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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME

Thirty-third session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 342nd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,  
on Monday, 11 October 1982, at 11 a.m.

Acting Chairman: Mr. MARSHALL (United Kingdom)  
Chairman: Mr. KHARMA (Lebanon)

CONTENTS

Opening of the session  
Election of officers  
Adoption of the agenda  
Statement by the Chairman  
Statement by the High Commissioner

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The meeting was called to order at 11.35 a.m.

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

1. The ACTING CHAIRMAN declared open the thirty-third session of the Executive Committee. He wished to welcome in particular the United Nations Council for Namibia, which had been elected to membership of the Committee. He also had the honour to welcome Her Royal Highness the Crown Princess of Norway, who was to receive the Nansen Medal that afternoon.
2. On the proposal of the Chairman, the members of the Committee observed a minute of silence in tribute to the memory of the refugees who had died since the thirty-second session of the Committee.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS (item 2 of the provisional agenda)

3. The ACTING CHAIRMAN invited nominations for the office of Chairman.
4. Mr. SAHM (Federal Republic of Germany) nominated Mr. Kharma (Lebanon).
5. Mr. de SOUZA (France) seconded the nomination.
6. Mr. Kharma (Lebanon) was elected Chairman by acclamation and took the Chair.
7. The CHAIRMAN invited nominations for the office of Vice-Chairman.
8. Mr. SKALLI (Morocco) nominated Mr. Ewerlöf (Sweden).
9. Mr. MARTINEZ (Argentina) seconded the nomination.
10. Mr. Ewerlöf (Sweden) was elected Vice-Chairman by acclamation.
11. The CHAIRMAN invited nominations for the office of Rapporteur.
12. Mr. INAN (Turkey) nominated Mr. Lejvi (Tunisia).
13. Mr. PEREZ-CASTILLO (Venezuela) seconded the nomination.
14. Mr. Lejvi (Tunisia) was elected Rapporteur by acclamation.
15. The CHAIRMAN paid a tribute to Mr. Marshall for his chairmanship of the thirty-second session.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA (item 3 of the provisional agenda) (A/AC.96/608)

16. The provisional agenda (A/AC.96/608) was adopted.

STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN

17. The CHAIRMAN said that the growth of the refugee problem during the past four years called for a sustained effort on the part of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the international community. In that connection, the General Assembly had adopted many resolutions calling for particular action or directing attention to matters of concern to UNHCR, and it was gratifying

to note the swift and positive response of the international community. It was likewise gratifying to note that UNHCR maintained close contacts with all sectors of the international community in order to keep them informed of new developments in its work.

18. The work of the voluntary and non-governmental organizations had continued to grow in importance, many having earned justified praise for their work. Regular programmes had developed beyond the emergency phase and were now concerned with care, maintenance and more durable solutions. A field-oriented policy on the part of the High Commissioner and closer co-ordination with other relief agencies would therefore be desirable, particularly in the case of long-term self-reliance programmes.

19. International protection still presented a serious challenge. In the case of the mass exodus of refugees individual determination of refugee status was difficult, and broader and more objective criteria were required. He was therefore pleased to note that the Sub-Committee on International Protection had incorporated the broader definition used by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in its conclusions on the protection of asylum-seekers in situations of large-scale influx. The need for such criteria had also been recognized by the General Assembly, which had called upon UNHCR to extend protection to displaced persons in refugee-like situations.

20. It was to be hoped that increased concern with the root causes of refugee situations would make it possible to avoid such situations through the promotion of more satisfactory conditions in countries of origin. In the meantime, two major problems relating to international protection must be given attention: (a) the rescue of refugees in distress at sea, and (b) military attacks on camps and settlements of refugees of concern to UNHCR.

21. UNHCR activities required a well-structured and highly-qualified administration, especially in the field, as well as a close relationship between headquarters and field offices.

22. He expressed the hope that, during the consideration of the reports of the two sub-committees, constructive solutions would be proposed in the areas of protection, and administration and management, where further progress was still needed.

