



Statements and Speeches

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THE WORLD REFUGEE PROBLEM

Statement made October 9, 1979 by J.C. Best, Alternate Representative for Canada to the thirtieth session of the UNHCR Executive Committee, Geneva

At no time in the nearly 30-year history of the office of the High Commissioner can the necessity of his humanitarian mandate have been more evident. It is no exaggeration to say that, worldwide, the international community is confronted with refugee problems of immense proportions. It has been estimated that during the twelve months since our last Executive Committee sessions, as a global average, 2,000 new refugees arrived each day in a country of first asylum. The magnitude of this global refugee problem, both in terms of sheer numbers and of human distress, is staggering. It is important to stress that this is indeed a global problem. However serious and however intensive the concentration of the public media on any specific refugee situation, we must never forget that refugees and displaced persons are present in every region of the world and are therefore in need of the High Commissioner's attention.

The refugee question must be considered as one confronting the whole international community, not simply a handful of countries which have traditionally been concerned with refugee affairs. However distant we may be geographically from the regions of refugee outflows, we all share an interest, as responsible members of the international community, in promoting both humanitarian relief for the refugees and durable solutions which will ensure that regional political stability will not continue to be disturbed by refugee movements.

In light of these growing refugee problems, Canada has actively encouraged this past year a much broader base of international support for the High Commissioner's program. We have done so both in international forums and through bilateral discussions. These efforts and similar ones undertaken by the High Commissioner and other countries have had a measure of success. I think particularly of the new financial pledges and resettlement commitments made during the special international conference on the Indochina refugee crisis held in Geneva last July. Further evidence of a broadening international support for the High Commissioner's activities is seen here today in our newly expanded Executive Committee. I am pleased indeed to welcome for the first time to an Executive Committee session the new members who were elected last August during the summer ECOSOC sessions: Argentina, Finland, Japan, Lesotho, Morocco, Nicaragua, Sudan, Thailand and Zaire. It is Canada's expectation that our new colleagues, many of whom represent countries with serious refugee problems, will bring useful experience and an additional perspective to our discussions.

Over the past year, the High Commissioner has undertaken a number of useful and productive initiatives in his efforts to deal with various refugee situations. I believe we can be particularly proud of the UNHCR operation in Bangladesh and the suc-

cessful repatriation to Burma of nearly 200,000 refugees. I think as well of the High Commissioner's co-sponsorship of the Arusha Conference to study the massive refugee problem in Africa. The recommendations of that conference, which were endorsed by the OAU Summit in Monrovia, will have a very direct and practical bearing on the legal status of refugees in Africa and set an admirable example for other regions by their reaffirmation of the fundamental principles of asylum and *non-refoulement*. It is Canada's hope that the Arusha principles will be accepted by as many countries as possible. Furthermore, I believe the endorsement of the Arusha recommendations by the member states of the OAU points up the practical value and usefulness of a more general accession to the major international refugee instruments. In order to facilitate and make more effective the High Commissioner's vital protection role, Canada would encourage all members of this Executive Committee to set an example for the international community by acceding to the convention and protocol and to encourage other countries to do so.

It is regrettable indeed that we must note today the ever-increasing number of serious and complex refugee situations throughout the world. In confronting these great problems, we must all demonstrate in active and practical ways our full support for the High Commissioner and do all we can to enhance the ability of his staff to respond to these increasing pressures. These new refugee problems and the great expansion in the High Commissioner's budget which they have caused, make it even more essential that the High Commissioner engage in a continuing and active consultation with his Executive Committee and with the other major international organizations with which he co-operates. Canada has been appreciative of the institution by the High Commissioner of more frequent consultation with the Executive Committee in the period between its October sessions. Useful meetings at the permanent representative level were held in January and June this year. We would encourage even more frequent and formal consultations most particularly on administrative and financial questions. This necessary consultation might best be achieved by the establishment of a sub-committee on management and finance.

In the past twelve months we have all been shocked by the distressing exodus from the countries of Indochina. We have been concerned as well by the heavy social, political and economic burden which this has placed on the neighbouring countries of first asylum. Canada's own resettlement program for Indochina refugees therefore has been increased ten-fold since the consultations convened by the High Commissioner last December. It has as its objective the resettling in Canada of up to 50,000 Indochinese during 1979-80. I am pleased to note today that the response of Canadians has been very encouraging and indeed exceptional in its openness and generosity — as of the end of September more than 44,000 resettlement commitments. To date close to 15,000 refugees from the countries of Indochina have already arrived in Canada since the beginning of 1979. This progress has only been possible through the co-operation of many Canadian voluntary organizations, private groups of citizens, municipalities, and of all the provinces, several of which have also made contributions to the High Commissioner's programs. We are confident that we will attain our objective of 50,000 Indochinese refugees which represents the most extensive resettlement program in Canadian experience. It is essential to emphasize that this resettlement

program for Indochina refugees has not prejudiced our refugee resettlement programs for Eastern Europe and Latin America, all of which are established and protected in our annual refugee plan.

In terms of refugee resettlement, it is essential to emphasize once again that there be full and active co-ordination at the operational level between all the parties concerned — the resettlement countries, the countries of first asylum and the High Commissioner's staff. The success of our efforts to move massive numbers of people as quickly as possible demands the fullest and most effective co-operation of all concerned. As the High Commissioner stressed in his opening remarks yesterday, the increasing demands placed on us all require that we adapt our procedures and methods with a flexibility which will permit the most effective operations. In this context, it is Canada's firm belief that increasing attention must be given, not only to the concept of resettlement but, as important, to providing the resettlement countries with adequate support services to ensure our own quick resettlement response. It is our responsibility to ensure that the High Commissioner is able to place in the field a sufficiently strong complement of officers to provide the necessary support.

We anticipate that Canada's main focus and concentration in terms of response to refugee problems will remain on resettlement in Canada. Canada fully intends, however, to continue its support for refugee activities other than resettlement in Canada. For example, Canada is considering actively and sympathetically support for the High Commissioner's Uganda appeal. Canada recognizes that not all countries consider themselves able to resettle refugees in large numbers but we believe all should continue to expand their resettlement commitment to the degree feasible. However, we would stress again that the refugee problem is a problem for the whole international community and that the High Commissioner's activities must be given the widest possible support in terms of financial contributions, the maintenance of a generous first asylum policy and resettlement places.

The High Commissioner has presented us with a full agenda. It is our responsibility to examine closely and to discuss as fully as possible the extensive range of the High Commissioner's programs. In so doing, the Canadian delegation would hope that one idea should inform all our discussion: namely that the world refugee problem is one which confronts the whole international community and that if we are to tackle it with any hope of success the heavy burden must be shared by us all.