

*Agenda Item 109: Report of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees*

*Statement by Hon'ble Dr. (Mrs.) J.G. Mohanta, MP on November 7, 2000*

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Madam Chairperson,

Let me begin by thanking Mrs. Sadako Ogata, the High Commissioner for Refugees, for her thought provoking address to this Committee yesterday. We were very pleased to have high level exchanges with her on refugee issues during her visit to my country earlier this year. Mrs. Ogata's distinguished tenure at the head of the UNHCR will be remembered for her inspiring leadership and tireless work in the face of daunting challenges and trying circumstances. We have no doubt that her vision will continue to inspire the UNHCR and indeed the entire humanitarian cause.

As the global refugee situation expands in scope and becomes more complex, there is no substitute to a concerted and coordinated response on the part of the international community. The principle of international solidarity and burden sharing is now well recognised. However, regrettably, it is more often than not flouted by rich countries. The UNHCR has repeatedly noted that the quality of asylum has deteriorated in a number of countries. Refugees find themselves faced with restrictive practices such as border closures, interdiction at sea, expulsions, premature return to an insecure environment and prolonged detention imposed by countries that have the financial means and indeed the duty to give them both asylum and protection. We recognise that societies may have a natural inclination to preserve their own prosperity. However, we do not believe that building walls to shut out refugees is the right solution. It should be recognised that the wave of restrictive practices in the most prosperous parts of the world has a detrimental impact on public opinion in the rest of the world when it comes to refugee protection.

There is yet another, and an even more important, reason why the principle of international solidarity and burden sharing needs to be strengthened further. As is well known, it is predominantly developing countries that constitute countries of origin as well as asylum. Host developing countries put at risk their fragile environment, economy and social fabric to provide refuge to millions. Addressing the needs of these countries must, therefore, move to the forefront of the refugee agenda. It is essential that the economic and social impact of massive refugee populations on developing countries be systematically assessed and effective means of global cooperation found to address it. This is a must if we are not to see a decline in the traditional willingness of developing countries to host vast refugee populations.

We note with concern the High Commissioner's assertion that the UNHCR has become a chronically under-funded organisation and that in the face of new emergencies, the shortfall of available means in relation to the projected expenditure is greater than in the past years. It is even more regrettable that the resulting cutbacks on expenditure have extended to activities that impact directly upon UNHCR's policy priorities such as women and children. We agree with the High Commissioner that long-term planning is not possible in the absence of reliable funding. Further, the available allocations have not addressed the needs of refugees in various regions in an even handed manner as donor countries tend to

direct most of their contributions towards a few refugee situations. Thus, funds available for Africa have been continuously far short of the requirements, while more generous contributions have been forthcoming for refugees in Europe. We hope that donor countries would take steps to ensure reliable funding for the UNHCR while permitting the High Commissioner to determine the priorities for its use.

Scant attention has been paid to abject poverty as the underlying cause of a number of refugee outflows. In this context, we note with disappointment the High Commissioner's statement that UNHCR remains necessary because persecution and conflict force an ever-greater number of people to flee their homes. Let us not forget that poverty and the accompanying degrading conditions bring out the worst in normal human beings and are a source of a number of conflicts which often manifest themselves in forms that unfortunately blur their linkage to poverty. Large scale refugee outflows result from such conflicts or from the natural impulse of the deprived to look for better opportunities. We often hear of development investments in developing countries of origin to facilitate return of refugees. However, in our view a preventive strategy on the part of the international community in addressing poverty would be more effective. Prevention of humanitarian crises through investment in long term development in developing countries is obviously the most cost effective approach available to the international community.

We are aware of a body of opinion which sees solutions to complex refugee situations through the prism of states acceding to various Conventions and Protocols. This is a restrictive way of looking at things. India is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees as it does not address the problem of massive refugee flows or factors such as mixed migration which accompany such flows. However, our commitment to humanitarianism is second to none. India is host to a large number of refugees and our programmes relating to them are managed entirely from our own resources. We have clearly demonstrated at all times our abiding commitment to the principles of protection and non-refoulement. In this context, we hope that the proposed global consultations will adopt a practical approach to the issue of International Protection rather than getting bogged down in a legalistic and strait-jacketed approach.

As for the issue of security, we could not agree more with the High Commissioner on the need for intensified efforts to focus on the safety and security of refugees as also the UNHCR personnel. We believe that this is the responsibility of the states concerned. Assistance to enhance the national capacity of such states can be envisaged if and when requested by them. Attempts to impose solutions from outside would be counterproductive.

Finally, Madam Chairperson, we would like to express yet again our position on the subject of Internally Displaced Persons which has found a mention in the High Commissioner's statement. In our view, the primary duty and responsibility of protecting and assisting IDPs is that of the states concerned. International action should remain within the bounds of the concept of sovereignty, which should not be diluted in any manner. Such action should, therefore, only be at the request of the country concerned.