

U.N. wants to help trees, not refugees

by Joyce Fredman

The latest figures from the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees show that the population of displaced people around the globe is continuing to grow at a staggering rate. Only two years ago, in 1990, the world's refugee population was 15 million. In 1991, it rose to 17 million. As regional wars continue to spread, that figure is now nearing 25 million. Why there appears to be no solution for the plight of these souls might be better understood by looking at those organizations that are charged with responsibility to alleviate such suffering.

A refugee is one who flees to a foreign country to escape danger or persecution. In *Food Aid in Africa*, a report by the World Bank and the World Food Programme, their vulnerability is noted: "Refugees, unlike victims of natural disasters or drought, depend almost exclusively on international and host government assistance. They are rarely allowed to seek outside employment and receive little or no cash to supplement their food rations or to cover their basic requirements for items other than food. Displaced people seeking refuge from civil strife can sometimes be helped to settle in new areas, but often their 'temporary' status means that they cannot own land."

Environmental degradation

The primary agencies set up to deal with this tragedy are the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP), part of the Food Aid Organization of the U.N. Both have failed miserably, and one only need look at their agenda to find out why: "Environmental degradation has increasingly become both a cause and a symptom of population movements. The majority of refugees today are to be found in arid and semiarid areas of the poorest countries of the world. The concentration of large populations in such areas leads to a tremendous strain on these fragile environments and on the meager resources available," stated Mrs. Sadako Ogata, high commissioner for refugees, in the World Food Programme's 1992 *Food Aid Review*. "Population growth is fastest in the poorest countries. More people means more pressure on natural resources—less land, less water, poorer soil, fewer trees."

The year "1979 saw the beginning of war in Afghanistan. It also saw the start of a less bloody but nevertheless brutal assault against the environment in neighboring Pakistan," said Diane Weathers in the report.

"Seeking safety from the terror raging across their land, one-fifth of Afghanistan's population fled to neighboring countries, making it one of the largest mass migrations in history. Approximately 3 million people—along with an equal number of sheep, goats, cattle, and camels—crossed the border into Pakistan. Most people crowded into the ecologically fragile Northwest Frontier Province, inflicting damage on the region from which it may never fully recover."

Recently, Keith Richburg of the *Washington Post* wrote of an investigation which claimed to uncover massive fraud, diversion of funds, embezzlement, and currency exchange manipulation in the U.N. programs. According to this and other reports, life in refugee camps is pushed to the limit by sheer negligence. In Liboi, a stop for Somalian refugees in Kenya, for six months, while UNHCR argued over what water holes should be dug, refugees "were forced to wait in long lines under a scorching sun for up to 12 hours a day to receive a couple of quarts of water. Problems with diarrhea and dysentery among the Somalis grew worse, and the death rate climbed."

Richburg quoted Jeffrey Clark, a former staffer on the Select Committee on Hunger in the U.S. Congress and now a consultant for the private U.S. Committee for Refugees: "The horror stories are not aberrations. Incompetence and evasion of responsibility are pervasive within UNHCR. That incompetence is so severe that it almost borders on negligence of a criminal nature. Then on another layer you have outright malfeasance."

UNHCR officials cite staffing shortages and inadequate funding. "All of these problems are true," Clark said. "But the main problem is the lack of determination to get a handle on these situations and to try to prevent these crises from developing. A bad situation is allowed to fester and become a horrible situation, and a horrible situation is allowed to become a catastrophe."

U.N. Special Envoy to Somalia Mohammed Sahnoun is blunt about the U.N.'s failures. "We were absolutely, totally absent," he said in Mogadishu, referring to Somalia. "The U.N. should have intervened, and I do not understand why they didn't. It was a very, very long delay and a tragic delay. And now we are paying the price. . . . I saw children dying with my own eyes. . . . I saw old people dying . . . and there was no assistance."

Another overarching explanation as to why refugees receive little help, is that people are not a priority. Over 45 million people in 1991 were in need of food relief, yet less than half received aid of any consequence, and those that did got the barest minimum. The WFP publications state: "WFP spends \$1 million a day on projects for afforestation and soil conservation and activities to promote environmentally sustainable agricultural production. Since its inception in 1963, WFP has disbursed \$6 billion in support of such projects and is one of the largest donors of resources for environmental projects in the developing world."