

George Gordon-Lennox Helping Refugees Return Home

■ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was set up in January 1951, as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly, in the same way as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The UNHCR's mandate runs for five-year periods and comes up again for renewal in December 1988. There is little likelihood the Assembly will vote to abolish it: the UNHCR now cares for some 10 million refugees scattered around the world. It has a budget of more than \$500 million, raised in voluntary contributions each year, to deal with both emergencies and long-term situations.

George Gordon-Lennox started his working life as a reporter on the *Winnipeg Free Press* and moved into work with refugees after years as an information officer with the League of Red Cross Societies. He was sent to India twice: during the Bihar famine of 1967, and at the time of the exodus of 10 million people from East Pakistan in 1971. He was recruited into UNHCR in 1972, and has spent years in Latin America—and in Geneva as executive assistant to the high commissioner. Here he tells mainly of two operations, in South Sudan and Burma, where he supervised the voluntary repatriation of refugees:

"In 1972 the Addis Ababa Agreement ended the civil war that had gone on in the Sudan for 17 years. It was agreed that refugees could be repatriated, and the high commissioner—then Sadruddin Aga Khan—was asked to co-ordinate the resettlement of refugees and [the] assistance to get the South Sudan going again. Various projects [that] were started were eventually picked up by the UNDP and other agencies, but for a year we were doing a really big rehabilitation job in the region—it was enormous. The headquarters of the operation was in Khartoum (and in Geneva), and I was in charge of the local sub-office in Juba. I was 37 at the time.

"The refugees had been in five nearby countries: Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zaire and the Central African Republic. There were between 250 000 and 300 000 who returned. They came back to practically nothing, to deserted villages that had often just gone back to nature or the bush. We helped them a lot with building materials, with putting up clinics and schools, so that they could start their village again. We were at the end of nowhere, at the end of the pipeline in all its senses.

"One of the things we did was bring in fuel. They had absolutely no fuel, and it took months to bring it up the Nile from Khartoum to Juba. We were bringing it in, overland, from Kenya through Uganda in trucks. But the city of Juba and the settled part is on the west bank of the Nile and the road to Uganda is on the other side, and there was no bridge—just a broken-down old ferry crossing the river, which is about 500 m wide at that point.

"We negotiated a contribution from the Netherlands for the building of a bridge, and said we would foot the bill for the approaches to the bridge. The approaches were earthworks, and were done mostly with manual labour and a few bulldozers. The Dutch brought in a ready-made Bailey type of bridge in pieces by sea to Mombasa and overland all the way up, and a whole team to build the bridge. A huge crew came in, and in about three weeks the bridge