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THE REFUGEES: A GLOBAL MOVEMENT IN HUMANISM

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My sincere appreciation and congratulations to the organizers and delegates to the 10th Congress of the International Movement of Catholic Jurists.

There can be no subject more appropriate than the theme you have chosen—the dignity of man—and the very particular situation of a special group of men whose life has been beleaguered by uncertainties, and subjugation brought about by the competition and supremacy among peoples, the onward movement of aggression, pursued by nations based on geographical imperatives for expansion and the gross violation of the respect for human kind has caught global attention.

December is a special month when we are all reminded of the Christmas virtues of love, peace and goodwill to our fellow men. We always see Christ as a child, who conquered the world as a leader of man. We are tasked to look at the situation of refugees, whose image is that of a young child needing care, love, affection, attention, and sanctuary, who by incident or accident are now helpless and hopeless.

PAST AND CURRENT SITUATION

Historically, the socio-political upheavals and the many years of struggle and civil strife in countries of the developed and developing world have brought displacement, untold sufferings and misery to thousands of people who are caught in the cross-fire of man's desire for control and supremacy.

The past experiences of the Philippines, whose refugees are the Russians, the Jews, the Chinese, the Vietnamese, and other nationals who seek help and sanctuary in nearby countries, and the escalating situation in Indo-China enabled the Philippines to extend humanitarian services to

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displaced persons and refugees, who are found along our coastal lines pleading for survival. I am fully aware that our foreign delegates have similar experiences, wherein we can also draw insights. May I therefore proceed by using the Philippine experience as an entry point in treating the subject assigned to me.

The involvement of the Philippines and the Filipino people with refugees has been of long tradition. The Filipinos themselves from the stabilization of immigration from other countries until the 13th century were actually refugees compelled to immigrate to the Philippines from Malaysia, Indonesia, and China for political, economic, and cultural reasons, and to find a happier place for them to live in. Fortunately for them, they came from many countries with similar ethnic and cultural attitudes and thus they developed a unique trait with a high degree of tolerance for foreigners. The Filipinos belong to a rare breed of people who smile always and who have practically no prejudice against anybody with respect to color, creed and religion.

It has been a place of refuge for many people. After World War I, refugees from Russia, who escaped and did not want to live under the communist government, arrived in the Philippines. When Hitler came into power in Germany in 1933, a good number of refugees of Jewish origin came to Manila and some of them are still with us, having adjusted themselves to the conditions of the country, and have prospered materially and professionally. The victory of the communists in mainland China in 1949 brought about the influx into the Philippines of thousands of Chinese, who were able to acquire permanent resident status as naturalized citizens, and who are integrated and participating actively in community affairs.

These previous experiences here influenced the Philippine Government under the able leadership of President Ferdinand E. Marcos in the handling of the biggest refugee problem in Southeast Asia—the Vietnamese Refugees—particularly the Boat People.

Looking back 41 years ago, an international conference on Lake Geneva concluded its deliberations. Thirty two "Nations of Asylum" convened to save the doomed Jews of Nazi Germany and Austria. On the eve of the conference, Hitler flung the challenge in the world's face. He said, "I can only hope that the other world, which has deep sympathy for these criminals will, at least, be generous enough to convert this sympathy to practical aid." At stake then were both human lives and the decency and self respect of the civilized world. If each nation had agreed on that day to take in 17,000 Jews at once, every Jew in the reich could have been saved. As one American observer wrote: "it is heartbreaking to think of the . . . desperate human beings . . . waiting in suspense But the question they underline is not simply humanitarian. It is a test of civilization."

The civilized world hid in the cloak of legalisms. Hitler again goaded

the delegates, and criticized "the other world for oozing sympathy for the poor, tormented people, but remaining hard and obdurate when it comes to helping them." Days later, the "final solution to the Jewish problem" was conceived, leading to the extermination of the Jewish people. Similar situations are now happening in Indochina and the world is called upon to direct their attention to this side of the Pacific, appealing to their sense of justice not to commit the same error.

It is the right of every individual to live, which is a human right. Human rights are basic rights intrinsic in man by virtue of his humanity and his worth as a person. Human rights have been described as God-given, natural, inalienable, and universal.

Recently, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance defined human rights in three categories, as follows:

First there is the right to be free from Governmental violation of the integrity of the person. These include torture, cruel treatment, and punishment. Secondly, the right to food, shelter, health care and education. While the fulfillment of this right is dependent on the country's stage of development, this may be violated thru Government inaction and indifference to the plight of the poor. Third, the right to enjoy civil and political liberties—Freedom of Thought; of Religion; of Assembly; Freedom of Speech; Freedom of Press; Freedom of Movement both within or outside of one's own country; Freedom to take part in Government.

