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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME

Thirty-fourth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 353rd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,  
on Monday, 10 October 1983, at 11 a.m.

Temporary Chairman: Mr. KHARMA (Lebanon)  
Chairman: Mr. EWERLÖF (Sweden)

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The meeting was called to order at 11.15 a.m.

OPENING OF THE SESSION (item 1 of the provisional agenda)

1. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN declared open the thirty-fourth session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. He mentioned the important problems that had arisen during the past year in the various fields of activity of UNHCR. Many of those problems had already been resolved; others remained to be examined with increased attention and, it was to be hoped, a more positive and more humanitarian attitude. It was to be hoped that those problems would be resolved relatively soon, since time was of the essence.
2. In the field of protection, countries did not have a uniform approach. The relevant instruments continued to be the subject of reservations, and they were frequently implemented only partly and sometimes not at all. That created a chaotic situation which should not be allowed to continue for ever. Among the serious difficulties encountered in that field, there were, of course, the attacks which had been made on refugees over a number of years in settlement areas or on the high seas; those difficulties were considered in the report of the Sub-Committee of the Whole on International Protection. In that field, mention should also be made of the problem created by a number of restrictive trends in the granting of asylum by Governments; those trends violated the principle of non-refoulement and, in the case of a mass exodus, could give rise to catastrophic situations.
3. In the assistance activities of UNHCR, there was a thin line between relief and development aid. UNHCR's assistance usually comprised three phases: relief, rehabilitation and development projects. In view of the fact that many countries of asylum were among the least developed, a broader approach seemed necessary with regard to the third phase. Moreover, such an approach was connected with the search for durable solutions, since those solutions included, as well as repatriation, local settlement. The Executive Committee should provide guidance to the High Commissioner by indicating how far it thought development activities should go and to what extent reliance should be placed on co-operation with other agencies.
4. As for administrative and financial questions, substantial progress had been made during the past year, particularly with regard to implementation of the recommendations of the Administrative Management Service and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions. He noted that the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters, in whose work he had personally participated, had dealt primarily with two aspects of those questions. Firstly, it had taken up the matter of the restructuring of international protection activities. In that field, the Assistance Division played, in relation to voluntary repatriation and the resettlement of refugees, a role which should be specified in order to avoid confusion, since it had little experience in that regard. Secondly, the Sub-Committee had examined the new job classification, which had already been undertaken for the General Service staff and which would be continued at a higher level. ACABQ had requested a post-by-post analysis to resolve the problem of the apportionment of posts in the regular budget. The apportionment of posts was currently a matter of priority and it was to be hoped that the Executive Committee would adopt a firm stand on the subject at its current session. The question had already formed the subject of two Fifth Committee resolutions which had been placed before the General Assembly, and the budget services of the Secretariat had prepared figures which appeared in the biennial budget estimates which the Assembly was shortly to examine. He hoped that delegations

delegations would adopt firm positions on that question during the session and maintain the same position in the Fifth Committee and the Assembly.

5. In conclusion, he expressed his gratitude to the Executive Committee for its concern for the welfare of the refugees, the High Commissioner for his invaluable advice, the officials of UNHCR, both at Geneva and in the field, and, lastly, the international agencies and non-governmental organizations for their close association with UNHCR.

#### ELECTION OF OFFICERS (item 2 of the provisional agenda)

6. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN invited the members of the Committee to nominate candidates for the office of Chairman.

