

Statement by Herbert H. Lehman on UNRRA Operations in Europe (3 August 1945)

Caption: In this press release, Herbert H. Lehman, former Governor of the State of New York and first Director-General of the Central Committee of UNRRA, describes the action taken by UNRRA in Europe and underlines the importance of the collective responsibility of European governments in ensuring that the operations are a success.

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Review of UNRRA Operations in Europe

Statement by HERBERT H. LEHMAN¹

[Released to the press by UNRRA August 3]

The reason for my present visit to London is the forthcoming Third Session of the UNRRA Council which will open at the London County Hall on 8 August.

En route to London I spent several weeks in Italy, Greece, and Yugoslavia and conferred there with the governments of these countries and with the UNRRA missions established there. The conditions prevailing in these countries, which are paralleled in almost every other European country, are extremely serious. I should, therefore, like to give you my impressions on the conditions in these countries as they bear directly on the business of the next Council session.

As to the work of relief in the countries which I visited, I was encouraged by the evidence of efficient performance by the UNRRA missions and of the aid which had been given the devastated economies of those nations by the imported supplies and by the relief services provided by the United Nations through this organization. The work proceeds with greater dispatch and more wide-spread effect than seems possible on first seeing the very difficult conditions under which it is carried on. For this I have the authority not only of my own observations but of the highest officials in the countries receiving aid, who were unanimous in praise and thanks for the assistance sent by the United Nations. I should report also that the members of our missions were unanimous in stating that the governments of the countries receiving assistance are exerting every effort to carry on distribution speedily and equitably and that they are succeeding to an extraordinary degree, but the inescapable fact remains: Only if the uninvaded United Nations send to the liberated countries of Europe a continuing and expanding flow of supplies through the months ahead, especially the winter, is there any chance that they will escape the most severe privations. Not food alone – that is but one of the most elemental necessities. There is scarcely an important need – food, clothing, shelter, soap – for many millions of people which is adequately satisfied on even the lowest standards. Lack of raw material, the destruction of industrial equipment, and in many cases the loss of the skilled labor necessary are all very serious handicaps to the efforts which the peoples of the liberated countries are making to meet their own needs. Because of this desperate situation I am convinced that for the next few months their hope must be the arrival of supplies from overseas – supplies designed first to tide them over the desperate months ahead and then to enable them to restart their own production of the necessities of life.

Generalizations are inadequate to convey the acuteness of the needs. To be more specific let me describe some instances of present suffering which will be multiplied many times when the winter comes. In Yugoslavia there are many villages to which it is not possible, because of lack of transport, to get food or medical supplies although both are urgently needed – so urgently needed that people are now seriously short of food, eking out the tiny stocks they have by a ration more severe than anything endured during the war. In Greece the victims of chronic malnutrition, especially the children, are still dying despite all that has been done to improve their plight. In Italy it is impossible to satisfy the needs of all those who are indigent and incapable of buying what they need. Over the whole continent it is now certain that the harvest will not cover the lowest subsistence needs of the total population – even if a smoothly working transportation system existed. In fact, as is known, the transport system over the whole of Europe is in a disastrous state: There is little hope that what is produced on the continent will be rapidly and efficiently distributed. The food situation is indeed tragic; but the same black prospect confronts the liberated countries in many other respects. The need for coal is urgent. But there is in sight production enough to meet the continental needs for coal. Nor is it possible to hope for any increase in coal production from the European industry in its present neglected and undermanned condition. Yet coal is the basis of a very large sector of the European economy: It is essential if life is to be supported during the long winter months. Even in this vital respect Europe cannot meet its own needs.

There is, therefore, no doubt in my mind that the economic conditions confronting Europe during the coming winter will be such as to strain the political and economic structure of the continent so seriously that

the consequences may do incalculable harm to all our hopes for a permanent and peaceful settlement in European affairs. This is, I believe, the most serious single problem facing the United Nations today. We may undo by our failure to aid these countries now all that has been achieved by our united efforts.

Needless to say, the liberated countries themselves have a most important responsibility. They must insure that local supplies are used to the utmost and for the maximum benefit of their people. They must make the fullest use of the equipment and supplies provided them by UNRRA. They must also take every possible measure to restore their own production of foodstuffs and other supplies. Throughout my visit I was impressed by the efforts that all the governments are making to achieve these objects. On all sides I was told of the real progress that has been made, and I have seen a great deal of evidence of the work that has been done to restore industries, transportation, housing, and to reestablish more normal living conditions. I would repeat my conclusion: It is that, however great their own efforts may be, the people of the war-devastated countries will have tremendous difficulty in the coming winter without increased assistance from the outside. UNRRA will continue to make the utmost effort to get those supplies and get them quickly. But the success of our efforts is dependent upon the willingness and understanding of the governments and people of the principal supplying countries. I repeat that I believe this to be the most serious single problem facing the United Nations today, and this is the main issue confronting the forthcoming UNRRA meeting which convenes on Tuesday next.

Made at a press conference in London on Aug. 3, 1945. Mr. Lehman is Director General of UNRRA.