REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS:
MEETING THE CHALLENGE

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I. REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS

More than ten million human beings are living outside their home country as a result of political oppression, war, civil war, and other man-made disasters; and hundreds of thousands are leaving their country every year for the same reasons. In addition, there are many persons who are displaced within their own country because of political and social calamities.

The greatest concentrations of refugees and displaced persons are found in Western Asia and in the Horn of Africa. A great number are living in Southeast Asia and Central America. Between a fifth and a quarter of the world’s uprooted people have found their way to the relatively rich countries of Western Europe and North America, where they are in various stages of processing and integration.

Many, but by no means all, satisfy the stringent criteria of the “refugee” definition in the Refugee Convention (1951) and the Refugee Protocol (1967). Others come within the extended definition in the OAU Convention governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (1969), and still others may benefit from refugee or asylum provisions of the national legislation in the country where they find themselves. But there are also very many who do not meet the criteria of conventions or of national legislation, yet come within the broader concept of “refugees and displaced persons” who nowadays are the concern of the United Nations and its agent, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The problems of refugees and displaced persons differ considerably from one part of the world to another.

The great concentrations of refugees and displaced persons in certain areas, particularly in the Third World – confined to camps and makeshift dwellings, often in miserable conditions, and regularly with no end in sight for the political conditions which caused their uprooting – call for measures both short-term and long-term.

Some of their problems are due to the very fact that refugees and displaced persons are strangers in a strange land. In order to overcome these very human problems, special counselling and assistance geared to the needs of the uprooted are essential. Other problems they share with the indigenous population – poverty, deficient housing, lack of meaningful employment – and such problems can only be resolved in ways which do not create resentment between the different groups. More often than not, it seems that a durable solution to a local refugee problem can only be found as part of a development programme for the region where the refugees live. This makes co-operation between helpers and development agencies – not to mention the authorities of the host State – a matter of paramount importance.

Sometimes the political and demographic conditions are such that more or less permanent integration of the refugees and displaced persons appears to be out of the question. In
some places one may have to concentrate on day-to-day care and maintenance in temporary dwellings while hoping for the day when the people may return home. In other instances there must be a search for resettlement opportunities in some other country.

In several industrialized countries it has become a real problem that the processing of requests for asylum tends to take a very long time. For the human beings concerned, this waiting time may be a terrible ordeal, in particular if they are denied the possibility of earning a livelihood, if their freedom of movement is restricted to a certain district, or if they are outright detained - perhaps for months or even years - while their case is being investigated and decided. "Asylum-seekers" have thus emerged as a special category, calling for humanitarian action, and it is essential to come to grips with this very unfortunate situation, one way or another. It is a task which cannot be neglected, neither by UNHCR, nor by governments, nor by voluntary agencies. Another appalling problem is that of "refugees in orbit": persons who clearly are prima facie refugees, but who somehow have been unable to find asylum or at least a right to stay in any particular country. And, of course, the list of problems does not end there.

To be a refugee or displaced person is a very painful experience, and behind the statistical figures there is a lot of heartbreak, hardship, and misery. The large number of refugees and displaced persons also makes it a major problem - socially, economically, financially, and also politically - not only for the countries most directly affected, but also for the international community at large.

II. AN INTERNATIONAL TEAMWORK

Practically since the end of the First World War and the creation of the League of Nations, refugees have been a major concern to the world organization. The League appointed a High Commissioner for Refugees in 1921, and this office continued to exist in various forms throughout the lifespan of the League. During the Second World War and the early post-war period, refugees and displaced persons were cared for by a trio of organizations: the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR), the military Displaced Persons Executive (DPX), and last but not least, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Some ten million uprooted people were helped back to their homes, but there remained one and a half million refugees who became the concern of the International Refugee Organization (IRO), which - after helping a million of them to resettle in third countries - was replaced in 1951 by the present Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and what is now known as the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM). Palestinian refugees were from the outset singled out and made the concern of a separate organization, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Other international agencies inside and outside the United Nations system have also, over the years, concerned themselves with refugee problems, notably the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and regional organizations, such as, the Council of Europe, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and the Organization of American States (OAS).

Refugee matters appear every year on the agendas of the United Nations General