United States General Accounting Office

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Report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate

May 2003

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Protecting Refugee Women and Girls Remains a Significant Challenge

GAO-03-663

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Protecting Refugee Women and Girls Remains a Significant Challenge

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-03-663, a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Why GAO Did This Study

Women and children refugees, who comprise 80 percent of the estimated 12 million refugees worldwide, are among the world's most vulnerable populations. They are subject to gender-based violence, including physical harm, rape, and unequal access to humanitarian assistance. GAO was asked to (1) assess efforts by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to protect refugees, especially with regard to women and girls; (2) determine what steps U.N. and international organizations have taken to prevent sexual exploitation of refugee women by humanitarian workers; and (3) describe U.S. government efforts to support adequate protection for vulnerable populations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State work to reform UNHCR's staffing system, expand protection training, encourage protection partnering, and maintain focus on combating sexual exploitation of women and girls. State agreed with our recommendations. UNHCR disagreed with fundamentally reforming its staffing system, stating that better instruments for assigning staff and managing vacancies are sufficient remedies. We maintain that UNHCR needs a strategic workforce plan and better staff assignment and rotation policies to ensure that certain vacant duty stations are filled.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-663.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David B. Gootnick, (202) 512-3149, gootnickd@gao.gov.

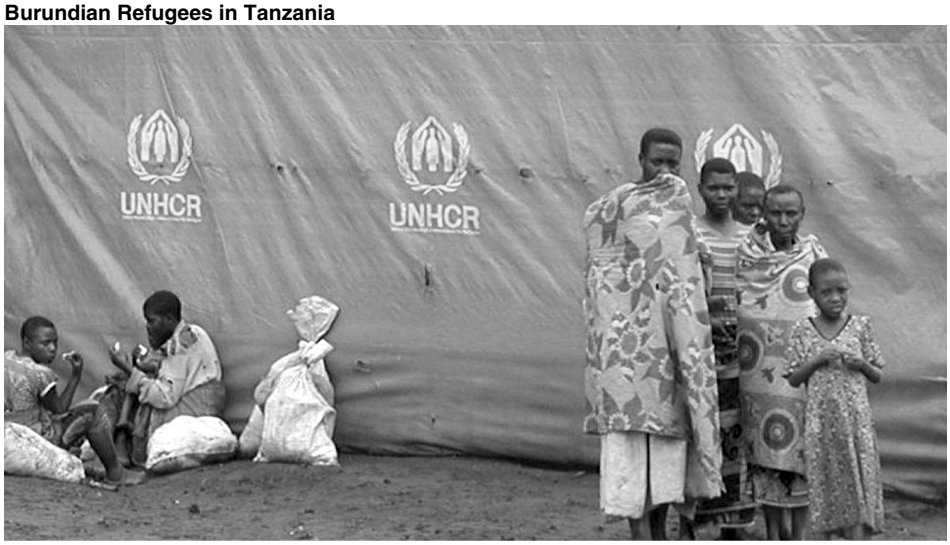
What GAO Found

UNHCR and international organizations have developed guidelines, best practices, and other measures to improve protection of refugee women and girls. However, weaknesses in its staffing process and training limit the effectiveness of these measures. UNHCR lacks a formal strategic workforce plan that links the organization's objectives, resources, and staffing; its staff assignment and rotation policies have resulted in extended vacancies at key protection posts; and it provides little practical training for most UNHCR and implementing partner staff on protection concepts and techniques. UNHCR could also make better use of partnering arrangements with nongovernmental and international organizations to boost its protection capacity.

In response to allegations in 2001 of sexual abuse and exploitation of women and girl refugees by relief workers and peacekeepers, the U.N. and other international organizations introduced policies and procedures to address the problem, such as codes of conduct and mechanisms to report and act on new allegations of abuse of power. While these efforts have raised awareness among workers in refugee settings, international organizations face continuing sexual exploitation of women by relief workers, and the issue remains a real and significant problem.

The U.S. government, through the Department of State, supports the protection of refugees and other vulnerable populations primarily through its funding to international organizations. It is also a strong advocate at the United Nations, within international organizations, and at the country level to increase protection efforts.

Burundian Refugees in Tanzania



Source: GAO.

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Accountability * Integrity * Reliability

United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

May 23, 2003

The Honorable Joseph Biden
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

Dear Senator Biden:

Women and children refugees, who comprise 80 percent of the estimated 12 million refugees worldwide, are among the world's most vulnerable populations. Violence against women and girls has historically been, and continues to be, prevalent among refugees, including those fleeing current conflicts in Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Liberia. Gender-based violence—harm perpetuated against a person because of gender-based power inequities—is aimed primarily at women and girls. In refugee settings, this violence can take the form of intimidation, physical harm, sexual abuse including rape, and unequal access to humanitarian assistance. Although no systematic data exist about the magnitude of the problem, reports by numerous international organizations over the past two decades demonstrate that sexual abuse of refugee women and girls is pervasive and present in almost all refugee settings. Reports out of West Africa in 2001 cited sexual abuse and exploitation of refugee women and girls by relief workers from international and nongovernmental organizations and by peacekeepers—the very people charged with protecting refugees. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the lead international organization charged with providing protection and assistance to refugees and other vulnerable populations.

Because of your concerns about the protection of this vulnerable population and the allegations of relief workers' and peacekeepers' abuses of power, you asked us to (1) assess efforts by UNHCR and its implementing partners to protect refugee women and girls from gender-based violence; (2) determine what steps the United Nations and international organizations have taken to prevent relief workers' and peacekeepers' abuse of women and girls; and (3) describe the steps the U.S. government takes to protect refugees and other vulnerable persons.

To assess the efforts taken to protect refugee women and girls, we conducted fieldwork in refugee camps and surrounding areas in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Thailand. Collectively, these four nations have more than 1 million refugees, face

protracted refugee crises in which refugees and other vulnerable populations are under imminent threat of physical and sexual violence, and were recommended as representative case study countries by State and think tank officials. We assessed the adequacy of international mechanisms to identify and provide protection to refugees from the time of their initial flight to their arrival and settlement in refugee camps to repatriation home. In addition to extensive interviews with refugee women and girls, refugee leaders, and camp management, we supplemented our field-level information with meetings with U.S. government, United Nations, Red Cross Movement, peacekeeping, and nongovernmental organization officials at the headquarter, regional, and country levels. In our work with UNHCR, we met with officials from 19 different offices and examined extensive staffing data—including vacancies, duty station categories, and worldwide distribution of staff. To assess U.N. and international organizations' response to reports of abuse by staff and peacekeepers, we reviewed a series of remedial action plans recently issued by U.N. and other international organizations and assessed how these plans were being implemented in refugee camps. We also obtained independent perspectives from recognized experts within the human rights, think tank, and refugee advocacy communities on U.N. and U.S. efforts to provide refugee protection. (For a more complete description of our scope and methodology, see app. I.)

Results in Brief

Over the last decade, UNHCR and its implementing partners have boosted their efforts to protect refugee women and girls from sexual abuse and violence by creating policies, best practice guidelines, and programs to protect this population. At the field level, gender based violence initiatives are targeting vulnerable persons—such as female-headed households—and providing them with secure shelter and access to services. Despite these gains, shortfalls in UNHCR's resources and its weak management in staffing and training limit the effectiveness of measures taken. Regarding resources, failure of donors to fulfill funding pledges forced UNHCR to make budget cuts of $73 million—nearly 10 percent of its regular budget—in 2002. These cuts led to a reduction in protection programs aimed at women and girls. Regarding staffing issues, UNHCR does not have a strategic workforce plan—a plan that links the organization's objectives, resources, and staffing—to maximize the physical protection of refugees. Consequently, the number of protection staff in some high-risk countries is insufficient and impedes protection efforts. Furthermore, UNHCR's staff assignments and rotations are voluntary and have resulted in extended

vacancies at key protection posts. In Tanzania, for example, UNHCR has 1 junior protection officer responsible for the physical protection needs of 155,000 refugees in 5 camps. Regarding training, we found that most UNHCR staff and staff within nongovernmental organizations that serve as their implementing partners in camps have not received practical training on protection concepts and techniques, such as how to identify and address sexual violence cases. Finally, we found that UNHCR's implementing partners and other international organizations have protection capabilities that provide significant opportunities for partnering arrangements to fill gaps in refugee protection.

In response to reports at the end of 2001 alleging sexual abuse and exploitation of women and girl refugees by relief workers and peacekeepers, the United Nations conducted an in-depth investigation into the allegations, and international organizations adopted codes of conduct and instituted training programs for their employees. During our fieldwork in numerous refugee camps, we found there was high awareness of the ethical and professional conduct expected of relief workers and peacekeepers, and there were established mechanisms to report and act upon any new allegations of abuse of power. Despite these efforts, international organizations still face continuing sexual exploitation of refugees by relief workers. Although the in-depth investigation could not verify specific charges of abuse, it found other cases and concluded that sexual exploitation by relief workers was a real problem. During our fieldwork, we observed officials from UNHCR and nongovernmental organizations investigating new cases of sexual exploitation and abuse by workers in Tanzania and Sierra Leone. Based upon extensive interviews with relief workers and refugee women, our observations, and review of 12 years of reports, refugee women and girls remain extremely vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse of power due to (1) the high level of poverty among refugees, (2) limited monitoring of camp situations by international relief workers, and (3) cultural attitudes on the part of some relief workers and refugee-led camp management. According to relief and human rights experts, continued high-level management focus on preventing exploitation is necessary so attention does not wane before it becomes part of organizations' institutional culture.

The U.S. government's role in protecting refugees and other vulnerable populations has been primarily through its funding of international organizations. In 2002, the Department of State provided UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross—the two key international organizations mandated to provide protection—with $265 million and $124 million, respectively. Furthermore, the Department of State in 2002 funded

a number of small grants for projects targeted to address specific protection problems in countries. During our fieldwork, we observed several of these protection projects—including some covering sexual and gender-based violence prevention—that addressed gaps in protection in Sierra Leone and Tanzania. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), through its Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and Office of Transition Initiatives, indirectly contributes to refugee protection efforts. Finally, in addition to financial support, the U.S. government plays an active role advocating for the protection of refugees and vulnerable populations at the United Nations, within international organizations, and at the country level.

This report makes recommendations that the Secretary of State work with U.N. member states to address the inadequacies in the UNHCR staffing system, expand protection training programs, encourage the development of protection partnering arrangements, and maintain international organizations' focus on combating sexual exploitation of refugee women and girls.

In comments on a draft of this report, the Department of State said we accurately reflect the reality of current efforts to provide protection to refugee women and girls, noting that shortfalls in funding, prioritization, and an ineffective staff management system hamper UNHCR's protection efforts. UNHCR disagreed with our recommendation to fundamentally reform its staffing system, stating that improvements to instruments for assigning staff and managing vacancies, as well as more predictable donor support, would be sufficient to address these problems. The problems in UNHCR's staffing system have been long documented and improvements aimed at selected aspects of the system have not been effective. In our view, therefore, creation of a strategic workforce plan and the development of a staff assignment and rotation policy are necessary to address the protection needs of refugees in high-risk and difficult duty locations. A more detailed discussion of UNHCR's comments and our response is included at the end of this report.

Background

UNHCR is the lead agency in a network of international organizations active in the protection and assistance of refugees and other populations that are vulnerable in war and conflict settings. Other major participants include the Red Cross Movement, the World Food Program, and the United Nations Children's Fund, as well as nongovernmental organizations such as the International Rescue Committee and Save the Children. Established in 1950 to help resettle European refugees in the aftermath of

World War II, UNHCR is guided by the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, both of which detail refugees' rights.[1] UNHCR's primary purpose as mandated by the United Nations is to provide international protection for refugees by ensuring that their basic human rights are respected. Further, UNHCR is to ensure that individuals seeking asylum are given access to refugee status determination procedures, are not refused entry at borders, and are protected from forced return to a situation of danger. UNHCR's policies, strategic objectives, and budget are set by its Executive Committee, which meets annually to set the organization's priorities and direction. (Fig. 1 depicts Burundian refugee women who told us of their protection concerns in the Kasulu refugee camp in western Tanzania.)

