

UNITED NATIONS

GENERAL
ASSEMBLY



Distr.
GENERAL

A/AC.96/SR.316

9 October 1980

Original: ENGLISH



EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME

Thirty-first session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 316TH MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva
on Monday, 6 October 1980, at 4 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. BIRIDO (Sudan)

CONTENTS

Statement by the High Commissioner and general debate (continued)

This record is subject to correction.

Corrections should be submitted in one of the working languages. They should be set forth in a memorandum and also incorporated in a copy of the record. They should be sent within one week of the date of this document to the Chief, Official Records Editing Section, room E-6108, Palais des Nations, Geneva.

Any corrections to the records of the meetings of the Executive Committee at this session will be consolidated in a single corrigendum to be issued shortly after the end of the session.

The meeting was called to order at 4.20 p.m.

STATEMENT BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER AND GENERAL DEBATE (agenda item 3)
A/AC.96/INF.160) (continued)

Mr. McPHAIL (Canada) said that since the Committee's previous session, the refugee situation had seriously worsened. There were some 10 to 13 million refugees from 37 countries. Moreover, refugee movements were no longer due solely to "fear of persecution"; many victims of war, economic migrants and other displaced persons were swelling their ranks and presenting the international community with an unprecedented challenge. Urgent action to deal with the root causes of those refugee situations was therefore essential. A great deal had been done to alleviate refugee suffering. During the current year, governments had contributed more than \$2 billion to international refugee relief and over 300,000 refugees had been resettled permanently. Yet much remained to be done.

A second aspect of the crisis was the fact that the international machinery for dealing with humanitarian relief was not fully adequate to the changed circumstances. Burgeoning refugee populations had meant that assistance was sometimes organized on an even more ad hoc basis than in the past, and managerial methods had not always evolved to cope with the huge additional human and monetary resources required. Lastly, the international community had not been able to provide political solutions to refugee situations.

The Canadian Government and people had in the past demonstrated their willingness to help, and would continue to bear their fair share of the burden, while insisting that the concept of international solidarity imposed a similar obligation on all other Members of the United Nations. He stressed the need for better co-ordinated utilization of the resources available, for streamlining the operations of participating agencies, and for a search for durable solutions by the appropriate organs of the United Nations system.

The role of the High Commissioner and his Office had assumed new dimensions in recent years in the fields of protection, assistance and resettlement; moreover the progressive extension of the High Commissioner's mandate by the General Assembly and ECOSOC had major implications for the future. The United Nations Secretary-General must be encouraged to proceed with his suggested rationalization of humanitarian relief action within the United Nations system; efforts must be made to achieve better utilization of resources through greater co-ordination between agencies and governments concerned and through more systematic exploitation of the possibilities offered by non-governmental organizations; sources of financing should be diversified; the administrative and managerial framework within the UNHCR must be adapted; the dialogue between the High Commissioner and the Executive Committee should be intensified; and there should be greater involvement by participating governments in the decision-making process.

He invited members to view within that framework the proposal his delegation had submitted the previous year, and which he now reformulated, for the creation of a Sub-Committee on Finance and Administration. The vast increase, since 1977, in the over-all annual financial requirements and in the range and complexity of the High Commissioner's programmes together with the increase, in 1979, in the membership of the Executive Committee, made it difficult, with only the same amount of time available to the Committee as in previous years, for it to advise the High Commissioner adequately on administrative and financial as well as policy and programme aspects. He proposed a reorganization of the Committee's calendar and programme of work so that after the first day of the session devoted to the general debate, while the Committee continued to discuss items 3,4, 6 and 9 in plenary, an open-ended working party consisting of one member from each delegation could meet in private to examine in greater detail than had previously been possible the more general administrative and financial aspects of the High Commissioner's programmes, and particularly item 5 of the agenda. On the basis of the report from the working party, the Committee would be better able to formulate its opinion on over-all financial requirements for 1980 and 1981. The suggested procedure might be followed at the current session on an experimental basis.

