



CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSLETTER ON REFUGEES

# REFUGEE

## POLITICS AND REFUGEES:

### The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

By Howard Adelman

**P**olitical questions and refugee problems are inseparable. How should humanitarian organizations assisting refugees deal with the political questions? There are at least three approaches.

One approach assumes that since refugees are a by-product of politics, a refugee problem cannot be adequately addressed unless its political causes are confronted. This conviction characterizes the work of increasing numbers of non-governmental organizations.

The other two approaches give immediate humanitarian issues priority and adopt an outwardly neutral stance toward political issues. Both United Nations bodies assisting refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), adopt this stance. The difference between the second and third approaches - as exemplified by UNHCR and UNRWA - hinges on the issue of resettlement.

UNHCR provides temporary relief while pursuing the objective of finding permanent homes for the refugees as soon as possible - through repatriation, settlement in the country of first asylum or resettlement abroad. UNHCR refuses to get into the political rights and wrongs of a refugee issue, but

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nonetheless affects the political equation indirectly. To the extent that Salvadorans, Chileans, Southeast Asians, Afghans, Lebanese, Ugandan Asians, Czechs, Hungarians, East Germans, Jews and other post World War II refugees are permanently settled rather than left in camps, an explosive reminder of the source of each refugee problem is removed. When masses of discontented and readily radicalized refugees are dispersed, a weakening in the moral outrage at the causes of their displacement follows.

Resettled ethnic groups have always been divided on the degree to which they ought to attempt to right historical injustice. Many simply want to get on with the job of reconstructing their lives in their new homelands. Estonians, for example, may gather together to remember and protest the elimination of their nation's State, but the protest grows weaker and weaker as the children become Canadianized or

Americanized.

The third approach, exemplified by UNRWA, attempts to completely separate humanitarian and political questions.<sup>1</sup> UNRWA was first established to provide temporary relief for Palestinian refugees. In contrast to UNHCR, it was not mandated to pursue resettlement. UNRWA developed on the assumption that the three solutions of repatriation, permanent settlement in countries of first asylum and resettlement abroad were not viable options: "It was soon recognized that few if any would be allowed to return to their homes at an early date, that countries in the area were economically incapable of absorbing hundreds of thousands of refugees and that the refugees themselves feared they might

<sup>1</sup>"Political aspects of the Palestine refugee problem, as well as the question of repatriation and compensation, are the responsibility of United Nations bodies other than UNRWA." *UNRWA: A survey of United Nations assistance to Palestine refugees*, p. 1.

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