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Conseil International des Agences Bénévoles

Statements  
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VOLUNTARY AGENCIES' STATEMENT  
TO THE  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
ON THE  
PLIGHT OF REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS  
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA  
(SARRED)

(Oslo, 22-24 August 1988)



## INTRODUCTION

Over eight million people are uprooted in South Africa, Namibia, and the front-line states. They have been forced to leave their countries, communities, homes and even families - this with an incalculable price in human suffering. The magnitude of this tragedy defies description, multiplying beyond measure the naked statistics:

1,5-----million refugees in 11 countries

4,9-----million displaced persons in 2 countries

These statistics do not include the millions of displaced persons and the thousands of refugees in South Africa and Namibia.

The SARRED conference deserves special commendation for bringing international attention to the needs of internally displaced persons. As can be seen above, the number of those who have fled their homes, but still remain in their own country, is even larger than the internationally displaced refugees.

Both the displaced and the refugees are generally fleeing for the same reasons, but they can be differentiated by the disparate levels of assistance and protection they receive. The refugees typically receive some assistance not only from the host country, but through international systems, largely focussed on the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In contrast, there is no real international system to meet the needs of the internally displaced, who suffer as each new situation is dealt with on an ad hoc basis (1).

### 1. THE PLIGHT OF THE UPROOTED

Why are so many uprooted in southern Africa? "Africa is, of course, part and parcel of nature's creation," stated OAU Assistant Secretary-General, Ambassador Dede, in opening the ICVA Consultation on Uprooted Peoples in southern Africa, held last year in Lusaka. "It has, therefore unfortunately, not been spared her share of natural disasters and calamities. Droughts, floods, cyclones, famine and other unfortunate acts of nature have contributed to the recent increases in the population of uprooted peoples in southern Africa."

But these natural causes, significant though they may be, are not the root cause of suffering. As Ambassador Dede and countless others have pointed out, the disturbing increase in uprooted peoples in southern Africa has mainly to do with economic (2) and military destabilization policies pursued by Pretoria

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1) To see the problem, one need only compare the per-capita international assistance provided Angolans displaced in settlements in Zambia versus that provided for internally displaced persons within Angola.

2) The economic effects of destabilization, estimated by the Southern Africa Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) to cost the region 35 billion US dollars, tear at the very fabric of the front-line states, even of South Africa itself, destroying whatever abilities and capabilities these states may have to bring about their own development. The conflicts in Angola and Mozambique, for example, have robbed the enormous potential of these countries. Even more tragically, the economic cost to individuals and families can only be reckoned in degrees of poverty, with many finding themselves involuntary numbered among the poorest of the poor.



against such African countries as Zambia, Mozambique, Angola, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Swaziland. This has led to the destruction of bridges, roads, railways, transport and communications. Even more seriously, it has led to the deaths of an estimated one million men, women, and children in the sub-region, according to a 1987 report prepared for UNICEF, entitled "Children on the Front-Line."

Underlying this destabilization policy is an attempt to protect and preserve an oppressive social system (3) in South Africa, which cannot be justified by any reasonable moral, ethical, religious or humanitarian standard. We speak of apartheid, a system which institutionally denies black Africans, Asians, and those of mixed-race, who comprise more than 80 percent of the population, the basic right to human development. In a land of immense wealth and resources, deliberate government policy excludes the black majority from the political process, from equal access to economic opportunities, and from basic health, education, and social services.

As the Commonwealth Secretary-General stated in a speech in Swaziland last year, apartheid is the modern face of slavery. It calls forth the same moral repugnance that slavery did. It involves the same guilt by association of all who support and sustain it.

The untold human suffering caused by apartheid is not limited to South Africa, but has spread throughout the southern African region. South Africa continues its illegal occupation of Namibia and enforces an apartheid system over the Namibian people. A flood of refugees -- especially women, children and elderly (4) -- has been forced to flee the brutalities of apartheid and are living in deplorable conditions in neighboring states. South Africa economic and military destabilization campaigns have contributed to famine and economic hardship in the neighboring states. Members of South Africa-supported rebel movements commit atrocities against local populations, and sabotage development and relief activities.

As a result, many voluntary agencies have been forced to restrict or suspend humanitarian and development operations in the field. The front-line states allocate scarce resources to combat this disruption, (5) resources desperately needed to alleviate the deprivation of their people.

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3) Meanwhile, the symptoms of this disease will be evident not only in the destabilization policies, but more so, in their by-products of human suffering and deprivation.

4) While the basic unit of society - the family - is often torn asunder, the lives of women and children are fragmented most. Government officials in Mozambique report, for example, that 200 thousand children do not know the whereabouts of their parents. Some, who have come in contact with RENAMO units, have been taught to kill and now suffer psychological aggression and withdrawal. Beyond the family, the negative effects of destabilization can be seen in a breakdown of other institutions in society. Churches, schools, hospitals and other institutions have been seriously damaged or destroyed in the region.

