security of an affected population, is a key area of the Guiding Principles. In some ways it has been put to good effect. Disaster preparedness efforts have increased significantly over the past two decades. When communities at risk are prepared, their vulnerabilities in the event of a disaster are likely to be greatly reduced. Often the length of their displacement is also reduced, as they are more quickly able to re-build their lives at home, or find alternative livelihoods in other locations. Well-planned initiatives for environmental protection, proper land-use planning, good building designs, natural resource management, effective early warning systems, public education, community preparedness and contingency planning can substantially reduce the humanitarian impact of severe weather events. In many countries, including those with limited financial resources, preparedness measures are being used successfully to save lives, support well-planned evacuations and prevent arbitrary.

Bangladesh is perhaps the best example, where good disaster risk reduction and preparedness measures have reduced cyclone death tolls by a factor of up to 100. But it is by no means the only one. Mozambique, as my colleague will no doubt elaborate, is a country particularly prone to natural disasters, including recurrent flooding, cyclones, droughts and earthquakes; events that displace thousands of people from their homes year after year. In response, the Government has developed an advanced mechanism for disaster management at the central and, crucially, at provincial and district levels. Most recently, in 2006 the Government adopted a Master Plan for Prevention and Mitigation of Natural Disasters aimed at strengthening adequate risk and vulnerability reduction measures. This has undoubtedly had an impact on the number of lives lost, and the number of people displaced on a lasting basis. Making sure that families do not live in recurrent flood-zones, using sensitive and transparent planning and relocation, will prevent disastrous displacement in the future.

Recognizing the vital necessity of such work, and the value of investment in these areas, OCHA, in collaboration with ISDR, UNDP, IFRC and other partners is working to strengthen disaster response preparedness efforts. We are working with governments to raise awareness that disaster-risk reduction is an integral component of sustainable development. The displacement angle is yet another reason why this agenda needs to be given top priority.

Entirely preventing displacement as a result of natural disasters is, of course, not possible. Whether in a developed or developing country, people's needs and vulnerabilities inevitably increase dramatically once displaced. The Guiding Principles tenets of what assistance and protection may be needed to respond during the period in displacement are therefore of enormous value.

Again, a great deal has been done by humanitarian and other actors in this area. Humanitarian response programmes, generously supported by donors around the world, continue to reach millions of those displaced by floods, storms, and other

disasters. Through our joint efforts, we have saved countless lives. Having streamlined our rapid response mechanisms, we are now better able to land tons of relief assistance on the ground, with the necessary staff to facilitate distribution to those who need it, within hours of a disaster. Our recent internal reform has also ensured a greater predictability in response, particularly in emergency shelter provision, camp coordination and camp management, and other key sectors.

But amidst these improvements, we often face inadequate partnerships between governments and other actors in displacement crises. This simply cannot go on, especially in the light of our strong fears that the pace and scale of displacement are going to pick up in the coming years. Currently the problem often manifests itself in a series of issues that we define as ‘access’. This is often serious from the point of view of the assistance community, requiring a significant proportion of time negotiating for and facilitating access to IDPs, as well as other affected populations, to ensure they receive the assistance and protection they need. Myanmar is a case in point. In this instance, proper access was only granted to the populations affected by Cyclone Nargis this May following lengthy diplomatic efforts, including those of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Such access restrictions, often bureaucratic, but sometimes also politically motivated, severely delay the provision of assistance to those who need it so urgently.

On the other hand, governments struggling to manage displacement from conflict and natural disasters sometimes criticize us for not investing sufficiently in partnership with them. Sometimes aid agencies come across as arrogant, and non-consultative. In many countries with natural disasters, we forget that governments have already invested significant resources in preparedness and prevention, and assume that nothing exists on the ground. Such attitudes can lead to misunderstandings, and sometimes significant delays in providing assistance.

The more we recognize each other’s point of view, the more the Guiding Principles

can help us in developing partnerships, and therefore, better preparedness and responses.

We also have a lot more to do to reduce broader protection risks during displacement. It is generally understood that those displaced by war are at risk of human rights abuses, including physical and sexual violence, discrimination and exploitation. Relatively little attention has been given to similar risks faced during displacement resulting from natural disasters. Whatever the cause, displacement strips dignity from those concerned, and separates them from normal social support mechanisms. People are often separated from family or friends, and lose their normal source of income. As a result, IDPs often become entirely dependent on others for their survival. As harrowingly demonstrated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, massive and sudden-onset disasters can cause the fabric of a society to erode. Even in well ordered societies, law and order can break down. In more dramatic natural disaster scenarios, IDPs are at significant risk from a range of human rights violations, including sexual and physical abuse, forced labour, discrimination, denial of their rights to property and housing, forced relocation, or forced return. However, these are often missed in natural disasters by governments and by humanitarians alike. All would agree that this is unacceptable, suggesting again that a closer partnership between aid providers, governments and civil society is needed. The Guiding Principles can certainly help in this context.