Today, this is a common scene in Indochina. People are forced to leave due to inhuman treatment and degradable conditions. We in the ministry of social services have assisted close to 18,000 boat refugees since 1975. Interviews revealed, that for every 100 boat people which left the shores of South Vietnam, only twenty-five may reach the Philippine shoreline. The high risk of exposure to uncertainties never create fear nor cause doubts for the refugees to falter. Their primary aim is just to get out and be free from the tentacles of a reign of terror. Most of the arrivals are women, children and the younger men, weak, emaciated with a long list of horrible stories to share, all appealing to be reunited with relatives or be resettled elsewhere. They arrived in groups headed by a leader whose main quality is the courage to sail the open seas or contact persons who engineered the escape after passing through a thick cordon of soldiers placed in strategic areas or command post.

Most of these escapees are professionals, traders, local leaders, government employees or officials who were connected in one way or the other with the old regime. With them are some members of the family, paying the exorbitant fees charged by the different contact persons and owners of the vessel. Gold bars, jade stones, jewels and precious dollars are their passports to enable them to get out. An old, rickety vessel, with a few cans of gasoline, drinking water, and canned food and other eatable items are the ammunitions they carry to an undestined place seeking safer

places. Their future has been charged to destiny and the kindness of men whom they may accidentally meet in the wide open sea. Their fate is dependent on their courage to fight all odds and adversities, and sheer determination to live, hoping to meet compassionate people willing to extend their humanitarian hands. Fastest travel normally lasts about 8 to 10 days. The more difficult encounters are when they are met with closely watched posted guards, heavy rains and typhoons, forcing them to sail for more than a month. Upon reaching the shore, most are sick, weak, dehydrated, malnourished, and ready to collapse anytime due to hardships, too much exposure to the scorching heat of the sun or the biting coldness of the sea, thereby weakening their resistance. With tattered clothes, haggard, expressionless faces, numbed bodies gazing as blank walls, they move aimlessly, not quite clear of their directions.

As a matter of policy, the Philippine government does not accept refugees. Beset as it is by the attendant problems of a third world country attempting to carry forward the high expectations of its people for a better life, the Philippines cannot afford to open its doors for refugees for resettlement. A burgeoning population, our social conflict problems in Mindanao, the impact of the oil crisis, the rising problems of unemployment and underemployment, and the presence of depressed and underdeveloped areas are some significant features which we have to resolve first, in order to make the life of every Filipino productive. However, President Ferdinand E. Marcos, based on humanitarian considerations of necessity, cannot ignore the plight of the "refugees." Therefore, under certain conditions, exceptions have to be considered for the temporary asylum and reception of refugees, until their final settlement is arranged in another country. With this agreement, they have a better chance of being resettled and of becoming self-sufficient.

Along this line, the Philippine Government has established the following principles and policies: It will grant temporary asylum in the Philippines if the refugees enter Philippine territorial waters by force majeure; when the refugees' boats are no longer seaworthy and they cannot proceed anymore to their final destination without risk to their lives; and when the refugees lack food or have become seriously ill and can no longer proceed to another country.

THE PROBLEM

In the handling of the boat people of refugees, the Philippine government has met problems which involve international law and cooperation. In cases of refugees arriving in fishing boats where all the crews and passengers are refugees, the matter is simple and most likely they will be accorded temporary asylum in the country. However, with respect to those who were picked up by commercial vessels on the high seas, critical questions have arisen and have caused extreme hardship to the refugees.

There is no question that a commercial vessel, registered under the Philippine flag and owned by a Philippine company, which picks up refugees on the high seas can land refugees in Philippine territory. However, problems step in and have become difficult to resolve under the following circumstances: when the commercial vessel is registered under the flag of a convenient country and such country, like Liberia and Panama, is not the schedule of the vessel, which is the normal situation of flag of convenience registered vessel; when a flag of convenience registered vessels owned by nationals of one country while the management of the vessel is by company of another country; and when a vessel is owned by nationals of the country of registry but does not include the country of registry in its schedule, such as a vessel plying between Japan and Europe which is registered in the United States and owned by Americans.

There are other problems arising from refugees picked up by commercial vessels who are not allowed to disembark in the first port of call. These problems cannot be resolved without resort to international law or cooperation. How much are we allowing ourselves to resort to legalism? How far are we willing to relax our policies, with the commitment of nations to save humanity based on social justice, equity and freedom? These are issues which are being discussed in conventions and have been fully taken up in Geneva and in the United Nations forum. We have raised the consciousness of the world and some concrete steps are being taken by selected countries to ease the situation. How can we intensify this movement?