In conclusion, he outlined the ways in which his Government was supporting the High Commissioner's programme. Since January 1979, some 60,000 South-East Asian refugees had been resettled in Canada and during the same period the Canadian Government and people had contributed more than \$50 million to international relief action. Domestically, some \$200 million had been contributed to help resettlement in Canada. In that context, he welcomed the High Commissioner's convening of the Workshop on Indochinese Resettlement, the previous week. In addition to its activities relating to South-East Asia, Canada had, since January 1979, provided continuing resettlement opportunities for almost 8,000 refugees from other areas, including eastern Europe and Latin America. For 1981, being conscious of the continuing needs in South-East Asia, it planned to give particular emphasis to the disadvantaged and handicapped, as well as to facilitating the reunification of families already in Canada. Canada's financial contribution to the High Commissioner's programmes would, as usual, be announced at the Pledging Conference in New York.

The CHAIRMAN noted the Canadian representative's suggestion regarding the creation of an open-ended working party to meet in parallel with the plenary when the general debate was concluded.

Mr. PALMIERI (United States of America) endorsed, on his Government's behalf, many of the comments made by the High Commissioner and by the Canadian representative in their excellent statements. All who dealt with refugee problems appreciated UNHCR's efforts to help refugees throughout the world.

The Refugee Act adopted by his Government in March 1980 had established a new basis for American assistance to refugees and had eliminated certain geographical and ideological restrictions which had previously existed. In 1981, the United States Government planned to spend \$2 billion on the relief and resettlement of refugees.

There were, however, other aspects to the refugee problem which were of equal or even greater importance. The increase in refugee flows, which was in many instances due to fundamental violations of human rights, in some cases by governments themselves, was a vicious and disruptive threat to the international community. The deliberate export of people represented a breach of fundamental norms including the right of every country to establish and apply its own criteria governing the entry of citizens of other nations, the humanitarian duty of society to provide refuge to an individual fleeing oppression, and the right of a person to return to his country of nationality. Moreover, the expulsion of common criminals and other persons representing a threat to the receiving society constituted an even more serious violation of international norms.

He did not expect the High Commissioner to solve the political problems that gave rise to refugees; those questions should be addressed in the United Nations General Assembly. However, where the force of international opinion failed to curtail the creation of refugees, it was essential to respond, and in that connexion the Canadian representative had outlined certain proposals with which his delegation associated itself. Moreover, the High Commissioner, in his statement, had anticipated and welcomed such improvements to the international process.

His Government was determined to do its share in providing for the relief and rehabilitation of refugees. It was providing over \$115 million for aid programmes in Africa, \$40 million for Pakistan for 1980, some \$30 million for Indo-China, and \$43 million for Khmer relief. For 1981, it would again make a substantial contribution to UNHCR to help Indo-Chinese refugees.

There must, however, be a return to basics. His Government strongly endorsed the principle that refugees should be able to return to their home countries. It had been pleased during recent years to see the repatriation of significant numbers of refugees to Zimbabwe, Burma and other countries, and had hopes for what could be accomplished in Kampuchea.

It was also essential, however, to make an expanded world-wide effort to resettle refugees. The United States continued to support the concept of the Fund for Durable Solutions, which could concentrate resources on the settlement projects in developing countries.

A high level of resettlement was essential as a long-term solution, in order to avoid the instability arising from permanent camp populations. In 1977 his country had undertaken to resettle 14,000 Indo-Chinese refugees a month until September 1980; and in view of the continued gravity of the problem it had extended the commitment to September 1981. But the United States was concerned about the lack of commensurate commitments by other countries; therefore, while maintaining its firm commitment, it urged all nations represented in the Executive Committee to maintain and increase their efforts to meet the burden of refugee flows.

Although the refugee problem had generated an immense humanitarian response by the international community and an unprecedented build-up of UNHCR's capacity, the gap between the needs and the response was widening each day, and aggregate human suffering was growing. Consequently, everyone must make greater efforts thereby contributing to the international stability and security sought by all.

Mr. STARK (Holy See) said that what was distressing in the High Commissioner's report was not only the number of refugees but also the conditions they endured in seeking asylum. The inhuman acts of piracy committed on seaborne refugees from Indo-China were particularly repugnant; in that connexion, the statement issued in 1980 by the Catholic Bishops of Australia had described the plight of those refugees as a portrayal of man's gross inhumanity to man and a sad commentary on mankind's actual progress. Added to those people's indescribable sufferings were those being endured by refugees from Afghanistan and in Africa, particularly in Somalia and Sudan, where drought and famine made conditions worse.

