

COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

COM(81) 301 final

Brussels, 17 June 1981

Communication from the Commission to the Council on assistance
to refugees and displaced persons

1. The problem of refugees and displaced persons is an old one, but in recent years - mainly as a result of political events in South East Asia, Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa - it has reached unparalleled proportions. At the start of the last decade, the number of refugees and displaced persons amounted, worldwide, to hundreds of thousands ; now, in 1981, they are numbered in millions. The recent Geneva conference (ICARA) drew attention to the presence of 5 million such people in Africa alone, and there are reported to be as many again in other parts of the world.

The huge increase in numbers that has occurred in the last two or three years is reflected in the volume of assistance provided by donors. The Community, for example, gave 40 million dollars' worth of aid to refugees and displaced persons in 1975 ; four years later this figure had risen to 140 million dollars, and at the Geneva conference, the Community and its Member States announced contributions totalling some 170 million dollars for 1981 for Africa only.

The problem has not only grown in size, its real character has also changed in the past few years. Until quite recently, when voluntary repatriation was not possible, it was generally felt that installation in industrialized countries was the answer. For the vast majority of today's refugees, whether Kampuchean, Afghan or African, it is realised that this solution is not feasible ; their rural background and lack of formal education and technical skills do not make them fit for such a radical change of environment. They can only either return to their country of origin - whenever voluntary repatriation is feasible - or settle in neighbouring host countries (most of which are economically fragile), or remain permanently in camps - this last possibility being unacceptable from a humanitarian point of view and, moreover, politically dangerous.

The size and nature of the refugee problem therefore mean, not only that massive foreign aid is and will be needed each time a new flow of displaced persons occurs, but also that a large share of assistance should be devoted to long-term solutions, i.e. helping economically weak host countries to settle their refugee and displaced populations elsewhere than in camps (as is being done on a limited scale in the Sudan), or helping countries of origin to settle their returnees (as in Zimbabwe).

2. Over the past year or so, the growth of the refugee phenomenon has prompted closer analysis of it. At the political level, there have been several calls for preventive action : in May last year the European Council made "a vigorous appeal to the Governments responsible for it to remove the causes of this widespread human tragedy" ; later the same year, in the U.N. General Assembly, the Federal Republic of Germany called for closer political cooperation to eliminate the problem at its roots ; and more recently, in Geneva, delegations from Africa, donor countries and from the Commission echoed that same sentiment.

At the administrative level, there is a growing realisation that refugee situations pass - or should pass - through different stages requiring different forms of assistance. In the Commission's analysis - shared by other delegations at the Geneva conference - three phases are recognizable : a first, emergency phase immediately after an influx of refugees, when basic supplies (drugs, food, shelter, clothing, etc.) are needed at once ; a second, subsistence phase pending a durable solution, when a certain degree of education, training and local food production are needed as well as shelter, medical supplies and domestic utensils ; and a third, settlement phase when assistance for the development of both physical and social infrastructure in the host country (or country of origin, in the case of voluntary repatriation) is required, of benefit to the local as well as to the refugee population.

Institutionally and financially, the first two phases pose less problems than the third. UNHCR has clear responsibility for emergency and subsistence assistance to refugees, and other agencies (WFP, UNICEF, ICRC and a number of NGOs) have demonstrated their ability to implement emergency and subsistence aid programmes, while all major donors (including the Community) can cover in cash or kind the needs of refugees and displaced persons at these two stages.

For the third phase however - settlement through "integration" upon return or in the host country - there is no one implementing agency with clear responsibility, nor any special financial support from donors. The first point was widely recognized at the Geneva Conference, where many delegations stressed the need for clarification of the role of the different humanitarian and development agencies at the settlement stage. The Conference indicated that this question would be discussed in detail within the United Nations family over the coming months, and concluded that UNHCR and other UN and voluntary agencies should liaise closely with each other, and co-ordinate their policies and programmes, so that "medium and long term assistance to refugees was not conceived on an ad hoc basis, nor assumed separately from on-going development programmes."

The second point - inadequate funding for development permitting settlement - was in a sense illustrated by the financial outcome of the Conference. Priority requirements to be met in 1981-82 (emergency and subsistence programmes) were estimated to cost 450 million dollars, while a much larger amount was estimated to be necessary to cover longer term settlement programmes. The Conference in fact raised 560 million dollars, so that at present only 110 million dollars would be available for refugee integration, assuming - which is most unlikely - that these funds will not be tied to new needs for emergency and subsistence aid.

3. Many African delegations to the Conference emphasized the very great importance they attach, in view of their own inadequate resources, to foreign assistance for refugee integration. This is an area where the Community as such is not equipped.

In food aid and emergency aid (Article 137 of Lomé II, Article 950 of the Budget), the Community has the means to offer large-scale assistance to refugees and displaced persons during the emergency and subsistence phases. It can only help in a very modest way during the third phase, chiefly by co-financing settlement projects implemented by non-governmental organisations (Article 945 of the Budget).

The Geneva Conference made it clear that several African countries now sheltering refugee populations have the political will to absorb these refugees and have already made considerable sacrifices to help them. Their own development programmes have been slowed down as a result. It would be dangerous to expect them to make further sacrifices by diverting part of development aid destined for their own needy populations to refugee settlement projects. The risk involved would be that more and more developing countries would deny access to their territories for new refugees, and possibly try to expel those who had already arrived ; pressures by nationals whose lives and future were directly affected by such a policy would gain strength and this could lead - as already noted in some areas - to politically and socially unacceptable conditions and tensions which could soon get out of control. As far as the Community is concerned, it needs to be stressed that the resources of the European Development Fund and of the budget-line for non-associated developing countries are intended for the development of the host countries themselves and their own populations, and should not be used as a means of financing durable solutions for refugees.

The Commission therefore considers that, in the absence of any current suitable form of Community financing, the choice is clear: either Member States agree to create a new Community aid specifically for this purpose, or they agree to provide new funds themselves for this third phase of the refugee problem, the task of the Community being limited to coordinating, in line with the Geneva Conference conclusions, such bilateral policies on refugee integration. The Commission feels the latter course would be preferable, provided the central responsibility for coordination at Community level was clearly defined.

The present communication calls for a substantive discussion, by Council and Parliament, of the ideas and principles put forward by the Commission. In the light of these debates, the Commission will then make a formal proposal, possibly before the summer of 1981.

