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Address by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Cover Page Footnote

International Law; Commercial Law; Law

Address by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was set up by the UN General Assembly to assist displaced persons throughout Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. Starting 1 January 1951—originally for only three years, but with successive five-year extensions thereafter currently reaching to 31 December 1998—UNHCR has been responsible for protecting refugees and promoting lasting solutions to their problems. UNHCR's founding Statute makes it clear that the organization's work is humanitarian and entirely non-political. According to its Statute, UNHCR is competent to assist: *Any person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear or for reasons other than personal convenience, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear or for reasons other than personal convenience, is unwilling to return to it."*

At the heart of UNHCR's efforts to carry out relief activities and find lasting solutions to the plight of refugees is refugee protection. In performing its international protection function, UNHCR tries to assure that refugees are granted asylum and a legal status which takes into account their particular situation and needs. Crucial to this status is the internationally-accepted principle of *non-refoulement*, which prohibits the expulsion or forcible return of refugees to a country where they may have reason to fear persecution or other threats to their lives, liberty or security. Based on the ever-changing socioeconomic and political circumstances in States, these protection concepts face pressure and likewise evolve. Accordingly, scholarly discussion and research are critical tools in assessing changes related to refugee law and in working to maintain the integrity of the international standards applied to refugees.

To support determination of refugee status in individual cases as well as research and discussion of refugee law, UNHCR has developed databases, known collectively as REFworld, housing international and national refugee law, UNHCR policy materials and extensive country of origin information. Caselaw and legislation related to refugees make up one part of the legal databases. Based on its expanding international emphasis as well as its clear commitment to UNHCR's mandate, the University of North Carolina School of Law has been chosen to participate in the REFworld Database Support Network. In this role, UNC law students pursuing a career in refugee law abstract selected U.S. refugee caselaw to be included in the UNHCR Databases and made available for worldwide REFworld users.

We at UNHCR look forward to a lasting relationship with the University of North Carolina School of Law.

SEAN KEPLER
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