[1]Additional international instruments underpinning the rights and guarantees relevant to the protection of refugee women and girls include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, ratified by the United Nations in 1979; the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1993; and the subsequent Global Platform for Action, adopted at the Beijing Fourth Conference on Women in 1995; U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000); and Guidelines on International Protection: Gender-related persecution (2002).

Figure 1: Burundian Refugee Women

Source: GAO.

Changing Nature of Refugee Protection

Factors inherent in armed conflict situations have changed the context in which UNHCR and other relief organizations provide assistance and protection to refugees and other vulnerable populations. In these types of situations, the nature of refugee and displacement flows has changed from persons fleeing organized conflict between states to an environment of civil war in which armed state and rebel groups purposely target civilian populations. The danger of operating in conflict zones and the personal security risks to relief workers are now major limitations to involvement in protection matters. For example, from 1997 through 2001, 106 relief workers were killed in the line of duty in Afghanistan, Angola, Rwanda, and Sudan. Even upon arrival at a refugee or displacement camp, women and girls remain vulnerable to violence from the local community, combatants who use the camp as a rest and relaxation base, and other refugees. In addition, some governments, such as Burma, block international organizations' access to their vulnerable populations, thus

hampering protection activities. (See app. II for a listing of U.N. reports that cite sexual violence against women.)

In response to the changing nature of the refugee context, humanitarian organizations in 1996 reexamined the legal, practical, and policy issues relevant to protection. Policy documents that emerged from this review defined protection as actions aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of individuals by (1) preventing abuse; (2) restoring adequate living conditions subsequent to a pattern of abuse; and (3) fostering a social, cultural, institutional, and legal environment conducive to respect for the rights of the individual.[2] For the purposes of this report, we focus on the physical dimensions of protecting refugees, especially women and girls.

Recent Action Raises Awareness, but Refugee Women and Girls Continue to Face Violence

Over the last few years, the international community has boosted protection of women and girl refugees from sexual abuse and violence through international conventions, new standards and guidelines, and increased programs on sexual and gender-based violence. However, UNHCR has faced heavy budget cuts because of shortfalls in contributions from international donors, and these cuts have directly impacted funding for gender-based protection programs. In addition, UNHCR lacks a strategic workforce plan linking its mission to its staffing system, which has led to insufficient protection staff in some high-risk countries. Furthermore, most UNHCR staff and those of their implementing partners have not been trained in protection concepts and techniques. We also found that UNHCR has opportunities to partner with other international organizations that it could use more effectively to increase protection of refugees.

UNHCR Has Taken Action to Improve Protection but Results Are Mixed

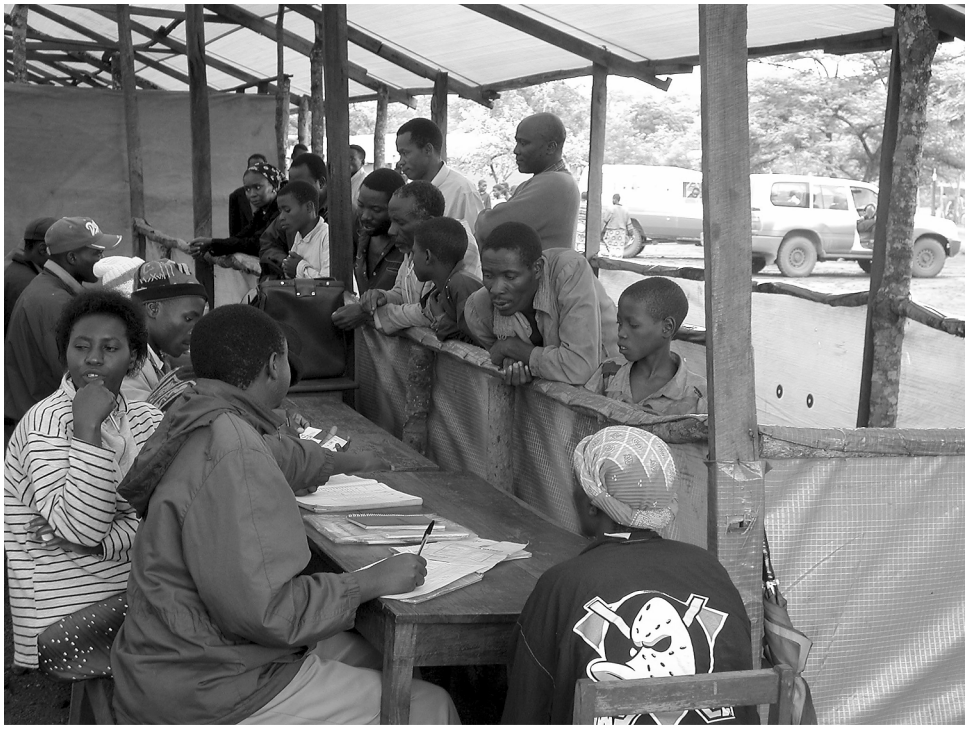
Over the last decade, UNHCR and its implementing partners have advanced the protection needs of refugee women and girls through a number of mechanisms, including the development of *UNHCR Policy on Refugee Women* (1990)[3] and *Sexual Violence Against Refugees:*

[2]*Workshop on Protection of Human Rights and Humanitarian Organizations: Doing Something and Doing It Well*, report of the workshop held at the International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, Switzerland, January 2001.

[3]*UNHCR Policy on Refugee Women* recognized that protection needs of men and women differ significantly and emphasized the importance of mainstreaming women's protection needs into all protection and assistance activities.

Guidelines on Prevention and Response (1995).[4] In addition, during our fieldwork in Sierra Leone and Tanzania, we observed UNHCR protection activities that identified vulnerable persons upon their initial arrival in their country of asylum—such as female-headed households and unaccompanied minors—provided them with secure shelter, and assigned them social service staff for continued assistance and monitoring. (Fig. 2 depicts a group of new refugee arrivals in Tanzania at a border reception center being registered by UNHCR staff.)

Figure 2: Registration of New Refugee Arrivals in Tanzania



Source: GAO.

Throughout 2001, UNHCR sponsored a dialogue with refugee women that focused on their unique protection vulnerabilities and concerns. As a result, in 2002 the High Commissioner established five commitments to

[4]*Sexual Violence Against Refugees: Guidelines on Prevention and Response* outlined practical steps and provided basic advice on preventing and responding to sexual violence, including the associated key legal, medical, and psychosocial issues.

improve protection of and assistance to refugee women and establish a link among gender equality, the advancement of women, and the protection of refugees. Based on our fieldwork and discussions with UNHCR and relief officials, we found that UNHCR has had mixed results in its efforts to implement the commitments and has not established mechanisms for their monitoring.

High Commissioner's Commitments to Refugee Women

The High Commissioner's five commitments to refugee women cover the following areas:

- **Sexual and gender-based violence programs**. UNHCR committed to develop comprehensive country-level strategies to address sexual and gender-based violence. The sexual and gender-based violence programs UNHCR has set up in recent years have increased awareness in both men and women. In our fieldwork, we observed sexual and gender-based violence programs in various camps. In Sierra Leone and Thailand, refugee women were attending gender awareness workshops and were active in monitoring their camps for incidents of sexual violence and assisting victims. In Tanzania, women participated in a firewood collection project designed to protect women and girls when they are outside of camps collecting firewood and very vulnerable to sexual assault. We also observed prevention and response strategies in place. In Tanzania, Sierra Leone, and Thailand, for example, refugee women told us that the camp gender-based violence centers and programs raised their awareness of the problem, informed them of their rights, and provided a practical means to get help.

- **Food distribution**. In response to women's difficulties in obtaining their rations when distribution is controlled by male-dominated camp committees or made directly to male heads of households without women's participation, UNHCR pledged to ensure that refugee women participate directly and indirectly in the management and distribution of food and nonfood items. At the sites we visited, we observed that women were generally represented in food distribution programs. In Tanzania, at least 50 percent of the food distribution was handled by women, although participation levels remain under target in Sierra Leone and Thailand.

- **Camp management**. To ensure that women's concerns are heard and acted upon, the High Commissioner committed that 50 percent of refugee camp management representatives would be women. Our fieldwork showed that women's involvement in camp leadership positions varied, partly due to cultural barriers in traditionally patriarchal societies. In Sierra Leone and Tanzania, camp officials and refugee women told us that women were very active, representing nearly 50 percent of the camp

leadership positions. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Thailand, however, we learned that women are finding it more difficult to overcome cultural barriers to their participation in camp committees.

- **Registration of women**. UNHCR committed to individually register all refugee women and provide them with relevant documentation to ensure their security, freedom of movement, and access to essential services in order to alleviate their dependence on men. During our fieldwork, we found that UNHCR is generally not individually registering women. Based upon our observations in Sierra Leone and Tanzania and on UNHCR's own reports, UNHCR is continuing its practice of designating males as head of households.

- **Sanitary material**. The lack of sanitary materials has negative health, social, economic, and psychological implications for women. As a result, the High Commissioner committed to making the provision of sanitary materials standard practice in all UNHCR assistance programs. The organization is finding this commitment difficult to fulfill, due to a lack of funds and commitment to the issue by some staff and implementing partners. A 2000-2001 UNHCR survey found that the provision of sanitary materials was inconsistent in terms of quantity, quality, method, and frequency of distribution. In May 2002, a State Department team also noted that the distribution of sanitary supplies covers only 40 percent of the relevant population in central Africa. In Sierra Leone and Tanzania, we learned that in some camps, a lack of funds allowed for the procurement and distribution of sanitary materials only to school-age girls.

Budget Shortfalls Inhibit Protection Efforts

UNHCR's protection efforts are constrained by recurring budgetary shortfalls. UNHCR's Executive Committee, comprised of 61 member states, approves and supervises UNHCR's annual work plan and approves its budget. The approved budget is based on pledges of support from the executive committee members themselves and other donor governments. However, in recent years donor governments have failed to meet their funding commitments.[5] In 2002, UNHCR had to cut $73 million from its regular budget—nearly 10 percent—because of unfulfilled donor

[5]Unlike other U.N. system organizations, UNHCR's budget is not based on assessed contributions from member states, but is voluntary. The U.S. government annually contributes 25 percent of UNHCR's approved budget.

contributions. Since 1998 UNHCR has had to operate with an average 11 percent shortfall in its regular budget. (Table 1 shows UNHCR's regular and supplementary budgets and actual funds available.)

Table 1: UNHCR's Approved Regular and Supplementary Budgets, Actual Funds Received, and Percentage Difference, 1998-2002

Dollars in millions

Year	Regular budget	Funds available	Percentage difference	Supplementary budget[a]	Funds available	Percentage difference
1998	460	384	-17%	609	662	+9%
1999[b]	437	385	-12	815	782	-4
2000	854	780	-9	102	77	-25
2001	791	730	-8	108	146	+36
2002	802	729	-9	228	218	-4

Source: UNHCR.

[a]UNHCR's supplementary budget consists of budgets authorized by the High Commissioner on an ad hoc basis for new situations that arise after the meeting of the Executive Committee. These budgets are exclusively funded from earmarked contributions and cannot be transferred to cover shortfalls in the regular budget.

[b]Due to the introduction of a new budget structure in 2000, subsequent regular and supplementary budget numbers are not directly comparable with those in 1998 and 1999.

According to UNHCR program documents, budget shortfalls have forced the organization to reduce the scope of refugee operations and cut some protection activities altogether. For example,

- the Refugee Women's Unit cut field missions that were to support refugee women's registration and documentation, as well as food distribution and camp management;
- newly arrived Liberian refugee women were forced to reside in overcrowded communal shelters;
- refugee registration programs in Iran were suspended; and
- the number of protection officers monitoring the movements of refugees across international borders in Pakistan was cut.

Flawed Staffing System Undermines UNHCR's Protection Mandate

UNHCR lacks a strategic workforce plan that links the organization's mission with its allocation of staff in the field. The organization's staff assignment system and rotation policy leave numerous vacancies in key posts. Stopgap staffing mechanisms UNHCR uses to address emergency

situations are intended only to address short-term emergencies and can lead to additional problems. Thus the number of protection staff is insufficient in many high-risk refugee situations and the organization is struggling to meet this population's protection needs.

