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## WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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

### PAN-AFRICAN CONFERENCE ON REFUGEES ARUSHA, TANZANIA, 7 - 17 MAY, 1979

A major conference on the subject of refugees in Africa took place in Arusha, Tanzania, from 7 to 17 May 1979. Called the Pan-African Conference on Refugees, this gathering marked the first time in twelve years that representatives from nearly every African country had met to consider the continent's refugee problem in all its aspects. During those twelve years the number of African refugees is estimated to have multiplied at least eight times to its present 4 million.

The idea of calling a Pan-African Conference on Refugees was originally conceived in 1977 by the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), and invitations to assist in organizing a new meeting were addressed to all who had participated in the 1967 conference. In 1978, however, the AACC suggested that for the meeting to have maximum impact, it should involve African governments primarily. Thus it was decided to re-name the meeting Pan-African Conference on Refugees and to have it co-sponsored by the three inter-governmental organizations directly concerned with refugees in Africa: the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. 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, and in addition to the three co-sponsors, the following organizations agreed to comprise this committee: the AACC, the International University Exchange Fund, the Lutheran World Federation, the Scandinavian Institute for African Studies, and the World Council of Churches (WCC).

Delegations from 34 African countries plus thirteen observer countries outside Africa attended the Conference. Also in attendance was the OAU, the UNHCR and other United Nations agencies, the African liberation movements, and 35 voluntary agencies active in African refugee work. In addition to the AACC, the churches of Africa were represented by the Christian Councils of Tanzania and Zambia, and other WCC partners in attendance were: the Canadian Council of Churches, Christian Aid (UK), Church World Service (USA), CORSO (New Zealand), Joint Refugee Service of Kenya, and Swedish-Free Church Aid. Dr. R. Andriamanjato of Madagascar, President of the AACC, spoke at the opening ceremony to the Conference.

The work of the Conference took place in two committees. One dealt with the legal and protection problems of refugees in Africa, and the other considered the social, economic, institutional, administrative and financial problems. The serious tone of the meetings of these committees gave clear indication of the grave importance which African countries attach to their continent's refugee situation.



The agenda for the Conference was a formidable one. Each of the many agenda points had been studied in detail by groups of experts who had met in advance of the Conference to prepare summary recommendations which then became the basis for consideration and debate at the Conference itself. While most of the subject matter of the Conference was by necessity of a technical nature, a number of broader themes did emerge. They were:

- Despite reservations taken by several African countries, the question of human rights had a prominent place in the proceedings. Several African speakers reminded Conference delegates that this issue did not only apply to Southern Africa, but that many people in independent African countries were fighting for their rights as well. Frequent reference was made to documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights whose principles provide guidelines for governments to follow.
- Burden-sharing, especially as it affects the front-line states in Southern Africa, was the subject of much discussion. Burden-sharing refers to the disproportionately large refugee populations in certain countries and the extent to which this burden in its various aspects might be shared with other less affected countries.
- The status of dissidents from African liberation movements stimulated a great deal of debate, and a recommendation emerged that an "African solution" to this problem be found. The matter arises out of the detention and imprisonment of people who are in conflict with liberation movements to which they have belonged, and the question before the Conference was whether such dissidents can be considered refugees. Some delegates argued that dissidents should be detained so that liberation movements could pursue their aims in an unimpeded way. Others argued that dissidents should be allowed to leave their host countries instead of being detained and thereby acquire refugee status. The problem here, however, is that it would be difficult for member states of the OAU to accept as refugees persons in conflict with liberation movements which enjoy OAU recognition.

The role of the OAU in refugee matters came under scrutiny, especially on two points. Attention was repeatedly called to the fact that while 41 African states have signed the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, as of May 1979 only 18 of these states had acceded to the document, that is, had accepted its contents as part of the law governing the recognition and treatment of refugees. Also, certain structural changes which would enable the OAU to play a better and more effective role in African refugee matters were recommended.

Although the white minority regimes of Southern Africa came under heavy attack for having produced an estimated 1 million refugees and displaced persons, such statements were invariably followed by reminders that by far the greatest number of African refugees come from independent states -- an estimated 3 million additional refugees. Debating exchanges of this kind were indicative of the sober, introspective tone that characterized the Conference as a whole. It was a gathering marked by surprisingly little political bombast and a great deal of serious work pervaded by a humanitarian spirit.

In terms of practical help to refugees, what will be the probable results of the Conference? Although the answer to this question is partially a surmise, what is certain is that the details of the refugee problems of Africa have been carefully reviewed by delegates of considerable influence from the many countries represented at the Conference. These delegates have taken home with them resolutions and recommendations that constitute consensus statements by 34 African countries on all important refugee issues. Meanwhile, these recommendations will also be referred for endorsement to the OAU Council of Ministers' meeting to be held in Monrovia, Liberia, in early July 1979. Given such endorsement, it is likely that legislation will be stimulated in the various countries which will commit them to higher and more uniform standards of conduct pertaining to the recognition, protection and treatment of African refugees.

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May 1979



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