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STATEMENT OF THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE HOLY SEE AT THE 48th MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE UNHCR (GENEVA, 22 JUNE 2010)

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Here below the statement by H.E. Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the 48th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of the UNHCR (Geneva, 22 June 2010):

Mr. Chairman,

The Holy See Delegation supports the intense effort made by the UNHCR to call attention to, to refine and to advance the priority of extending increased protection to refugees and persons of concern. Though it appears like a counter-trend to current political sensitivities, it is a timely response, since conflicts have been displacing more people and forced return of potential asylum seekers gives evidence of a difficult political environment for uprooted people. The latest statistics indicate that involuntary movement of persons around the globe continues. The number of people of concern to the UNHCR has grown to 43.3 million worldwide in 2009, the highest number since the 1990s. A sign of current instability and change, for example, is the number of IDPs in Colombia that has reached 4.9 million at the end of 2009 – a record high – and the new huge wave of refugees from Kirghizstan. Confronted with such figures, and the suffering of persons hiding behind the statistics, the right course of action is continuing the enlargement process of categories of people to be protected as the international community has progressively included them in the mandate of the UNHCR. Among the new categories for which more targeted provisions can be developed, mixed flows, internally displaced and urban refugees have rightly been pointed out. The increasing attention given to internally displaced persons moves in this positive general direction. Now that over fifty percent of the world population lives in urban areas, it is not surprising that refugees follow the same trend and move to cities in greater number, creating specific challenges for their protection from registration of their children at birth to avoid statelessness to employment possibilities, access to education and legal residence. Today's 'boat people' from Africa, Asia and elsewhere cannot simply be towed back to the port of origin of their journey as if distancing their presence would offer a real solution. Similarly, the automatic resort to detaining potential refugees and asylum seekers – often in appalling conditions – is inappropriate.

A combination of safety, respect of human dignity and human rights is necessary. To sustain such a combination, a renewed effort is required to prevent forced displacement before it starts and to anticipate events that could trigger protection issues. Equally important is maintaining a strong international consensus on the protection regime which is founded on international law at a time when non-state actors play outside its rules. In the end, protection is an ethical commitment that underlies and serves as a foundation for effective action. The responsibility we owe to vulnerable groups of our one human family prompts adequate answers to remedy the violation of rights and to assist the victims. The same sense of coherence needs to drive States in translating into appropriate protection services the commitments they have assumed. In the final analysis one cannot say that a state has met its responsibility when persons of concern are left in a state of destitution. It certainly is a commendable and encouraging sign that, notwithstanding the enormous difficulty that the current financial and economic crises have brought about, contributions provided for refugees have increased. A culture of friendly human interaction in our globalized world can nourish further solidarity.

The role of media in presenting a positive perception of forcibly displaced persons, a fair indication of the real causes of this displacement and a sound and realistic sense of solidarity can counteract disinformation and the political manipulation of fears of unknown cultures and people. It can show instead that refugees and forcibly displaced people have talents and capacities to offer and show as well the advantages of building together a common future.

Mr. Chairman,

In conclusion, allow me to quote the words of Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of World Refugee Day 2010: "Refugees wish to find welcome and to be recognized in their dignity and their fundamental rights; at the same time, they intend to offer their contribution to the society that accepts them. We pray that, in a just reciprocity, an adequate response be given to such expectations and that the refugees show the respect they feel for the identity of the receiving community."

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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