



Statements and Speeches

No. 78/18

AN INTERNATIONAL PROBLEM OF GREATEST URGENCY – RESETTLEMENT OF REFUGEES FROM INDOCHINA

A Canadian Statement by Mr Jacques Gignac, Assistant Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, during Consultations held in Geneva, December 11 and 12, 1978, on the Indochina Refugee Problem, under the Sponsorship of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

We are meeting today in response to an international problem of the greatest urgency – namely, the massive refugee outflow from Indochina. This is a problem of grave humanitarian concern. Tens of thousands of lives may depend on whether we find a solution without delay; however, the problem is of such magnitude that only a concerted and systematic international effort can deal with it. It is a problem of concern to all countries that adhere to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and to its proclamation of the rights of every individual to life, liberty and security of person and of refugees to seek asylum in other countries. It seems particularly appropriate to recall these fundamental rights on the day following the thirtieth anniversary of the proclamation of the human-rights charter.

We are meeting here at the urgent invitation of the High Commissioner. Our first objective, based on a humanitarian concern, is to find solutions adequate to this tragic problem and to make certain that the High Commissioner will have at his disposal the means necessary to carry out fully his mandate as it relates to the refugees and displaced persons from Southeast Asia. In the excellent note he has prepared for us, the High Commissioner has correctly analysed the present plight of the refugees and displaced persons from Southeast Asia, and the enormousness and complexity of the problem they pose. According to the statistics in his report, more than 430,000 individuals have fled Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos since 1975. Thailand alone has received some 195,000 refugees, including 51,000 this year alone. Of these, 130,000 remain. More than 85,000 have fled Vietnam in small and large boats. Many have found asylum in Malaysia, and of these 40,000 remain to be resettled. In addition, more than 150,000 have fled Cambodia for Vietnam during this period. During 1978, the flow of refugees has expanded dramatically from month to month, increasing from a monthly level of 2,000 to 12,000 in the space of several months. Impressive as these statistics are, their real significance can be appreciated only in the context of the human suffering they represent. However, this problem would have been even more dramatic had the High Commissioner and his devoted staff not already deployed remarkable and commendable efforts to assist the populations affected by this exodus and to alleviate their suffering. The fact that tens of thousands of refugees have been saved and can hope to establish themselves anew in another country is in large measure attributable to the sustained effort of the High Commissioner.

It is equally important to commend the responses of the Southeast Asian countries of first asylum, particularly Thailand and Malaysia. Confronted with a situation not of
