

UNHCR closes refugee camp, gives assets to Zambia

NANGWESHI, Zambia, December 21 (UNHCR) – The UN refugee agency on Thursday handed over the facilities in Nangweshi Refugee Camp to the Zambian government, marking the formal end of a camp that had been established seven years ago to house Angolans fleeing their civil war.

The closing of the camp and the transfer of assets worth almost US\$500,000 was made possible by a combination in recent months of repatriation of some Angolan refugees and the relocation of others to another refugee settlement, Mayukwayukwa, where they have a chance to become self-sufficient through agriculture.

Out of 15,000 Angolan refugees in Nangweshi on August 15, when UNHCR launched this year's assisted repatriation programme for Angolans in Zambia, 4,971 were relocated to Mayukwayukwa and 2,140 repatriated to Angola. The rest of the refugees indicated they were returning to Angola on their own.

"In recognition of the outstanding hospitality of Zambian people and in order to contribute to the welfare of the Nangweshi host community I am pleased, on behalf of UNHCR, to officially hand over the health clinics, school, office and residential buildings in Nangweshi Refugee Camp to the government of Zambia," said Vedasto Mwesiga, UNHCR deputy representative in Zambia.

"I am confident that the provincial authorities together with the local community will utilise these buildings for the benefit of the entire local community," he added.

The assets include several office blocks, staff houses, a police station, guest house, two clinics, eight primary schools and two secondary schools. The government also received food distribution centres, a canteen, mechanical workshop, water points and hammer mills for grain donated by the UN World Food Programme.

UNHCR now cares for 64,581 refugees in four remaining refugee sites – Meheba and Mayukwayukwa refugee settlements in the west and Mwange and Kala refugee camps in northern Zambia – including 18,451 Angolans and 43,839 people from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In addition, UNHCR estimates there are 5,500 refugees living in urban areas of Zambia and a further 75,000 refugees – including 49,000 Angolans – who have settled among the Zambian population.

"UNHCR is aware of the burden Zambia has had to shoulder in hosting refugees and we are extremely pleased that despite the burden to the host community, the Zambian population lived peacefully with refugees over these years," said Mwesiga.

Mwesiga said UNHCR's preferred solution for refugees was voluntary repatriation and added that 71,000 Angolan refugees had gone home since UNHCR began assisting returns to Angola in 2003. UNHCR's programme of helping Angolans to return from Zambia, which had been extended for an extra year, formally ends on December 31.

The UNHCR official said at the handover ceremony that another durable solution was local integration of refugees who do not wish to repatriate, noting that UNHCR and the government would discuss how to proceed. If UNHCR invokes the cessation clause, which could end the refugee status of Angolans in Zambia, those wishing to remain in Zambia would have to obtain permits, he said.

"While we acknowledge the pressure exerted by the presence of refugees to the host community," said Mwesiga, "We may also wish to recognise that the refugees have also contributed positively to the local economy by providing labour to the Zambian population for increased agricultural production and, as consumers, provided a market for local goods and services."

Nangweshi camp, located on the western banks of the Zambezi River in western Zambia, was established in January 2000 at the height of the last stage of the Angolan civil war. Repatriation from Zambia began after peace was established and by 2004 allowed UNHCR to close the Ukwimi refugee camp,

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In Nangweshi, Zambia*