7. Mr. SKALLI (Morocco) nominated Mr. Ewerlöf (Sweden) for the office of Chairman.

8. Mr. SADLEIR (Australia) seconded the nomination.

9. Mr. Ewerlöf (Sweden) was elected Chairman by acclamation.

10. The CHAIRMAN invited the members of the Committee to nominate candidates for the office of Vice-Chairman.

11. Mr. ONKELINX (Belgium) nominated Mr. Mebazza (Tunisia) for the office of Vice-Chairman.

12. Mr. LI LUYE (China) seconded the nomination.

13. Mr. Mebazza (Tunisia) was elected Vice-Chairman by acclamation.

14. The CHAIRMAN invited the members of the Committee to nominate candidates for the office of Rapporteur.

15. Mr. GEORGE (Nigeria) nominated Miss Feller (Australia) for the office of Rapporteur.

16. Mr. PURCELL (United States of America) seconded the nomination.

17. Miss Feller (Australia) was elected Rapporteur by acclamation.

18. The CHAIRMAN paid tribute to Mr. Kharma, who had presided over the thirty-third session.

#### ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (item 3 of the provisional agenda)

19. The provisional agenda (A/AC.96/619/Rev.1) was adopted.

#### STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN

20. The CHAIRMAN said that 18 years had passed since the time when he had worked for UNHCR and that no comparison was possible between what had then been the refugee problem and what it had since become: one of the most important aspects of the activity of the United Nations. The emergence of new refugee situations had led the Executive Committee to take up the problems of management and administration and to envisage, in particular, the delegation of greater powers to field officers.

21. It had also become necessary to co-ordinate the whole of multilateral and bilateral aid in order to derive the best possible benefit therefrom. Between 29 and 31 August 1983, a Meeting of Experts on Refugee Aid and Development had been convened at Mont Pélerin (Switzerland). The findings of that Meeting should help UNHCR in its future work.

22. Lastly, the military attacks against refugee camps and settlement areas had brought home to UNHCR the need to obtain for the fulfilment of its mission and particularly in the field of legal protection, the active participation of the voluntary agencies.

#### OPENING STATEMENT BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

23. Mr. HARTLING (High Commissioner for Refugees) said he was convinced that, under the enlightened guidance of the Chairman, the session would not fail to be constructive and stimulating, and he welcomed the new Vice-Chairman and Rapporteur.

24. The Executive Committee had considerably more information than in the past. As the Committee had decided, the programme document - the "book" - was more comprehensive in its presentation of facts and figures. Documents on progress in various fields were regularly sent to the members of the Executive Committee and informal sessions or other meetings were held during the year, as required. His introductory statement did not therefore have to serve to report on the various refugee situations in the world: rather it provided the two parties with an opportunity of reflecting together on some major issues confronting his Office in its humanitarian task. The specific refugee situations to which he would refer would serve only to illustrate the broader concepts that he would endeavour to share with the Executive Committee.

25. The "book" contained a report on the previous year, an explanation of the state of affairs in the current year and plans for the coming year. In other words, it looked more or less just over a year ahead, which was a reasonable time-span for establishing realistic and sufficiently detailed programmes and targets for each country, given the fluidity and sometimes rapid or drastic evolution of refugee situations. However, beyond the annual cycle, his Office was trying increasingly to develop a longer-term view, whenever possible, in order to orient its action towards durable solutions which sometimes required several years. It could be said that much had been done to improve his Office's capacity for programme delivery and monitoring. It was more than ever necessary, however, to develop longer-term planning from a solution-oriented perspective. That was already being done, in accordance with the mandate of UNHCR, both for new problems or for those which lingered on for years. However, the question must be asked whether it was not possible to do more and do better.

26. While never giving up hope that one day the refugee problem would subside, the international community should regard the problem as a long-term one, since there had been refugees in the world in considerable numbers for decades. Solutions had, indeed, been found and implemented - sometimes for very large numbers - year after year, but new refugees had constantly emerged. Although the list of solutions was a long one, the over-all balance in terms of numbers

reflected unfavourably on mankind: there had been some 1.5 million refugees in 1951, when UNHCR had begun its activity, and there were currently some 10 million. Numbers were not all; but the magnitude of the refugee problem was an indicator of the state of the world. There had been, over the past two years, fewer refugee generating crises than in the years before but, even if there were no new refugee influxes in the future, it would still take the world a long time to absorb the backlog that had been created. Very often, a situation of initially modest scope turned into a lasting problem and solutions, when they were possible, were often only partial. Therefore, UNHCR had good reasons to look into the future of its activities.

