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THE ARAB REFUGEES AND THE UNITED NATIONS

1. "Turning refugees into people"

More than half a million Palestinian Arabs have been uprooted socially and economically by the events of 1948. They have lost their homes, and what is more important, they have been deprived of the normal opportunities of earning a living as members of an established social and economic group.

The international community has taken certain steps to cope with that historic calamity. The first step, of a humanitarian and temporary nature, was to provide relief for its victims. But looking beyond that immediate task, the world community has now envisaged measures towards liquidating the refugee problem by integrating the refugees into the normal life of society, by "turning refugees into people again", as a United Nations broadcast put it.

To "integrate" a person means to make him a member of a functioning social organism aimed at the preservation of life, i.e. an organism whose participants are afforded the normal opportunities of earning their living and the normal protection of life and civil rights. It is not necessary that the integrated individuals be granted, or accept, immediate full citizenship in the countries where they settle; it is necessary, however, that they enjoy equal rights and opportunities of supporting themselves and their families.

Theoretically and logically it makes no difference where the refugees are settled and thus "turned into people again"; it could be in Israel, it could be in Arab countries, or it could be somewhere else. For practical purposes, however, and in the language of General Assembly resolutions, settlement of Arab refugees in Israel has been called "repatriation" and settlement in Arab countries "resettlement". (Individual settlement by

emigration to other countries is a personal problem outside the scope of the United Nations.)

2. Creating Land

In countries more highly developed than those of the Middle East, the problem could thus be reduced to the mere political question of procuring the agreement of their governments to admit a certain number of refugees - as "immigrants" in the case of the Arab countries, or as "returnees" in the case of Israel. However, in view of the limited economic resources of that region, the problem arises of how to create the economic conditions under which the governments concerned can reasonably accept the required numbers of immigrant or repatriate refugees.

According to a statistical survey prepared by the Mandatory Government, 116,000 of the 183,000 gainfully employed Moslems of Palestine were engaged in agriculture. The next highest groups - 18,000 and 15,000 respectively - were employed in manufacture (largely handicrafts and petty industry) and trade.

The figures quoted above indicate that the majority of these refugees stem from an agricultural background - land owners, landed farmers, tenant farmers and landless peasants. The task of creating opportunities for them in target countries thus becomes the task of creating agricultural land in those countries. Some of the countries, for example Syria and Jordan, have an abundance of barren land which could be transformed into agricultural land by means of irrigation, soil reclamation, etc.

3. The possible and the impossible

It is suggested that the creation of land in target countries of the Middle East would offer the required opportunities for the majority of refugees to settle themselves, either permanently or temporarily. The emphasis in the foregoing statement, however, should be placed on the words "opportunities" and "themselves". Efforts to plan the settlement of refugees by an outside agency would be far too time-consuming, complicated and costly and, therefore, self-defeating. All that can be done within a reasonably short time is to assist target countries to create economic conditions under which a specified number of refugees can be admitted and given the right to earn their living.

It would be illusory and impossible to introduce any form of planned economy for one sector of the population - namely, settled refugees - in countries where a planned economy does not generally exist. Basically the Arab refugee problem is an immigration problem - re-immigration into Israel or new immigration into Arab countries. The fact that international assistance is required to make such immigration economically feasible is incidental, not essential. If their immigration is made possible through international aid, then their status will naturally not be different from that of immigrants - permanent or temporary - to the United States, Australia, Brazil or any other country: they will have to become part of the prevailing social structure and pursue their economic aims as best they can.

4. The procedure

To achieve the aim outlined above, the closest possible co-ordination of the functions now separately entrusted to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and the Conciliation Commission would be required. On the basis of such a co-ordinating arrangement, the governments concerned - Israel and the Arab States - would be asked whether they are prepared to admit a certain number of Arab refugees under certain conditions.

The conditions might include the following :

(a) The governments place at the disposal of the United Nations specified tracts of land free of charge;

(b) The United Nations will provide the labour and materials to improve that land according to plans arranged in agreement with the respective governments (refugee labour would primarily be employed for that purpose and, at the same time, relief to able-bodied refugees discontinued);

(c) The improved land will become the property of the government with the injunction that the refugees have an option to buy acreage thereon for a predetermined price, or to rent it as tenants for a predetermined rent. Purchasers of land would have to erect the necessary structures; for tenants, the government would provide the customary habitations to be paid for out of the rent. The outright buyers of land will be largely former property owners who have either received

compensation, secured payments out of blocked accounts or been able to salvage some of their former properties. Former landless peasants and tenants would have the opportunity to earn a living as before as tenant farmers or farm hands.

This arrangement would not mean that the refugees admitted to the country would be forced to settle on the land improved by the United Nations. It would simply mean that the immigrating refugee would have an opportunity to settle himself under specified conditions. He would be entirely free not to avail himself of that opportunity, to buy land elsewhere, or to earn his living by any other legal pursuit. Any of the improved land not claimed by immigrant refugees would be at the free disposal of the government.

5. Non-agricultural refugees

It is clear that the settlement of a considerable number of agricultural refugees would in itself stimulate opportunities for non-agricultural refugees - traders, craftsmen, professional men - in the same area. Labourers will be needed for building houses, tradespeople and craftsmen to cater to the needs of the new communities.

