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**WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES**

PROGRAMME UNIT ON JUSTICE AND SERVICE  
Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service

CONFERENCE ON THE SITUATION OF REFUGEES IN AFRICA

Africa has more refugees than any other continent. Official estimates place the number of refugees there at about 2 million; unofficial estimates are more than twice that number. In May 1979 a major Conference will take place in Arusha, Tanzania, to review the situation of refugees in Africa in all its aspects : legal, social, economic, institutional, administrative and financial. Concerned governments as well as United Nations agencies and voluntary organizations doing refugee work in Africa will attend. Taking place as it will against an ever-growing flood of refugees from one end of the continent to another, this Conference will undoubtedly be of major importance.

With refugees now in no fewer than 27 countries, Africa has been forced to consider the problem in a most serious way. Over a number of years, during which Africa's refugee population steadily swelled, the following events occurred :

- 1967 : the Addis Ababa Conference on the Legal, Economic and Social Aspects of the Problem of African Refugees was held.
- 1969 : the OAU (Organization of African Unity) Convention on the Specific Aspects of the Problems of Refugees in Africa was drawn up, subsequently ratified and entered into force.
- 1977 : the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) took the initiative by suggesting that an African Consultation on the Rights and Problems of Refugees in Independent Africa be held. Invitations to assist the AACC in organizing such a meeting were addressed to all those who had participated in the 1967 Conference.
- 1978 : the AACC decided that for the meeting to have maximum impact, it should involve African governments primarily. Therefore, it was decided to re-name the meeting "Conference on the Situation of Refugees in Africa" (although it is commonly being referred to as the Pan-African Conference on Refugees) and to have it co-sponsored by the three inter-governmental organizations directly concerned with refugees in

Africa : the OAU, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). Also, a planning committee was established to assume responsibility for all the preparatory work leading up to the Conference. The director of the AACC Refugee Department, Mr Melaku Kifle, was seconded to head the planning committee for the Conference. In addition to the three co-sponsors, the following organizations agreed to comprise the planning committee : the AACC, the International University Exchange Fund (IUEF), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the Scandinavian Institute for African Studies (SIAS), and the World Council of Churches (WCC).

What will be the agenda for the Conference and what results will it produce that will be of help to refugees? Following is the provisional agenda guideline to which the planning committee has agreed :

- Legal and protection problems
- Social, economic, institutional, administrative and financial problems
- Establishment of a "Clearing House" on refugee problems

A major paper will be presented on each of these topics.

The planning committee has stated its objectives as follows :

- a) Long-term objective : to keep all concerned -- governments, governmental organizations, voluntary agencies, and refugee-serving agencies -- fully aware of the rapidly growing nature of the problems facing refugees in Africa, and conversant with the possible permanent, semi-permanent and temporary solutions to these problems in order for them to be more committed to reducing this plight and to assisting refugees on humanitarian grounds.
- b) Immediate objectives : (i) to review and evaluate the present refugee situation in Africa and the legal, social, economic, institutional, administrative and financial aspects of the problems faced by refugees in African countries, with a view to proposing solutions and conceiving ways and means of properly tackling these problems in the decade to come;  
(ii) to study and appraise national legislations concerning refugees in order to propose improvements which will lead to a more committed adherence to an implementation of the OAU Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa, as well as to other international instruments, i.e., the 1951 UN Convention on the status of refugees and the 1967 Protocol pertaining thereto;  
(iii) to explore the possibility of establishing as soon as possible, in Africa, a Clearing House on refugee problems, an office to coordinate all voluntary and official activities in the field of refugee assistance.

It is reasonable to expect that the Conference will succeed in making a thorough analysis and evaluation of the refugee situation in Africa. Such information is essential in providing justification for the major financial commitments by all concerned -- governments, inter-governmental agencies and voluntary organizations -- that will translate the objectives of this Conference into actual assistance to refugees. In short, the Conference will act to focus attention on African refugees and provide the impetus for raising the funds necessary to carry out the many relief and development programmes that have been, and will be, evolved to help refugees.

While refugee experts and programme administrators from many countries will be in attendance at the Conference, so too will be many men and women who deal with individual refugee cases on a day-to-day basis. It is hoped that the participation of these grassroots refugee caseworkers will keep Conference deliberations at a very practical level, but at the same time give these people the opportunity of understanding their work in its total political, economic and social context.

The scope and complexity of rendering assistance to African refugees is reflected in the agenda of the Conference. Although the UNHCR makes every effort to encourage adherence to internationally recognized standards for the protection and treatment of refugees, sovereign states are not always willing to comply with these standards, a fact that sometimes has very serious and even tragic results for the refugees concerned. Thus such issues as the recognition of refugee status, of asylum, of protection against return to a country where a refugee has reason to fear persecution ("non-refoulement"), of expulsion, of personal safety, and of the economic and social rights of refugees will all be considered and discussed in the hope of finding common ground on which the participating countries will be willing to cooperate. Related issues like refugees' travel and identity documents, reunification of refugee families, voluntary repatriation to a refugee's home country, naturalization in his or her country of asylum, statelessness, and many other matters having an immediate effect on the status and well-being of millions of people will also be on the Conference agenda, all there for the purpose of achieving some progress toward the international standardization of refugee recognition and treatment and, beyond this, making headway in the search for permanent and just solutions to the increasingly urgent refugee concerns of Africa.

The immediate significance of this Conference is demonstrated by the initiative and determination taken by the various concerned bodies to deal with a major African problem. The deeper importance of the gathering will take place at national levels when legislators in the various countries decide whether or not to commit their nations to a standard and humane set of principles when dealing with the refugees within their borders.

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Carl F. Nielsen  
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