But the report of the High Commissioner for Refugees, and the statements made in the Executive Committee, pointed encouragingly to improved efforts and worldwide solidarity; for example, some countries had now liberalized their refugee admission criteria. The High Commissioner for Refugees had paid tribute to the work done by non-governmental organizations. The latter, which included many Catholic organizations, were carrying out difficult tasks in a number of countries, and their contribution would always be needed.

With regard to financing, his delegation considered that the suggestion just made by the Canadian delegation could be studied to useful effect. It also welcomed all efforts aimed at determining the legal standards to be applied to situations in various continents. Since UNHCR's main task was protection, there was an urgent need for supplementing refugee law, in view of such despicable crimes as piracy. Some measures had been suggested in the Sub-Committee, relating not only to neighbouring countries but to the international community in general.

With regard to new accessions to existing international instruments, large areas of the world were not covered either by the 1951 Convention or the 1967 Protocol. His delegation welcomed the regional approach adopted by UNHCR, since regional instruments similar to the OAU Convention were still lacking in other continents. It was to be hoped that the Round Table of Asian Experts on International Protection of Refugees and Displaced Persons had opened up some avenues or encouraged countries to accede either to the Convention or to the Protocol.

The Holy See welcomed the progress made in family reunification, a matter in which it was greatly interested. As a result of the High Commissioner's programmes, many families hitherto separated had been reunited. Perhaps efforts could be pursued with a view to overcoming the sort of problem arising from certain national legislations whose effect was that persons once resettled in another country lost their refugee status and could move again only as immigrants. It was also expected that the "Orderly Departure Programme from Viet Nam", based on an agreement in May 1979 between UNHCR and the Government of Viet Nam, would allow many more families to be reunited.

It was part of the educational work carried out by Catholic churches and organizations to make the plight of refugees increasingly known. The High Commissioner for Refugees had mentioned the problem of information, and the Holy See delegation understood that UNHCR was in contact with Governments and NGOs in that connexion. Perhaps greater efforts should be made at local levels, since the response of public opinion was now more important than ever, given the growth of the refugee problem. The Catholic Church had made many appeals in that connexion. Pope John Paul II, both in Rome and during his visits abroad, had stressed the plight of refugees and had appealed for assistance and asylum for them. Speaking at Fortaleza, during his recent visit to Brazil, he had also reaffirmed that the Church would continue to uphold the human rights to a homeland, to a full family life, to the preservation of ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritage, to public profession of religion and to treatment in keeping with human dignity in all circumstances. The Church denounced all situations which forced people to seek a life elsewhere, and the Holy See would continue its collaboration with UNHCR in alleviating the plight of such people.

Mr. HESS (Switzerland) said that the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees was not empowered to attack the refugee problem's root causes -- that was a task for other forums -- but had to strive to remedy its effects. The needs, and the scope of the aid provided, had never before been so great; UNHCR's role now included the tasks of repatriation or permanent settlement of refugees in countries of asylum or other countries. Nevertheless, the original task of international protection for refugees should remain a major concern; indeed, the work in that field of so many public and private bodies, at national and international level, testified to the international community's immense compassion for the plight of refugees.

The problems were not diminishing, however, and the capacities of donor and asylum countries were not unlimited. The Secretary-General, in his report of 12 September 1980, had noted that a number of emergency assistance operations had had to be improvised. It was time for an over-all assessment of activities: while effectiveness did not depend on a unification or standardization of everyone's assistance policies, better co-ordination was doubtless necessary to avoid gaps, duplications and misunderstandings. The aim must be to derive the utmost benefit from the funds and efforts donated; on their careful use depended the rescue of human beings and their hopes for a better life.

Study and execution of projects suitable for financing by the United Nations Fund for Durable Solutions referred to in the Working Group's report, entailed the need for close and clear collaboration of all concerned. He wished to stress that Switzerland, which financed many aid operations, was prepared to take part, in some form, in any consultations that might be held concerning the various operations within the United Nations system. The High Commissioner clearly appreciated the need for continued improvements in administration and management. The Swiss delegation welcomed the formation of a Policy, Planning and Research Unit and an Emergency Unit, and urged the High Commissioner to continue and intensify such efforts.

