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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME

Thirty-second session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 340th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 20 October 1981, at 10.30 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. MARSHALL (United Kingdom)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.50 a.m.

REPORT OF THE SUB-COMMITTEE ON ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL MATTERS
(agenda item 5) (A/AC.96/600) (continued)

1. Mr. SAHM (Federal Republic of Germany) said that the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters was to be congratulated. In view of the value of its work, he suggested in connection with paragraph 9 of the report (A/AC.96/600) that the Sub-Committee should be able to meet more than once a year if the Chairman of the Executive Committee and the High Commissioner so requested and that it should submit a report adopted by all of the members. His delegation approved the terms of reference proposed for the Sub-Committee, as set out in annex E to the report, and considered that they should be included in the Executive Committee's final conclusions.

2. With regard to the last part of paragraph 2 of the report, concerning the flow of budgetary and financial information, he hoped that the list of criteria requested from the Executive Committee would be prepared before the Sub-Committee's next meeting and, with reference to paragraph 4, on the UNHCR Project Management System, that members of the Executive Committee would be informed of the findings of the detailed evaluation so that they could comment on them. The increase in UNHCR personnel suggested in paragraph 5, on management, programme support and administration, had already been the subject of full discussion between the High Commissioner and delegations; his own delegation, however, was not altogether happy with all of the answers which had been given and thought members of the Executive Committee should make known their Governments' views so as to reach a closer understanding with the High Commissioner. There was still a need to improve not only geographical distribution but also the representation of women in UNHCR personnel. With the proposed establishment of regional sections, it would seem that the two "regional co-ordinators" remaining would be exercising functions that were not in keeping with such a title; they would in some measure be roving ambassadors and might better be called "special advisers".

3. Mr. SHIMIZU (Japan) said that the work of the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters had contributed a great deal to his Government's understanding of the activities and management system of the High Commissioner's Office and would facilitate the planning of its support. His Government would like to see both the operations and the management of the Office conducted more openly; in its view, there should be a systematic, standardized and periodic flow of information, so that Governments would be kept informed on a regular basis. In that respect, he endorsed the conclusion set forth in paragraph 2 of the report. Other delegations had already pointed out that a more open approach would help Governments to support UNHCR activities more effectively.

4. With regard to the increase in staff, he noted that 83 new posts were provided for in the 1981 revised budget and 28 in 1982, and that the proposed strengthening of the structure of the Office implied the creation of eight new posts. In fact, those three proposals for an increase in staff had the same objective and should therefore be considered together. His delegation felt that more details should be given on the proposed over-all increase in the number of posts, and awaited with interest the Administrative Management Service's study agreed to by the High Commissioner. The study should in his view cover not only the strengthening of the management of UNHCR but the whole management structure and the staffing policy. Again, to improve efficiency, priority should be given to strengthening management in the field, so as to achieve greater decentralization of decision-making and improved project implementation and inter-agency co-ordination. His delegation was therefore able to endorse the High Commissioner's proposals, provided a report by the Administrative Management Service was submitted for consideration at the Executive Committee's next session.

5. Mr. HEIMAN (United States of America) said that the report under consideration justified the confidence his delegation had placed in the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters. Set up on an experimental basis a year previously, the Sub-Committee should be permanently established and the proposed terms of reference set out in annex E to the report seemed to form a sound basis, on the understanding that they would be reviewed after more experience had been gained. During the Sub-Committee's discussions, a request had been made for additional detailed information on major programmes to be supplied to the members of the Executive Committee. Several members had at the time suggested a form of presentation for reports containing such details and his delegation would look forward to joining in the discussion at a later stage on the form the reports should take.

6. Strengthened management was needed because of the rapid growth in UNHCR programmes. The High Commissioner's proposal on the subject had been substantially modified as a result of the consultations during the past year, and the time had come to implement it, especially as the Sub-Committee had concluded that such a course would not stand in the way of the comprehensive management review which the High Commissioner had asked the Administrative Management Service to undertake without delay. It was to be hoped that the review would be ready for the thirty-third session of the Executive Committee. It should cover in particular the possibility of achieving more cost-effective results in implementing UNHCR programmes and the question of administrative costs and their implications for the United Nations regular budget.

7. Apart from the proposal to strengthen UNHCR management, the Executive Committee was asked to approve the establishment of 111 additional posts under the General Programmes. His delegation noted that 58 of those posts were already in existence and had no objection to them being transferred to the General Programmes; as regards the other 53, it accepted the assurance that every consideration had been given to redeploying existing posts, a matter which the High Commissioner should keep under regular review. In some countries administrative costs exceeded operational expenditure and he wondered whether there might not be room for further regrouping or regionalization of UNHCR representation.