UNHCR Lacks a Workforce Strategy

At the end of 2002, UNHCR had 1,301 professional staff, including 402 (31 percent) in headquarters and 899 (69 percent) serving in the field. The professional staff carries out UNHCR's core mandate of protecting refugees and the organization's 11 strategic objectives, such as improving the physical protection of refugees and monitoring their safety and well-being. Of these professional staff, UNHCR's 320 protection officers have primary responsibility to protect refugees and other people of concern to the agency, although UNHCR's field officers and community service officers (who are responsible for general management and assistance functions) also have protection duties, such as observing and reporting on potential problems.

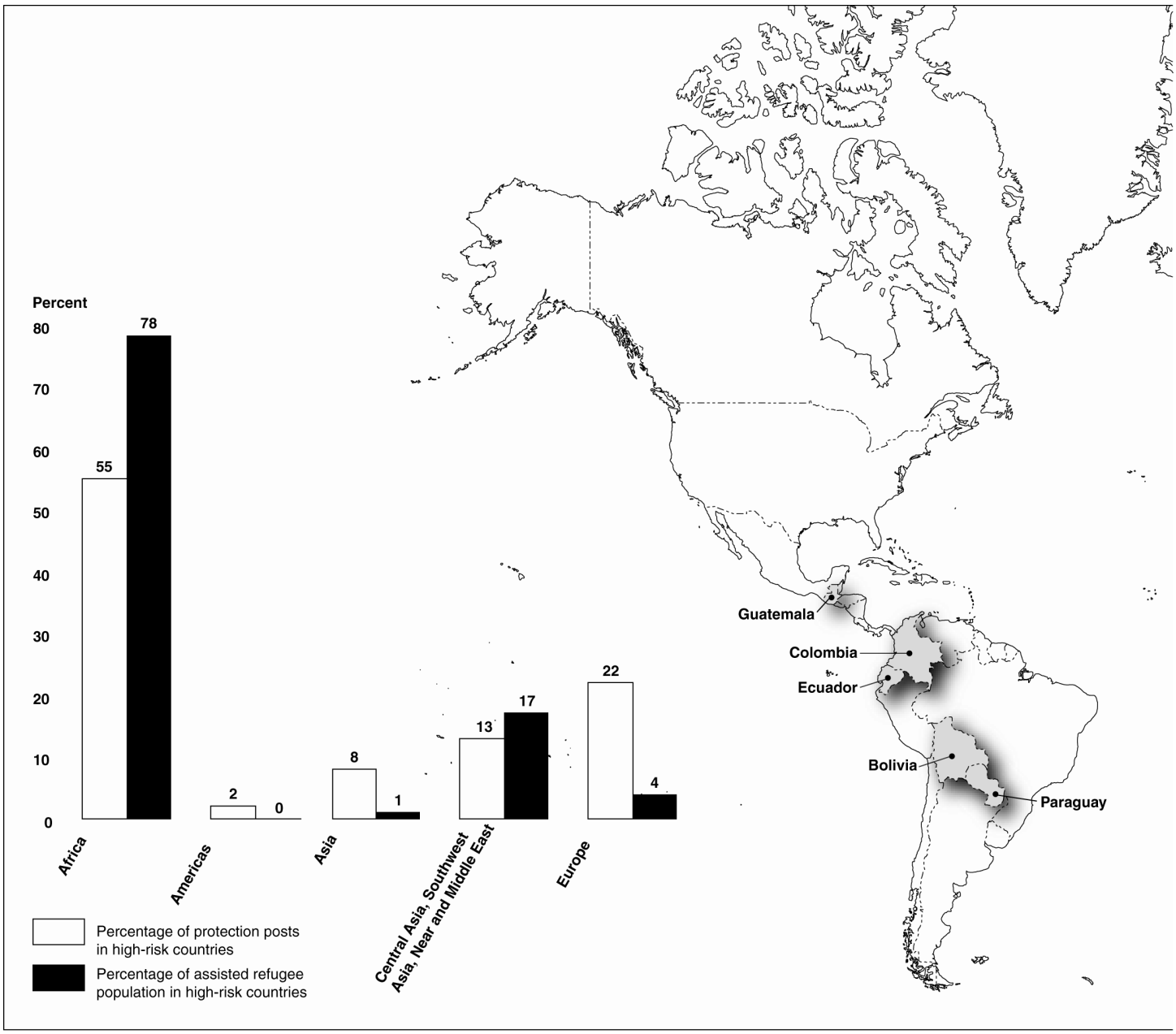
However, according to the Deputy High Commissioner and the Director of UNHCR's Human Resources, the current process for managing human resources does not fully link the organization's objectives, budgetary resources, and staffing. Currently, UNHCR's process for allocating staff positions is largely based on available resources and broad operational plans rather than the protection requirements of refugees, according to UNHCR human resource officials. For example, in 2002, UNHCR's Africa bureau and the Department for International Protection conducted an assessment of the protection staffing requirements in Africa and determined that 117 additional protection positions were needed. Due to funding constraints, however, only 21 additional positions were created. According to numerous relief and human rights officials, including some in UNHCR, current UNHCR staffing levels in Africa are insufficient relative to the protection caseload there.

Related to the lack of a strategic staffing process, UNHCR does not conduct a global risk assessment of the threat level to refugees to help determine the number and distribution of all posts that could best protect refugees. Though determining minimum protection standards and optimal distribution of posts is outside the scope of this review, our analysis of high-risk countries found that UNHCR's distribution of protection posts is

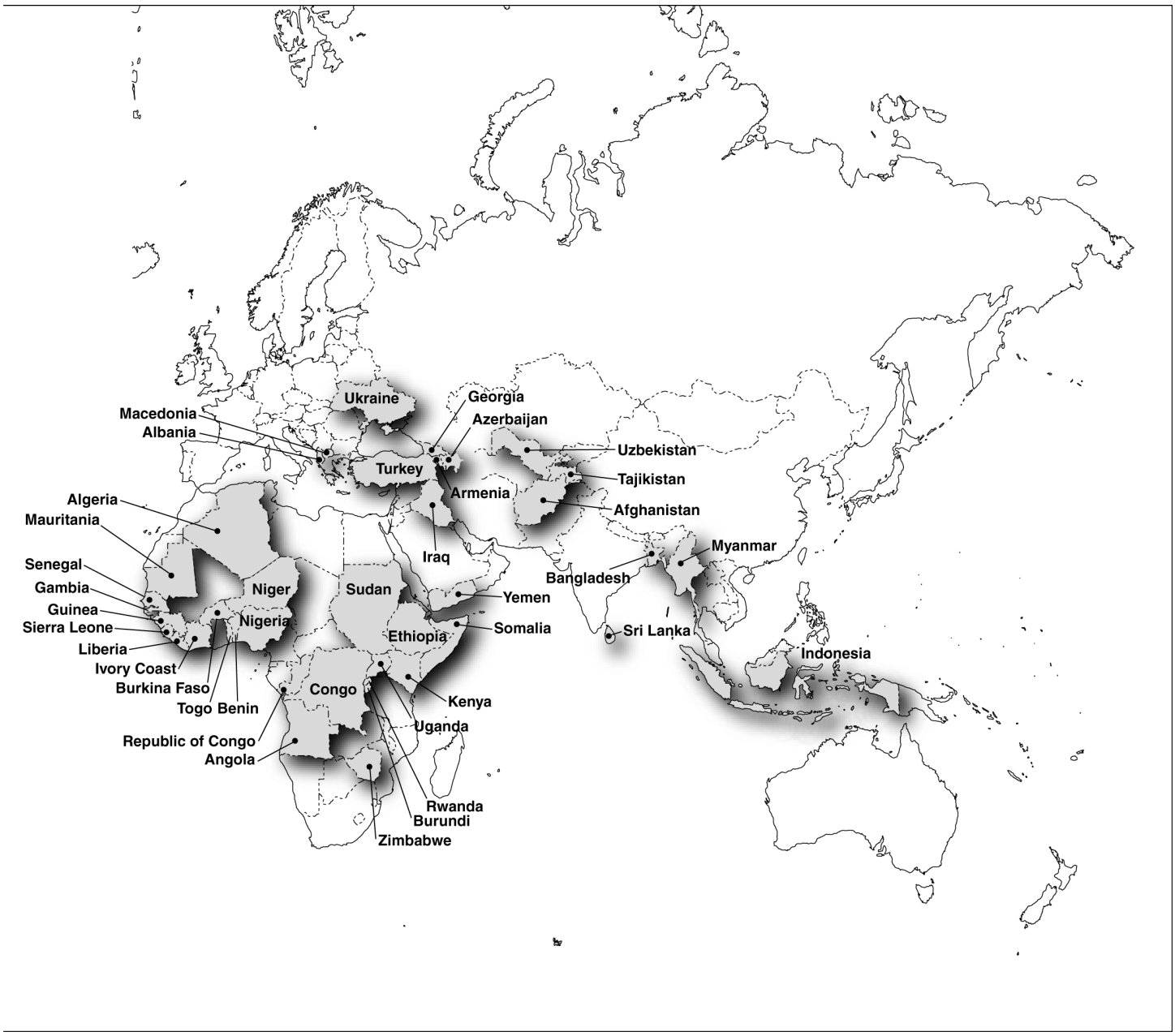
not consistent with the risk level and the caseload of the refugee setting.[6] Specifically, high-risk countries in Africa have 55 percent of the protection posts but nearly 80 percent of the assisted refugee population. Conversely, high-risk countries in Europe have 22 percent of the protection posts but only 4 percent of UNHCR's assisted refugee population. Furthermore, nearly 60 percent of the protection posts in low-risk countries are in Europe and serve less than 30 percent of the population at this risk level. While protection officers in low-risk countries in Europe play an important role in influencing governments regarding asylum law, the bulk of their work focuses on legal issues as opposed to the more immediate need of physical protection. Figure 3 shows high-risk countries and the distribution of protection officer posts and refugees within each region.

[6]UNHCR does not formally designate risk levels for refugees. The World Bank has developed a database for measuring risk and governance; it includes 160 countries and is based on information from sources such as Standard and Poors and the World Economic Forum. We used political stability/violence measurements from this database to identify countries of high risk (Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Pablo Zoido-Lobaton, "Governance Matters II: Updated Indicators for 2000-01"), World Bank Policy Research Department Working Paper (Washington, D.C.: 2002).

Figure 3: Distribution of Protection Officer Posts and Assisted Populations in High-Risk Countries



Source: UNHCR and World Bank (data), GAO (analysis).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Somalia
Ethiopia
Sri Lanka
Liberia
Indonesia
Ivory Coast
Burkina Faso
Congo
Togo
Benin
Kenya
Uganda
Republic of Congo
Angola
Rwanda
Burundi
Zimbabwe

Vacancies Pose Protracted Protection Problems

Protection experts acknowledge that a visible field presence of staff is one of the most effective means of preventing harm to refugees and other vulnerable persons. However, since the mid-1990s, UNHCR has identified staff vacancies, particularly in duty stations that already function with minimal staff, as negatively affecting its ability to fulfill its mandate. UNHCR staffing data in late 2002 indicated that 20 percent of its 320 protection positions were vacant. Table 2 shows protection vacancies as of October 2002.

Table 2: Protection Officer Vacancies by Region

Bureau	Vacancies in nondifficult duty stations	Vacancies in difficult duty stations	Total vacancies	Total protection positions	Percentage of protection vacancies
Africa	10	21	31	103	30%
Central Asia, Southwest Asia, Near and Middle East	4	9	13	49	27
Asia and Pacific	5	1	6	30	20
Americas	2	0	2	15	13
Europe	6	3	9	83	11
Department of International Protection (headquarters)	3	0	3	17	18
Total	**30**	**34**	**64**	**320[a]**	**20**

Source: UNHCR.

[a]Total posts include an additional 23 positions at headquarters.