His delegation endorsed the Canadian proposal for an informal open-ended working group to consider the financial affairs of UNHCR.

Switzerland had worked closely with UNHCR from its beginning, particularly on the resettlement of handicapped refugees, of whom there were many among the 6,000 Indo-Chinese refugees that entered Switzerland in 1979 and 1980. It would continue to help those refugees in 1981 while admitting others, particularly with a view to reuniting families. Individual requests for asylum in Switzerland from the nationals of some 50 States had almost doubled, since 1977, to over 2,000. In 1974, the Swiss authorities had spent SF 4 million on assistance to refugees in Switzerland; in 1980, that figure would exceed SF 33 million, not including the contributions of voluntary agencies.

Switzerland was aware of the rapid expansion of UNHCR activities and its growing need for financial resources. It had therefore not only increased its contributions to UNHCR but also to other international organizations and programmes for assistance to refugees. In 1977 his Government had contributed some SF 9 million to refugees throughout the world, in 1978 about SF 16 million, and in 1979 over SF 22 million, apart from the considerable assistance provided by charitable organizations and private institutions. It would continue to provide assistance in cash or in kind or through personnel for emergency situations. An additional contribution to UNHCR and other organizations working for refugees was currently under consideration by the Swiss authorities and he hoped that a positive decision would be forthcoming shortly.

Mr. PAOLINI (France) said that the flow of refugees and displaced persons throughout the world continued to increase, as was reflected in the UNHCR budget: general assistance programmes, which in 1979, had cost \$162 million, had increased by 80 per cent for 1980 to \$293 million. Over-all expenditures for UNHCR were expected to rise from \$282 million in 1979 to over \$470 million in 1980. His Government would continue to support UNHCR, which, in the circumstances, was meeting its responsibilities competently and efficiently. An organizational effort would no doubt be required to adapt UNHCR structures to a new situation, and closer co-ordination should be achieved with other United Nations bodies involved in one way or another with refugee problems, in order to avoid both over-cautiousness and duplication of work. His delegation was prepared to participate in an expert working group as proposed by Canada with a view to preparing the Member States for the discussion of the High Commissioner's report at the General Assembly.

After reviewing developments in Africa, which remained the continent with the largest number of refugees, and in other continents during the period under consideration, he pointed out that since 1975, France had received 100,000 refugees from South East Asia, and the current rate of arrival from that region was about 1,000 refugees per month, of whom about 700 per month arrived from Bangkok. The two groups of 5,000 places which France had reserved for South East Asian refugees in 1980 would be filled by the end of October, but his Government intended to continue its effort and a decision should be officially announced within the next few days. The French Government's offer to take 600 stray children from the new Kampuchean camps in Thailand over and above the quota established had not received the attention expected, and only 120 such children had so far arrived in France.

Total assistance activities undertaken by his Government entailed costs of over F 1.3 billion, in addition to the financial efforts of voluntary organizations.

Expenditure on language and vocational training alone was estimated at some F 94 million. The progress achieved so far in the integration of the refugees would not have been possible without the movement of solidarity manifested by the whole country and without the remarkable activities of the specialized agencies responsible for welcoming the refugees.

Apart from its work with South East Asian refugees, France had not forgotten the plight of refugees in other regions of the world. It continued to welcome refugees from Latin America in particular and made every effort to answer the appeals of the High Commissioner regarding special programmes for refugees in certain African countries. France also provided considerable humanitarian aid to friendly African States bilaterally, for example, to Uganda, Chad and recently Zimbabwe for the resettlement of returning refugees. In Pakistan, his Government was assisting the UNICEF programme and many French voluntary organizations were providing medical assistance for UNHCR activities and programmes.

He welcomed the accession of additional States to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol and hoped that still other States would sign those instruments, which remained the basis for improving the status and protection of refugees. Further progress in that regard would be made by continually improving national regulations to implement the rules of the 1951 Convention rather than by trying to introduce new legal concepts at the international level which might give some countries cause for concern. His Government had accordingly decided in June 1980 to exempt persons holding a refugee certificate issued by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and stateless persons from all the formalities for obtaining a work permit. The regular exchanges of view in, for example, an ad hoc committee of experts on the legal aspects of territorial asylum and refugees of the Council of Europe were very encouraging. A European convention on the transfer of responsibility between States with respect to refugees was to be signed shortly and work was continuing on the harmonization of refugee admission procedures and eligibility criteria. His Government fully endorsed the idea of setting up a centre of that type within UNHCR.