As in the case of agricultural refugee immigrants, the former property owners and recipients of compensation would be the ones able to buy shops and workshops. The others would try to find employment according to their ability. But again the overriding principle must be complete freedom of economic decision for the individual non-agricultural refugee. It is up to him to try his fortune in one of the refugee settlements or elsewhere according to his ability and his judgment. No special planning for these people is required or desirable.

6. Financing

The capital needed in order to "create" the land for the reintegration of the refugees would emanate from three sources :

- (a) land grants made by the Arab governments;
- (b) money grants made by the international community through the instrument of the United Nations;
- (c) contributions levied from recipients of compensation payment among the refugees themselves.

The request that recipients of compensation participate in the financing of the reintegration of their property-less fellows in no way prejudices the fundamental difference between compensation and reintegration: compensation being a legal obligation devolving upon Israel to indemnify individual owners for their abandoned property; reintegration being a voluntary international contribution towards a solution of the refugee problem as a whole. However, when tax-payers in remote countries are requested to finance the reintegration of Arab refugees, then it seems fair and equitable to expect that the more fortunate among the refugees themselves should also contribute their share to this United Nations effort, the more so since the United Nations is to be instrumental in procuring the compensation payment which they may receive.

The collection of these contributions from recipients of compensation would be a simple procedure since Israel has already indicated her unwillingness to deal with compensation claimants individually. In view of this attitude on the part of Israel, any compensation payments which may be made will have to flow into a United Nations-operated disbursement agency. This disbursement agency would simply transfer to the reintegration fund a certain percentage of the compensation payments collected. The remainder would be disbursed to the legitimate individual owners, according to an appropriate key, in three instruments of payment: cash, negotiable bonds, shares in a Refugee Loan Co-operative.

7. The Loan-Co-operative

The creation of such a Loan-Co-operative is proposed because many of the immigrant refugees will be in need of initial loans to tide them over the period of settlement: tenant farmers will have to buy agricultural implements, seed and a minimum of livestock, property-less craftsmen will need a basic stock of tools.

To meet these requirements, it is suggested that a Refugee Loan Co-operative be established, the capital being supplied through compulsory subscription by recipients of compensation. It should be noted that this subscription of capital would not constitute a levy or private taxation. The individual recipient

of compensation would merely be required to invest a certain percentage of his compensation in the Loan Co-operative and thus to contribute to the settlement of his less fortunate fellow-refugees. He would retain full ownership of his shares.

It can be seen from the procedure outlined above that the suggested scheme would combine all three main aspects of the refugee problem: repatriation, resettlement and compensation.

Repatriation would be viewed as just one special form of resettlement, namely, resettlement in Israel. This approach would offer an inducement to Israel to permit the return of certain refugees, inasmuch as Israel would then become eligible for the international assistance contemplated as a corollary to the settlement of refugees. Thus the acceptance of some degree of repatriation would constitute not merely a sacrifice, but also a tangible advantage to Israel.

The connection between the proposed procedure and compensation is also obvious. Compensation would become a means of restoring to a degree the social structure under which the refugees were living before they became refugees, and at the same time, through its partial transfer to the reintegration fund and through investment in the Loan-Co-operative, it would serve to establish property-less refugees in their new environment.

The proposed arrangement would obviate the vexing problem of financial relations between compensation and reintegration funds. There will be no need for recipients of compensation payments to reimburse the reintegration fund for expenditures made towards their individual reintegration.

(a) "Reintegrees" - rich or poor - will, in principle, be given opportunities rather than tangible assets. In their capacity of "reintegrees" they will, therefore, incur no debt and have none to pay;

(b) Those "reintegrees" who are also recipients of compensation payments will have made their contribution to the reintegration fund before they receive their payment;

(c) Those "reintegrees" who contract loans to tide them over the period of settlement will have to repay the borrowed money in the form of an ordinary business transaction, not to a United Nations fund, but to a Loan Co-operative administered by their own fellows.

8. Conclusions

As a matter of principle, the proposed procedure avoids involving United Nations agencies in any extraneous activities. It considers it the primary task of these agencies to turn refugees as quickly as possible into people by facilitating their immigration into countries of the Middle East.

Any further involvement with the problem would be over-complicated and beset with pitfalls. That is why it has been suggested that the "created" land be turned over - under certain conditions - to the governments concerned. That is also why it has been suggested that rehabilitation loans be handled by a refugee-administered and refugee-financed Loan Co-operative. It would be undesirable for United Nations agencies in the area permanently to go into the land-selling, land-leasing or banking business. The United Nations effort towards solving the refugee problem should be simple, efficient and as brief as possible. Once the opportunities for settlement are created, the task should be left to the people on the spot.

All three parties - the refugees, the governments concerned and the international community - would derive advantages from this scheme:

- the refugees would be given opportunities to become "people" again;
- the governments would be given valuable improved land which would constitute an important and permanent source of revenue;
- the world community would be able to resolve the Palestine refugee problem and thus to remove one of the most formidable obstacles to the restoration of peace in the Middle East.