The Africa region had almost half of all protection vacancies, including all the protection vacancies UNHCR is chronically unable to fill. We observed vacancies in key protection situations during our fieldwork. For example, in Tanzania's Kibondo camps, two protection officer posts were vacant, leaving only one junior protection officer to cover 155,000 refugees. We also observed that vacancies led to significant protection problems for refugee women and girls in and around the African Great Lakes region (Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, and Rwanda) and West Africa (Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast). The lack of sufficient staff resulted in long delays in resolving individual protection cases, which in turn discouraged reporting of additional sexual violence cases. For example, in Tanzania, UNHCR protection staff told us that some sexual assault cases were not pursued or were dropped altogether due to lack of staff and other resources to devote to them. As a result, victims of sexual violence often remained at risk while the perpetrator remained at large. Numerous relief officials in the field with whom we spoke voiced

frustration over UNHCR's inability to follow up on protection cases that were referred to them.

Staff Assignment and Rotation Policies Are Ineffective

In general, UNHCR employs a voluntary staff assignment and rotation policy: UNHCR does not direct staff where to serve, and staff members are responsible for finding and applying for their next post before their tour ends. While the High Commissioner emphasized in a 2001 letter to staff that it is incumbent upon UNHCR staff to be in the field, near refugees, to provide effective protection, many hardship posts are vacant or understaffed. One problem is that UNHCR does not have a centralized way to track and ensure that staff members apply for their next position,[7] resulting in both post vacancies and staff being without assignment. As of January 2003, according to UNHCR staffing data, 109 staff were in-between assignments—staying either at their home of record or at their old assignment—with an average of 4 months lapsing before staff took a new position.[8]

Furthermore, UNHCR's regulations do not require staff members to rotate among duty station categories (i.e., from a nonhardship to a hardship duty station), although there is an expectation that they will do so. According to some UNHCR staff with whom we spoke, there is a sentiment among staff that being posted in a remote location (also referred to as the "deep field") negatively affects a person's promotion potential, as they would be "forgotten" by those making decisions in Geneva. In addition, the percentage of staff over the age of 40 has increased from 54 percent in 1990 to 70 percent in 2000, and UNHCR officials acknowledge that a larger percentage of this aging workforce is reluctant or unwilling to serve in difficult duty stations because of personal reasons. UNHCR's work requires many staff to live in remote, isolated locations that are not conducive to family life, and with more than half the duty stations designated as nonfamily, it is difficult to find enough staff willing to be separated from their families. According to UNHCR human resource officials, a further consequence of the organization's limited rotation policy is that high-risk, hardship duty stations are more likely to attract

[7]The onus is on the individual staff member to apply for his or her next post; UNHCR has no mechanism to ensure that staff apply in time for a seamless transition from one post to another.

[8]During the comment period on the draft report, UNHCR clarified that 80 percent of staff in between assignments are deployed on temporary missions or assignments, or continue at their post until their successor arrives.

less experienced junior staff without dependents than more experienced senior staff with dependents.

Stopgap Staffing Mechanisms Address Emergency Situations but Have Drawbacks

UNHCR relies on short-term staffing deployments during emergency refugee operations to fill vacancies or augment country teams. Deployments generally last for 2 months but can extend up to 6 months. According to UNHCR and relief officials, while emergency deployments do help fill an immediate protection gap, the system has several drawbacks. Among them are the high operational and financial costs involved in relocating staff. Emergency deployments require intensive staff training and orientation and incur substantial transportation and relocation expenses. The emergency deployment mechanism can also leave a vacancy in the deploying staff's original duty station. In Tanzania, for example, we observed that a senior protection officer responsible for more than 100,000 refugees was away from his/her post for more than 6 months while on emergency deployment in Afghanistan. During Sierra Leone's recent civil war, UNHCR had 77 emergency staff deployments on 2-month missions over a 19-month period. According to the Country Representative, so many staff rotated in and out that he barely learned their names. Relief officials active during the Sierra Leone emergency told us that by the time the new UNHCR staff understood the local protection context it was time for them to rotate back out, which limited their effectiveness. According to another senior UNHCR field official, the protection workload during Sierra Leone's civil war would not have constituted an emergency if an adequate number of staff had been assigned initially.

To help fill empty field positions, UNHCR also relies on U.N. volunteers and project staff—workers contracted for a limited time by a specific project. In 2002, there were 106 U.N. volunteers serving in protection functions. However, according to UNHCR officials, while U.N. volunteers are a valuable source of staff support, they are often relatively inexperienced. Furthermore, according to UNHCR officials, because project staff are not regular UNHCR employees and are governed by restrictive employment regulations, they cannot work beyond an 8-hour day or on weekends. As a result, according to these officials, project staff are often unavailable during critical emergency periods. In Tanzania, for example, many of the Burundian refugees arrive during the night or over weekends, when crossing the border is considered safer. Because only UNHCR staff are available to assist during these surge periods, the workforce is even further strained.

Lack of Training Continues to Hinder Protection

Although protection officers have primary responsibility for the protection of refugees, UNHCR states that all staff serve in a protection role. However, a long-standing impediment is insufficient training for nonprotection staff on protection issues, especially regarding women and girls. In our examination of UNHCR protection reports and evaluations between 1990 and 2002, we found about half cited the need for training to increase the organization's capacity to protect women and children. However, during our fieldwork, we had extensive discussions with UNHCR officials and their implementing partners' staff and found that few of them had received any training on protection issues. For example, in a meeting with UNHCR's field office team in Kibondo, Tanzania, only 4 of 43 staff told us they had received training on protection issues. Similarly, in discussions with staff from UNHCR implementing partners, who are in the camps and in daily contact with the refugees, only a few had any protection-related training or were familiar with UNHCR's guidelines on the protection of refugee women or children. In our discussions, we were further told that protection training was needed in such areas as how to identify and address sexual violence cases and how to work with refugee camp leaders and the local community to solve protection concerns.

During the course of our review, we found that numerous protection training courses and modules have been developed and made available to UNHCR nonprotection staff and to implementing partners, such as Protecting Refugees: A Field Guide for NGOs (1999) and Human Rights and Refugee Protection (1995). However, according to several senior UNHCR officials, the organization has not committed the necessary time or resources to this training. These officials added that if UNHCR continues to assert that all field-based staff serve as protection officers, then it is incumbent that they be properly trained in protection issues. Furthermore, according to UNHCR implementing partners in Tanzania and Sierra Leone, there is a very high turnover rate among nongovernmental organization staff in the field and therefore a continuous need for training.

UNHCR Has Opportunities to Increase Partnering to Fill Protection Gaps

While UNHCR has collaborated with international organizations such as the International Rescue Committee, CARE, Catholic Relief Services, and Save the Children in delivering humanitarian assistance, we observed that there are also opportunities to work with these types of organizations to help protect refugees. According to U.S. government and relief officials with whom we spoke, including other organizations in protection activities is necessary because of the increased scope and complexity of refugee situations worldwide and certain governments' restrictions on UNHCR's access to refugees and vulnerable populations.

According to officials of international and nongovernmental organizations, these groups have some capacity and resources to assist and augment UNHCR's protection efforts, though such collaboration has been rare thus far. Based on our observations during fieldwork and discussions with these officials, their organizations could provide personnel and other resources to

- assist in registering refugee women;
- provide legal case management of victims of rape and sexual violence;
- find durable solutions for refugees, such as identifying individuals for third country resettlement;
- increase the number of international staff to monitor camps and surrounding areas for protection problems; and
- ensure systematic reporting of incidents.

In addition, UNHCR security personnel, who assess security and situation risks for staff in the field, said they could apply their expertise to refugees and other vulnerable populations and thus supplement the work of protection officers.

During the course of our evaluation, we noted two partnerships already in existence that could serve as useful models on which to expand. For example, the International Rescue Committee's Protection SURGE Capacity Project, started in 2001, placed 36 temporary protection staff in nonemergency refugee situations. In Sierra Leone, we met with a SURGE protection officer who was the only international staff available to receive and relocate more than 10,000 fleeing Liberian refugees from the border after unexpected fighting in Liberia erupted. Also, the Red Cross Movement and nongovernmental organizations have recently collaborated with UNHCR in designing a protection-training workshop, called "Reach Out," for mid-level non-UNHCR staff.[9] Figure 4 depicts the entrance of two refugee camps in Thailand. A nonsignatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Thailand denies formal refugee status to fleeing Burmese who are instead afforded only "temporary shelter" along its border. UNHCR,

[9]Both the Protection SURGE Capacity Project and the Reach Out protection training initiative were funded by State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

which has only been accorded observer status by the Thai government, relies significantly on nongovernmental organizations to monitor the protection situation in the camps.

Figure 4: Refugee "Temporary Shelters" in Thailand

Source: GAO.

Another group that UNHCR may have greater opportunity to work with is U.N. peacekeeping forces, often the only international entity with some capability to protect refugees and other vulnerable groups in situations of armed conflict. We found that UNHCR and peacekeeping forces have worked together in some instances when force commanders judged that

mission mandates, resources, and capabilities permitted this collaboration. For example, a successful partnership occurred in 2001 when U.N. peacekeepers assisted in separating armed combatants from a refugee camp in northwestern Congo. According to U.N. and relief officials with whom we spoke, two key protection areas in which UNHCR and peacekeepers have opportunities to work together are:

- ensuring access to vulnerable populations for humanitarian assistance and protection; and
- separating civilians from armed combatants in refugee camps and settlements.

While UNHCR officials in general viewed partnering as a positive development, they expressed concern that partnering could dilute the agency's unique protection mandate by delegating its tasks to external parties. This concern has grown as European donors have channeled increasing proportions of their refugee funding to their bilateral aid agencies and national nongovernmental organizations that operate independently of UNHCR leadership. These officials noted that some nongovernmental organizations hold political views that may complicate UNHCR's relationship with the refugees' country of origin and country of asylum. However, according to relief experts, partnerships can be structured so UNHCR continues to be the main interlocutor with governments and maintains primary responsibility for overall protection while international organizations help fulfill discrete protection tasks.

Despite Remedial Actions, Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Power Still a Problem

Following allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by relief workers and U.N. peacekeepers in refugee settings in West Africa in 2001, the United Nations and international organizations undertook a number of remedial and preventive measures at both the global and country level. At the global level, the U.N.'s Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted a detailed investigation into the allegations presented in the February 2002 report by UNHCR and Save the Children-UK[10] and concluded that the charges could not be verified. However, during the course of the investigation, OIOS discovered other specific cases of abuse and concluded that sexual exploitation of refugees is a real problem. To

[10]UNHCR and Save the Children-UK, *Sexual Violence & Exploitation: The Experience of Refugee Children in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone* (Geneva: United Nations, Feb. 2002).

address the problem, the U.N.'s Inter-Agency Standing Committee[11] established a task force in 2002 and implemented a plan of action for U.N. agencies and nongovernmental organization to follow. The plan focused on (1) outlining preventive actions to help agencies create an environment in humanitarian crises free of sexual exploitation, (2) providing basic health and psychosocial care to survivors of abuse, and (3) developing management and coordination mechanisms to ensure accountability of humanitarian agencies.

We examined several international organizations' remedial actions and found that they had made a concerted effort to address the issue of sexual exploitation by their staff. For example, after reviewing documents and discussing the issue with field staff from UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Catholic Relief Services, and the International Rescue Committee, we found that organizations had

- sent clear statements to staff of their ethical responsibilities toward refugees, the need for accountability, and "zero tolerance" of exploitive behavior;
- developed or revised codes of conduct to guide the behavior and attitudes of staff;
- provided awareness and training workshops for international and national staff; and
- polled country staff globally on the potential for situations of sexual exploitation and conducted investigations of high-risk environments.

Our extensive interviews with relief workers, peacekeepers, and refugees in the field also indicated a very high awareness concerning the issue of abuse of power, the ethical and professional conduct expected of relief workers and peacekeepers, and the rights and entitlements of refugees.

[11]The U.N. Inter-Agency Task Force is composed of the following members: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, U.N. Development Program, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, U.N. Children's Fund, World Food Program, Food and Agriculture Organization, World Health Organization, and the U.N. Family Planning Agency. In addition, there is a standing invitation to the International Organization on Migration, International Committee of the Red Cross, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Representative of the Secretary General on Internally Displaced Persons, the World Bank, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, InterAction, and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response.

