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The Thirty-Second Session of the UNHCR Executive Committee

This annual gathering took place in Geneva from 12 to 20 October 1981. Present were representatives or observers from 74 governments, four liberation movements, members of the UN system, several inter-governmental organizations, and nearly 60 non-governmental agencies. The purpose of the meeting was to review UNHCR policy, elect new officers for the year to come, assess the work of the year just completed, and to authorize plans for the next twelve months.

In his opening address, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Poul Hartling, noted the dramatic growth in his agency's responsibilities over the last few years as a result of increasing numbers of refugees nearly everywhere. At the same time, though, this growth has raised questions about the extent of UNHCR's mandate. This means two things basically: what categories of people fall within the meaning of the term "refugee," and what are, consequently, the limits of the assistance that UNHCR can offer?

Summarizing events for the year under review, Mr. Hartling noted improvement in the plight of refugees in Somalia and Djibouti, expressed concern over large numbers of Salvadorean refugees in Central America and mentioned successful voluntary repatriation programmes in recent years from Bangladesh to Burma, from Angola to Zaïre and vice versa, from Costa Rica and Honduras to Nicaragua, and from several countries to Kampuchea, Uganda, Equatorial Africa and Laos. Most recently, 660,000 Zimbabweans had repatriated, and a similar operation was now underway for returnees to Chad.

Integration of large numbers of refugees in countries of first asylum was also occurring: 265,000 people in China, 100,000 in the Sudan, 36,000 (who had recently been naturalized) in Tanzania, and smaller efforts in six other African countries and in northern Latin America.

Resettlement in third countries was led by Indochinese refugees, 700,000 of whom had found new homes abroad since 1975.

The High Commissioner closed his address on a note of concern about several current problems, especially among women refugees and those who are physically or mentally handicapped. In matters

concerning the legal protection of refugees, he noted widespread refusal of asylum, the forcible return of people to their countries of origin ("refoulement"), arbitrary detention, and acts of violence and piracy against refugees.

On questions of finance, Mr. Hartling had earlier pointed out that UNHCR's annual budget first exceeded US\$ 100 million in 1977, and that in succeeding years the budget had doubled and then redoubled until, in 1980, it passed US\$ 500 million. Toward the close of the Executive Committee meeting it was reported that total spending in 1981 was expected to be US\$ 460 million and that the projection for 1982, subject to revision, was US\$ 421 million. It can be surmised that these reductions were made not because there is less concern about the world refugee situation but rather because of questions about the breadth of UNHCR's mandate. For example, to what extent should UNHCR be involved in development undertakings when the UN Development Programme is charged with that task? Or, when does UNHCR help internally displaced people (Zimbabwe) and when does it not (Angola, Ethiopia)? Or, in a world where many people flee intolerable economic conditions that are to varying degrees the result of political decisions, or the lack of such decisions, can any meaningful distinction be made between "economic" and "political" refugees? Or, should the UNHCR uncritically accept a given government's estimate of the refugee population within its borders or insist upon verifiable figures?

Questions like these reflect the tensions and concerns that are brought by member governments of the UNHCR to the annual Executive Committee meeting. The fact that financial outlays are expected to decline somewhat this year and next suggest not only that the agency has been stretched administratively to the limit, but also that its major supporters prefer to see it play a more strictly defined role when it comes to definitions of who shall be helped in which ways for how long. The Executive Committee also recognized the need for a restructuring of UNHCR which would involve a degree of decentralization and an improved division of labour. It thus appears that UNHCR's ideal of a liberal mandate in its approach to refugee problems has run against the reality of some influential governments wishing the agency to be more restrictive in its spending as well as its responsibilities. The unfortunate paradox here is that even well-intentioned adjustments to budgets and organizational mandates will not bring the world's refugee problem much closer to solution. Only the exposure and elimination of the reasons why people become refugees will do that.

Meanwhile, though, the immediate humanitarian needs of refugees have of course to be met. It was in recognition of this that UNHCR was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize -- its second -- during the Executive Committee meeting. In a gracious statement, Mr. Hartling accepted the prize "in the name of refugees everywhere." He went on to say that "I hope the fact that the (Nobel) committee has chosen UNHCR for such an honour will encourage all of those in a position to assist refugees, whether they be organizations, voluntary agencies or individuals, to redouble their efforts."

As in previous meetings of the Executive Committee, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies made a statement on behalf of its members. A copy of this statement is attached and is worth reading as a summary of current refugee issues as seen by the voluntary agencies in the context of their co-operation with UNHCR.

The official Report of the Thirty-Second Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme is also now available. This is document no. A/AC.96/601 and can be had in English or French. Requests should be made of UNHCR, Palais des Nations, 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland.

