

MBARGO

FRIDAY, 20 July, 11.30 a.m.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY



COMMUNAUTÉS EUROPÉENNES

Information à la Presse du Bureau de Genève

MEETING ON INDOCHINESE REFUGEES 20/21 JULY 1979

Statement by Mr. Michael O'Kennedy, T. D. ,
Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ireland and

President-in-office of the Council of
Ministers of the European Communities.

37-39, rue de Vermont
Case postale 195
1211 Genève 20
Tél. 34 97 50 Télex 28261

Geneva, 20 July 1979

1. On behalf of the Nine Member States of the European Community, in whose name I have the honour to speak, I should like to thank you for calling this meeting to consider measures to deal with the problem of refugees in South East Asia.
2. The problem which confronts us is of formidable dimensions; it is a human problem of great magnitude and one which has commanded widespread public attention in the member States of the European Community; the spectacle of human suffering on such a vast scale has aroused feelings of profound sympathy and compassion among our people. The problem calls for a special effort by the international community to relieve the material and moral distress involved and to spread more evenly the very heavy burden which the influx of refugees has placed on the countries of the region.
3. The foreign ministers of the Nine, meeting in Paris on 18th June, expressed their grave concern at the dramatic problems posed by this mass exodus of refugees from Indo-China. They called for the urgent convening of a conference under U.N. auspices to examine practical solutions; they stressed the importance of increased efforts to help the refugees and they emphasised the need to spread such efforts more equitably throughout the international community. The seven major industrialised countries who attended the recent Tokyo summit also called for immediate steps to meet the problem which they described as one of historic dimensions.
4. I am myself aware, from my own meeting with the foreign ministers of the five ASEAN countries in Bali on 1st July, of the deep concern felt by other countries in the region and the immense pressures and burdens which the flood of refugees has imposed on them. The joint communique which the ASEAN countries issued on 30th June is further evidence of the need for effective and urgent international action on all aspects of the problem. The countries and

.../...

territories in the region which have had to bear the brunt of the problem are under very great strain at present; they fear social disruption in their own communities and they have made it clear that they will have the greatest difficulty in continuing to carry the present burden unless there is effective international action to support and help them and unless measures are taken to meet the basic problem of the continuing massive exodus of refugees.

5.

In their approach to this urgent and tragic problem the European Community and its member States on whose behalf I speak, hold to certain basic principles which they believe must be upheld. . These principles are rooted in the Charter of the United Nations and its preamble and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which member States of the United Nations have accepted and which provide a firm basis for the orderly conduct of relations between states and respect for the rights of individual human beings.

6.

We uphold the right of people to leave their own countries freely and to return freely to them; we believe that no one should be obliged to leave his own country through fear or compulsion or because conditions have been made so intolerable that it is no longer possible to stay and we believe that anyone who does nevertheless leave his country of origin for any such reason must not be forcibly returned against his will, nor denied asylum elsewhere. We hold too to the general principles set out in the Convention on the Status of Refugees adopted in 1951 which our countries have accepted, including the principle of non-refoulement contained in Article 33 thereof.

7.

The problem with which we are confronted is not only serious and urgent but also complex. It has aspects which go beyond the question of refugee status or the problems of accomodation, health care, nourishment and transportation for those who have fled - and unless these aspects are dealt with the problem will continue to grow.

8.

I do not wish to enter here into purely political issues of a kind which would be outside the scope of this meeting.

.../...

It is evident however, and I am moved by humanitarian concern in saying this, that there are very important aspects of this exodus which are simply not within the capacity of states now receiving refugees, or states outside the region, to solve and which can be resolved only by the countries which the refugees are leaving.

9. The Nine have noted with considerable interest the Understanding concluded on 30 May 1979 between the Government of Vietnam and the High Commissioner for Refugees but they are concerned that despite this Understanding, the exodus of refugees has continued in conditions which have led to loss of life and great suffering by very many people.
10. In the view of the Nine it is necessary now for all who are in a position to help, to commit themselves to do what they can to reduce and end this massive human tragedy. We consider it to be the purpose of this meeting to see how we can do this to best effect and to this end we feel we should have particularly in mind in our discussions the suggested Plan of Action set out in Section III of the paper prepared by the High Commissioner for Refugees for this meeting.
11. In our view, what is necessary is that each of the countries represented here, including in particular the countries which the refugees are leaving, should face its own particular responsibilities if the common effort to alleviate human misery and death is to succeed. This means that measures should be agreed to ensure that, while no one is compelled to leave, those who do freely wish to leave their countries of origin and can be accepted for settlement elsewhere, may do so - and do so in conditions which will be consonant with human dignity. We each have our part to play in this major humanitarian effort - the countries from which the exodus originates, the countries of first arrival, where, if the overall problem is contained, the possibility might arise for a degree of regional settlement, and the countries which are willing to accept refugees for resettlement and to contribute financially or in kind.

.../...

12. The European Community and its member States for whom I speak have already given practical evidence of their concern about this problem and their willingness to help. All of our countries have admitted, or agreed to accept, refugees for resettlement and all have contributed to the funds of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. Individual representatives of member States in speaking here will give details of what they have done, or are willing to do. In addition the Community as such has made a large amount of special aid available to relieve the refugees, Commissioner Cheysson, speaking later in the discussion, will elaborate on this. We know that certain other states too have contributed greatly by accepting large numbers of refugees and we hope that countries which had not previously responded will now find it possible to do so, so that the burden will be more fairly shared. All of this will not be enough however unless all of us play our part - and in particular unless the countries from which the exodus of refugees is taking place meet their particular responsibilities. I appeal to them to do so, so that together, and by common effort, we may relieve great human suffering.

13.

I would not wish to close my remarks on behalf of the member States of the European Community without paying tribute to the High Commissioner for Refugees and his office, which throughout the development of this critical situation have exerted every effort, in the highest tradition of humanitarian service, on behalf of the refugees, and which have carried out their task with the utmost dedication under the most trying conditions. The High Commissioner's efforts have earned the admiration of the international community and deserve its fullest support.