Reports have been received that commercial boats have changed course to evade picking up refugees on the high seas. Tragedies have occurred because of their failure to pick up these unfortunate people, whose lives of undetermined number were gobbled by big waves and man-eating sharks due to international bureaucratic policies and stringent measures. More lives will be lost unless various countries, which may be represented by you, reach an agreement on how a more humane approach can be adopted by the community of nations.

A few months ago, President Marcos' commitment to a compassionate society under the new social order opened the door of the Philippines for the establishment of a Processing Center for Refugees, capable of accepting 50,000 refugees to be properly attended to, until everyone is resettled under a more permanent arrangement. We have the Fabella Centre in Metro Manila, the Tara Island in Palawan and the Morong, Bataan Center. Madam Imelda Marcos is the Chairman of the Philippine International Refugee Program, to demonstrate once again the Catholic faith and virtues of the Filipinos who, according to Madam Marcos, have a mind to feel and a heart to think, a spirit to reflect, and a body to support those who are weak, frail and in need of our loving, tender care.

The Human Settlement Program under Madam Marcos will be im-

plemented in the Processing Center, wherein eleven basic services of man will be made available. The basic services are food, housing, clothing, water, health, education, energy, ecology, recreation, infrastructure, and mobility. The refugees will be organized in teams to work alongside the government representatives, maximizing their skills with planned activities which will make use of their time and collective efforts to their best advantage.

As President Marcos stated, Asians are clannish and adhere strictly to the principle of spiritualism. We Filipinos are following closely this Asian tenet of spiritualism, where we draw much strength and inspiration in our undertakings. We always call on God and the Catholic religion.

This inner strength has helped us to survive many wars and withstand many difficulties. We are again demonstrating this trait in being our brother's keeper as we help the Vietnamese refugees by sharing our limited resources, as they look forward with renewed vigor in facing the challenges of a new environment.

The time has come for all nations, especially the Catholic leaders, to act in unison by harnessing our collective efforts in continuous support of leading the way for the refugees to anchor themselves in safe places. We have done it, and we will do it again.

Floating human cargoes are now a regular occurrence. The reality is with us. We have to observe the universal principle of human rights, distributive justice, the right to live and the right to assistance. If we have to face our creator, we are being reminded during Christmas time.

In closing, may I share with you the programs and services extended by the Philippine Government to the refugees in close coordination with the UNHCR and other International Voluntary Agencies of CRS, CARE, Church World Service.

Social Workers, Local Officials and Military Personnel working alongside the non-government organizations and volunteers stay in camp with the refugees extending a 24-hour, round-the-clock service.

Cottage types of temporary shelter are set up to create a home like atmosphere.

Series of interviews are conducted for identification and security clearance leading to the preparation of required documents needed for eventual departure.

Social workers in close consultation with the Foreign Ministry, the UNHCR and the military have to carry on the functions of following through the situation of refugees individually or in groups. Different problems are brought to the fore. Aside from their basic needs, the refugees are helped to adjust to their new homes, to come to a decision in so far as their plans for their new life is concerned. Casework services are extended to certain individuals who manifest deep emotional stress, especially those who are separated from their families or relatives or those who

have lost their loved ones.

The welfare program provides emergency assistance of food, shelter, clothing, medical aid and other urgent needs; primary health care services to insure protection from infectious and communicable diseases through periodic check-up, sanitary practices and safe water usage; day care services and supplemental feeding for infants and children to improve nutritional status; practical skills training for youth and adults to assist them in acquiring occupational skills which will facilitate job placements in their country of destination; language sessions to easily acquire the major language needed in getting along with the people they will be living with; counselling services to clarify their feelings and emotional difficulties during the adjustment period; referral services for family tracing and reunion are arranged to facilitate their admission to third countries and resettlement services in countries of their choice with the follow-up and contacts made with the UNHCR and the new country opening their door for admission.

Gleaned from the services and assistance extended, the humanitarian concern to alleviate human suffering is strictly adhered to.

The amity and concord among Developing Countries is ably demonstrated by the manner in which programs are supported by government and other agencies.

The instability in certain parts of the world will continue to prompt the heavy exodus of people seeking peace and freedom elsewhere. As long as we are willing to face our problems and work together within the ethical principles of respect for the dignity of man, then the collective efforts of nations and the collegiality of leaders and people will be a ground to understand one another and find a solution in upholding the belief of man's humanity to man in the continuing quest for everlasting peace. We have to act now, for if we fail, we all will fall. This is the movement. It requires involvement and commitment.