Humanitarian reform has helped in meeting the challenge in this area. UNICEF, for example, has led the protection response in 10 natural disaster-affected countries. However, this challenge remains enormous and more must be done, through UNHCR's global protection cluster leadership, to ensure a more predictable, accountable and effective protection response in natural disaster contexts.

Let me recognise here the significant work that Professor Walter Kalin, the Representative of the UN Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally

Displaced Persons, has done in recent years to strengthen the protection of IDPs, and other affected populations in natural disasters. In particular, I commend his efforts in developing the Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters, endorsed by the IASC in 2006, which elaborates further on the Guiding Principles to provide practical guidance to governments, civil society and international organizations on how to protect those affected by natural disasters, including the displaced.

Sadly, once the emergency phase is over, still greater problems may arise. The Guiding Principles set out very clearly the rights of IDPs to long-term solutions but in practice, securing their rights to return, resettle elsewhere in the country, or to integrate locally at the place of displacement, presents perhaps the greatest challenge. Years after a disaster has struck, millions of the displaced may remain in inadequate shelters, unable to support themselves, and unable to get their lives back on track. In some cases, the misery of continuing displacement is handed down to the next generation, as many of those displaced by Hurricane Mitch, more than a decade ago, understand only too well. Life in camps or shelters can be demoralizing, dispiriting and often dehumanizing.

For many governments, as I'm sure our colleagues here today will acknowledge, trying to facilitate voluntary, safe and dignified return, resettlement or local integration for all of those displaced in a disaster can be an overwhelming task, and one that requires significant resources. However, these efforts are essential. Too often, those displaced are effectively obstructed in realizing these rights. Some have no choice but to return to areas that are uninhabitable or present additional dangers, to relocate to alternative sites that are unsuitable, or are left in the place of displacement with no efforts to provide or augment public services to support their basic needs, or facilitate their integration process. I want to remind us all that the rights to durable solutions cannot be limited, except for restrictions provided by law, and those necessary to protect the safety and security of those affected. Return to places of origin can only be prohibited in situations where a real risk to their life and security persists which cannot be alleviated.

As we know, protracted displacement results not only in the need for assistance and the consequent drain on resources, but also creates a dependency syndrome which can in turn exacerbate the risks of abuse and exploitation, and compound the feelings of despair that so many of the displaced experience. These rights to a long-term solution are fundamental to the individual. But the frustrations of a population in protracted displacement can also have a far-reaching impact on a society as a whole, undermining national efforts for recovery and development in the post-disaster phase.

As often stated by Professor Kälin, violations of the human rights of those displaced by natural disasters are not always intended or planned, but often result from inappropriate policies, inadequate capacities or simple neglect or oversight. Taking a rights-based approach in designing policies that seek to protect throughout the phases of displacement helps to prevent such violations. Moreover, working in full consultation with IDPs themselves at all stages maximizes the chances of appropriate and effective responses, enhancing their protection from further abuse.

I started by saying that tackling IDP problems is at the heart of my mandate. In looking ahead, I have set myself and my office two key objectives – to further our efforts to prevent displacement, and, as importantly, to bring it to an end where it happens as soon as possible.

Despite the ever-expanding impact of climate change, governments like those of our colleagues here today have demonstrated that much can indeed be done to minimize the scale and impact of displacement in disaster-prone areas through increased investment in disaster preparedness, and partnership. I urge more countries to follow their lead. For our part, OCHA and other UN partners will continue our work in support of these government efforts; we will also increase our

understanding of the future risks presented by climate change and use this to prepare ourselves better to respond.

To promote durable solutions, as in armed conflicts, ending displacement from natural disasters, in a manner that ensures the rights of the displaced, requires significant political, as well as financial investment. But, as I have tried to bring out, this is the absolute right of those displaced, and the legal, moral and political responsibility of their governments.

My conclusion is that the Guiding Principles have indeed provided an useful framework to guide the responses of governments, humanitarians and other actors in natural disasters. However, as in other displacement contexts, more needs to be done by all of us to translate them into consistent policy and practice. I reiterate my commitment, and that of my staff, to support all stakeholders, particularly governments, in ensuring that the standards set by the Guiding Principles are met. If we want to stand true to our commitment to end the suffering of the millions who are, and who will be, displaced by natural disasters, there is no other option.