Statement by Donato Kiniger-Passigli (IFP/CRISIS) at the 56th Session of the U.N General Assembly Third Committee

New York, 20 November 2001

Mr Chairman, distinguished Delegates,

Two years ago, the ILO set up a new programme, the In Focus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction (IFP/CRISIS), devoted to tackling the employment and related social and economic challenges of crisis. The Programme draws upon the skills and expertise available within the Organization and its constituents in such areas as employment promotion, social protection, social dialogue, tripartism and the Declaration on the Promotion of Fundamental Rights and Principles at Work. It seeks to address the problems of countries and territories facing the consequences of armed conflicts, natural disasters, rapid political and social transitions, and financial and economic downturns.

In carrying out these tasks, the ILO is actively extending support to, and building partnerships with, other UN and non-UN organizations working in the fields of relief, recovery, reconstruction and a return to development. A central element in the ILO’s crisis response is to facilitate the socio-economic reintegration of refugees and other crisis-affected people through the formulation and implementation of direct programmes of job creation, income generation and social integration.

We believe that the challenge of protecting and assisting refugees, displaced populations and vulnerable groups affected by crises worldwide cannot be met unless we stop thinking exclusively in terms of humanitarian assistance. Relief is undoubtedly essential, but much more is needed if we want to restore the conditions for a decent life in war-torn societies, communities devastated by major disasters or countries shaken by economic downturns and socio-political upheavals. As the High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr Ruud Lubbers, recently put it: “efforts to protect refugees are of limited value if durable solutions are not found”.

The ILO is taking up this challenge of bridging the gap between relief and long-term development and contributing to providing durable solutions. As those who have worked with them know, refugees and internally displaced people, once their physical security and immediate food needs are met, demand one thing most of all: work. Decent work, which confers freedom, equity, dignity and security, is the aspiration of working people all over the world. If we do not want refugees and vulnerable groups, children in particular, to become a burden on society if not a threat, we need to invest in their future. Work opportunities, not handouts, are needed to help refugees and internally displaced people to overcome their vulnerability.

During the recent ILO Global Employment Forum, the UN Secretary-General, Mr Kofi Annan, and the ILO Director-General, Mr Juan Somavia, drew attention to the fact that unemployment, poverty and social exclusion are basic threats to human security. In crisis situations and in relation to refugees and other vulnerable groups this is particularly true. Employment expansion, poverty reduction and social integration of refugees and other vulnerable groups would contribute greatly to human security in not just one country, but often for the concerned sub-region as well.
Crisis situations are often marked by tensions and social and political instability. The enduring solution is to give refugees and internally displaced persons the opportunity to prepare for their eventual return or integrate with the host community. This is essential if they are to have dignity, self-respect and hope for the future.

The first step is to assess their profiles, including their existing skills and competencies. The process of planning for their integration and eventual return must include preparing them for a productive working life on their return. Refugees and displaced people need assistance in skill training geared to the labour market to which they will eventually return. Women in particular can take advantage of their enforced sojourn in the camps to learn new skills, which they may not have been able to do under more normal conditions. They also can be helped to set up micro-businesses even in the camps. Apart from this, counselling and guidance may be needed to facilitate their social and economic reintegration.

If such groups are not likely to return for the foreseeable future, there is likely to be tension between them and the host community. Social dialogue between them has to be promoted around common interests, mainly productive assets and resources, and the elimination of fears and prejudices. An important mechanism for this is local economic development programmes, an area in which the ILO has considerable experience in a variety of settings.

It is important that the potential beneficiaries, including refugees and other vulnerable groups, participate in the planning stage of the reconstruction, which typically follows the emergency phase. This creates ownership and a sense of involvement in measures for securing their future. The ILO experience is that reconstruction itself opens a window of opportunity for job creation, if labour using, equipment-supported technologies are adopted. The ILO has much expertise to offer in this area.

The ILO is seeking an even stronger partnership with member States, employers and working organizations, UN agencies, the Bretton Woods Institutions, NGOs and all who are committed to social justice, equal opportunities and lasting peace.

Thank you.