8. When document A/AC.96/598 had been considered by the Sub-Committee, his delegation had said that it was firmly opposed to any growth in the regular budget of the United Nations. It supported the objective of appropriate regular budget funding for UNHCR administrative costs and considered that UNHCR should continue to co-operate with the United Nations in order to identify the posts which should be so funded. It noted, however, that the 1982-1983 budget made no provision for increased support and believed that any future increases would have to be offset by reductions in other areas of the United Nations budget.

9. Mr. McPHAIL (Canada) said that his delegation too approved the terms of reference of the Sub-Committee proposed in annex E to the report, on the understanding that they would be reviewed later on. For the time being, it also approved the proposals in the relevant section of the Sub-Committee's report for strengthening UNHCR management; those proposals had already been the subject of lengthy discussion, which had enabled delegations to express their concerns and the High Commissioner would doubtless bear them in mind. In the longer term, the study requested of the Administrative Management Service would become a normal periodic procedure and it was to be hoped that the Executive Committee would be able to examine that study within a year.

10. With regard to an increase in UNHCR staff, an effort should be made to improve the composition at all levels, from the standpoint of both geographical distribution and representation of women. The High Commissioner was already concerned with that latter aspect and his delegation would give him its support in that regard. It also hoped that the High Commissioner would report on ACABQ's reaction when it received the further information requested in its report. ACABQ had laid down some conditions, in particular on the modalities for strengthening UNHCR's management and for decentralization. In that connection, he stressed the value of delegating authority in financial matters, something that would be a major aspect of management strengthening and a measure of its effectiveness. It was his hope that the dialogue begun the year before on matters pertaining to such strengthening would be pursued, for it had already solved a number of problems and should now clear up any that still remained. In any event, it greatly helped to create a climate of mutual confidence.

11. Mr. PICTET (Switzerland) considered that the Sub-Committee's work had been of value and a convincing experiment. The existence of the Sub-Committee afforded an opportunity to consider in detail matters of increasing importance that would take up too much of the Executive Committee's time. His delegation approved all the points set out in the report and the terms of reference proposed in annex E. It also appreciated the reasons for strengthening UNHCR management. The volume of activity had considerably increased, but the structure and staffing had not. Possibly the reorganization of UNHCR had been left too long; the High Commissioner had in the meantime endeavoured to cope with the situation with limited means at his disposal. Even after the proposed increase, the number of staff would still be modest in comparison with that of other United Nations bodies. The strengthening of management was also justified by the need to ensure an adequate flow of information. His delegation hoped that the Executive Committee would be kept abreast of the measures taken to strengthen UNHCR management and so ensure that the most appropriate approach had been taken. At the same time, it would like the High Commissioner to bear in mind the views that Governments had expressed on the subject during the discussions.

12. Mr. CAPPELEN (Norway) said that his delegation had already commented on the strengthening of UNHCR management during the general debate and reiterated that it had no objections to the proposed changes in staffing for 1981 and 1982. Indeed, the High Commissioner's proposals should be acted on at once, for delay might be harmful to programme effectiveness. However, the High Commissioner should submit a progress report at the next session. His delegation had noted the additional information furnished to ACABQ at its request, and the High Commissioner's intention to request the Administrative Management Service to conduct a review of the UNHCR management structure and its methods of organization. Like other delegations, it hoped the review would be ready in time for the Executive Committee to consider it at the next session.

13. He approved the terms of reference proposed for the Sub-Committee, but emphasized that the Sub-Committee's primary function was to assist the Executive Committee in its work; hence it seemed preferable that the documents it received and meetings it held should not go beyond the Committee's regular session. Lastly, the High Commissioner's intention to ensure greater delegation of authority at the local level met with his support.

