

UNHCR and Refugees

A "refugee" is defined by the United Nations as a person who has left the country of his normal residence because of fear of persecution. At the end of the Second World War, the number of refugees in Europe was close to 2.2 million. Immediately after the War, Canada and other countries formed the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees in order to assist refugees in their emigration, re-establishment in their country of present asylum or voluntary return to their original homes. In 1946, a United Nations Specialized Agency, the International Refugee Organization, was established to continue this work. Canada became a member of the IRO in 1947 and, from 1946 to 1951, contributed about \$18.8 million to the organization and accepted 123,479 refugees and displaced persons for resettlement.

At its fourth session in 1949, the General Assembly decided to appoint a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for a three-year term, to continue to protect the interests of refugees after the termination of the IRO. In 1953, the Assembly extended the term of the High Commissioner's Office for another three-year period, and in 1957 the term was extended for a further five-year period, from January 1, 1959, to December 31, 1963. The seventeenth session voted in favour of a further renewal to December 31, 1967.

The High Commissioner's role was at first a non-operational one, limited mainly to the protection of refugees. In 1952, however, he was authorized to appeal for funds to enable emergency aid to be given to the most needy groups of refugees within his mandate. Funds raised by this decision were contributed to the United Nations Refugees Emergency Fund (UNREF). In 1954 this fund was incorporated in a new voluntary fund, the United Nations Refugee Fund (UNRFF), whose programme was aimed principally at the promotion of a permanent European refugee solution by assimilation within European countries and the promotion of emigration to other countries.

On January 1, 1959, the UNREF was replaced by a new programme of the High Commissioner for Refugees, administered by the Office of the High Commissioner under the guidance of an Executive Committee composed of representatives of United Nations member governments. Canada has been a member of this Committee since 1957, and chaired it in 1965. From 1951 to 1966, Canada contributed over \$3.5 million to the UNHCR, and it donated \$650,000 in 1956-57 to the Canadian Red Cross for the assistance of Hungarian refugees. In 1965, the Canadian Government increased its contribution to \$350,000 from the previous figure of \$290,000.

Through the efforts of the refugee programmes of the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees, the IRO and the UNHCR, the number of refugees in Europe has been reduced from about 2.2 million in 1946 to about 50,000 in 1967. However, in 1965 the High Commissioner took on added responsibilities by bringing assistance to new groups of refugees, particularly in Africa, where the total number within its purview is over 400,000. The improvement of the situation in Europe has been made possible to a large extent by the contributions of governments to the United Nations and its related programmes, World Refugee Year (WRY) and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM). During