

## U.N. WATCH

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### Talking Shop

The opening weeks of every General Assembly session are a time of pronouncements, pleas, threats, warnings, and bluster that summon a whole range of human emotions—hope, despair, anger, resignation, fear. Called a debate, there is really little interchange among the heads of state, foreign ministers, prime ministers, and ranking diplomats who address the delegates each fall. Most are speaking for and to their own constituencies, with little expectation of influencing the international gathering. Many, depending upon the time of day, address a half-empty hall.

The problems touched on range from A to Z—from apartheid to zinc—and even a casual drop-in at the General Assembly cannot help being struck by their complexity and diversity.

The speeches fall into two basic categories: those that take a global view, focusing on disarmament, nuclear war, and economic disorder; and those that express regional concerns over such areas as Namibia, Lebanon, or Central America.

President Reagan, the first speaker, filled the General Assembly chamber, but it was President Betancur of Colombia who received the rare standing ovation. In a talk that addressed the concerns of all the delegates in terms at once philosophical and poetic, he noted that "violence, tensions, incidents, underdevelopment and injustice are all symptoms of a crisis in which coexistence and self-determination have been forgotten and which sees the superpowers shamelessly interfering...."

Fifteen days and 150 speakers later, one leaves the chamber with an overwhelming sense of sadness.

### ...Always With Us

The United States Committee on Refugees, a privately supported group that works closely with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, has just issued its twenty-fifth World Refugee Survey. In 1983, it seems, 600,000 were added to the world refugee rolls, and the total refugee population is now estimated at 10.6 million.

The U.N. has been concerned with refugees since its very inception. Its first refugee program, the IRO, reflected the optimism of the early postwar era, defining a refugee as one who has left, or finds himself outside, a native land as a result of Nazi, Fascist, quisling, or Spanish Falangist regimes and assigning a termination date for the program of June 30, 1950. With high hopes of ready repatriation in a peaceful world, the U.N. gave little thought to refugees of the future—the millions who would flee famine, oppressive governments, and a hundred wars.

For those under its jurisdiction, IRO provided care, legal and political protection, transport, and facilities for resettlement. Although many did return home or found new places to live, there were in June of 1950 considerable numbers of displaced persons still requiring help. By December of that year the General Assembly had voted into being a High Commissioner's Office for Refugees.

The High Commissioner's Office was itself a naive conception. Health, food, education, atomic energy, trade—each had its importance recognized in the formation of a

specialized agency receiving U.N. funding. But the refugee situation—save in the case of the Palestinian refugees in the Near East, by then under the wing of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)—was still viewed as a transitory one. Even today the budget for the High Commissioner's Office is inadequate. The HCR must continually plead for funds, which are subject to the whims of U.N. member-states; and few nations are willing to support their own runaways.

The report of the U.S. Committee lists the largest refugee populations: Afghanistan (3.3 million), Palestinians (1.9 million), Ethiopia (883,000), Indochina (256,000), El Salvador (241,000), Angola (237,000), Uganda (230,000). Host countries in these troubled areas are unable to provide adequate supplies even for their own people. Without outside help, the refugee shelters easily become death camps.

In evaluating the past year, the report states: "In parts of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, nations have pushed small groups of refugees and asylum seekers back across international boundaries, notwithstanding their fate on the other side, and are treating refugees within their borders with a harshness not generally exhibited in the past."

### Warning

Ten years ago, when famine struck northern Africa, uncounted thousands died. The blame was distributed, as were accusations of indifference and inefficiency. Chief among the responses was that there had not been enough time to provide adequate help.

Warnings of a new crisis are now pouring in from the press, U.N. agencies, and African nations themselves. At its meeting in Rome in October, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) listed twenty-two African countries with "catastrophic food shortages."

As a result of the worst drought in a century, uncontrolled population growth, and a continued lack of trained people and sufficient organization to deal with an incipient crisis, even more countries will be affected than were in 1973. The South is suffering, and so, even more than in the past, is the desolate sub-Sahara region. South Africa itself, a long-time exporter of agricultural products, must now import corn. The FAO is appealing to the Western nations, chiefly the U.S., for immediate aid to Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, Sao Tomé, and Mozambique.

Edouard Souma, the director general of FAO, has stated that most African nations will not be self-sufficient in this century and some will never be. This he attributed in part to the elitist attitude of those who rule these nations.

### U.S./U.N.

Owing to efforts of the Reagan administration, a Senate amendment to cut the U.S. contribution to the United Nations over four years went down in defeat. On the Senate floor, supporters of the amendment asserted that the American public was fed up with the world organization; but according to a 1983 Roper Poll, a clear majority of Americans believes the U.N. should be given *more* power to reduce superpower disputes and enforce human rights.

Support for the U.N. was stronger among women than among men, and stronger among higher income groups than among lower ones.

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