27. All those concerned with refugee work, including UNHCR, Governments and non-governmental organizations, must develop not only the will but also the capacity to achieve durable solutions. Everyone knew that obstacles, some of which were insurmountable, might stand in the way of all three solutions of voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement. Sometimes, one or other of those options remained open, sometimes the horizon was obstructed in every direction.

28. The impediments to voluntary repatriation were basically of a political nature and the numerous voluntary repatriation operations of the past few years had followed accessions to independence, changes of regimes, amnesties to political opponents or the end of a conflict. Hopes for the future, with regard to that solution, were based on past experience. Of course, it was not a Utopian world in which all refugees were able to return home, but even a purely humanitarian organization like UNHCR had a role to play: a successful repatriation and rehabilitation programme could produce a snowball effect once the political conditions were created; through participation in tripartite commissions helping the authorities of the country of refuge, the country of origin and UNHCR, a set of difficulties could be ironed out and conditions conducive to voluntary repatriation could be promoted. He had in mind, for example, the repatriation from Djibouti to Ethiopia which had recently started. UNHCR could even help in delicate negotiations between two countries, provided it did not side with either and confined itself to its purely humanitarian and non-political role. While remaining realistic, UNHCR was systematically reviewing the situations where it believed more could be done for repatriation so that, while respecting the free will of the refugees, no stone was left unturned.

29. Local integration was not always possible. Some of the difficulties in developing countries - insufficient infrastructure, lack of cultivable land or of water, shortage of work opportunities - limited the absorption capacity of the receiving country. It was then for the international community to act in a co-ordinated manner so as to improve conditions as much as possible, within financial, technical and staff constraints. The participants in the Meeting of Experts on Refugee Aid and Development, held from 29-31 August, had called for a review of policies for refugee assistance in low-income countries with a major refugee problem, and for a new approach to the solution of such problems. The report (A/AC.96/627) stressed that, while meeting the urgent needs of refugees as a first priority in the early stages of an influx, refugees' productivity should be encouraged from the outset so as to enable them to support themselves and to contribute to the development of the area. That more comprehensive view of what was sometimes called the "refugee affected areas", where the refugees were a component of a much wider picture involving the local population as well, invited realistic reflection on the means of overcoming the many obstacles to local integration.

30. Obstacles might, however, be other than technical and even when refugees were offered asylum and hospitality temporarily, they might nevertheless be undesirable. Asylum should always be regarded as a peaceful and humanitarian act, but refugees might be seen to have a political impact as a group and contribute to tension between neighbouring countries or affect important national concerns.

31. When repatriation and local integration were not possible, resettlement became the only solution. Obstacles to resettlement were well known. No country had an endless receiving capacity. Not all refugees were able to integrate smoothly and, for many, resettlement was not really an adequate solution and might create severe cultural trauma. There were the handicapped who had the double disadvantage of being refugees and disabled. Three hundred of them were accepted every year, but 800 were still waiting, and new disabled refugees were being identified every day. More places were also needed for those whose security was endangered and required immediate resettlement as the only possible means of ensuring their protection.

32. The difficulty of reaching a burden-sharing balance acceptable to all concerned, the world economic crisis, spreading xenophobia, and compassion fatigue were all factors which affected resettlement policies and practices, and also, unfortunately, the granting of asylum. As the result of the combination of all those factors, there had been for a long while in the UNHCR programmes a comparative slow-down in the provision of durable solutions, and relief, care and maintenance had become increasingly conspicuous components of UNHCR's efforts. The "book" contained some striking figures: while in 1970, the proportion of the programme geared towards the promotion of durable solutions had been 83 per cent, it had declined to 54 per cent in 1977 and then, following major refugees crises in South-East Asia, in the Horn of Africa and in Pakistan, to 26 per cent in 1981. Some progress had been made since, and it was hoped that in 1984 the figure of 33.5 per cent would be reached. Those figures were eloquent, and should serve as a powerful incentive to reverse the trend further.

