



STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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PALESTINE REFUGEES

Statement by Mr. J.W. Holmes in the Special Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, on February 20, 1957.

We all regret, I am sure, that we must again consider the question of the Palestine refugees without finding ourselves closer to a solution of the problem. Perhaps, however, this discussion will serve one useful purpose if it directs our attention from the abstractions of international policy to the human problems of those who have suffered all too long. We have all, I know, been greatly impressed by the reports, both oral and written, of the Director of UNRWA. What impressed my Delegation most was the humanity and the compassion which were so evident in his statements to us. He and his colleagues have persevered throughout the most difficult and dangerous period yet experienced by this Agency because of their selfless devotion to the unfortunate people whom we have asked them to help. It is a record which has not been surpassed in the history of service by the United Nations to the unfortunate and the afflicted. It will be a source of satisfaction to the Agency and to all of us that recognition of their service has been gratefully accorded by speakers whose views on most problems of the situation on the Middle East vary widely. There rests a heavy responsibility on all of us to see that UNRWA is given the support it deserves and is enabled to carry out the work which is on the conscience of all members of the United Nations.

Because the Director's report is an honest report, it is neither comforting nor encouraging. This is the fact which we must face with equal honesty. It is clear that little progress has been made in reintegrating the refugees into the economic life of the Middle East. For reasons beyond his control, the Director has been unable to point to any indication of progress - of progress in securing the repatriation of the refugees or compensation for their losses, or fulfilment of our hopes that rehabilitation and resettlement schemes might steadily decrease the number of refugees requiring relief. The situation of the refugees continues to be a matter of grave humanitarian concern and a serious obstacle to the ultimate stability and peace of the Middle East. There can be no permanent settlement until the problem has been, if not solved, at least greatly alleviated.

It is not an easy problem to solve, and no good purpose is served by pretending that the solution is simple, that it would come about if only one or other of the parties concerned would take some uncomplicated step. Those of us who are far removed from the scene must resist the temptation to prescribe facile remedies. We must recognize that the passionate feelings and the intransigent positions are not merely evidence of wilfulness but the inevitable products of bitter experience and suffering by all the inhabitants of this deeply troubled area. Because these passions have been further inflamed in the past few months, there seems less chance than ever of a solution, and yet it is our hope that the crisis will bring us to realize that things must now be done which have been left too long undone.

In this spirit I would like to say that we are disappointed that the Government of Israel has not yet seen fit to advance some positive offer of repatriation for those refugees who desire it or of compensation for those who do not. We regret also that the governments of neighbouring countries have not seen fit either to give full support to schemes for rehabilitation and resettlement of those refugees who would prefer this course and to reassure the refugees that UNRWA's programmes of rehabilitation are designed for their benefit. We neither ignore nor scorn the arguments of all these governments as to why such courses are not possible and we appreciate the difficulties involved, but we recognize also that charity and relief are the most temporary of solutions and that something more decisive and more painful must be done soon if the refugees are to be delivered before it is too late.

It is understandable that the governments directly concerned with the refugee question should take the attitude that in advance of a satisfactory general political settlement, steps we have suggested cannot be taken. But, Mr. Chairman, we are all well aware that the refugee problem is a major cause of political tension in the Middle East and an obvious obstacle to progress towards a general political settlement in that area. Governments concerned have the responsibility of seeking at least some partial solution to the refugee question as a vital step towards the restoration of stability and peace in the Middle East. Governments concerned must also recognize that UNRWA's relief programme is an interim measure pending the formulation and implementation of plans for a final settlement. They should not expect that member governments of the United Nations will be able or willing to contribute indefinitely to a relief programme of undiminishing proportions. Above all, a start must be made in finding a solution to this problem for the sake of the hundreds of thousands of persons, including a high proportion of young people, who are living unproductive and miserable lives.

Most Serious Problem

The most serious problem we face here, of course, is the Agency's precarious financial position. We have noted with concern the absence of broad financial support from governments to assist the Agency in meeting its commitments. The host countries have borne a substantial share of the burden of caring for the refugees. Among countries from outside the Middle East area, the United States has been an outstanding contributor, while the United Kingdom and France have also borne a large share of the Agency's financial responsibilities. We feel that we too have some right to speak because Canada, although it is a distant and not a very populous country, has made the fourth largest contribution to programmes in aid of the Palestine refugees. With respect to the UNRWA budget now before us, the Canadian Government intends to seek Parliamentary approval for a contribution of \$750,000 to the UNRWA relief programme for the current eighteen month fiscal period. This will bring Canada's contribution to UNRWA to nearly \$5½ million. We are taking steps which we trust will enable this contribution to be made available promptly when it obtains Parliamentary approval.

We appeal to other governments also to contribute to the work of the Agency at a time when it is in such great need. You will remember the Director's urging us the other day -- I quote him -- "to remember that we are not dealing here with abstract financial figures but with stark realities -- the lives and welfare of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children". It should be clear to us that if sufficient contributions are not forthcoming during the current fiscal year to finance the Agency's operations, the Agency may be required to liquidate some of its major operations and member governments will have then to contend with the inevitable human and political repercussions. We firmly believe that if the work of the Agency requires additional funds, they should be provided from additional sources. We see no reason why this essentially humanitarian work which the Agency is performing should not have the support of all members of the United Nations.

If sufficient funds are not forthcoming, then my Delegation sees no alternative to the Agency's taking steps to reduce its services. We still hope that the extent of contributions during the fiscal year will be such as to allow the Agency to maintain, if not to improve, its present facilities and services for the feeding, shelter and health of the refugees in its care and, in addition, to provide these facilities and services to those refugees who have not been registered with the Agency in the past but have gradually used up their resources and are now in great need. We think this latter category of bona fide unregistered refugees cannot be penalized for their earlier attempts at self-support and should be cared for, if funds allow it.

