

have also occurred in the past year, including hurricanes in the Caribbean, locusts in the Sahel and the tsunami in the Indian Ocean.

150. The outpouring of international support for relief and recovery operations in countries affected by the tsunami has been both generous and unprecedented in its scale. Sadly, many other crises continue to suffer from neglect. By December 2004, a year after the devastating earthquake in Bam, Islamic Republic of Iran, only 11 per cent of pledged funds had been disbursed. In Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia, funding continues to be well below what is required, even after considerable effort by United Nations agencies and their partners to better assess needs and prioritize activities. Once again, I call upon the donor community to ensure that funding is provided more consistently across humanitarian emergencies and that it better address the needs of all sectors, including in the area of protection.

#### **Protecting and assisting refugees and displaced populations**

151. The consolidation of peace in a number of conflicts during 2004 encouraged the return of refugees and displaced people to their homes. More than 1.5 million refugees were aided in their voluntary repatriation last year, 35 per cent more than in 2003. UNHCR estimates that in 2004 the global number of refugees dropped to 9.2 million, its lowest level since 1980. That number does not, however, include an estimated 4.2 million Palestine refugees, who continued to receive assistance and services from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), among them an estimated 1.6 million living in the occupied Palestinian territory. In spite of the decrease in the number of refugees, the total population of concern to UNHCR increased from 17 million people at the end of 2003 to 19.2 million by the end of 2004. The latter figure includes 4.8 million internally displaced persons, a fraction of the worldwide total. Globally an estimated 25 million people have been displaced internally because of conflict or human rights violations.

152. The largest number of returns last year occurred in Afghanistan with more than 940,000 refugees alone returning home. Economic improvements and successful elections reinforced interventions to ensure the reintegration of more than 4.1 million refugees and internally displaced people who had returned home since the end of 2001. Mine-action programmes continue to facilitate return and the delivery of assistance by opening vital routes into communities at risk. Using a community-based approach to ensure

local support, UNICEF has been addressing the particular needs of returning child soldiers. More than 4,000 underage soldiers have been demobilized and reintegrated into their communities through programmes combining informal education, skills training and psycho-social support. Despite progress, however, an estimated 160,000 people remain displaced in Afghanistan owing to insecurity or drought in their place of origin. An estimated 1 million Afghans remain in the Islamic Republic of Iran, while another 960,600 are living in camps in Pakistan. According to a February 2005 Government census, an additional 1.9 million Afghans are living in urban areas in Pakistan, some of whom may be refugees.

153. Returns also continued in Africa. Under the UNHCR organized return programme, nearly 90,000 Angolans returned home in 2004—an increase over the corresponding figure for 2003 (43,000)—bringing the total to more than 338,000 since the conflict ended there in the first quarter of 2002. In Burundi, some 90,000 refugees returned home in 2004 as part of UNHCR assisted repatriation programmes, bringing the total number of assisted returns to 226,000 since the start of the programmes in April 2002. In Liberia, a total of 269,000 refugees and internally displaced people had returned home since October 2004. In Sierra Leone, the repatriation of refugees has come to an end. Some 270,000 refugees have returned home since the conflict ended, an estimated 179,000 of whom were assisted by UNHCR.

154. In eastern Africa, the conclusion of a peace agreement between the Government of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement has opened the door to significant levels of return. By mid-March 2005 an estimated 600,000 Sudanese had returned home, including 200,000 people who had repatriated spontaneously from neighbouring countries and 400,000 who had returned from other areas of the Sudan. Mine education and clearance in the Nuba region facilitated the resettlement of returnees there. As many as 550,000 refugees are expected to return in the coming months from neighbouring countries where they are being registered by UNHCR for organized repatriation. To continue providing effective protection and assistance, UNHCR has expanded its presence in southern Sudan.

155. The optimism generated by the resolution of the conflict in southern Sudan has been dampened, however, by continuing violence in Darfur, where more than 1.6 million people have fled their homes since the beginning of armed conflict. UNHCR continues to provide for more