

Canada's record

One of the primary by-products of this state of affairs is the refugee. The 1980s have witnessed an astronomical inflation in the numbers of displaced persons and no country seems immune to their desperate quest for respite from persecution and natural calamity. Canadian assistance in the area of direct aid to refugees takes four major forms: supplying selected countries with direct food aid; supporting directly or through international parent bodies, refugee-related projects launched by volunteer agencies in Canada; bolstering international aid efforts carried out through the United Nations; and presenting refugees with the opportunity to settle in Canada. The commendable record Canada possesses generally in rendering service and protection to the stateless and homeless was formally acknowledged by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees when it awarded the 1986 Nansen Medal to the people of Canada, "in recognition of the major and sustained contribution made to the cause of refugees in their country and throughout the world over the years."

If anything, though, the refugee crisis currently displays tendencies only of deteriorating further for both Canada and the international community as a whole. Canadians have always felt secure in the belief that geography armed them with a barrier against a sizable influx of uninvited immigrants. The relatively new phenomenon of refugees appearing on Canada's doorstep has begun to reveal cracks in this myth. It has at the same time put to the test Canada's commitment to upholding its liberal humanitarian tradition of the generous acceptance of refugees. Indeed, Canada's refugee system has been under assault for the last three years. Large groups of Latin Americans, together with the sensational arrival of Tamils and the role of Canadian Sikhs in their people's dispute with the government of India, have placed enormous strains on what was an already backlogged refugee determination system. Perhaps more distressingly, those conditions have caused a public backlash that threatens genuine refugees, not to mention fomenting divisions among Canadians themselves. In short, refugee policy has emerged as a particularly contentious issue in Canada.

Refugees and foreign policy

Not surprisingly, all this has brought the resettlement component of Canadian refugee policy under concentrated scrutiny. Yet refugees carry with them policy implications which encompass more than purely domestic considerations. It is not solely the mechanics of the inland refugee status determination process that these troubles of the moment have called into question. The very principles which underlie Canada's overall refugee policy have been subjected to closer inspection. Altogether, the ongoing controversy regarding what the appropriate response to the refugee conundrum should be has focused attention on the broader themes of Canadian refugee policy, especially its relationship to foreign policy.

Working multilaterally in conjunction with other nations — in existing international organizations or via some new mechanisms — not only to strike at the roots of the refugee predicament but also to deal fairly and humanely with the refugees themselves, would seem essential. Yet, more and more countries are joining in closing their doors to refugees and in choosing to ignore their plight. At the same time, humanitarian needs cannot be divorced from politics. Refugees are used as pawns, food as a weapon in intra- and interstate wars. Yet ironically, this quan-

dary holds within it the prospect of stemming the refugee overflow. This conclusion rests on the theory that there exists a connection between emergency operations on the one hand and conflict management or prevention on the other.

As has been noted elsewhere, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) activities effectively carried on in a theater of war can, at the very least, perform a crucial confidence-building function. In other words, while a failed relief effort might very well compound an already turbulent situation, a fruitful one could, by aiding all victims, produce confidence between opposing groups. In fact, by intervening on behalf of afflicted populations on both sides, HA/DR missions can reduce tensions, redress grievances, and de-escalate violence, thus generating a climate favorable to negotiation. The basis for political conciliation may be laid by humanitarian efforts, the chances for political agreement increased through "humanitarian mediation."

Canada's chance

Undoubtedly, Canada could stake out a role here. It has experience, expertise, a long tradition, and generally speaking, a high degree of credibility as well as a good reputation when it comes to both emergency operations and mediation/negotiation initiatives undertaken in regional conflicts. Moreover, its muscles stretch not only into the United Nations, but into the Commonwealth, la Francophonie, and G-7 too. For these reasons, Canada appears superbly qualified to act as a catalyst in establishing a framework for dovetailing emergency operations with conflict management/prevention.

More specifically, Canada could take advantage of the recent resurgence in the fortunes of the UN by using that organization as a vehicle for preparing and supporting programs that would combine HA/DR operations directly with conflict management/prevention. As one commentator has pointed out, the UN remains the only international actor which has the capacity, universal character, moral authority and "humanitarian right of access" to respond to large-scale breakdowns. Naturally, the UN would not be appropriate as a lead agency in every instance. Nonetheless, as past experience in Bangladesh, Kampuchea, Bolivia, Ethiopia and The Sudan demonstrates, there is no option to dealing with such catastrophes. Plainly, as the international community's belief that collective action is imperative becomes reinforced by the seriousness of crises in various regions, the "comparative advantage" of the UN in certain issue and geographic areas grows.

Canada could play a part by examining how exactly it, as well as other "like-minded" powers, could best assist the UN in fulfilling such a function, and by studying the ways in which they could mesh their peacemaking and HA/DR activities. It could contribute to pinpointing the obstacles which must be surmounted and the conditions which must obtain for such operations to augment the chances for conflict management, and to recommending how those obstacles could be overcome, those conditions created, and "humanitarian mediation" made attractive to opposing parties. It could also work toward facilitating superpower and regional power cooperation.

Involve the UN

Canada has always striven in the past to buttress the world's multilateral institutions, especially the UN, in the well-founded conviction that these offer the most solid guarantee of international cooperation, of exercising Canadian influence, and of safeguarding Canadian interests. In the last three years, the Ex-