



Foreword

T Alexander Aleinikoff

Rows of huts, spread out over a dry and dusty terrain. Tented warehouses, containing food, blankets, shelter materials and tools. A makeshift marketplace, where basic items such as batteries, buckets, soap and second-hand clothes are sold. And hand-powered pumps surrounded by a throng of people (most of them women) waiting to collect their family's water supply.

Superficially at least, today's refugee camps do not appear significantly different from those that existed 30 or 40 years ago. Modernisation seems to have passed them by. But upon a closer look, it becomes apparent that things are changing.

Today, refugees and IDPs in the poorest of countries often have access to a mobile phone and are able to watch satellite TV.

Internet cafés have sprung up in some settlements, the hardware purchased by refugee entrepreneurs or donated by humanitarian organisations such as UNHCR. And aid agencies themselves are increasingly making use of advanced technology: geographic information systems, Skype, biometric databases and Google Earth, to give just a few examples.

The importance of technology is even more pronounced in urban settings, where a growing proportion of the world's forced migrants are to be found. In some cities, UNHCR now communicates with its clients by text message and provides them with financial assistance through ATM cards. Telephone hotlines enable urban refugees to report protection incidents as soon as they take place, while those who are

not satisfied with the services that UNHCR provides can make use of an online complaints facility.

As these examples indicate, technology is increasingly significant in the life of refugees and the agencies that support them. I am therefore delighted that *Forced Migration Review* has chosen to dedicate its current issue to this important theme. New technologies are changing the environment in which we work, creating risks that we must not ignore while bringing opportunities for both displaced people and those who work on their behalf.

T Alexander Aleinikoff is the Deputy UN High Commissioner for Refugees. He can be contacted through HQP00@unhcr.org.