It is with much regret that we find that, in view of the Agency's limited funds and in the absence of action by the Government of Jordan to remove ineligible persons from the

relief rolls, the Agency has been unable to care for eligible refugee children born in Jordan since February 1951. We appreciate the difficulties of the Jordan Government, but nevertheless hope that it will soon see fit to implement the agreement reached between the Government of Jordan and the Agency in October 1955 on procedures for rectifying the relief rolls and for resolving the difficulties which impede the granting of rations to all qualified children in Jordan.

Rehabilitation Programme

Turning to the Agency's programme of rehabilitation, Mr. Chairman, I must again express our disappointment that political considerations have prevented steps being taken to implement the Yarmuk-Jordan and Sinai projects which, if undertaken, would make a significant contribution toward a solution of the refugee problem and would be of great economic benefit to the area. In addition to the political obstacles to rehabilitation schemes, the Agency now faces financial obstacles to carrying out any extensive programme of self-help projects. My Delegation welcomes the suggestion that the Agency contribute to plans for the general economic development of Jordan, but until such time as the Agency finds itself with more funds at its disposal, we do not think the Assembly should enlarge the Agency's mandate to permit expenditures by it upon general economic development programmes with which the immediate employment or self-support of refugees might not be directly connected. In our view, the Agency should undertake projects only where the money so spent will result in a proportionate reduction in the funds now required for the Agency's relief programme.

In regard to the Agency's educational facilities -- financed out of rehabilitation funds -- the Director's report has mentioned requests for an expansion of the programme. We attach great importance to the provision of greater educational opportunities to refugee children, but we fail to see how UNRWA can be directed to expand its educational programme at a time when its finances are shrinking.

It is, of course, our hope that the Agency will be able to pursue its present programmes of education and self-help projects, but we urge that this be done without prejudice to the Agency's primary responsibility for the feeding, shelter and health of the refugees. We, of course, concur in the assumption made by the Director in his report that if the Agency should find itself without sufficient funds to carry on all its present programmes, there should be no reduction in basic rations. We also believe that the Agency should endeavour to maintain the essentials of medical care. Indeed, it seems to us that health care is so necessary that it should be maintained in preference to any of the items, including education, now part of the rehabilitation programme.

Mr. Chairman, I regret that there is still another matter to regret -- the problem posed by the attitude on some matters of some host governments. The Committee will recall that, when establishing UNRWA in Resolution 302 (IV), the Assembly called upon governments concerned to accord to the Agency all the privileges, immunities, exemptions and facilities necessary for the fulfilment of its functions. Unfortunately, some of the host governments have failed to extend to the Agency the co-operation essential to the effective execution of its task. The interference of some host governments in the local operations of the Agency, as described in the Director's report, is serious. The Agency cannot be expected to continue operations in such circumstances. We appreciate the concern of the host governments with protecting their national sovereignty, but we believe that they must come to a decision. If they are unwilling during the remaining period of the Agency's mandate to allow the Agency the freedom it requires to operate in their respective territories, are they prepared to assume the direct operational responsibilities for the relief and rehabilitation of the refugees? If they are not, and if they take the position that in the remaining period of its mandate the Agency must continue to have full responsibility for the care of the refugees, then are they prepared to recognize that in order for the Agency to discharge its responsibilities it is essential that it have their co-operation and that it be free from unwarranted interference in its operations in their territories? Surely the host governments would be prepared to abide by the terms of Articles 104 and 105 of the Charter and to recognize that the Agency is free to recruit, direct and terminate the employment of its personnel according to its own best judgment. Moreover, it should be understood that the Agency has the right, after representations to the governments concerned, to suspend its operations in areas where local conditions unduly hamper the carrying out of its responsibilities.

My Delegation noted with interest the suggestion of the representative of the United States that the Director of the Agency should submit to the next session of the General Assembly, recommendations concerning the nature and extent of the Agency's future operations and responsibilities. By the end of this year, when his report will be made to this Assembly, it will be urgently necessary to have clear understanding of the arrangements for refugees which will be necessary during the transitional period before the Agency ceases its operation in 1960.

Perhaps the most difficult task facing the Agency will be to meet the humanitarian needs of the refugees of the Gaza strip. As if their plight in past years had not been agonizing enough, these helpless people now find themselves in a virtual no-man's land with no sign of safety or security even for the bare subsistence which the Agency has been able to provide. They suffered casualties during the recent fighting and its aftermath - we deeply regret this loss of life and the injury sustained. The future for these refugees is even more uncertain than the past. There can be no doubt that in their

uncertainty and distress these people urgently require - now more than ever - the care and assistance which the Agency is able to bring them within the scope of its financial and operational means.

We therefore welcome the Agency's decision to continue its services during the current emergency. We believe this work should - indeed must - continue, for experience has shown that the plight of the refugees become more acute in periods of crisis. This humanitarian work may require the Agency to seek the co-operation of the de facto administering power but this would be a matter of practical necessity and in no sense any form of recognition of the existing state of affairs. To the same end - that is, to provide the essential relief services of the refugees - we urge strongly that those authorities co-operate with the Agency and in particular to ensure that the Agency's personnel and its legitimate operations are not interfered with.

Mr. Chairman, I have taken time to touch upon the main questions that have been raised in this year's annual report of the Director of UNRWA, in the belief that these questions are of such urgency that they cannot be passed by. My Delegation sincerely hopes that our deliberations at this session regarding this item, conducted with a full sense of responsibility for the future of hundreds of thousands of persons, have contributed towards the solution of a most grave problem.

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