We also observed that UNHCR had mechanisms in place in the camps for refugees to confidentially report abuses of power and had trained refugee women leaders to monitor for exploitive situations. In Thailand's Mae La refugee camp, for example, we met members of the women's committee who had received UNHCR sexual and gender-based violence training, served as the camp's "eyes and ears," and were actively engaged in managing cases of exploitation and domestic and sexual violence. Figure 5 shows a woman from the Karen tribe engaged in an income-generation project that supports women's programs in the camp. Income generation and empowerment programs make women less vulnerable to exploitation.

Figure 5: A Karen Women's Committee Income-Generating Activity, Mae La, Thailand, 2003

Source: GAO.

A woman weaving cloth to be sold in the camp; proceeds are used to provide members with income and to support women's programming in the camp.

Despite these efforts by international organizations, abuse of refugees continues to be a problem. During our fieldwork in Tanzania and Sierra

Leone refugee camps, we met with UNHCR and nongovernmental organization officials who were actively investigating several new cases of sexual exploitation by relief workers. In the Tanzania situation, eight nongovernmental organization relief workers and four Tanzanian police officers employed under a U.S. government-funded project were fired for sexual exploitation of refugee girls or failure to report the exploitation.[12] In addition, senior UNHCR officials in Nepal were dismissed for tolerating an environment of exploitation among Bhutanese refugees by refugee men and Nepalese government officials employed under UNHCR-funded projects.

Moreover, based on our fieldwork, analysis of UNHCR staffing, and review of UNHCR's most recent reports on refugees (2000-2002), the conditions in refugee camps create an ongoing environment in which women and girls are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse of power. First, camps are sites of extreme poverty, and women are often reduced to exchanging sex for otherwise unavailable food and nonfood items such as clothing, shelter materials, and cooking items. According to refugee women with whom we spoke, adolescent girls seeking such items as clothes and jewelry are particularly susceptible to transactional sex relationships. Second, there is limited monitoring of camps because few UNHCR professional staff are present, leaving actual day-to-day management of camps to locally hired staff or the refugees themselves. Finally, some relief workers and refugee-led camp management staff hold cultural attitudes that are accepting of sexually exploitative arrangements and thus perpetuate the problem.

Although the issue of sexual exploitation of refugee women and girls by relief staff has recently caught the attention of the public and international organizations due to the publicity of the West African case, the problem is long-standing and likely to continue, according to relief and human rights experts. In our examination of UNHCR and nongovernmental organizations' reports on refugee protection, we found numerous references to refugee women being exploited while in camps and recommendations for corrective actions (see app. II). However, it is only recently that action has been taken. Given this situation, relief and human rights experts, including senior UNHCR officials, emphasized the need for a continuing high-level focus on preventing exploitation by international organizations in such forums as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and

[12]All State Department funded nongovernmental organizations are required to incorporate the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's six core principles into their codes of conduct.

UNHCR's Executive Committee. They noted that international relief organizations are moving on to new emergencies and priorities and feared that the current attention to preventing sexual exploitation will wane before it becomes a part of organizations' institutional culture.

U.S. Government Funds International Organizations' Protection Activities

The U.S. government addresses the protection needs of refugees and other vulnerable populations primarily by providing funding to international organizations mandated to provide protection. In 2002, the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration provided UNHCR $265 million in budget support—nearly 28 percent of the organization's funding. Table 3 shows the amount of funds State contributed to international organizations mandated to provide protection.

Table 3: State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Contributions to UNHCR, United Nations Children's Fund, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, 1998-2002

Dollars in millions

Year	UNHCR	UNICEF	ICRC
1998	$268	$1	$101
1999	293	14	127
2000	261	18	124
2001	243	8	122
2002	265	11	124

Source: Department of State.

Note: The U.S. government's total contribution to UNICEF in 2002 was $110 million, which includes emergency and regular budget support.

The Department of State also provides grants to nongovernmental organizations to implement targeted protection activities to augment international organizations' protection efforts. In 2002, State provided $11.4 million to fund 35 discrete protection-related projects. During our fieldwork we observed several of these small grant projects (ranging from under $100,000 to $2 million) and found that they focused on protection gaps. For example,

- In Tanzania, a $1 million grant strengthened the government's capacity to maintain the civilian and humanitarian character of the camps in its territory. The funding enabled deployment of nearly 280 Tanzanian police to the border camps to maintain law and order and prevent and investigate crimes, including incidents of sexual and gender-based violence.

- In Sierra Leone, a $630,000 sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response program provided shelter for female-headed households, income-generation and leadership training for women and girls, gender sensitization training for host communities, and psychosocial counseling, medical care, and rehabilitation support to victims of sexual assault.

USAID is not directly involved in refugee protection programming; however, a number of its humanitarian and development assistance activities indirectly contribute to protection of refugees and other vulnerable persons. USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance provides non food humanitarian assistance, such as shelter, water sanitation, and food security, to persons caught up in crisis situations. The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance has also provided funding to transport civilians facing imminent threat of physical attack from insecure areas. USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives also indirectly contributes to protection by assisting countries in their transition from post-conflict situations to democracy. In countries such as Macedonia and Angola, project staff have worked with government leaders and populations to strengthen awareness of and respect for human rights, advocated for a stronger role for women in peace and reconciliation issues, and assisted ex-child soldiers in their reintegration into society.

U.S. Government Also Advocates Strong International Response

Apart from providing funding, the Department of State historically has played an active role advocating within the international community for increased attention and programmatic response to the plight of refugees and other vulnerable populations. According to relief experts and European government aid representatives, State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration is unique among donors in the number of staff resources devoted to managing refugee and humanitarian programs. In addition to approximately 80 Washington-based staff, the bureau has 5 refugee officers serving in liaison roles with international organizations in Geneva and Brussels, and another 19 overseas-based officers monitoring refugee situations. According to U.N. and relief officials with whom we spoke, the U.S. government is active in assessing humanitarian needs in the field and promoting an international response to them. A 2002 Overseas Development Institute report characterized U.S. government

staff as playing the role of pushing and prodding UNHCR and its operational partners in their programmatic responses.[13]

We reviewed U.S. government policy positions and statements concerning protection of refugees and other vulnerable persons since 1998 and found that the U.S. government has consistently pushed for a strong international response. For example, in early 2000, the U.S. Representative to the United Nations strongly criticized the international community for its failure to address the needs of internally displaced persons. More recently the U.S. government has argued for renewed support to UNHCR from the European Commission and its member states, whose recent cuts in funding contributed to UNHCR's budget crisis. As a member of UNHCR's governing body (known as the Executive Committee), the U.S. government has consistently called for increased and better response to refugee protection needs. Over the last several annual meetings, the U.S. government has

- encouraged UNHCR to ensure that protection is prioritized as its core function;
- pressed for continuous focus on the prevention of sexual exploitation;
- criticized staffing decisions by UNHCR management to cut posts in Africa; and
- called for an operations plan for the protection of women that would identify benchmarks to measure progress, create a monitoring plan, and establish a timetable for implementation of specific protection-related actions.

Conclusions

While international organizations have taken a number of steps in recent years to improve the protection situation of refugee women and girls, this population remains extremely vulnerable to sexual violence. Among the factors undermining the international community's efforts are the difficulty of protecting refugees caught up in conflict zones and recurring budgetary shortfalls caused by donors not fulfilling funding pledges. However, UNHCR's weak management of its workforce planning and

[13]Overseas Development Institute, *The 'bilateralization' of humanitarian response: trends in the financial, contractual and managerial environment of official humanitarian aid* (London, U.K.: Oct. 2002).

staffing system also significantly hinders protection of women and girls. A strategic workforce process that emphasizes a performance- and goal-oriented approach to human resource management could link the organization's mission and goals to its workforce staffing. There are insufficient numbers of protection staff in many high-risk countries, and UNHCR's assignment policy has resulted in extended vacancies at key protection posts. Furthermore, international relief workers who implement assistance programs and have daily contact with refugees have not received protection-related training, and many were unfamiliar with UNHCR's guidelines on the protection of women and children. Despite this, UNHCR's implementing partners and other international organizations have significant resources and capabilities that provide opportunities for partnering arrangements to fill protection gaps. In response to allegations reported at the end of 2001 of sexual abuse and exploitation of refugee women and girls by relief workers and peacekeepers, the United Nations and international organizations adopted codes of conduct stressing zero tolerance for such behavior and implemented training programs on gender-based violence for all national and international staff. In the four countries we visited, we found that relief workers and peacekeepers were acutely aware of the professional conduct expected of them, and refugees had access to mechanisms to report any new problems of sexual exploitation. Nonetheless, during our fieldwork we observed several new allegations of sexual misconduct by relief workers. High-level management must continue to focus on the issue of exploitation because extreme poverty in camps, limited monitoring by relief workers, and cultural attitudes of some camp staff continue to put women and girl refugees at risk.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To strengthen the international response to the protection needs of refugees, especially women and girls, we recommend that the Secretary of State work with member states to fundamentally reform UNHCR's staffing system so that it can more effectively fulfill its core protection mandate. Measures to accomplish this could include:

- creating a strategic workforce plan that systematically determines priority staff positions worldwide, based on the relative protection needs of refugees and realistic assumptions of available resources; and
- developing a staff assignment and rotation system that ensures difficult and chronically vacant duty stations are filled with employees with the requisite skills and experience, especially in Africa.

We also recommend that the Secretary of State work with other U.N. member states to

- expand training opportunities so that international and nongovernmental staff in positions of contact with refugee populations are fully versed in protection policies and practical protection techniques;
- encourage the development of protection partnering arrangements between and among U.N. agencies and nongovernmental organizations to better utilize and leverage program and staff resources currently operating with vulnerable populations; and
- ensure continued focus on efforts to prevent sexual exploitation of refugee women and girls by making the issue of exploitation an annual agenda item at refugee policy forums, including the U.N.'s Inter-Agency Standing Committee and UNHCR's Executive Committee meetings.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

State and UNHCR provided written comments on a draft of this report and we revised the report where it was necessary. (See app. III and IV for a reprint of State's and UNHCR's comments.) State endorsed the intent behind the report to improve the protection of refugee women and girls and said it would exercise its best efforts to implement the report's recommendations. State noted that a strategic workforce plan is key to developing a stronger, more flexible workforce that meets UNHCR's strategic needs. State also said it is essential that nongovernmental organizations receive training on protection issues as they are on the front lines and serve as protection "eyes and ears." In this regard, State plans to promote a more disciplined application of training in fiscal years 2004 and 2005.

UNHCR disagreed with our recommendation to fundamentally reform its staffing system, stating that it already has processes for allocating staff resources and that we did not take into account UNHCR's full range of responsibilities. UNHCR believes that improved instruments and capacity for placing staff and managing vacancies, along with more predictable donor support for established priorities, are sufficient elements for success. UNHCR did not indicate its position with regard to our three other recommendations—expanding protection training programs, developing protection partnering arrangements, and maintaining international organizations' focus on combating sexual exploitation of refugee women and girls. It did, however, describe activities in which it is

engaged pertaining to each recommendation. Where appropriate we provided some of this information in the report.

Regarding our recommendation on staffing, we do not dispute UNHCR's assertion that its mandate is not limited to the physical protection of refugees and that it has many responsibilities, including status determination and finding durable solutions for refugees. Our report demonstrates the inadequacies of physical protection for refugees and the lack of an overall strategic workforce plan that incorporates risk to refugees. We used the World Bank's database for measuring risk because it is an authoritative source of political stability and violence measurements across 160 countries in the absence of any such analysis by UNHCR. The problems associated with UNHCR's staffing system have long been documented in Executive Committee and public and internal UNHCR reports, including *The State of UNHCR's Staff (December 2000) and In the Service of Refugees: A Review of UNHCR's Policy and Practice on Rotations* (October 2001), and provide ample evidence of a staffing system failing to place the necessary number of people, with the requisite skills, where they are needed most. UNHCR may disagree with our use of the term "fundamental" when describing the reforms, but we have observed that half-steps or partial measures will not solve its staffing problems. According to the reports mentioned above, previous attempts at improving separate aspects of the staffing system have not achieved the desired results. At a minimum, UNHCR needs to create a strategic workforce plan that links the organization's objectives, resources, and staffing and systematically incorporates the physical protection of refugees. It also needs to devise a staff assignment and rotation system that fills vacant posts in high-risk countries, especially in Africa.

