THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Before I give the floor to Mr Lubbers, I wish to add a personal word of welcome to him as a fellow countryman and as Vice-President of this Assembly. He was a member of a very difficult cabinet when he started his career - the cabinet of Mr Joop Den Uyl, which we in Holland all still remember well. After that training, Mr Lubbers became our prime minister for twelve years and made a great impression. After that, he took on the very important work of being the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and this Assembly, with its forty-three members, regards the problem of refugees as one area in which we can make a difference. If my dear colleagues will allow, I wish to add a sentence in Dutch.

(The speaker continued in Dutch.) (Translation) Ruud, I have fond memories of the working group of which we were both members and I hope that that will continue to inspire our work today.

Mr Ruud LUBBERS (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): Thank you for those kind words of welcome and for inviting me. Allow me first to pay tribute to the Assembly’s work with refugees, the support that it has extended to my office and, in particular of course, the Committee on Migration. Refugees and Demography for its work in highlighting the plight of refugees. In particular, I wish to thank the rapporteur for her work and all the people who work with her to report on the fiftieth anniversary of the convention.

It is good to be here, because the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects fundamental freedoms, was adopted thanks in large part to the work of this Assembly, and the Geneva Convention on Refugees celebrates its fiftieth anniversary within a year of the fiftieth anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights. It is said that those who were born in the aftermath of the bloody second world war shared a common fundamental objective in promoting and protecting the safety and dignity of the individual.

Our organisations both work in the field of human rights and rely on the same principles. Of course, we work in different ways. But the links are clear - respect for human rights where the lack of such respect is often the main determining factor in forced population displacement.

In the same way, the restoration of human rights lies at the heart of durable solutions and the sustainable return of refugees - human rights are at the heart of the causes as well as the solutions. Therefore I consider respect for human rights and the rights of refugees as the hallmark of membership of the community of nations.

That brings me to my next point. When states join the family of the United Nations, they subscribe to the universal declaration of human rights as an integral part of their democratic systems. That has to imply that all nations, simply by virtue of the fact that they present themselves as members of the United Nations, accept and must uphold their obligations towards refugees.

We have this wonderful system of democracies encouraging each other in the characteristics of democracy, but there are citizens in this world who do not have a
government that takes care of them, protects their rights and ensures their physical security and well-being.

Of course, as has been said again this morning, states have the primary responsibility for providing refugees with the protections guaranteed in the convention. The first and primary task of UNHCR is to ensure that refugees receive that protection from states. Protection is the mission and the raison d'être of my office.

What is protection about? It is about physical protection, and about essential material aid - basics such as shelter, food and medical care. It is also protection from discrimination. Those are the three main parts of the protection obligation that states must fulfil. Sometimes states can do it when we call upon them; sometimes they simply cannot. Then we have to assist the refugees ourselves, calling upon the international community to make that possible.

Today, UNHCR is responsible for 21 million people. That includes refugees, of course, but also asylum seekers, stateless people, returnees, and, in certain conditions, internally displaced people. Sometimes people think that this is a global problem, involving Africa, Asia and so on. The rapporteur gave us some numbers this morning. However, the problem is also very much a European problem. Europe today hosts more than 7 million people who are of concern to UNHCR. That is one third of the total.

For example, there are well over half a million refugees and displaced persons in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia - a number that, sadly, is increasing daily as refugees are uprooted by the conflict in “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. There are also hundreds of thousands of refugees, internally displaced people and returnees living in difficult conditions in the Russian Federation and throughout the Caucasus region. Those are just a few striking examples.