33. It was necessary to promote the only three solutions available whenever there was the slightest glimmer of hope, even if it would take many years to reach them and implement them satisfactorily. It was Governments and not UNHCR which had the key to the problem. Of course, Governments had their own constraints, which it would be unrealistic and unfair not to recognize; however, refugees were waiting and, for them, no progress often meant deterioration in their condition.

34. In view of that problem, UNHCR was trying to develop its planning capacity by continuing to seek durable solutions and trying to push barriers a little further back. Governments occupied the centre of the game, but UNHCR must be a catalytic agent and convince the refugees, the Governments and the international community. It was not always difficult to provide assistance: a new problem might receive a favourable echo from Governments, from public opinion and from others concerned. However, if solutions were not readily feasible, it became very difficult to see a problem through to a conclusion. That was so in the case, for example, of the boat-people or the refugees from Indo-China in general.

35. A few examples would show where UNHCR stood and what it was currently trying to achieve. It had given a great deal of thought to the refugee situation in the Horn of Africa and the Sudan, and was looking for ways of achieving further progress in depth in each country and the region as a whole. In Somalia, the refugees had to be provided with more land and more income-generating activities. That required a considerable effort. In March 1983, pursuant to the pertinent

General Assembly resolution, a review mission had visited Somalia to consult the Government on the refugee situation, assess the international relief effort and identify the requirements for 1983 and later. The mission's task had been to focus on the over-all needs of refugees, with a view in particular to their settlement and rehabilitation. Those terms of reference had coincided perfectly with UNHCR's own preoccupations. Assessments of that kind and ensuring recommendations - especially after the emergency phase, when concrete efforts were made to move beyond care and maintenance - were fundamental for long-term planning.

36. The mission had visited all the areas in which there were refugees: Gedo, Hiran, the North-West and Lower Shebelli. It had acted in close co-operation with the authorities, visited 27 camps out of 35, and met with representatives of countries involved in the effort. The World Food Programme had accompanied UNHCR, which had maintained liaison with other United Nations bodies. While attention had been paid to self-sufficiency in Somalia itself, the question of voluntary repatriation had not been overlooked.

37. The mission had studied all facets of assistance: food, health, water supply, communal facilities, provision of utensils and equipment, shelter, transport and logistics, and of course self-help, which was really the new direction. While conditions did not permit an all-embracing self-help plan covering all refugees, UNHCR hoped that efforts would lead to more than just a modest beginning. Attention was being paid to small-scale farming and even to larger-scale agricultural projects, where the possibility existed for land expansion and irrigation. The possibility of relocating refugees to other areas where such facilities were accessible was envisaged. UNHCR was drawing up guidelines for planning and implementing rural settlements for refugees, with the objective of achieving socially and economically viable rural entities. Measures also included training in various skills. Small-scale industry and handicrafts were foreseen and provision for reforestation, tree and bush planting made. The needs of the local population were part of the over-all concern.

38. Of course, that approach was by no means a solution to all difficulties and would require years of efforts by all concerned. It was, however, an effort at consolidation and improvement in a vast joint undertaking carried out in full awareness of the magnitude of the task, the time element and the means that had to be mobilized by UNHCR and others.

39. During the current year and in 1982, many refugees were still arriving in the Sudan. Furthermore, in the Kassala area, flooding had made it necessary to airlift tents and blankets. While facing those emergencies, UNHCR had endeavoured to draw up a plan of action, in line with the intent and spirit of the General Assembly resolutions, the latest dating from December 1982. Just before that date, UNHCR had already sent an assistance review mission to the Sudan. The mission had returned with a set of recommendations prepared in agreement with the Sudanese authorities and designed, once they could be implemented, to give a fresh impetus to the programme in order to ensure self-sufficiency and integration where possible. Those recommendations covered refugee protection and assistance measures; they also addressed the phasing out of some UNHCR activities. Much attention was given to the highly complex problem of ensuring that refugees had access to sufficient land. The Director of Assistance had visited the Sudan in early 1983 to study with the authorities how the recommendations could best be implemented. In April, an UNHCR-ILO study had been concluded on income-generating activities for refugees in the Eastern and Central Sudan; the implementation of some aspects had already begun. The United Nations system had helped in various surveys. In order to give the necessary support to the launching and implementation of the plan and to follow up progress carefully, a task force had been set up at Headquarters.

