

update

UNHCR/Visual Refugee Service

UNHCR slashes budget

When former Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers took over as High Commissioner at the beginning of this year, UNHCR's budget planners predicted that once again several donor governments would not pay the total sum that they had pledged. Lubbers, by training an economist, has decided to cut staff and operations by 15%. He argues that it is better to face reality and cut in a planned way rather than to follow the practice of previous years and freeze programmes and activities once the money runs out.

Unlike other major UN agencies, UNHCR is dependent on voluntary contributions. 96% of UNHCR's work is funded by 14 governments and the European Union. The largest contributors since 1995 have been the USA (28.7%), the European Union (15.2%), Japan (14%), Sweden (6.4%), Netherlands (5.8%), Denmark (5.2%), Norway (4.7%) and the UK (4%). France and Italy (each paying just over 1%) and Germany (2.2%) are among the major industrialised countries regarded as underfunders. Whereas the European Commission and EU member states provided 54% of UNHCR's funds in 1995, they provided only 32% in 2000. Lubbers has noted that the US contribution, while generous, falls slightly below the \$1 per capita that he hopes to receive from wealthy countries. Several Nordic countries currently exceed that standard. Lubbers is outspoken in criticising governments for not giving enough.

UNHCR is cutting its total budget from more than \$950m to \$850m and axing some 600 jobs. Almost three quarters of funding in Africa is being slashed. In Africa UNHCR will probably have to cut important health, water purity, family planning and HIV/AIDS protection programmes. Most of these cuts will flow down to NGOs that act as UNHCR implementation partners.

In at least 10 countries — Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Gambia, Kuwait, Mali, Niger, Swaziland, Togo, United Arab Emirates and Vietnam — it plans to close offices completely. Rachel Reilly, Refugee Policy Director for

Human Rights Watch, says such closures will affect stranded urban refugees. "In some countries, like Gambia, Benin, Chad, Mali, we know there are asylum seekers coming from far afield — from countries like Iran and Iraq — who are in desperate need of protection. They will arrive and find there are no UNHCR offices to go to. And often the cuts are being made in countries which do not have in place their own asylum-determination procedures and where refugees really are at serious risk of arrest, detention, and even deportation."

Currently a quarter of those assisted by UNHCR — just over 5 million — are IDPs. Lubbers says that some IDPs are in large programmes in such places as Guinea where they cannot be split from refugees and are funded together as one programme. Their funding is assured. A second set of IDP activities is classed as 'special projects' and are brought directly before donors, who decide to fund them on a case-by-case basis. This year, donors have agreed to fully fund programmes for IDPs fleeing long-running conflicts in Colombia, Eritrea and Sri Lanka. Their failure to provide cash for Angola, however, has caused widespread disquiet in the aid world.

For further information see www.unhcr.ch/fdrs/ga2001/funding.pdf

Cambodia refouling Montagnard refugees to Vietnam

A number of indigenous minority tribes in Vietnam's Central Highlands are collectively known as Montagnards. They became embroiled in the war in Vietnam when many were recruited into the US Special Forces and were subsequently evacuated to the US. In February 2001 thousands of Montagnards demonstrated in Kontum Province against land confiscation and religious repression (most are evangelical Christians). The severity of the Vietnamese crackdown caused large numbers to flee to Cambodia. While a few have been given asylum in the US (angering the government of Vietnam), some 400 are believed to remain in Cambodia.

Cambodia, despite being one of the very few southeast Asian states to have signed the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, has come under intense Vietnamese pressure to deport the refugees. In May at least 89 people were forcibly repatriated to Vietnam despite commitments made by Cambodia's Prime Minister to respect the principle of *non-refoulement*. After being handed over to Vietnamese police, they were handcuffed and taken away. Human Rights Watch has voiced serious concern about their whereabouts and safety as the Vietnamese Criminal Code provides for harsh punishment for non-violent political activity deemed to be 'anti-government'. Although Vietnam, Cambodia and UNHCR have met in Hanoi to discuss the issue, the Vietnamese government continues to deny UNHCR or other humanitarian organisations access to the Central Highlands.

For further information see www.montagnards.org

Grim prospects for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

The political, economic and social exclusion of the 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon has reached unprecedented heights with the passing of a new property law.