#### STATEMENT BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

23. Mr. HARTLING (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that, since the report on UNHCR assistance activities (A/AC.96/606) contained more detail than in previous years, he would not follow his usual practice of giving the members of the Committee an up-to-date picture of the world refugee situation but would express some points of concern to UNHCR.

24. Quite obviously, the refugee situation in the world was different from what it had been 20 or 30 years before; the difference was partly geographical, since the refugee problem existed in all continents instead of involving mainly European refugees, but was also to be seen in the approach to the "caseload", since nowadays refugees tended to arrive in a country in large numbers instead of small groups. Furthermore, the majority of refugees today were in developing countries, which could not carry the burden without substantial international assistance. The protection task remained fundamental, but the assistance function had acquired considerable magnitude; UNHCR assisted large numbers of refugees throughout the world, first of all to survive, but also to reach self-sufficiency.

25. Most of the problems confronting UNHCR arose from the borderline situations of distinguishing between refugees and non-refugees, between the social and economic problems posed by a refugee situation and the social and economic problems of the receiving country as a whole, between humanitarian assistance to refugees and development, or between political and humanitarian work.

26. A question often heard by UNHCR was "Who is a refugee?" or more broadly "Who is a person of concern to UNHCR?". In principle, it was a person outside his own country, although that was not always the case since economic migrants and alien workers were not refugees as such. In many cases the distinction was not easy to make and borderline cases had grown in complexity, since today more than ever people were leaving their countries for a variety of reasons. To comply with those evolving realities the General Assembly had introduced the concept of "displaced persons", and in addition to refugees within the terms of its Statute, UNHCR concerned itself with uprooted persons in refugee-like situations. There again, UNHCR was treading the borderline of concepts and definitions and a pragmatic approach was called for.

27. Another group of questions concerned the frontier between humanitarian work for refugees and development assistance to a country. It was not the task of UNHCR to participate in the development efforts of a developing country, but when refugees arrived in a developing country in large numbers UNHCR must try to help in the emergency phase in the best possible way. That phase was full of obstacles. There had been many examples of refugee sites with no drinking water and where providing it had entailed practical, logistical and financial difficulties; the same applied to food and other emergency relief. Even in the emergency phase some indispensable measures might have a developmental connotation. For example, it might be asked whether investment in a water-purification plant for a refugee population constituted "development assistance" since the local population might also benefit from it.

28. The question became even more significant when one considered measures to promote the self-sufficiency of refugees; it was necessary to ensure first that the refugees overcame the initial emergency and then to aim at achieving a durable solution. In planning its programmes, UNHCR tried to give increasing weight to those components aimed at bringing the refugees to a level where they could take care of themselves. Wherever possible, it worked closely with the other organizations in the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations, but those organizations encountered difficulties when it came to taking over entire operations since they had their own mandates to fulfil. Similarly, receiving countries found it impossible to allocate part of their badly-needed development resources to refugees and it was for the international community to supplement their efforts. In short, the process leading towards refugee integration was not simply a succession of relief, self-sufficiency and development where UNHCR could hand over responsibility at a given point.

29. Sometimes measures that might be considered as development must be taken in the early stages of a relief operation. At all stages, consolidation measures must be taken so that the progress made would be hampered as little as possible by outside events. During that process other organizations must be called upon, according to their mandates, procedures and possibilities; that was valid at all stages - from emergency relief to development. Where appropriate and feasible, UNHCR did not hesitate to hand over responsibility, in an endeavour to confine itself to activities where circumstances made its intervention imperative.

30. A fundamental aspect of UNHCR's work was its absolutely non-political character. Refugee problems were by definition political but the provision of assistance to refugees was humanitarian and non-political. UNHCR helped refugees to become self-sufficient but it did not support them in their political struggles. A United Nations organ could not and should not take sides or be party to any political conflict. Nor could UNHCR try to tackle any of the "root causes". In many cases, it was clear what the causes of a refugee problem were, and the international community must do its utmost to remove such causes. However, the High Commissioner must remain outside any political fight since to do otherwise would cause him to be hindered in his task.