40. Djibouti was currently an example of a situation where a new element intervened and entailed reorientation of part of the programme towards a durable solution, in the case in point - voluntary repatriation. Refugees had started to return to Ethiopia, some spontaneously and others under the organized repatriation programme. The Tripartite Commission composed of representatives of Ethiopia, Djibouti and UNHCR, had focused on ways and means of promoting repatriation while emphasizing its strictly voluntary nature. A plan had been established to provide appropriate relief and rehabilitation assistance measures in Ethiopia, and at that point the regional dimension of the problem could be seen. Returnees from Djibouti could not be viewed in isolation but had to be integrated into the wider context of voluntary repatriation to Ethiopia. UNHCR offices had been opened at Asmara and Dire Dawa to provide technical assistance to the Government and the agencies and on-site monitoring of programme implementation.

41. When the Special Programme of Assistance to Ethiopian returnees had started in June 1982, it had been felt that, on the basis of the pattern which had evolved over the years, basic relief assistance was necessary but not sufficient. Therefore, self-sufficiency packages were given for agricultural or pastoral activities. Urban returnees were eligible to receive assistance in establishing small-scale cottage industries. That was an attempt at an over-all programme, adapted to refugee needs and local realities. However, once again reality had shown that it was not sufficient to wind up the clock and let it go. According to the Government, up to 3 million people in the north-western provinces had been affected by drought: that had had, of course, a negative impact on the UNHCR programme and it had been necessary to review priorities in the area, in terms of logistics and transport, and to mobilize existing means for immediate distribution to the victims. However, UNHCR's objective remained unchanged: to provide, in co-operation with the authorities and agencies, proper initial rehabilitation of the returnees, providing them with a sound basis to start a new life in their home country.

42. The second International Conference for Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA II) which was currently being prepared and was to be held at Geneva from 9 to 11 July 1984, was the most globally planned, longer-term approach to refugee problems in Africa. The pertinent General Assembly resolution aimed both at meeting the needs of refugees and strengthening the social and economic infrastructure of African countries concerned with refugee or returnee problems, in order to help them to cope with the burden. In the UNHCR 1984 Programme to meet refugee needs, more than half of the target submitted for Africa was for durable solutions. Additional needs were being studied, country by country.

43. To devise projects aimed at easing the burden on national infrastructures, the OAU, the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General, the United Nations Development Programme, UNHCR and other agencies had sent technical teams to some 15 countries. The teams were to take all possible factors into account, such as the refugee situation, government policy towards refugees, the socio-economic situation and the impact of the presence of refugees. Reports would be prepared for each country, with the concurrence of the respective Governments. UNHCR was actively involved in all preparations and was confident that the Conference would lay a sound foundation for future concerted action.

44. An unprecedented effort had also been made in South-East Asia. More than a million Indo-Chinese had been resettled outside the region in less than



10 years, but there still remained more than 200,000 refugees, for whom solutions were increasingly difficult to find. UNHCR had therefore attempted to study the situation in all its aspects in order to suggest an integrated over-all approach. Third country resettlement could not provide a total solution to the problem, but self-sufficiency in the region was not a realistic option at that juncture and voluntary repatriation had yielded comparatively small results so far.

45. The question had therefore to be asked what UNHCR could do. First, it could create and maintain public awareness of the situation, which was no longer in the headlines. Several Governments had been contacted and it had been stressed that, in spite of the response from the international community, joint efforts continued to be necessary. It seemed that some measures were under consideration for maintaining and possibly increasing the current resettlement rate, for speeding up the intake of those accepted and for relaxing admission criteria.