Constraints on the employment of Palestinians go back to the beginning of exile in Lebanon. Palestinian refugees are barred from the professions, a wide range of skilled and semi-skilled work and public sector employment. Discriminatory labour laws mean that Palestinian workers, regardless of level of education, are mostly unemployed. A diminished Palestinian professional and trading stratum has survived through sharing with a Lebanese 'partner', accepting lower wages or staying within camp boundaries. Much property owned by Palestinians has never been registered. Palestinian civic rights are constricted by laws and practices aimed — though this is never explicitly stated — at making life so unbearable that many leave. Guest workers from Sri Lanka or Ethiopia have more civic rights than Palestinians.



“Whoever wins, Palestinians lose” is an apt summary of the role of pawn and scapegoat played by Palestinians in Lebanon’s complex political arena. The Intifada has produced changes in media depiction of Palestinians but has not made life in squalid and overcrowded camps any more bearable. President Lahoud has vied with other Arab leaders in glorifying the Intifada while the Lebanese army siege of the camps in the south remains as tight as ever. Ex-PLO representative Shafiq al-Hout has summed up the contradictions of Lebanese policy: “With Palestine, against the Palestinians”.

A new threshold of exclusion has been reached with the recent passing by the Lebanese parliament of a law banning ownership of real estate by “anyone who does not have citizenship in a recognized state”. If left unamended, the law will mainly affect Palestinians forced by low income and need for UNRWA services to live in the camps. Because camp boundaries are non-expandable, and repair or expansion of dwellings is restricted (building materials may not legally be brought into camps), Palestinian families have hitherto sought to accommodate their increasing families by trying to buy apartments or plots of land outside camps. This will now be illegal, as will mechanisms to inherit existing property.

The Tampa: the Olympic Nation wins gold for xenophobia

by Winton Higgins

In late August the Norwegian freighter Tampa responded to an Australian request to assist a sinking ferry carrying 433 asylum seekers. The captain rescued them, signalled that the refugees were in distress and made for Australia’s nearby Christmas Island. What happened next beggared his and the world’s imagination. Threatened with naval action, the Tampa was boarded by the Australian army who refused the captain

permission to land his distressed passengers. He had unwittingly sailed through a time warp, back to colonial, racist Fortress Australia and the White Australia Policy. He had also sailed into a major diplomatic incident. His most significant cargo turned out to be about the only chance of re-election the rightist Howard government could conjure up.

What the captain and the world saw was a rich country with a relatively small influx of asylum seekers defying morality and international law by callously refusing to help Afghan refugees. Australians saw a whole lot more. John Howard has consistently opposed meaningful multiculturalism and Aboriginal reconciliation. He unfurled his assimilationist vision called One Australia in 1988. Eight years later a splinter group from his own party stole, embellished and rebadged the vision as One Nation, a new populist-right party that has since made major inroads into the government’s electoral base. Now the government wants to outflank One Nation by outbidding it for the racist vote. It has succeeded brilliantly. According to opinion polls, 75% of Australians supported his decision to make the refugees (literally) stew in the sun on the Tampa’s scorching deck. The opposition Labor Party has limply gone along with Howard, looking unsuccessfully for its own share of the xenophobic vote.

This electoral ploy has been long in preparation. The government has gradually intensified its demonisation of asylum seekers, as ‘criminals’ and ‘queue-jumpers’ who are mounting a veritable invasion (see FMR issue 8 pp31-34). It has revived old nightmares of the Threat From The North – the teeming, barbaric Asian hordes hungrily eyeing Australia’s wide-open spaces. It is a rare case of a government, rather than the media, initiating a moral panic.

Uniquely for a developed country, Australia throws all asylum seekers, including children, into detention centres. Situated in remote desert regions, these are run by the US jail tycoon, George R Wackenhut.

This ‘ethnic caging’, suggests Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage, starkly demarcates who is inside and who is outside Fortress Australia.

Australia’s violation of its responsibilities as a signatory of the 1951 UN Convention contrasts with its hospitality to war criminals. Of the thousands of killers who have found a place in the country’s post-war migration programme, not one has ever been deported or convicted. The comparative treatment of refugees and war criminals points to a deeply rooted moral nihilism in the national culture, one which the Howard government ruthlessly exploits.

Because of their wealth and stability, Western countries bear a special responsibility towards refugees. As they grope towards some way of shouldering it, they can expect no solidarity from Australia. No matter who wins the election at the end of the year.

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For updated news of Australia’s refugee policies see: www.wsws.org/sections/category/news/au-immi.shtml. See also: www.dev-zone.org/links/Afghan_Refugees/

FMR web links

For the Internet’s best set of links to sources of information on refugees and IDPs, visit our links section at

www.fmreview.org/2links.htm

If you would like to add or suggest a link please contact the Editors. Email: fmr@qeh.ox.ac.uk