Regarding our recommendation to expand training opportunities, UNHCR stated that the report does not adequately reflect UNHCR's existing protection training programs and activities and provided detailed information on its training activities, including the Protection Learning Program. During the course of our evaluation, we reviewed a large number of protection training courses, modules, and materials and spoke with staff who participated in the various training programs, including the Protection Learning Program. By all accounts the protection training programs and materials are very useful in transmitting protection concepts and practical techniques to staff. (However, we were told that the 4 month and 10 month Protection Learning Programs are too time intensive for field staff.) Nevertheless, when meeting with UNHCR and nongovernmental organization staff at the camp level in each of our four case study countries, we found that a large majority of staff had received

no training on protection matters. This and our overall analysis of international organizations' training led to our recommendation to expand protection training.

UNHCR stated that our report does not reflect the extensive partnering arrangements in which it has engaged for decades and that it would welcome more extensive involvement with other agencies on the provision of services. It provided an outline of partnering arrangements between UNHCR and other U.N. agencies. When we examined UNHCR's list of arrangements and recent developments, we noted that they mainly involve high-level meetings to coordinate assistance activities. Our recommendation, however, is aimed at increasing the role of international and nongovernmental organizations in the protection of refugees. International organizations' daily interaction with refugee populations and their organizational capacity could be better utilized and leveraged to enhance refugee protection.

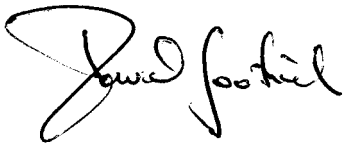
Regarding our recommendation on maintaining international organizations' focus on combating sexual exploitation, UNHCR made no comment on the substance of the recommendation but provided additional information on activities it has taken over the last 20 months. However, under Part B of its response, UNHCR stated that our summary of the U.N.'s Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) report was not an accurate reflection of the investigation's conclusion. UNHCR referred to the report's conclusion at paragraph 42 as a more accurate representation of the report and noted further that no allegations against any U.N. staff member could be substantiated. Our statement characterizing the OIOS report was taken from the fifth paragraph of the Executive Summary—the first substantive discussion of the report's findings, which states that "although the stories reported by the consultants could not be verified, the problem of sexual exploitation of refugees is real." We further note that 12 of the 17 recommendations in the OIOS report are directed to UNHCR. We are concerned that the principal message UNHCR has drawn from the OIOS report is that UNHCR staff are exonerated from wrongdoing. Our perspective, however, is that although U.N. staff members were exonerated from wrongdoing, the problem of sexual exploitation of refugees is significant.

UNHCR also provided a number of technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to interested congressional committees, the Secretary of State, the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.N. Secretary General, and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. We will also make copies available to other parties upon request. In addition, this report will be made available at no charge on the GAO Web site at http://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3149 or at gootnickd@gao.gov. Other GAO contacts and staff acknowledgments are listed in appendix V.

Sincerely yours,



David Gootnick
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

To assess the gaps and weaknesses in the current international system of protection of refugees and vulnerable persons, as well as the actions the U.N. and international organizations have taken in response to recent reports of relief workers' and peacekeepers' sexual exploitation of refugee women and girls, we interviewed officials and analyzed policy, program, and budgetary documents from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the U.N. Children's Fund. In our work with UNHCR, we met with officials from 19 different offices and examined extensive staffing data—including vacancies, duty station categories, and worldwide distribution of staff—and reviewed UNHCR staffing policies. We also met with officials and reviewed reports pertaining to humanitarian and refugee issues from numerous nongovernmental organizations and think tanks, including the International Rescue Committee, the United States Committee for Refugees, Refugees International, and InterAction.

To assess the steps the U.S. government takes to protect refugees and other vulnerable persons, we interviewed officials and analyzed policy, program, and budgetary documents from the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration; the Bureau for International Organizations; and the U.S. Missions to the United Nations in New York City and Geneva, Switzerland. When examining State's small grants program, we included only those projects that directly dealt with protection matters, such as conflict prevention and reconciliation, psychosocial assistance, sexual and gender-based violence prevention, and transportation of vulnerable populations. We also met with officials and analyzed program documents from the U.S. Agency for International Development's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Affairs, including the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and the Office of Transition Initiatives; and the Bureau for Global Programs.

We also performed fieldwork in our case study countries of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Thailand to assess the protection mechanisms in place for refugees and other vulnerable persons in refugee camps and their surrounding areas within those countries. These four nations face protracted refugee crises in which refugees and other vulnerable populations are under imminent threat of physical and sexual violence by warring parties, local communities, and other refugees, and were recommended as representative case study countries by State and think tank officials. In these countries, we observed first-hand the protection programs and activities conducted by U.N.

organizations, peacekeeping units, the Red Cross Movement, nongovernmental organizations, and the U.S. government. We also conducted numerous interviews with refugee-led camp management groups and individual women and girls to discuss the protection situation in the camps, as well as the mechanisms in place to report and address incidents of sexual and gender violence and exploitation.

Finally, we conducted an analysis of 22 UNHCR and nongovernmental organizations' evaluations and reports issued since 1990 to document the reported gaps in and recommendations to strengthen the international community's system of refugee protection. We also conducted a detailed analysis of the mandates and capabilities of the 13 current peacekeeping missions managed by the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

We performed our review from August 2002 through May 2003 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Appendix II: Catalogue of Refugee Protection Reports

We examined 22 reports published since 1990 by UNHCR and nongovernmental organizations that addressed problems related to refugee protection. We focused on whether the report cited physical violence, sexual abuse, or exploitation of refugee women and girls. Each column heading denotes the year that the report was published. We then identified eight discrete protection concerns that were commonly discussed in the reports and listed them in the left column. Finally, we analyzed the reports to determine whether a protection gap was identified or a recommendation was made to address the specific protection concern.

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	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Problem/context						
Physical violence	X	X	X	X		
Sexual abuse	X	X	X	X		X
Exploitation	X	X	X	X		
GAP/Recommendation						
Weak dissemination of policies, information between headquarters and the field						
Strengthen dissemination of policies, improve the flow of information between headquarters and the field				Recommendation	Recommendation	Recommendation
Lack of accountability	GAP	GAP				
Improve accountability					Recommendation	
Inadequate funding and/or resources for refugees						
Increase donor funding/availability of resources for refugees						
Monitoring/reporting mechanisms are ineffective		GAP				GAP
Improve monitoring/reporting mechanisms	Recommendation	Recommendation			Recommendation	Recommendation
Child/Women Specialist staff are underutilized or lacking						
Establish or strengthen child- and women-specialist staff positions		Recommendation			Recommendation	
Weak or nonexistent professional codes of conduct						
Establish or clarify professional codes of conduct						
Lack of staff training on women and child protection issues					GAP	GAP
Provide staff training on female and child protection issues	Recommendation	Recommendation	Recommendation	Recommendation	Recommendation	Recommendation
Lack of beneficiary participation in design, implementation, or distribution of services	GAP					
Enhance beneficiary participation in design, implementation, or distribution of services	Recommendation	Recommendation	Recommendation		Recommendation	

Source: GAO.

1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
	X			X		
	X			X	X	X
	X			X	X	X
	GAP		GAP Recommendation	Recommendation		GAP Recommendation
	GAP Recommendation		GAP Recommendation	Recommendation		GAP Recommendation
	GAP		GAP	Recommendation	GAP Recommendation	GAP Recommendation
	GAP		GAP Recommendation	Recommendation	GAP Recommendation	GAP Recommendation
	Recommendation				Recommendation	GAP Recommendation
				GAP Recommendation		Recommendation
	GAP Recommendation		GAP Recommendation		GAP Recommendation	GAP Recommendation
	Recommendation			Recommendation	Recommendation	Recommendation

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Appendix III: Comments from Department of State

United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

MAY 13 2003

Dear Ms. Westin:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE: Protecting Refugee Women and Girls Remain a Significant Problem," GAO-03-663, GAO Job Code 320141.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Margaret Pollack, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, Office of Multilateral Coordination and External Relations, at (202) 663-1075.

Sincerely,

Christopher B. Burnham
Assistant Secretary for
Resource Management and
Chief Financial Officer

Enclosure:

As stated.

cc: GAO/IAT - David Gootnick
State/OIG - Luther Atkins
State/PRM - Arthur Dewey
State/H - Paul Kelly

Ms. Susan S. Westin,
Managing Director,
International Affairs and Trade,
U.S. General Accounting Office.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE: Protecting Refugee Women and Girls Remains a Significant Problem
(GAO-03-663, GAO Code 320141)

We appreciate the chance to review the Report "Protecting Refugee Women and Girls Remains a Significant Problem". The protection of refugee women and refugee children has been and remains a core priority for the Department of State.

We strongly endorse the intent behind the report to improve the protection of refugee women and girls. The allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse that surfaced in 2002 provided an added impetus to the efforts already underway to address more effectively violence against refugee women and children. The Report accurately reflects the reality of efforts to date. UNHCR has indeed made major efforts to improve the protection of refugee women and children over the past years, but shortfalls in funding, lack of prioritization, and a less than effective staff management system have hampered protection efforts.

We note that UNHCR has recently announced its intention to reform and restructure its staffing systems. Its intent is to develop a stronger, more flexible workforce with better gender balance, and guided by better ground rules. We will follow closely the development and implementation of this reform (as recommended in the Report), will work with UNHCR and other member states to address the inadequacies of the present system, and ensure that the new approach meets the strategic needs of the organization. We concur with the report's finding that a strategic workforce plan is key to making progress.

The recommendation on expanding protection training to the staff of international and non-governmental organizations and developing protection partnership arrangements reinforces the efforts we have already undertaken. The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration strongly supports the "Protection Surge Capacity Project" and the "Reach Out Project." We firmly believe that whatever the job description that every humanitarian worker - international organization or non-governmental organization - needs, in effect, to be a "protection"

officer. We acknowledge and support UNHCR's premier protection mandate and its systemic coordination role for protection. Non-governmental organizations are also on the front lines and must also serve as our protection "eyes and ears." It is, therefore, essential that they too be provided with training on protection issues. We will plan and promote more disciplined application of this training in support of our critical protection activities in FY 04 and FY 05.

The Department of State is committed to ensuring continued focus on efforts to prevent sexual exploitation of refugee women and girls in all refugee policy forums as well as the UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee. We continue to lead a group within the context of UNHCR's Executive Committee on sexual exploitation and are firmly committed to ensuring that all organizations funded by PRM have endorsed the IASC's six principles into their Codes of Conduct.

Finally, we would like to express appreciation for the acknowledgement of the Department of State's efforts to advocate and program for better protection of refugee women and girls. We insist on linking assistance with protection as a central tenet of our funding practices on behalf of all refugees - but especially women and girls. We remain relentless in this linkage, and in implementing the recommendation of this very useful report.

Appendix IV: Comments from UNHCR

UNHCR Response to May 2003 Draft Report, "HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, Protecting Refugee Women and Girls Remains a Significant Problem"

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is pleased to review the draft report, "HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, Protecting Women and Girls Remains a Significant Problem" and to have the opportunity to provide comments.

The General Accounting Office was requested to look into three aspects of UNHCR's work in providing protection and assistance to refugees and other vulnerable populations, in particular that of refugee women and girls. This was – in part - prompted by concerns raised in 2001 as a result of reports of alleged sexual exploitation of refugees by relief workers. Although an intensive investigation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services of the United Nations concluded that no UNHCR staff were implicated, the Office of the High Commissioner continues to make efforts to secure the protection of this particularly vulnerable population.

The three objectives of the GAO investigation team were:

- To assess efforts by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to protect refugees, especially with regard to women and girls;
- Determine what steps UN and international organizations have taken to prevent sexual exploitation of refugee women by humanitarian workers, and
- To describe US government efforts to support adequate protection for vulnerable populations/

UNHCR is grateful for the professional and objective efforts of the GAO in meeting with a number of our staff both at Headquarters and in the field, and in observing our programmes in four countries over a three week period. In its conclusions, the GAO team makes four recommendations. In reviewing the draft report, UNHCR would like to offer additional commentary to each recommendation **(Part A)** and to provide specific corrections **(Part B)**. In addition, as supporting documentation not received by the GAO team, UNHCR is forwarding a number of technical documents, which we respectfully request be considered as an integral part of our comments.