14. Mr. KHARMA (Lebanon) thought that the undeniable increase in UNHCR's responsibilities and the volume of funds it had to manage should induce the Executive Committee to respond favourably to the problem of strengthening the management structure. In the light of the discussions in the Sub-Committee and the further information UNHCR had supplied at its request, his delegation generally supported the High Commissioner's staffing proposals for 1981 and 1982 and his recommendations on the strengthening of UNHCR management. The High Commissioner should, as requested, arrange for the widest possible representation at all levels, so as to reflect the worldwide character of the Office's humanitarian activities.
15. ACABQ had recommended that the Administrative Management Service should be called upon to review the institutional structure of UNHCR, where some reorganization was necessary, and the High Commissioner had decided to respond to that recommendation. The review was an urgent necessity and he noted with satisfaction that, in suggesting new structures, the High Commissioner had borne in mind the need to limit the cost.
16. Some difficulties remained concerning the financing of UNHCR's administrative costs and the apportionment of those costs between the regular budget and UNHCR voluntary funds. His delegation endorsed the Sub-Committee's recommendation that the High Commissioner's note on the financing of such costs should be transmitted to ACABQ and the General Assembly for consideration and speedy action. A zero growth rate could only apply to bodies whose activities or responsibilities had not increased to any significant extent, and if the zero growth principle was applied to UNHCR it would not be a case of zero growth but one of negative net growth.
17. In conclusion, he expressed the hope that the delegations of States members of the Executive Committee that would be going to New York would spare no effort to see that the necessary funds to strengthen UNHCR's management were included in the regular budget of the United Nations.
18. Mr. HESSEL (France) said that the Sub-Committee was to be commended on the way in which it had carried out its work in rather difficult circumstances. In his opinion, the atmosphere of mistrust that had prevailed for some months now dissipated, since everyone had had the opportunity to speak of his concerns in the Sub-Committee, where the questions raised had been examined in depth. There was thus a climate of greater confidence and it was to be hoped that the new and more thoroughgoing dialogue would continue. It was essential for the High Commissioner, in a phase of activity in which the funds he had to manage were substantial, to have the administrative authority that was as important for him as his undeniable political authority.
19. He expressed warm support for the statement by the representative of Lebanon and shared the latter's opinion regarding the steps to be taken for fruitful discussions with the Secretary-General and the Fifth Committee on the share of UNHCR costs that should be financed from the United Nations regular budget. It was also useful that the Administrative Management Service should be called upon to study the problems that remained, and thus move towards the more effective management that everyone wanted. The study could include such matters as decentralization, delegation of authority, especially in financial matters, the composition of the staff, where the essential criteria of efficiency and competence could still be combined with equitable regional distribution and representation of women, internal structural problems, emergency relief problems and co-ordination with other organizations engaged in similar tasks. Another matter, one frequently mentioned by his delegation, was that of greater openness, in other words, providing Governments with the most specific and clearest information possible on UNHCR operations and changes in its budget.

20. He assured the High Commissioner and his close colleagues that he was not unaware of the marked progress which had been made in recent months in those matters, but they were still important in a world where budgetary restrictions weighed on all States and Governments had to be persuaded of the value of the programmes for which their support was requested. It was in that spirit that the Sub-Committee should pursue its task. His country wholeheartedly supported the terms of reference of the Sub-Committee as set out in annex E to the report (A/AC.96/600).

21. Mr. HOMANN-HERIMBERG (Director, Administration and Management Division) said that it was important to reaffirm the high regard which the High Commissioner attached to the work of the Sub-Committee.

22. He had taken careful note of the comments made in the course of the discussion and wished first of all to assure the representative of the Federal Republic of Germany that his understanding of the role of the regional co-ordinators was correct. As to the vigilance advocated by several representatives in the creation of new posts and in the redeployment of existing posts, the High Commissioner himself took a personal interest in the matter and exercised very strict control. Some representatives had said that the level of programme support costs and administrative costs was higher than the operational expenditure. It was not always possible to draw a parallel between administrative costs and programme implementation costs, because some of the protection activities the High Commissioner was required to undertake had no corollary in actual operational expenditure.

23. The High Commissioner was well aware of the need for equitable distribution of posts among geographical regions and among men and women. The Executive Committee could be assured that very considerable progress had been made in that area over the past five years and the High Commissioner was firmly resolved to continue along the same lines.

24. The views expressed in the Sub-Committee and the Executive Committee on management methods would be taken into account, particularly on the questions of delegation of authority and decentralization, and steadfast efforts would be made in that connection.

25. Lastly, UNHCR found that the reactions of delegations in the matter of the apportionment of administrative costs between voluntary funds and the regular budget were encouraging. The High Commissioner would continue his efforts to bring about a speedy improvement in the situation; however, his resolve was not the only important factor and support from member States was also essential.

ANY OTHER QUESTIONS (agenda item 9) (continued)

26. The CHAIRMAN suggested that the Executive Committee should consider the organization of its future work in the light of the establishment of the Sub-Committee and the experience gained at the current session. The agenda for the next session might contain four essential items: general debate, protection, assistance and administrative matters, on the understanding that those items were interdependent; the heading "administrative matters" would cover some points which were shown separately in the agenda for the current session, such as items 5, 6 and 8. The preparation of an annotated agenda also would greatly facilitate the Executive Committee's work.

The meeting rose at 12.05 p.m.