



# Statements and Speeches

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## **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

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their making and, furthermore, one that causes them enormous political, economic and social problems, they have responded to the limit of their means. That contribution should be recognized. Similarly, we commend those countries, particularly the United States, France and Australia, that have accepted refugees for resettlement, as well as those that have contributed financially to the High Commissioner's requirements. These countries have all assumed a share of the responsibilities incumbent upon them as members of the international community.

Canada is a country of long-standing humanitarian traditions. We have historically considered that a tragedy of great human proportions, whether it occurred in our region or elsewhere, whether it involved people with whom we had close historical links or otherwise, was nonetheless a matter of concern to us. We have considered that we have a responsibility to respond in the context of international efforts.

Besides being a country of immigration, Canada is also a country that has welcomed refugees and displaced persons. Furthermore, the new Canadian immigration act that came into effect earlier this year is reflective of our concern for refugees, as it incorporates the obligations we have assumed in acceding to the Refugee Convention and Protocol.

Canada is far from Southeast Asia. We have never had historical contact with the countries of the region. This has not, however, prevented us from taking an active interest in the tragic fate of the Indochina refugees. Since 1975, approximately 7,600 have resettled in Canada. This year we have initiated programs to accommodate 50 small-boat families and 20 overland families a month. We anticipate that we shall be able to continue to receive a significant number of refugees from this region. Recently, we played a significant role by accepting more than 600 refugees from the *Hai Hong*; these 600 were over and above our established resettlement programs. In all the regions of Canada where these refugees have started a new life, they have been warmly welcomed by Canadians.

While the effort to which the Canadian Government has committed itself rests on a national consensus, it does entail a considerable financial outlay. The decision to take in an additional 600 refugees from the *Hai Hong* required in itself a financial provision of \$2 million. The costs of resettling other refugees from Southeast Asia is in comparable proportions.

The Government program does not represent the totality of Canadian efforts. For example, a program has been established that would permit Canadian churches, non-governmental organizations, and indeed groups of five or more adults, to sponsor a refugee family's entry into Canada. Any such sponsored inflow would be above and beyond that sponsored financially by the Government. And I must say the response has been considerable. This new sponsorship program is only now being fully developed, but already the large number of Canadians participating is heartwarming.

The decision of the High Commissioner to convene this special meeting was taken in October in circumstances rather different from those that prevail today. In the two-

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month interval, what was a serious outflow of refugees has turned into a major exodus. The flow of overland refugees has continued in the serious proportions that have existed for some time. However, the flow of boat refugees, which averaged 1,500 in the period May 1977 – March 1978 and which then increased to a level of 5,000 or 6,000 by August of this year, has since September reached the proportions of 10,000, 15,000, and perhaps even 20,000, a month.

Faced with the magnitude of the problem, it is quite evident that the High Commissioner, despite the effectiveness of his programs, cannot cope with the task with the resources at his disposal. It is also obvious that the burden on the countries of first asylum is becoming too heavy and that it must be lightened and more equitably shared. Furthermore, the options for permanent resettlement must be considerably increased and diversified. In short, given the form and magnitude of the population outflow, it is essential that the problem be taken in hand by the international community as a whole in a broadly-based co-operative effort. It is no longer adequate to address ourselves in a sporadic way to certain manifestations or symptoms of the problem, even when they represent as serious and as immediate a crisis as the *Hai Hong* incident. If we each seek individual remedies, the problem in its totality will remain. Furthermore, a continuation of recurring unco-ordinated appeals for assistance runs the risk in the long term of exhausting the good will of governments and individuals or, worse, of causing them to lose interest in the whole problem.

That is the challenge we must meet together. We consider that the High Commissioner in his note of November 29 has given us all the elements for an international plan of action to face that challenge. We agree with the High Commissioner that, first and foremost, we must aim at securing rescue at sea and first asylum. Human lives must not be lost as a result of the inability to provide a temporary asylum for refugees. To this end, it is necessary that the number of countries of first asylum in the region be increased and that guarantees be made to them of permanent resettlement in third countries. The High Commissioner should establish temporary camps throughout the region that will serve as reception and transit centres for the refugees as they arrive. We are fully aware, however, that the success of the High Commissioner in establishing temporary-asylum camps in the region will depend directly on guarantees of permanent resettlement. We believe that, in the present circumstances, it is imperative to explore thoroughly all possibilities for permanent resettlement, both within the region and in other parts of the world. It is essential that more countries open their doors to the refugees from Indochina. What a few countries alone cannot resolve surely could be resolved by the concerted efforts of a larger number of countries that have the means to contribute to a solution. Apart from the direct consequences for the refugees thereby received, this action would have a favourable impact on the parliaments and governments of the receiving countries and would reinforce their resolve to participate in a global effort. It is also essential that the fullest and most expeditious use be made of present resettlement possibilities. In this context, we should support all measures taken in concert by resettlement countries to move refugees quickly from countries of first asylum to countries of resettlement. Canada, for its part, has already undertaken a redeployment of its processing staff for the Indochina refugee program. In the case of the 600 *Hai Hong* refugees, though we should have

preferred the more measured and established procedures, we nonetheless succeeded in moving the refugees to Canada in two weeks.

We believe that, in any co-ordinated international effort, the national responses will vary, and should vary, as best accords with the resources and capabilities of each country. Both financial contributions and resettlement places are required. Some countries can provide both, while others can more productively seek to provide one or the other.

The measures we are discussing here touch only the manifestations of a phenomenon the origins of which lie in the political and social evolution of the countries of exodus. It is the responsibility of these countries to find a true long-term solution. This is not the occasion to discuss root causes in any detail. Suffice it to say that we have done so in other contexts, notably the United Nations General Assembly, and we intend to continue doing so until we see some amelioration. But any meeting of this kind should make it clear that the international community holds the countries of exodus responsible for the welfare of all their citizens, whatever their racial origin or their economic circumstances. It should not hesitate to make a clear humanitarian-inspired call upon those countries to make whatever adjustments are necessary to ease the situation that is engendering so much deprivation and suffering.

We are aware of the serious economic situation that exists in the countries of exodus. Apart from the broader economic problems, there exists a very serious food shortage, which has been compounded by recent severe flooding. To the extent that the refugee outflow is encouraged by a poor economic situation, the institution of multilateral and bilateral assistance measures may help somewhat to reduce the flow of refugees.

For purely humanitarian reasons, the international community might, perhaps, wish to respond. It has been the case for Canada, which has provided substantial assistance to one of the Southeast Asian countries of exodus. Nonetheless, our disposition in this regard would doubtless be strengthened if the countries of exodus showed a greater attachment to the fundamental rights and needs of all their citizens.

Given the magnitude of the problem and the complexity of the necessary solution, it is doubtful that two days are sufficient to our task. For this reason, my delegation believes that, at this stage, our first priority must be to reach consensus on the necessity for broad participation in an international plan of action such as the High Commissioner has outlined. We must support all the measures proposed by the High Commissioner, but first of all, and above all, those that address themselves to the immediate needs of the refugees — namely, temporary asylum, a more equal sharing of the burden among countries of first asylum and permanent resettlement. If we reach an understanding on these points and engage the participation of a sufficiently large number of countries, we shall have made important progress.

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