Mr. THOMSON (Australia) said that although the severe pressure generated by the massive outflow of boat people had eased, new pressures had built up along the Thai-Kampuchea border and many problems of even greater magnitude remained unresolved in Africa and other parts of the world. The United States had recently had to provide sanctuary to many asylum-seekers arriving directly on its shores, and the full impact of over a million Afghans in Pakistan and other countries was yet to be felt. The great humanity shown by countries in Africa and South East Asia in admitting asylum-seekers into their territory, often at considerable sacrifice to themselves, must not be forgotten.

There were now over 9 million refugees throughout the world more than the population of some member countries of the Executive Committee. The international community must therefore come to terms with the fact that the mass refugee problem was a continuing feature of the world scene and could no longer be dealt with by routine responses or simple humanitarian gestures. The current refugee problem was not only a tragedy of vast proportions, but threatened to destabilize the existing international order in various parts of the world and undermine the social fabric of

countries in no way responsible for the situation in which they found themselves. In view of the gravity of the problem, the work of the Executive Committee and the High Commissioner now had an acute relevance to wider world affairs. The decisions taken by the Committee would have a real impact on international relations and the contribution of some nations to them. It should be borne in mind that important decisions concerning refugee situations would also be taken at other international meetings.

He congratulated the High Commissioner and his staff on the way in which they had met the ever-increasing challenges of the past few years. He was pleased to hear that the High Commissioner attached importance to a constructive dialogue on managerial and financial matters with members of the Executive Committee. Australia would do its best to contribute to that dialogue, recognizing the need for confidence and understanding between the Office and the members of the Committee. His delegation welcomed the Canadian proposal for an experimental open-ended working party to consider UNHCR financial commitments during the current session of the Executive Committee.

He hoped that the Sub-Committee on Protection would reach conclusions on the issues of temporary refugee and international burden-sharing so as to ensure maximum protection for asylum-seekers in mass-exodus situations, and that its conclusions would be referred to the Executive Committee.

His delegation looked forward to the discussion on the proposed Fund for Durable Solutions, whose establishment it strongly endorsed and to which it had already given financial support. The question of rescue at sea was also an important matter for discussion and he was glad to note the success of the High Commissioner's efforts to implement the principles of rescue at sea and establish a pool for resettling refugees rescued by ships flying flags of convenience. It had become increasingly apparent that the problem of refugee situations could no longer be left to a relatively few countries and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, but was a global problem for which the international community must accept responsibility.

Australia's response to the current refugee situation had been three-fold. First, in the twelve-month period 1980/1981, Australia would take in a minimum of 19,500 refugees, of whom over 14,000 would be from Indo-China. There were now some 42,000 Indo-Chinese refugees who had resettled in Australia since 1975. Secondly, Australia, like other countries, had significantly increased its assistance to refugees through UNHCR, other international and non-governmental agencies and direct bilateral aid to countries of first refuge. Total assistance for refugee relief in 1979/1980 amounted to over \$A 18 million, and further assistance for refugee programmes would be provided in 1980/81 in cash and commodities. Australia's contribution to UNHCR general programmes would increase from \$A 3.78 million in 1980 to \$A 4.62 million in 1981 and would not be earmarked for any specific programme. Thirdly, Australia would continue to focus attention on refugee problems and their solution. In that context, the Executive Committee must recognize the need to maintain the momentum achieved to date in finding solutions, particularly in finding additional resettlement places. It was essential that the level of resettlement places achieved following the United Nations Conference in July 1979 be maintained and if possible increased, despite the difficulties involved.

A/AC.96/SR.316
page 10

Australia had co-sponsored a resolution at the summer session of the Economic and Social Council calling for an international conference on refugees in Africa. Although it was especially concerned over refugee problems in nearby countries, Australia recognized that those problems were only part of a larger picture and could not but be aware of the immensity of refugee problems in the continent of Africa.

In conclusion, he endorsed the High Commissioner's remarks on the value of the Workshop on the Resettlement of Indo-Chinese Refugees to governments, non-governmental organizations and UNHCR.

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.