

UN salutes country for aid to refugees

The people of Canada have been awarded the 1986 Nansen Medal in recognition of their contributions to the cause of refugees in their country and throughout the world. The medal, presented by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Jean-Pierre Hocke to Governor General Jeanne Sauvé on November 13, recognizes outstanding contributions towards protecting and assisting refugees. It perpetuates the spirit of Fridtjof Nansen, a pioneer in international humanitarian aid, who was the League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees from 1921 until his death in 1930. The medal has usually been given annually since 1954.

Canada is the first country to receive the Nansen Medal. Mr. Hocke stressed the unusual nature of giving the award to an entire people, saying that it was a means of recognizing human solidarity which reached well beyond government actions in support of the refugee cause.

"Given the size and diversity of Canada, and bearing in mind the outstanding achievements attained in favour of refugees at the national and provincial levels, by individuals as well as groups, organizations and authorities belonging to a broad political, linguistic, cultural, social and religious spectrum, it would have been unfair to single out one individual or group as opposed to another," he said.

To mark the presentation of the award to the Canadian people, a Nansen Medal project for the benefit of refugees is to be established. Details of the project and the designation of the beneficiaries are under discussion.

In considering the validity of claims for refugee status, Canada follows the general and universally applicable definition of the term 'refugee' in the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 as supplemented by the 1967 UN Refugee Protocol. A "Convention refugee" is defined as any person who, by reason of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, (a) is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, by reason of such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or (b) not having a country of nationality, is outside the country of his former habitual residence and is unable or, by reason of such fear, is unwilling to return to that country.

Canada has always supported international efforts on behalf of refugees. It was a member of the International Refugee Organization and subsequently a strong supporter of UNHCR. In addition, Canada is a leading contributor to international humanitarian and refugee aid programs having already given more than \$18 million to UNHCR this year.

Canada also has a commendable record of receiving refugees fleeing persecution in all parts of the world. More than half a million refugees have been resettled in Canada since the end of the Second World War and the *World Refugee Survey*, 1985, lists Canada second among industrialized nations in number of resettled refugees with 157 700 from 1975 to 1984.

New determination system

A new refugee determination system, based on Canada's "obligations as a signatory to the UN Convention as well as Canadian standards of justice", was announced on May 21, 1986. It reflects Canada's humanitarian tradition as a country of refugee resettlement and its desire to continue to share the burden of the international refugee situation. The new system will help eliminate "delays for genuine refugees and months of uncertainty for others" as well as discourage those who use the system for purely economic reasons.

Highlights of the system as outlined in *Refugee Perspectives 1986-1987* from Employment and Immigration Canada, are:

- an oral hearing on questions of merit for claimants;
- independent and well-informed decision-making;
- a two-member expert panel;
- a non-adversarial format;
- split decisions to favour the claimant;
- benefit of the doubt to the refugee;
- appeal by leave to federal court;
- limited access controls, such as for those exceeding the time limits, those granted prior protection in another country, and those making repeat claims; and
- a legislated requirement that claims be heard expeditiously.