5) From the broad humanitarian perspective, destabilization compels us to respond by sacrificing the future on the altar of the immediate. In the face of suffering, we must provide uprooted people with such temporary measures as protection and emergency assistance in food, shelter and health. These remedial actions are important and often imperative, but they drain resources which could be dedicated to more lasting measures.



The current crisis engulfing South Africa points to the urgency of finding a peaceful means to dismantle apartheid. The South African government has responded to black unrest with brutal repression, while refusing to address the systemic injustice that has produced it. Detentions, torture, random killings and the atrocities committed by the security forces occupying the townships have been well documented. an astounding percentage of the victims of these governmental reprisals has been children under the age of 16.

As voluntary agencies, we have a role to play in assisting the victims of apartheid in South Africa and the region. However, we will not provide assistance in a manner which tacitly supports the structures of apartheid. Assistance must be coupled with unambiguous support for efforts to bring rapid and thorough change to South Africa. Apartheid cannot be reformed. We believe the violence will only intensify, with incalculable cost to human lives, until apartheid is destroyed and a just system of government is established.

## II. BURDEN-SHARING

In Article II of the OAU Convention, Member States are enjoined "to use their best endeavours consistent with their respective legislations to receive refugees and to secure the settlement of those refugees who, for well-founded reasons, are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin or nationality."

That statement embodies not only an international convention, but the more basic principle of burden-sharing among nations. Providing for refugees thus becomes a fundamental humanitarian action; conversely, casting of refugees denies the very essence of the human contract between those who seek refuge and those who have the ability to provide it. For that reason, says the same Article, "The granting of asylum to refugees is a peaceful and humanitarian act and shall not be regarded as an unfriendly act by any Member State."

Moreover, rejection, return or expulsion of refugees is specifically precluded by this Article, though Member States may appeal to other Member States when it becomes difficult to provide assistance. In this event, says the Article, "such other Member States shall in the spirit of African solidarity and international cooperation take appropriate measures to lighten the burden of the Member State granting asylum."

In this context, the voluntary agency community would like to voice its praise and recognition for the exemplary role played by the Member States of the OAU in responding to the needs of uprooted persons throughout the continent, and in providing an example to the entire world of how such persons should be cared for and dealt with. This commendable performance deserves a generous response from the international community, especially given the magnitude of the crisis in southern Africa.

It was with good reason, then, that the organizers of the SARRED Conference set as an objective the securing of greater adherence by the international community to this principle of burden sharing and international solidarity. They particularly desired that OAU Member States outside southern Africa demonstrate their commitment to this principle. The voluntary agencies hope these countries will rise to that challenge, not only providing material and/or financial assistance, but opportunities for third-country resettlement and education at the secondary and post-secondary levels.

Beyond that, the opportunity now exists for African nations to once again take the lead, as they did in 1969, when the Organization of African Unity expanded the definition of a "refugee" beyond that of the Geneva Conventions. That was done to better match international instruments and mandates with realities in



Africa. Central American countries have now followed that example, agreeing to a similar definition in the Cartagena Declaration.

Now, the number of internally displaced persons, surpassing that of refugees, is part of the present realities in Africa. Finding ways to ease their suffering will not be easy. With creativity, however, and with the conviction that humanitarian aid should be provided to those who suffer - wherever they may be - such means can be found and incorporated into international instruments and conventions.

### III. MATERIAL ASSISTANCE

Concerned as we are as voluntary agencies that the OAU Member States do all they can to help themselves, we feel that the principle of burden-sharing is a universal obligation that extends to the international community outside Africa. Thus, we strongly urge the non-African governments to respond positively, not only to the humanitarian needs identified by the SARRED Conference, but to the development imperatives of SADCC.

For the uprooted, the voluntary agencies are firmly convinced that the most appropriate approach is the sustainable development of the entire affected area, including the local population. Both should be included in the development process. The guiding principle is to enable each community, and particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, to undertake their own development according to their own priorities.

Development of the affected area should involve local structures and/or African voluntary-development organizations. This may entail participation by international voluntary agencies in institution-building and other supporting roles to strengthen indigenous capacities. The goals of such efforts should not be limited to economic development, but must include educational, social and community development as well. In this context there is need for reinforcement of communications systems in the affected countries in order to facilitate the delivery of services and coordination.

Beyond these basic approaches, it is also our conviction that coordination should be promoted in priority sectors such as food security, agricultural development, income-generation, cooperatives, training and credit systems, and appropriate technology (6). Among other factors, protection of the environment and development of renewable energy systems should be integrated into these activities, where appropriate. Effective coordination, in our opinion, will entail cooperation with technical ministries, intergovernmental and regional bodies, including SADCC units.

Regarding regional relief and development, we feel that donors should be particularly sensitive to the damage done by flooding an area with commodities that are readily available for purchase in local markets. This should be avoided when commodities are at hand.

