

## 'The United Nations and the refugee problem' from Le Monde (6 May 1947)

**Caption:** On 6 May 1947, the French daily newspaper Le Monde paints a dramatic picture of the refugee situation in a war-torn Europe and describes the resources used by the United Nations to come to the aid of displaced persons.

**Source:** Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 06.05.1947, n° 706; 4e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Les Nations Unies et le problème des réfugiés", p. 1.

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## The United Nations and the refugee problem

Since 1 May, the second session of the Preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organisation has been held in the Château d'Ouchy Hotel. The meetings are taking place in the same room where, in 1922–1923, the Middle East Peace Conference was held.

The latest conference in Lausanne brings to the fore the problem of refugees, or, as they are termed in English, 'displaced persons', a problem which is one of the most serious and worrying consequences of the 'hellish war' from which we have just emerged. At the end of the hostilities, there were about 12 million. Now there are still over a million. It is mainly UNRRA, helped by several private organisations, that has, to date, provided for their daily needs. The Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR), founded more than ten years ago to help those who were fleeing Nazi persecution, includes representatives of 36 nations and has helped in the work of assisting and relocating the 'displaced' persons.

These organisations will cease to operate on 30 June. To cope with this situation, the UN General Assembly decided to create an International Refugee Organisation (IRO) at its second session last December. This decision was taken by 30 votes to 5 (those against being the countries of origin of most of the refugees, the USSR, Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and Yugoslavia), with 18 abstentions. The opponents argued that repatriation was the only solution.

For the creation of the IRO to become effective, it must be ratified by 15 states or by a large enough number of nations for three quarters of the first year's budget to be covered by their contributions — that is, 115 million dollars. The USA and the United Kingdom will contribute respectively 46 % and 15 %.

The Preparatory Commission of the IRO met for the first time in the former Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva from 11 to 21 February 1947. It elected as Executive Secretary an American, Arthur Altmeyer, and gave him his instructions.

Mr Altmeyer's report to the current meeting of the Commission revealed that both China and Belgium were about to sign up, bringing the number of signatories to the Convention to 14, their contributions accounting for 74 % of the budget. However, only the United Kingdom and New Zealand have given their unconditional agreement. The Convention has been ratified in the US Senate but not yet in the House of Representatives. The French Government has asked the National Assembly to deal with this issue under urgent procedure.

There are 'displaced persons' in the Western zones of Germany and Austria, in Italy, in the Middle and Far East. The main task of the Preparatory Commission is to ensure that, as from 30 June, the International Refugee Organisation is in a position to help European refugees, estimated at approximately 835 000. The most significant groups are the Poles and the Jews, amounting respectively to 350 000 and 170 000. In addition, there are 90 000 Latvians, 55 000 Lithuanians, 26 000 Estonians and 82 000 Ukrainians.

It is no longer possible to hope that a large proportion of the 'displaced persons' will seek repatriation. What is more, the period of two months left before the dissolution of UNRRA and of the Intergovernmental Committee is apparently not enough for the IRO to be fully functional by the scheduled date. Without another prolongation of the activities of the former (highly unlikely) or the maintenance of the latter (no less likely), there is only one solution, apart from returning the whole question to the UN Economic Council. It would involve giving responsibility for the 'displaced persons' in their zones (90 % of the total) to the military authorities of the American and British occupied zones that have worked with UNRRA and the IGCR from the outset. However, apart from the fact that this would constitute a very heavy financial burden on these two powers, it would demonstrate the failure of the United Nations to solve a problem affecting the entire civilised world.

The use of the pool of labour represented by the refugee camps of Central Europe — from which Belgium, for example, will employ 20 000 Baltic workers to replace the German prisoners in its mines — could only be delayed, while many areas of Europe, devastated by the Germans, are crying out for labour.