

PALESTINE REFUGEES

A statement by Mr. Arthur R. Smith,
Canadian Representative on the Special
Political Committee, on November 24, 1959

...Our thanks are due both to the Secretary-General and to the Director for the two reports which they have presented to us - documents at once succinct and comprehensive. It is not invidious to mention especially our debt to the Secretary-General, partly because his effort has been an added burden on top of his already heavy duties and partly because, or so it seems to us, his report has hitherto received insufficient acknowledgement. Every page in Part I of this document reflects the careful and indeed anxious thought he gave not merely to the future of UNRWA but to the whole tragic problem resulting from the state of Arab-Israel relations.

Mr. Hammarskjold himself remained us in his short statement at the opening of this debate that it was not necessary for the Committee to assess the reasons which led him to his conclusions. My Delegation has no intention of departing from this advice, so timely and sensible under the circumstances. We shall go no further in this particular connection than to express the view that it is only through broad and imaginative, venturesome and, above all, generous measures that there is hope for an easing of the international situation in which the fate of these refugees seems at present to us inextricably locked. The eloquent statement given us a few days ago by the distinguished and learned representative of Ceylon has made it superfluous for me further to elaborate this point.

If this Assembly decides to extend the life of UNRWA, as the Secretary-General has recommended, we shall naturally be anxious to see the Agency function as effectively as possible. The two reports before us have pointed out specific areas where improvement can and should be made. I do not intend to discuss all the matters mentioned in the reports where progress is highly desirable. Without minimizing the importance of the other technical considerations, however, I think particular mention should be made of the need to rectify ration rolls and to increase programmes for self-support.

We strongly support the Director's intention to make a new attempt to clear up the situation which has existed for some years, whereby a number of persons have been receiving assistance from UNRWA to which they are not entitled and whereby, in consequence, over 100,000 children of registered refugees have had to be deprived of rations for which they are eligible. We urge the Director to give the solution of this problem a high priority and we have been encouraged by the references in his report to the co-operative attitude of the authorities most closely concerned.

Similarly we urge that every effort be made to ensure that the humanitarian work of UNRWA not be hampered by any host government's lack of full recognition of the Agency's status as a subsidiary organ of the United Nations.

We also place considerable importance on the need for self-support programmes and have been pleased to hear expressions in favour of such programmes. In our view the Agency should do all it can within the prevailing political and financial conditions to assist the refugees

as individuals to establish themselves in the economic life of the area wherever they may settle. We therefore urge the Director to explore fully the existing possibilities in the field of vocational and agricultural training. We would recall especially in this connection the Director's comment that the present lack of opportunity for young people to participate in vocational training and self-employment projects is even more tragic in terms of human waste than the need for improved food and shelter. We think this is particularly significant because it brings with it disappointments, frustrations and blighted hopes, the unhappy consequences of which must be far-reaching indeed.

I turn now to the financial aspects of our problem. I am glad to note in the Director's report that the financial position in 1958 was better than during the previous year when the Agency was forced to eliminate or curtail entire sections of its programme. We are also pleased that in 1959 six additional countries pledged themselves to join the list of contributors to the Agency. However, the report makes it clear that the position is far from satisfactory. It points up two basic financial facts which should not be passed over in silence. First, the members of the United Nations individually have not given the Agency enough money to perform all the tasks which the United Nations collectively has assigned to it. Secondly, only 28 of the 82 member governments of this organization made contributions to the work of the Agency in 1958. These facts speak for themselves and I will not dwell on them other than to say that no operation can function properly without adequate and preferably wide-based financial support.

The central question to be decided at this time, in our estimation, is whether the General Assembly agrees with the Secretary-General's recommendation that UNRWA be continued pending the re-integration of the refugees into the economic life of the Middle East either by repatriation or by resettlement. My Delegation is very concerned at the continued absence of a solution to this problem. Year after year - and this is the eleventh year - we have considered this problem without moving much beyond the necessity to prolong what was originally considered to be a temporary relief organization. We continue to hope that the nations most immediately concerned will find it possible to begin taking real steps, however small, in the direction of a basic political settlement of the underlying problem. In our view any step that would help ensure a better life for the refugees would serve to foster stability throughout the Middle East. However, pending such developments, humanitarian and practical considerations impel us to continue to give aid to the refugees and we firmly believe that the best agency to carry out the task is the present United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees. Therefore Mr. Chairman, we shall be prepared to consider supporting the continuation of the Agency. We do, however, think it desirable that any recommendation concerning extension be coupled with an understanding that the whole situation would be kept under review. We noted that the distinguished Delegate from the Netherlands mentioned two years as a suitable lapse of time and we understand that certain other delegations are thinking in terms of a somewhat longer period. Whatever the period, such a review - which might once again be prepared by the Secretary-General - would logically pay particular attention to whether UNRWA's operation should be continued, altered or terminated, in the light of the political, economic and psychological aspects of the problem at that time, as the Secretary-General sees them. We are mindful of the fact that during its annual considerations of the report of the Director, the General Assembly is competent, and perhaps obliged, to review these questions but we think that a thorough consideration of the question is more likely to result if, as this year, we are given the additional stimulus of an independent high level survey.

Mr. Chairman, my Delegation is deeply mindful of the human aspect of the problem which now faces this Committee. It is not for us to apportion responsibility for the sad plight of these hundreds of thousands of people, but it is our responsibility to be greatly concerned about the failure to move in the direction of a solution of the refugee problem. Realistically, of course, we must recognize that the problem is not narrowly confined to the plight of the refugees but is essentially linked with the broad political picture in the Middle East. It is a problem so deeply rooted and complex that we must not be unreasonable in demanding quick solutions. The passing of time might of itself serve to produce more favourable conditions for dealing with the problem. However, our patience in this regard should not lead to indifference or any lack of vigilance in seeking and exploring opportunities for making progress.

Some of the remarks of previous speakers have encouraged us in so far as they appear to represent a desire to be constructive and to bring forward ideas which might possibly open up new avenues of approach. We have in mind particularly suggestions concerning the re-activation and expansion of the Palestine Conciliation Commission and the possibility of a special U.N. committee or organization in connection with the Palestine problem. We trust that such suggestions will be seriously considered because it is possible that there may be something here on which we can build and because such ideas may in turn encourage the exploration of other constructive approaches. My Delegation sincerely hopes that members of this committee will turn increasingly from recriminations over the past to considerations of the most practical course for the future. It has always been the desire of Canada that the Assembly should leave nothing undone which might have any prospect of bringing nearer a solution of those political and psychological aspects of the Palestine problem which the Secretary-General outlined in his report and which has necessitated the continuance of UNRWA. We urge Israel, the Arab States and all members of the U.N. to redouble their efforts to solve this problem in the knowledge that succeeding generations will not hold us guiltless if, by inaction, we perpetuate this tragedy.

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