The basis of any long-term development must always be anchored in the immediate present, and in the context of the conflict situation engulfing southern Africa, this means paying particular attention to the social and economic burden borne by the states which provide refuge to persons uprooted in the region. Justice and the exigencies of international planning thus dictate that if the international community wishes to make a long-term contribution to the

6) The PVOs hold that appropriate technologies are normally small-scale projects designed and implemented by local people. They are easily replicated and multiplied to the masses.



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refugees in southern Africa, this must involve assistance and support for the receiving countries in the area.

In the areas of finance and funding, we sense several necessities:

1. Debt relief for SADCC countries burdened by the effects of destabilization.
2. Transportation and communication assistance for SADCC countries, so long as apartheid exists.
3. Better partnerships between voluntary and multilateral agencies.
4. Use of newer mechanisms for development-funding, such as monetization, purchase of debt, etc.

#### IV. PLAN OF ACTION

While the voluntary agencies appreciate being asked to present a background paper and statement for the SARRED Conference, we feel it would have been more productive to involve the agencies in developing the initial action plan. We respectfully request, then, an active role in the present and continuing review-and-implementation process - this at the planning and strategy-setting levels.

That sort of interaction should be encouraged at every level, both with the international voluntary agencies and with the indigenous agencies. The latter are increasingly taking on the operational role, while the international agencies are adapting to a supporting role.

The progress made toward resolving the conflict in Angola and in regard to Namibian independence represents a major step forward in the process of bringing peace to the region. NGOs are ready to play a major role in facilitating the voluntary return of Namibians to participate in the proposed free elections and in assisting their reintegration in Namibia.

#### CONCLUSIONS

In this brief statement, the voluntary agencies have not attempted to address every issue of humanitarian concern, nor have we focussed on all the problems and perspectives of the states within the region. But, through an extensive consultation process, internationally and in the region, we have achieved a broad consensus on the points reflected here.

From the consultative process, one dominant impression remains: the voluntary agencies are deeply committed to working with the governmental and intergovernmental organizations to meet ongoing humanitarian needs; but, more and more, this effort is seen to have lasting value only within the context of development. We are painfully aware that this development in the southern region of Africa will not take place unless there is peace; and a just and lasting peace will not come unless apartheid is dismantled.

We therefore call upon the Conference to:

1. Identify apartheid as the root cause of the suffering of countless uprooted people and take appropriate action to enforce the UN arms embargo and to support the implementation of effective sanctions against South Africa.



2. Provide assistance aimed at strengthening the infrastructures and communities of the host countries.
3. Establish mechanisms for development of concrete proposals toward appropriate changes in the international relationships, mandates, institutions and conventions to enable displaced persons in Africa to be offered adequate protection and assistance.



## NGO RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED DURING THE SARRED CONFERENCE

Resolution No. 1: Orderly Politics Bill

The NGOs who attended the SARRED Conference agree to put pressure on their governments to continue opposition to the proposed "Orderly Politics Bill in South Africa, or any subsequent and alternative measures that might be introduced to hinder international support to opponents of apartheid in South Africa.

Resolution No. 2: Development Approach

The NGOs attending the SARRED Conference recall the Consultation on Uprooted Peoples in Southern Africa held in Lusaka (Zambia) in June 1987 and request ICVA to pursue its efforts for an early implementation of the conclusions reached by the Working Group on Development of the said Consultation, and to identify a development strategy by applying these conclusions to the study of one or two refugee settlements which have still not reached the stage of self-sufficiency on a sustainable basis.

Resolution No. 3: Internally Displaced Persons

The NGOs attending the SARRED Conference request ICVA and its member agencies to give priority to the need for protection of internally displaced persons and for ICVA to urgently undertake a preliminary study outlining principles and possible actions aimed at ensuring international protection of internally displaced persons, focusing on the situation in Southern Africa.

Resolution No. 4: Education

The NGOs attending the SARRED Conference in Oslo reaffirm the importance of integrating education initiatives in the programmes of relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development designed for refugees, returnees and displaced persons in Southern Africa. Furthermore, the NGOs actively seek to implement the recommendations on education and health formulated at the ICVA Consultation on Uprooted People in Southern Africa held in Lusaka in June 1987.

Resolution No. 5: Follow-Up

The NGOs attending the SARRED Conference request AACC, FAVDO, ICVA and InterAction to instigate a study and make recommendations on ways to ensure effective coordination in Southern Africa among all NGOs for the follow-up of the SARRED Conference. The study should be conducted at the country level in consultation with churches, local organizations and operational voluntary agencies, and should be completed by March 1989 and distributed to the four agencies concerned for dissemination to their members and other agencies as appropriate. It is envisaged that one or more of the four organizations may convene a meeting of NGOs operating in Southern Africa and working with refugees, returnees and displaced persons, to consider the recommendations of the study and to initiate any action agreed.