31. UNHCR's work was the responsibility not of its staff members alone, but also of the members of the Executive Committee. It was a source of satisfaction to the Committee when UNHCR's work was successful and it was a source of concern when difficulties were encountered. UNHCR had been started by nations which had had the necessary vision, political will and idealism. They had given UNHCR a Statute, a mandate that had proved valid throughout the years. Many problems had arisen and the whole background had changed in 30 years as so many countries had become free and independent. Year after year, refugees had needed not only sympathy but also hospitality and financial generosity. Those needs had always been met, since nations were united in their will to maintain and support that humanitarian task.

32. All Members of the United Nations could take pride in the humanitarian work achieved. It was to the credit of all Governments that they met, not only to discuss political, economic and social problems and to seek compromises in fields where so much conflict prevailed, but also to engage in humanitarian work, to improve the quality of life and to alleviate the burdens of the peoples of the world. Much of the suffering in the world was the outcome of conflicts between nations and of social and economic injustice; at the same time, however, there was a widespread, even unanimous, will to help the victims of war, disease and injustice. The humanitarian work of the United Nations testified to that will.

33. For a number of reasons, the humanitarian activity of protecting and assisting the uprooted was one of the most rewarding in the international community. First of all, UNHCR dealt with individuals. In its work for refugees, it was a privilege to be close to the individual, to see persons protected against refoulement and saved from prison, torture and possible execution, and to see a family reunited.

34. Secondly, humanitarian work showed concrete results. He did not for one minute underestimate the work done in the political forums since without it the world would suffer even more. But in the more specific humanitarian sphere, there was the privilege of observing speedier results. In many situations, refugees were satisfactorily settled outside their homeland before the political problem that had caused their departure was solved. On other occasions, however, a political settlement would be a key factor in the solution of a refugee problem. Some situations that had seemed hopeless had thus come to a quick solution. For example, in 1978, almost 200,000 refugees had gone from Bangladesh to Burma, creating what had been considered a long and perhaps insoluble problem. However, the two Governments had reached an understanding, the way home had opened up for the refugees and UNHCR had been requested to arrange voluntary repatriation. At present, all the refugees had returned to their own countries, the camps set up by UNHCR in Bangladesh had been dismantled and the office in Dacca closed.

35. His first journey as High Commissioner had been to Africa. He had wanted to visit the refugee camps and meet the authorities in the countries surrounding Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. At that time, it had been estimated that there were some 250,000 refugees from Rhodesia. It had therefore been a great experience to attend the independence celebrations of Zimbabwe in April 1980. At present, all the refugees had been repatriated.

36. He had recently visited the United Republic of Cameroon, where he had met several hundred refugees, including a small group from Chad. Yet less than a year previously, more than 100,000 persons from Chad - who had since returned to their homeland - had sought refuge in Cameroon, a country that had received them with hospitality and friendship. Some groups had returned to Chad only recently and would be helped in their efforts to resume a dignified existence in their homeland.

37. Thirdly, it was rewarding to note that the non-political, humanitarian role of the High Commissioner's Office was accepted and recognized in all quarters, which indicated agreement to minimize political differences and the existence of a political will to protect individuals.

38. He hoped that at the current session the Committee would make a clear recommendation that the mandate of UNHCR should remain unchanged. In his opinion, it would be disastrous for refugee work if the mandate were changed, since it had proved useful and flexible in many situations throughout the years and had been a solid foundation on which to build. He further hoped that the members of the Committee and UNHCR were not fatigued in their compassion and were still ready to fulfil their obligations on the humanitarian front. For many refugees in the world, the work of the United Nations - of UNHCR - was literally the only hope; they must not be let down.

The meeting rose at 12.45 p.m.