(A) UNHCR Commentary

Recommendation One: ... that the Secretary of State work with member states to fundamentally reform UNHCR's staffing system so it can more effectively fulfil its core protection mandate.

UNHCR appreciates the time the GAO spent to analyze aspects of UNHCR operations and to provide suggestions for improvements. However, it would seem that at least part of the basis for this recommendation comes from use of non-UNHCR indicators of political stability and violence in certain countries, which are described as "risk" factors that are to suggest relatively higher need for protection staff in these countries. This is then used to suggest that there are anomalies in the current

placement of UNHCR protection staff throughout the world, and the conclusion that these anomolies would be addressed by the development of a strategy.

We believe that further information and analysis will be helpful in understanding the actual situation UNHCR is in with regard to staffing strategies. We think that this information would modify the recommendation, which implies that UNHCR has no overall staffing strategy for protection, and will put the comments of the DHC and the HRM staff into perspective.

Foremost, UNHCR's mandate is not limited to the "physical" protection of refugees. UNHCR's responsibilities are much broader and include the full range of human rights . UNHCR also is required, *inter alia,* to promote ratification by States of international instruments to protect refugees; assist governmental efforts to promote voluntary repatriation or assimilation within new countries; promote the admission of refugees into countries and their access to procedures.

Placement of Protection Staff: Page 9 of the report, [Background Section] notes that the GAO focused on the "physical dimensions of protecting refugees, especially women and girls.". However, in some of the analysis regarding workforce strategy, the Report compares protection staffing for countries in which other than physical protection activities are underway. While the report notes that the bulk of the work done in Europe and Western countries is legal protection, and not physical, it still makes the comparison for certain European countries, which is not entirely valid, since it compares two fundamentally different aspects of carrying out the protection mandate, and depending on the situation, could even be comparing jobs with very different skill requirements.

UNHCR has protection staff in Europe to interact with governments, to promote adoption of legal instruments for protection, and development of asylum systems. This is important work, often requiring specific skill sets (legal background), and should not be compared to physical protection responsibilities, some of which have legal backgrounds, and some of which do not. With regard to Europe, it is important to note that fully one-third of the protection staff in Europe are working in Turkey and the Russian Federation, where UNHCR has particular responsibilities for refugee status determination and resettlement.

Conversely, the data does not capture, for purposes of noting the staff devoted to physical protection, the number of staff who are devoted to this activity in large refugee population countries. The data should include Field Officers, registration staff, community services officers. etc.

How Protection Resources Are Determined: While the interviews with the DHC and the Director of Human Resources noted that there was not a specific document which in one place linked objectives to budget resources, and thus to posts, one should not conclude that there is a lack of process for setting budget priorities, and allocating resources. In the Annual Programme Review, held in the Spring as a precursor exercise to development of the following year's budgets, overall workforce requirements are assessed. The annual Programme Review is supplemented by periodic reviews of staffing in particular situations during the course of the year. In fact, the report notes a specific assessment on needs for protection staff in Africa.

However, in the Programme Review process, the actual requirements are well beyond anticipated contributions for a given period, and thus not all staffing proposals can be favourably considered. It should be noted that UNHCR takes the issue of sufficient numbers of protection staff seriously, so that between 2002, and 2003, in a time of significant budget shortfalls, there was an overall increase in the number of "officially designated" protection staff from 621 to 700. Within these total numbers there has also been a reallocation of resources from Southeastern Europe to other regions. When we inslude the staff posted for Supplementary programmes in Afghanistan, Angola and West Africa, the staffing component in 2003 exceeded 1100 positions.

Efficiency of the Human Resources System: The report highlights the fact that there have been vacancies in hardship duty stations, and that the UNHCR rotation policy creates certain inefficiencies in maintaining continuously filled protection posts. While UNHCR confirms that this is an issue that needs addressing, the extent of the problem needs to be put into perspective. In this regard, we would like to note that the vacancy statistics in the report include (1) posts which are advertised in anticipation of the future rotation of a staff member, but in which a current incumbent is still serving, and (2) those which are actually vacant and without an incumbent. It is also important to note that more than 80% of staff in between assignments are deployed on temporary missions or assignments, or continue at their post until their successor arrives in a duty station. The Office limits the number of vacancies without even a temporary incumbent to the absolute minimum.

While some progress has been made in reducing the volume and duration of elapsed vacancies, there is a need to revise postings policies and rotation policies to make even further progress. A new set of rotation and postings guidelines is under discussion in staff/management advisory bodies at the current time. These guidelines introduce such reforms as two principal end dates for assignments, which will help improve workforce planning, as well. This measure will increase the number and diversity of posts advertised twice a year, as well as the number and diversity of who will apply. Benchmarks will be set to gauge the efficiency of vacancy management, especially as concerns the deployment of protection staff in field duty stations.

In conclusion, we do not believe that the need is for "fundamental" reform of the staffing system, but rather improved instruments and capacity for assessing placement of staff, as well as for vacancy management. In addition, more predictable donor support for established priorities is a key element of the success of these improvements.

Recommendation Two: ...that the Secretary of State work with other UN member states to expand training opportunities so international and non-governmental staff in positions of contact with refugee populations are fully versed in protection policies and practical protection techniques.

UNHCR provides its staff and partners with a host of training opportunities. Staff development activities account for roughly two percent of staff costs. For example, in 2002 3863 UNHCR staff and 1,178 partners participated in some form of training event. The numbers are similar for 2001 and 2000.

Specialised training in protection and gender issues is also widely available. As an example, the Action for the Rights of Children (ARC) is an inter-agency training and capacity building initiative with the International Save the Children Alliance, UNICEF and the High Commissioner for Human Rights. It is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and targets all persons under 18 years with a comprehensive programme that includes resources such as International Legal Standards, Abuse and Exploitation, Separated Children, Child Soldiers etc. ARC training, moreover, forms an integral element of the interventions of the emergency stand-by roster deployments from Save the Children e.g. in Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire etc.

Throughout the GAO report it is noted that that the organisation provides "little practical training for most UNHCR and implementing partners staff on protection concepts and techniques,"[1] including on how to identify sexual violence cases.[2] It further recommends the expansion of protection training programmes.[3]

The recommendation to expand protection training is certainly welcome, however, the report does not adequately reflect UNHCR's existing protection training programmes and activities. The only training material referred to in the GAO's draft report is the NGO Field Guide (which is not in fact a training manual) and the 1995 training module on Human Rights and Refugee Protection. It is regrettable that the team was unable to meet with Senior Protection Training Officer.

UNHCR has made significant efforts to provide UNHCR staff with comprehensive and practical training on protection, and to provide training which specifically aims at enhancing staff capacity to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). These include the ten-month **Protection Learning Programme (PLP)** for UNHCR staff and the shorter four-month **Thematic Protection Learning Programmes (TPLP)** for UNHCR senior managers.

PLP aims at creating a common understanding amongst all staff of UNHCR's mandate for international protection and related international standards, as well as enhancing staff capacity to ensure these standards are applied in UNHCR's operations. Since the programme was first piloted in August 2000, **approximately 500 staff members in over 85 countries have participated in or are participating in this programme.** More recently, the PLP has been complemented by two **TPLPs** for senior managers: **Protection Strategies in the Context of Armed Conflict,** and **Protection Strategies in the Context of Broader Migration Movements.** As outlined below, enhancing the capacity of staff to and to ensure an appropriate protection response to SGBV features significantly in all of the protection learning programmes.

The **PLP** is currently open to **all professional staff** (including UNVs, JPOs and national professional staff) and **senior general services staff** (G5 and above) working in support of protection. Due to resource constraints, the length of the programme, and strong internal demand, this programme is primarily for UNHCR staff, although a few NGO partners are currently participating in the programme on a pilot basis.

[1] Executive Summary. See also pp. 5, 9, pp.22 – 23, 34
[2] Draft Report, p. 9
[3] Draft Report, p.6, 35

At the end of 2002, DIP launched two Thematic Protection Learning Programmes (TPLPs) for senior staff, each of which includes a brief **self-study phase** (6 weeks), a highly participatory **workshop** (5 days) and **a post -workshop exercise** (8 weeks). These programmes are:

- **Protection Strategies in Areas Affected by Armed Conflict:** to support field operations in comprehensively protecting persons of concern to UNHCR in situations of armed conflict (non-international or international) as well as post-conflict scenarios.

- **Protection Strategies in the Context of Broader Migration Movements:** to assist senior managers develop strategies and outline UNHCR's role in relation to broader migration movements, particularly to ensure that refugee concerns are met.

The TPLPs are open to all Senior Protection Officers, as well as Representatives, Deputy Representatives and Heads of Offices who have a significant understanding of UNHCR's protection mandate and related international legal principles. Approximately 60 senior managers, who spearhead UNHCR's operations worldwide, are currently participating in the two pilot programmes.

The primary goals of the TPLPs are:

- To assist participants to **continually update their knowledge base** on the developments in the field of refugee law, international human rights and international humanitarian law, with a view to enhance their capacity in applying this knowledge towards the protection of persons of concern to UNHCR.
- To assist participants in appreciating the **roles of other international agencies and NGOs** (such as ICRC, OCHA, ILO, IOM, UNICEF, ICC the *ad hoc* Criminal Tribunals and human rights treaty monitoring bodies) that support the work of UNHCR, and examine UNHCR's relationship with these agencies, with the view to jointly improve the situation of refugees and others of concern to the organization.
- To support efforts made by participants towards **operationalizing the Agenda for Protection** and related policy guidelines by assisting in the construction, development and implementation of protection strategies on the specific themes offered by the TPLP.
- To enhance the participants' understanding of **UNHCR's mandate in relation to the protection of refugee women and children** and mainstream gender equality. In particular, to assist participants in developing manageable protection systems to protect refugee women and children.
- For participants to advise DIP on the **practical application of various protection policies** and standards in the field, and identify protection gaps that requires further support in relation to the specific thematic issues.

Recommendation three: Encourage the development of protection partnering arrangements between and among UN agencies and nongovernmental

organizations to better utilize and leverage program and staff resources currently operating with vulnerable populations.

The GAO report does not reflect the extensive partnering arrangements in which UNHCR has been engaged for decades, and which it continues to develop and refine. On a bilateral basis, UNHCR has partnership agreements with WFP, UNICEF and other specialized agencies such as UNIFEM, Habitat and UNEP as the chart below illustrates. UNHCR would welcome more extensive involvement of other UN agencies in the direct provision of services such as education and health to refugees. Having said this, we do recognize the usefulness of increasing the use of and capacity of our partners to assist us in our work.

NGOs have been the implementation partner for most of these services in camp and in urban settings and as such receives a large percentage of UNHCR's annual budget. NGOs often have the first point of contact with refugee populations and through their direct management of camps in health, community services, income generation, education and other related protection programmes. The ICMC resettlement deployment scheme, which makes available staff to UNHCR for refugee status determination, are being expanded. The Surge project with IRC helps the Office to provide additional protection staff in emergency situations. Stand by arrangements with Save the Children (Sweden and Norway) have also proven to be very successful.

Below, you will find an outline of the various partnership arrangements between UNHCR and other UN agencies.