46. Experience showed that for a large number of Khmer and Lao refugees in Thailand, options other than resettlement had to be sought. For Lao refugees, departures during the first six months of the current year had decreased by 50 per cent as compared with the same period in 1982. Voluntary repatriation - especially for lowland Lao - while modest, was encouraging and must be increasingly explored as a solution; all Governments concerned should work towards that objective, including the provision of assistance in the returnees' villages of origin. For Kampuchean, concrete practical steps should be taken by the parties concerned and, when the repatriation programme was undertaken for those who freely wished to return, several countries should provide reintegration assistance in villages of origin. UNHCR was acting or was prepared to act at any stage of the process within its competence.

47. Since resettlement and voluntary repatriation did not appear to be the total answer, self-sufficiency schemes on a regional level should be envisaged for all groups, wherever possible, and vigorously pursued within the context of regional burden sharing in a renewed effort to seek durable solutions of a humanitarian nature.

48. Among the encouraging aspects of the problem, mention should be made of the momentum gradually gained by the Programme of Orderly Departures from the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Up to 30 September, 12,918 persons had left Viet Nam under the Programme in 1983 as against 10,057 in 1982. For the third consecutive year, UNHCR had recently had talks with a delegation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam during which the evolution of the Programme had been the main concern. Those talks, which also provided an opportunity for conversations with all interested parties, including resettlement countries, had proved fruitful in tackling difficulties, consolidating progress and improving results.

49. The problem of unaccompanied minors should also be mentioned. There were currently some 4,000 of them in refugee camps in South-East Asia. Many had no relatives in third countries and might not qualify for current resettlement programmes. Some, rejected by several countries, had been in camps for years, a situation which could not be allowed to continue indefinitely. Initiatives such as the recently liberalized processing of minors by the United States would help to provide solutions for some of them.

50. UNHCR had just sponsored a Seminar on the Integration of Refugees in Europe which had debated social and practical problems relating to refugee integration. Those problems did exist, as could be seen from the report, and had to be solved by joint efforts. The Seminar had been a useful venture that had made it possible to see how countries could meet and try, in a positive spirit, to analyse an integration process in all its aspects.

51. In northern Latin America, the situations and future prospects were widely diverse according to countries and the location of refugees. While in some areas, local integration of urban and rural refugees could be envisaged, in others only holding operations were possible for the time being, with limited activities in the form of handicrafts or vegetable gardens. With the authorities and all those concerned, UNHCR was trying to open up avenues which should bring the refugees closer to some degree of self-sufficiency.

52. Refugees counted in the contemporary world. In certain countries or regions, they exceeded 15 per cent of the local population. In others, their political weight was important. They were an element in international negotiations of wider scope.

53. The refugee problem was becoming more and more difficult. In many parts of the earth, some of the poorest people were asking for help from poor countries. In spite of the great hospitality often given by many developing countries, the needs remained colossal. Industrialized countries received refugees and lent support; developments showed, however, that the level of their response - in many instances highly generous - was not to be taken for granted.

54. In a world situation which was in many ways chaotic, UNHCR was trying to mobilize energies and put them to good use. It had developed patterns, which it was trying to improve, for emergency and more durable response, for implementing, for monitoring, and for providing vital support to its field offices. It was trying to develop in-depth analyses for comprehensive action-oriented planning, being fully aware that all situations had their own characteristics. When examining problems all options for solutions had often to be considered. When no real solution was in sight, self-sufficiency, income-generating activities, skills, training and strengthening of local infrastructures were so many partial answers to the problem. It was essential to be innovative and UNHCR relied in that regard on the help of Governments, since in the last analysis the solutions were produced by Governments, not UNHCR.

55. The CHAIRMAN thanked the High Commissioner for his statement and noted that he had stressed the importance of long-term planning and the need to seek durable solutions.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.