

CANADIAN DELEGATION TO THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
(FIFTEENTH SESSION)

RELEASE ON DELIVERY

PRESS RELEASE NO. 14

October 24, 1960

Press Office
750 Third Avenue
YUkon 6-5740

Statement by H. E. W. A. Irwin, Canadian Representative
in the Second (Economic and Financial) Committee
on the Provision of Food Surpluses to Needy Peoples Through
the United Nations System (Agenda Item 29)
Monday, October 24

Mr. President,

It is a privilege to table formally in this Committee draft resolution A/C.2/L.459 co-sponsored by Canada, Haiti, Liberia, Pakistan, United States of America and Venezuela on the question of the provision of food surpluses to needy peoples through the United Nations system. This is a subject which my Delegation considers to be one of the most important, if not the most important, of those to be considered at this year's session of the Second Committee.

Canada has repeatedly urged that international action be taken to provide food, which is in surplus in some parts of the world, to needy and hungry peoples in other lands. It is one of the great anomalies of our time that there are widespread areas in desperate need of food while at the same time there are other areas where foodstuffs are in abundant surplus. Surely the international community has developed a sufficient sense of responsibility and adequate experience with the techniques of international cooperation to find some way by now out of this dilemma. The co-sponsors have joined together to submit draft resolution A/C.2/L.459 in an effort to have the Assembly consider this tragic human problem as a matter of great urgency. In his speech to the General Assembly on September 26, Prime Minister Diefenbaker re-emphasized Canada's determination to seek international action on this question, stating: "I believe that much must be done on behalf of food deficit countries, first to help them in their hour of need and then to help them raise their own levels of production. This to me is the responsibility of the United Nations as a whole to meet this challenge." He went on to say "We envisage a food bank to provide food to member states through the United Nations. Such a scheme would require the establishment of concerted machinery which would take into account established patterns of trade and marketing and co-ordinate the individual surplus disposal to improve the effective utilization of wheat."

It must be admitted that progress in this matter has thus far been slow and to us in Canada, and no doubt even more so to the food deficit countries, disappointing. On a number of occasions in recent years, the Prime Minister of Canada has urged that specific programmes be established to make available surplus foodstuffs for consumption in those parts of the world where food shortages occur. As far back as December 1957, Prime Minister Diefenbaker, speaking in Paris, referring to the needs of hungry peoples, stated that "The conscience of the free world will not accept a situation where half mankind is well fed and the other half is starved". He advocated the establishment by some of the more fortunate countries of something in the nature of a food bank whereby food would be made available for distribution among those countries that were struggling for economic advance but which were held back by low or inadequate nutritional levels among their populations.

At the opening session of the Food-for-Peace Conference held in Washington in May 1959, the Canadian Minister of Trade and Commerce expressed Canada's hearty support for the humanitarian objectives of the President of the United States in his proposals to Congress for the more effective utilization of surplus food supplies in the interests of peace and he recalled Prime Minister Diefenbaker's many previous suggestions for international action to alleviate distress and to promote economic development in the less fortunate countries of the world. At the last session of the FAO Assembly in October 1959, the Canadian views on this subject were once more put forward. The Canadian Minister of Agriculture, referring to the challenge of surpluses and hunger continuing side by side, urged member countries to encourage and assist multilateral action whenever possible.

My Delegation recognizes that the draft before you is open to improvement and I would emphasize that we are deeply interested in the views of other delegations on the issues raised in that resolution. For our part, we would earnestly hope that the FAO, in its study of the feasibility and acceptability of new arrangements for mobilizing and distributing available surplus foodstuffs in areas of greatest need, will find it possible to recommend for this purpose the establishment of a U.N. food bank which would be supported by all member countries on an equitable financial basis. As Prime Minister Diefenbaker said on September 26, "A few countries cannot underwrite the costs of transferring their surpluses to countries in need. What we need is to join together in contributing to a solution of truly world-wide scope to this problem." Canada would of course expect that any food bank that may be established as a result of the FAO's study would be both realistic and workable. We fully agreed with the distinguished representative of Argentina when on October 18 he said that any international arrangements established for the disposal of surplus agricultural commodities must avoid damage to legitimate and normal commercial trade. Our own trade has in the past been disrupted by erratic surplus disposal arrangements and we would certainly have no intention of ourselves supporting action which would have this effect. The Delegate of Argentina is correct in saying that the concept of a world food reserve has been studied in FAO and considered at various times in the past. But times are changing, and my Delegation is convinced that a fresh look at this problem, in an atmosphere of goodwill and sympathy for the world's suffering people, could this time produce concrete results.

The problem is admittedly complex, but in our view its solution is of the greatest urgency for every day the numbers of hungry people increase. Let our goal be the abolition of hunger in a world where hunger should no longer exist and let us now join together in taking a great and decisive step forward.

Mr. Chairman, I now propose to comment briefly on the text of the resolution itself and to refer to some of the comments other delegations have been good enough to make both in the Committee and outside it on this subject. The statement which I have made in the first part of my intervention governs of course everything that I will be saying in this second part.