PARTNERSHIP UPDATE, January 2003
(UN and International Organisations)

Agency	Strategic Initiatives	Recent Developments
ICRC	• Annual High-Level meeting • Consultations on Iraq coordination • Working guide for field staff on cooperation	• High-Level Meeting (June 2002) • Joint meeting ICRC / DIP[1] / CASWANAME[2] / RBE[3] on Iraq (11 October 2002) • High Commissioner met ICRC President on 21 October 2002 on Colombia and Iraq • Joint meeting ICRC / DIP / CASWANAME / RBE on Iraq (2 December 2002) • Joint meeting ICRC / DIP / CASWANAME / RBE on Iran (20 December 2002)

[1] Department of International Protection

[2] Central Asia, South West Asia, North Africa and the Middle East
[3] Regional Bureau for Europe

IFRC	• Framework agreement on Iraq	• Joint meeting DOS[4] / ESS [5]/ SIOS[6] / IFRC[7] on 8 January 2003
ILO[9]	Joint Working Group	• Joint training manual issued on micro-finance in conflict-affected communities • ILO intervened during general debate on UNHCR report to the Third Committee of 57th session of GA: "converging interests with UNHCR in several areas; need to elaborate coherent policy addressing all aspects of international movement of people." • Meeting of joint wg held on 9 December to further discuss the draft of a "Joint UNHCR-ILO project: Rapid Deployment of Livelihood Experts to Support UNHCR Field Operations".
IOM	High-Level Meeting and follow-up initiatives	• High-Level Meeting held on 1 November. • Meetings held with IOM[10] and DIP on managing migration matrix (Follow-up to the High-level meeting). • Draft joint letter on "returns" under review (Follow-up to the High-level meeting). • Re-issuance of Guidance Note of May 2000 on transportation sector agreed by IOM and UNHCR (Follow-up to the High-level meeting). • IOM intervened during general debate on UNHCR report to the Third Committee of the General Assembly A 57th session: "IOM and UNHCR to engage in a regular dialogue Cooperation with UNHCR, flexibility and a balanced approach essential to addressing complex migration flows. • UNHCR participated in and read a statement at the 84th session of IOM's Council session (2-4 December).
UNDP[11]	• UNDG[12] • High Commissioner's 4 Rs (repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitatin and reconstruction) , transition issues	• UNDP statement at UNHCR Executive Committee • SIOS to be added to UNDG mailing list for UNCountry Teams.
UNFPA		• Preliminary meeting between DOS and SIOS held on 20 November to discuss partnership. DOS to report back on possible bilateral initiatives to include in March 2003 coordination note for Standing Committee.

[4] Department of Operational Support
[5] Emergency and Staff Safety
[6] Secretariat and Inter-Organization Section
[7] International Federaton of the Red Cross
[9] International Labor Organization
[10] international Organization for Migration
[11] United Nations Development Programme
[12] UN Development Group

UN-Habitat	Partnership	• Letter by UN-Habitat Executive Director to the HC calling for strengthened partnership in pursuing the MDGs.
UNICEF	• Joint Working Group established • Revision of MOU • High-Level meeting	• Follow-up joint meeting at the end of October on MOU • LOU signed in Kabul on 18 November setting out the commitment of both agencies to cooperate in the areas of high returns and/or IDPs presence. • Follow-up joint meetings on MOU held on 1 and 27 November.
World Bank	4 Rs, transition	• HC met President of WB J. Wolfensohn and Vice-President, M. Karlsson on 10 October 2002 to discuss 4 Rs
WFP	MOU	• MOU signed on 9 July 2002 • Pilot countries under review (Pakistan, S. Leone, Uganda agreed, two more still to be designated)
WHO		• Preliminary meeting between DOS and SIOS held on 20 November to discuss partnership. DOS to report back on possible bilateral initiatives to include in March 2003 coordination note for Standing Committee.

Recommendation four; Ensure continued focus on efforts to prevent sexual exploitation of refugee women and girls by making the issue of exploitation an annual agenda item at refugee policy forums, including the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee and UNHCR's Executive Committee meetings.

As long as refugees continue to live in situations of severe poverty and deprivation, women and girl refugees will be vulnerable to exploitation. UNHCR can ensure that its staff and its partners treat all refugees with the dignity and respect for their rights to which they are entitled. UNHCR can not alleviate the conditions in which many refugees are forced to exist.

UNHCR has been highly engaged with this issue in the past 20 months, including through the IASC and in on-going informal consultations with the Executive Committee. Internally, the office has also made a number of efforts. A Code of Conduct was enacted and as of March 2003 over 4000 staff had participated in specific training on the Code and its implications for staff and partners. Moreover, ---- - international and national staff members have signed the Code at every level of the organisation. The Office has revised our implementing partners which now require specific adherence to the principles contained in the HCR and IASC codes of conduct.

Enhanced attention has been placed on updating and developing new policy and training tools and elaborating effective strategies for dissemination of these tools to front-line staff in the field. The 1995 Sexual Violence Guidelines has undergone a process of revision, and new Guidelines on Prevention and Response to SGBV will be published in May 2003. Part of the dissemination strategy for the new Guidelines emphasises a series of regional and country-specific training workshops for staff

members from different operations around the world in order to introduce the contents of the Guidelines to them.

A draft basic awareness-raising manual on protection of women and children's rights and prevention of sexual exploitation, was developed by UNHCR staff in West Africa following the allegations made of sexual exploitation of refugees by humanitarian workers. The draft manual has been used to sensitise all levels of staff and is being used in other regions beyond West Africa as a tool for raising awareness on the protection of women and children's rights and the promotion of gender equality.

An important component of ongoing training activities to enhance protection of refugee women and girls is the strong emphasis being placed on the participation of male staff of UNHCR and implementing partners in such fora. This approach is being stressed as a means of broadening responsibility for addressing gender issues within UNHCR operations.

UNHCR has placed some attention on the task of broadening accountability within the Organisation and among partners organisations. Three recent evaluations undertaken to assess progress on protection of refugee women, children and community services, all underlined the need to enhance accountability mechanisms in this regard, and also recommended the introduction of benchmarks to measure accountability in relation to programming-protection operations as well as individual staff performance.

UNHCR has also taken steps to strengthen its own investigative capacity in order to provide timely and effective response to any allegations of sexual abuse of beneficiaries by humanitarian workers.

Greater attention is being placed on increasing the numbers of new female staff recruited to front-line positions in various operations. While the recruitment of female staff, *per se,* is not the solution to ending sexual exploitation of refugees, it is recognised that this process will positively impact on the work environment and will also facilitate increased confidence on the part of refugee women to share their concerns with the female staff.

A greater degree of collaboration is being stressed between protection officers and community services and field officers towards the goal of enhancing protection of refugee women and girls. This approach aims to encourage the establishment of multi-sectoral teams to jointly work on addressing protection problems facing refugee women and girls, and draws on similar efforts initiated previously in Turkey and the Americas region.

In many country operations in Africa, Asia and Europe, action plans to prevent and respond to SGBV have been developed by UNHCR field offices. These action plans have been the result of consultations with beneficiary communities and partner agencies, and are serving to guide efforts to mainstream SGBV prevention activities within each of the operational sectors. The mainstreaming of SGBV issues is being strongly encouraged so as to avoid the danger of establishing stand-alone programmes to prevent abuse and exploitation, which are not integrally linked to the mainstream programmes of UNHCR, and which may therefore result in a limited impact.

Although an effective mechanism for reporting on cases of SGBV in different country operations is still required in order to assess trends and ensure more targeted support for prevention and response activities, some limited progress has been made to date in this regard within a number of operations. In Tanzania, a monthly SGBV reporting form has been developed, and is being used to capture general information on levels and types of reported cases. This form has been shared with a number of other operations, some of which like Nepal, have adapted the form for use in capturing their own reporting on such cases.

As part of ongoing efforts to improve field monitoring and reporting on the High Commissioner's 5 Commitments, the Refugee Women and Gender Equality Unit is working in partnership with the Evaluation Unit to develop monitoring indicators to guide field reporting.

Some progress has also been made to date on implementation of the individual commitments, including significant changes to the registration process to support the principle of individual registration. In several operations including Guinea, Kenya, Georgia, Yemen and Ecuador, it has been possible to reach agreement with the government on the principle of issuance of photo identity cards to all adult men and women. With regard to ration cards, a new practice has been introduced of including names of all adults in the family on the family's ration card, rather than a single 'head of family' as was the practice in the past.

As regards the Commitment to provide sanitary materials to women and girls, a budget line for sanitary materials has been established to enable programme staff to allocate funds and protect the allocation more easily. Efforts are also being made strengthen equal female representation on camp leadership structures by investing in capacity-building activities for refugee women elected to camp adminstration committees.

Under-reporting of cases by victims/survivors continues to pose challenges to efforts aimed at addressing the problem of sexual exploitation. In some cases, a long-standing culture of impunity, absence of mechanisms for ensuring confidentiality, the "settlement" of such cases between family members of the victim and those of the perpetrator and the long process involved in seeking legal redress, are all factors that continue to impede victim reporting

A further challenge which is being addressed through some of the ongoing training initiatives, concerns the need to broaden the conceptual framework for addressing SGBV, in such a way that the issue is situated within the wider goal of promoting gender equality. This is necessary to ensure that the starting point for UNHCR's interventions address the root causes of SGBV, by working to reverse the negative attitudes, practices and institutional barriers that erode and undermine the ability of refugee women and girls to access their equal rights, and which leaves them vulnerable to various forms of violence.

B. UNHCR Corrections to the Report

UNHCR would like to correct the following factual errors:

1. Page 5 Para 2

   Quote:" Despite these efforts, international organizations still face continuing sexual exploitation of refugees by relief workers. Although the in-depth investigation could not verify specific charges of abuse, it found other cases and concluded that sexual exploitation by relief workers was a real and significant problem."

   This is not an absolutely accurate reflection of the conclusions of the OIOS investigation. The OIOS report states in its conclusion at para 42:
   "The Investigation Team found, however, that the impression given in the consultants' report that sexual exploitation by aid workers, in particular sex for services, was widespread is misleading and untrue. None of the specific stories cited against aid workers named in the consultants' report could be confirmed despite a six-month-long effort by the Investigation Team - for reasons previously cited in this report. Furthermore, refugees and aid workers interviewed in the course of the investigation were unanimous in stating that sexual exploitation in the context used in the consultants' report is not widespread. The relationships perceived as exploitative by the consultants were in most cases relationships between refugees."
   Furthermore the OIOS investigation found that of the 43 other cases brought to their attention , 10 could be substantiated . Of these, 8 involved NGO staff, one a UNV and one a peace keeper. .No allegation against any UN staff member could be substantiated.(para 6 summary)

2. Page 10

   Reference made to existing Guidelines and tools available for training UNHCR staff should also mention that the 1995 Sexual Guidelines have been revised to ***Guidelines on Prevention and Response to SGBV.*** Two additional training tools also worthy of mention here are: The People-Oriented Planning tool (POP), which is used to build staff capacity for undertaking gender analysis, and the Action for the Rights of the Child (ARC) training toolkit.

3. Page 15

   Reference to the role of protection and community services staff cites protection staff as having primary responsibility for protection of refugees. This should perhaps be amended to stress a ***shared responsibility*** between protection, community services and field officers for overseeing protection needs of refugees, in line with the approach being promoted within the Organisation.

4. Page 13, last paragraph

   "The approved budget is based on pledges of support from executive committee members themselves and other donor governments. However, in recent years donor governments have failed to meet their funding commitments."

   This statement is misleading. It implies that when UNHCR's budget is approved, it is underwritten by pledges equal to the amount of the budget approved. This is not the case. UNHCR's budget is approved with the

assumption that funds will be made available by donors. Recent budgets have been developed in the context of "fundable" levels, but as the report points out, there continues reference to funds being made available.

5. Page 21, last paragraph

A distinction should be made between EPRS deployments, which can not last for more than 2 months maximum, and other deployments (often SIBA) which can extend up to 6 months or more.

The point that this paragraph is trying to make is not clear. It criticises short-term emergency deployments but has nothing to propose instead. Also it does not take into account the fact that at the beginning of an emergency situation posts do not exists to which staff could be quickly assigned. Emergency deployments are therefore inevitable.

6. Page 24, paragraphs 2 and 3

Partnership opportunities as proposed by the GAO should be seized whenever possible but there are nevertheless also some drawbacks of which we should be aware.

- Only some NGOs have independent financial resources, thus only they and not local NGOs could increase UNHCR capacity. This is not always in our interest. Local NGOs and government need to take on certain responsibilities directly and not merely watch others who have come from outside do it for them.
- International NGOs depend for the most part on the same sources of funds as UNHCR and the rest of the humanitarian world. Increased capacity will only be achieved if resources brought by NGOs are additional to those usually provided to UNHCR and not merely funds recycled through NGOs rather than through us.

7. Page 24, last sentence of paragraph 2

UNHCR's Emergency and Security Service has redrafted the job descriptions of UNHCR Security Officers to make them responsible not only for staff security but to give them responsibility for refugee security.

8. Page 30

Some UNHCR staff working in Nepal have been suspended.

Appendix V: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contacts

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