Attachment: ICVA Statement

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Refugee Service, CICARWS
World Council of Churches
150, route de Ferney,
1211 Geneva 20,
Switzerland

1. Correct my address as follows:

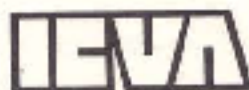
.....
.....
.....
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2. Delete my name from your mailing list.

3. Add the following name(s) and address(es) to your mailing list:

.....
.....
.....
.....

Signed:..... Date:.....



Statement of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) to 32nd
 Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme

Mr. Chairman, first of all, on behalf of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies I would like to join the distinguished delegates in offering our congratulations to you and the other members of the Bureau, on your election. We are also pleased to have this opportunity of meeting the new Deputy High Commissioner, Mr. Richard Smyser, and look forward to working with him. We very much appreciated the cooperation we have had with his predecessor, Mr. Dale de Haan.

The voluntary agencies have also asked me to express their congratulations to General Paul Cullen, on the award of the Mansen Medal, and to say how happy we are at this well merited recognition of his own outstanding service to refugees and of the work of Austcare and of the voluntary agencies in Australia.

Voluntary agencies note with increasing concern a deteriorating trend in the physical safety of refugees. In spite of a constant reaffirmation by States of the principle of non-refoulement, both through international and regional refugee instruments the stark reality is that there continue to be increasing incidents of forcible return of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as various threats of such return, arrests and arbitrary detention, and violations of their physical safety including pirate attacks, bombardments of camps and kidnappings. There is particular concern for women who are one of the most vulnerable groups of refugees, and who are subjected to various forms of sexual and other exploitation. Voluntary agencies continue to manifest their deepest concern for this apparent inability, even of governments, to control such things as criminal and military attacks on asylum seekers and refugees. It is hoped that the High Commissioner will take effective action to prevent further violations of accepted international principles and promote greater security for those who depend on this protection. We wish to assure the High Commissioner that the voluntary agencies support him wholeheartedly in such efforts.

In his note on International Protection, the High Commissioner refers to cooperation between his Office and non-governmental organizations in the dissemination of principles of protection and refugee law in regions where these principles have not been fully elaborated. These efforts are essential in promoting the truly universal acceptance of principles of refugee protection. However, in the short run, these principles continue to be violated and it is the responsibility of the member governments of the Executive Committee to find more effective means of enforcing them. Voluntary agencies urge the Executive Committee and individual governments to deploy immediate and practical measures for the protection and safety of refugees.

Member agencies are also expressing concern about the situation of individual asylum seekers in Europe. In contrast to the generous reception of quota refugees from Indo-China, the interpretation of the "refugee" definition of the Convention appears to have become increasingly restrictive when applied to individual asylum seekers. Since the beginning of the 1970s, the percentage of

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asylum seekers obtaining convention Status has been declining and as the economic crisis has deepened, the proportion of these has reached a disturbing low in the last few years. It is felt that the attitude of some authorities is incompatible with the letter and the spirit of the Convention. Equally disturbing are the sometimes very long periods during which asylum seekers remain in a situation of uncertainty awaiting decisions on their status. In some countries, they have no right to work, to study, to learn the language, and our agencies are daily confronted with the very damaging effects this can have on the refugees psychological and social well-being.

We would urge the governments concerned to speed up asylum procedures and enable asylum seekers to spend the waiting period constructively.

The High Commissioner's note on protection also addresses "categories of persons under UHCR protection", referring to the widened definition of the term "refugee" contained in the OAU Convention. Voluntary agencies familiar with the refugee situations in Africa have followed with interest the effect of the application of this definition, which has enabled UHCR to extend protection to groups of persons who might not be able to invoke a well-founded fear of persecution according to traditional criteria. The agencies intend to follow with interest and contribute to the debate on whether "the objective assessment of refugee situations" which the OAU Convention definition provides, can be applied universally.

The voluntary agencies have also followed with considerable interest the discussions which have taken place within United Nations forums during the last year concerning the humanitarian needs of groups of people other than refugees who suffer as a result of man-made disasters, for example, people displaced within the borders of their own countries as a result of war-like situations, as in southern Angola at present. We would urge that these discussions continue and result in a clarification of mandates and areas of competence of the respective member organizations and specialized agencies of the UN family, so that no group in need remains outside the reach of effective assistance from the UN system.

The International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa held in Geneva last April was a milestone which not only focussed world attention on the plight of refugees, but also highlighted the effect that large numbers of displaced populations are having on the economies of their host countries, many of which belong to the ranks of the least economically developed. It would be unfortunate if governments and intergovernmental organizations perceived ICARA only as a fundraising exercise. The country presentations, imperfect or exaggerated as they were in certain instances, unmistakably demonstrated how the refugee problem intersects and affects the development process. Development-oriented voluntary agencies which have refugee-related programmes in Africa have been aware of this for some time, and it is encouraging to note that some studies initiated by them are being undertaken with the support and collaboration of UHCR. But much more practical research is needed to understand the effects of refugee influxes on the development process.

