

By far the most difficult and controversial matter which the Third Committee was asked to study, and to which it devoted seven sessions of full and frank discussion, was the problem of refugees. This matter was, in the first instance, the subject of a paper presented by the United Kingdom representative. It stated that the refugee problem was now, with the end of the war, assuming formidable dimensions, was one of great urgency, and must be approached on bold lines. The present machinery was clearly no longer adequate: the Inter-governmental Committee on Refugees imposed no real contractual obligation and it commanded neither sufficient resources nor organization, while UNRRA, the only other body which had recently been concerned with the problem, was a purely temporary institution and was not authorized to deal, except for a short period, with persons who for any reason could not return to their homes, or who had none to return to, or who no longer enjoyed the protection of their Governments.

The United Kingdom representative therefore proposed that the refugee problem should be referred to the Economic and Social Council for thorough examination in all its details and for early report.

The Yugoslav representative, however, touched off the controversy by submitting that the problem of displaced persons had ceased to be an important international question; the war was now over and therefore the basic reasons which had prevented the return of these persons to their own countries had disappeared. He declared that the only call for action on the part of the United Nations was in respect of war criminals and traitors, whose return to their countries of origin should be obligatory on each and every member of the United Nations.

This point of view, which was supported chiefly by the representative of the Soviet Union, aroused a flood of protests from many others, especially those of the western European nations, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the dominions. They were entirely in agreement that no action taken by the United Nations should be construed as or have the effect of affording protection to traitors and war criminals; but they insisted that outside of this "Quisling" group there existed a large number of persons whose care must be accepted as a responsibility of the United Nations.

In the course of the debate the New Zealand viewpoint was put forward by Miss J. R. McKenzie in the form of a reply to the main points of the Yugoslav delegate's contentions, particularly his claim that refugees other than war criminals and traitors should not be entitled to any international assistance if they declined to return to their own countries. Revolutionary situations such as those which had arisen in Europe over the last decades always produced numbers of exiles, the New Zealand representative said. What was new to-day, however, was the largeness of the numbers; the severity of the punishment which loss of identifiable status imposed upon the individual in an age of ration cards and work permits; and the burden which the presence of refugees placed upon the chief countries of refuge unless it was to some extent equalized by international action.