In the first place, may I say how much my Delegation appreciates the spirit in which this resolution has been received. We believe that there is now a general appreciation of its purposes.

There is one specific aspect of the resolution's preamble which I would like to emphasize. This is the close relationship between shortages of foodstuffs and economic development programmes. I make these comments on the basis of Canada's experience with such problems under the Colombo Plan. On many occasions in the last ten years, governments in South and Southeast Asia have been obliged to curtail and in some instances even stop major projects in their economic development programmes because of a lack of foreign exchange and even of domestic financial resources. One of the main causes for some of these sudden changes of plan has been the unexpected foreign exchange expenditures that governments in the area have had to make for the purchase of foodstuffs in order to avoid serious famine conditions. Much work has of course already been done under bilateral programmes and under the various multilateral programmes to alleviate and to assist in preventing recurring crises of these kinds.

Turning now to the operative paragraphs, I hope there will be unanimous support of the Freedom from Hunger Campaign launched by the FAO. Similarly, I assume that an appeal of the kind contained in operative paragraph 2 is one which should receive broad support. Operative paragraphs 3 and 4 do not seem to call for specific comment at this stage.

Paragraph 5 is the first of the two main operative paragraphs of the resolution. The observations which follow represent the Canadian interpretation of the purposes and objectives which these paragraphs are designed to reflect.

In the first place, as the distinguished representative of FAO has already told us, any action by the FAO which would involve the expenditure of substantial funds would have to be the subject of detailed decisions by the appropriate organs of the FAO. This Assembly may, as indeed we have already done in this Committee, question the representative of FAO about FAO's procedures and practices but we should, I think, keep in mind that these procedures and practices are not subject to control by this Assembly. However, it seems clear that, without in any way pre-judging what the properly constituted authorities of the FAO may decide, the FAO could take some early action designed to carry out the objectives of this resolution.

The passage at the end of operative paragraph 5, which, I might say, applies equally to operative paragraph 6 and which refers to the FAO principles for the disposal of surplus agricultural commodities, is of major importance to my Delegation. This section provides the kind of protection which the distinguished representative of Argentina has stated must be available at all stages during consideration of this subject. These principles, which have been worked out in cooperation with representatives of all the different interests involved, clearly involve a protection of normal commercial trade in agricultural commodities and also provide that agricultural surpluses should not be disposed of in such a way as to damage agricultural development in the less developed countries.

Operative paragraph 6 is perhaps more closely related to the Canadian position than any other part of this resolution. My Government, as I have indicated, has views which are clearly on the record which it intends to press vigorously in the FAO.

There is one specific aspect of the resolution's preamble which I would like to emphasize. This is the close relationship between the areas of foodstuffs and economic development programmes. I have these comments on the basis of Canada's experience with a programme under the Colombo Plan. On many occasions in the last ten years, governments in South and Central Asia have been obliged to curtail and in some instances even stop major projects in their economic development programmes because of a lack of foreign exchange and even of domestic financial resources. One of the main causes for some of these sudden changes of plan has been the unexpected foreign exchange expenditures that governments in the area have had to make for the purchase of foodstuffs in order to avert serious famine conditions. Much work has already been done under bilateral programmes and under the various multilateral programmes to alleviate and to assist in preventing recurring crises of these kinds.

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The passage at the end of operative paragraph 2, which I might say, applies equally to operative paragraph 3 and which relates to the FAO principles for the disposal of surplus agricultural commodities, is of major importance to my Delegation. This section provides the kind of protection which the distinguished representative of Algeria has stated must be available at all stages during consideration of this subject. These principles, which have been worked out in cooperation with representatives of all the different agricultural, mainly involve a protection of animal commodities, trade in agricultural commodities and also provide that agricultural surpluses should not be disposed of in such a way as to hamper agricultural development in the less developed countries.

Operative paragraph 6 is perhaps more closely related to the Canadian position than any other part of this resolution. My Government, as I have indicated, has views which clearly on the record when it intends to cross vigorously in the FAO

Nevertheless, the language of paragraph 6 clearly provides that the FAO will be requested to study "the feasibility and acceptability of additional arrangements". This paragraph clearly does not preclude the submission of other proposals in the FAO by other members.

Canada has always opposed wasteful duplication of effort in international organizations and members of this Committee can take it for granted that we would not have supported language which would create conflict between the FAO organization and the United Nations organization itself or between their respective secretariats. We would anticipate that the studies coming forward under operative paragraphs 7 and 8 would be fully coordinated so as to avoid duplication.

May I conclude by stressing that my Delegation has a flexible position with respect of the language in this resolution and looks forward to hearing the comments of other delegations on the text contained in L.459. We, and I am sure the other co-sponsors, would be prepared to take such comments into account prior to final action on this resolution since it is our understanding that the great majority of delegations in this Committee endorse the general objectives of this initiative.

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