Voluntary agencies which traditionally work in close cooperation with the people in question, are convinced that no assistance can be effective, or development promoted, without the active participation of the groups for whom the assistance is provided. Here, we would particularly mention women, who because they make up the majority of the refugee population (though their voices are seldom heard) should be involved in the planning and decision-making process and in the implementation of programmes which will affect their future. The follow-up of the ICARA Conference provides an extraordinary opportunity for the international community to study and understand the refugee problem in a developmental context. Voluntary agencies would like to be associated more closely in the follow-up process, believing that they have specialized knowledge and expertise that can be utilized to the greater benefit of refugees and the host communities. UNHCR may consider establishing a commission of experts on the topic of "refugees and development", perhaps in the African context, which could bring together a limited number of specialists from development-oriented intergovernmental organizations, voluntary agencies, bilateral aid agencies and host governments, to begin to define the issues and delimit responsibility in a systematic manner.

We consider it an integral part of the function of UNHCR to be the focal point for intergovernmental assistance in meeting emergency needs and in finding durable solutions for refugees. Where this pertains to groups of refugees in developing countries, this may include development components in order to bring the refugees to the point of self-sufficiency. In such a case, it would also be necessary to ensure an orderly transfer, for subsequent development needs, to other agencies in the UN system which have the competence and the capacity with regard to such development.

The voluntary agencies continue to play a vital role in the resettlement and integration of refugees, and some, in cooperation with the official services involved, have taken steps during the past year to evaluate their programmes, and to improve and streamline their reception and resettlement work. They stress the importance of the exchange of information and experience at international level, and, in this connection, we are happy that the International Refugee Integration Resource Centre, whose establishment was strongly recommended at the UNHCR Workshop last October, is now becoming operational under an Interia Coordinator. The Centre has been set up by joint agreement between UNHCR, ICI and ICVA.

One particular aspect of resettlement on which we would like to comment is that of the reuniting of separated refugee families. Continuing and extended measures are necessary to facilitate family reunion, particularly in applying liberal criteria in the admission of family members, and it is hoped that both countries of asylum and countries of origin will support the High Commissioner's efforts to ensure that such reunion take place with the least possible delay.

ICVA members have continued to follow closely the situation of unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents from Indo-China, and to work actively in meeting their special needs, with emphasis on tracing, establishing contact with family members, and family reunion whenever possible.

It is felt that the question of unaccompanied refugee children is one that requires continued, careful study and the development of internationally accepted guidelines.

Voluntary agencies which traditionally work in close cooperation with the people in question, are convinced that an assistance can be effective, or development promoted, without the active participation of the groups for whom the assistance is provided. Here, we would particularly mention the fact that because they are up the majority of the refugee population (though their voices are seldom heard) should be involved in the planning and implementation of the assistance and in the follow-up process, believing that they have specialized knowledge and experience.

The voluntary agencies note with appreciation the High Commissioner's initiatives on behalf of disabled refugees and would fully endorse his appeal to governments of resettlement countries to make a general effort to accept additional numbers of these disabled refugees for whom resettlement is felt to be appropriate.

In addition to their programmes of aid to refugees, in assistance, resettlement and integration, counselling, education and social services, the voluntary agencies are addressing themselves increasingly to the complex question of the root causes of refugee situations. We have noted with satisfaction the study currently being made by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan on mass exodus, as special rapporteur to the Commission on Human Rights, and we hope that this may lead to more effective preventive action within the UN system.

In closing, we would like to mention an event of special significance in the longstanding cooperation between UNHCR and the voluntary agencies. This was the NGO/UNHCR Consultation organized in Geneva on 20-22 May 1981. Preparations for the meeting were made by UNHCR in consultation with a steering group of ICVA member agencies, and the reunion itself was jointly chaired by the Deputy High Commissioner and the Chairwoman of ICVA's Working Group on Refugees and Migration. Bringing together over 120 voluntary agencies which collaborate with UNHCR, the meeting covered a wide range of topics pertaining to assistance to and protection of refugees, and support activities for refugees needs including fundraising and public information. Voluntary agency participants particularly appreciated sessions devoted to panel discussions which facilitated open and frank exchanges on matters of mutual concern. We were also glad to be consulted on the preparation of the UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies. This is an initiative of the High Commissioner's Office which we warmly welcome.

The necessity for a follow-up of the Consultation was one of the major recommendations of the meeting. In this respect, UNHCR has already taken an initiative in the field of public relations/fundraising, and an informal meeting of several NGOs has recently been held with the Director of the Protection Division. Voluntary agencies are, however, particularly interested in concrete proposals for follow-up, especially in the planning and implementation of assistance programmes. This will be one of the major issues discussed at ICVA's General Conference in Sri Lanka on November 22-27, 1981, and UNHCR has been invited to make specific proposals to voluntary agencies at that time.

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