

The Global Shift in Mobility and Migration Governance in the Long 1970s

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Keynote (Peter Gatrell): 'UNHCR in the long 1970s: engagement with states and refugees' (short version)

The standard history of the international refugee regime maintains that a substantive change in policy and practice took place during the 1970s. According to political scientist Michael Barnett, the 'new refugees' who claimed asylum had nothing in common with the 'classic' post-war figure: 'Whereas once he or she was from an Eastern bloc country attempting to escape to the West, now he or she was from the Third World and *frequently attempting* to gain entry to Western states for what these states viewed as illegitimate reasons', meaning that many of them were deemed to be 'economic migrants'.¹ This view largely replicated the contemporary evaluation made by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). For example, soon after taking office in 1978, HC Poul Hartling (in office from 1978 to 1985) remarked that 'many European countries are faced with new problems, resulting either from the organised resettlement of large numbers of non-European refugees, or the *sudden arrival* of asylum-seekers, many being from other continents'.² Hartling might have added that new 'problems' arose as a result of the sharp downturn in the major capitalist economies of Western Europe to which governments responded by introducing stringent measures designed to deter refugees and where possible to contain them in situ.³

Yet, a moment's reflection suggests that the discursive emphasis on 'new problems' is misleading in the sense that it discounts the global dimensions of mass population displacement in the aftermath of the Second World War and under-emphasises the neglect then shown by the major powers. The Western governments that framed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention made strenuous efforts from the outset to exclude refugees from the Global South from consideration, particularly where it implied an obligation to provide asylum.⁴ Instead, the priority was to deal with the enormous legacy of the war in Europe and with refugees escaping from Soviet bloc countries: hence the emphasis on those who had a 'well-founded fear of persecution'. As a consequence, many of the world's refugees in other parts of the world, such as those displaced by the Partition of India in 1947 as well as Palestinian refugees and Chinese refugees who fled to Hong Kong after the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, came under the aegis of regional and national refugee regimes. The failure to incorporate these mass displacements in refugee studies contributed to what B.S. Chimni termed 'the myth of difference', characterised by a shift from the classic or 'exilic' interpretation of refugeedom to an emphasis on the 'internalist' mainsprings of displacement and the assumption that the responsibility for solving the 'refugee problem' lay

¹ Michael Barnett, 'Humanitarianism with a sovereign face: UNHCR in the global undertow', *International Migration Review*, 35, no. 1, 2001, 244-77 (p. 255, my emphasis). In the standard history, Gil Loescher writes that the 1970s witnessed an expansion in the geographic reach of UNHCR, taking it into 'previously uncharted territories' in Africa, Latin America, and Asia'. Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: a Perilous Path*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 140, 152, 176-77.

² Opening Statement by Mr. Poul Hartling, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, twenty-ninth session, 9 October 1978, my emphasis.

³ David Scott Fitzgerald, *Refuge Beyond Reach: How Rich Democracies Repel Asylum Seekers*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, takes this story up to the present day.

⁴ Lucy Mayblin, *Asylum after Empire: Colonial Legacies in the Politics of Asylum Seeking*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, pp. 135-46; Laura Madokoro, 'Eurocentrism and the international refugee regime', *Journal of Modern European History*, 20, no. 1, 2022, 34-49.

with the state of origin rather than 'inconveniencing' the international community. UNHCR adjusted its focus accordingly.⁵

Without a doubt, the Allied powers devoted considerable attention to the situation of refugees in post-war Europe. In the first phase, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) arranged for the repatriation of Displaced Persons until it became clear that a significant minority refused to return to their homes in countries that now formed part of the Soviet bloc. In 1946, the newly established International Refugee Organisation embarked on the resettlement of refugees in the face of protests from the Soviet Union which refused to join. Nevertheless, the process of recognition and resettlement was not straightforward. It required the scrutiny by eligibility officers of individual applications as well as an undertaking by prospective host countries to accept refugees; as a result, some requests for recognition were rejected as being economically opportunistic. Some DPs were admitted under organised labour recruitment schemes, for example in the UK and Belgium. But those who were sick, elderly, and disabled, or who had even a minor criminal record, were rejected. Entire families might be stranded in Europe as a result. Jewish refugees who fled westwards in the immediate aftermath of the war were regarded as 'infiltrates'. In addition, the Convention did not extend to the numerically largest group subject to mass displacement, namely ethnic Germans expelled from East-Central Europe who became the responsibility of West and East Germany. Thus, Western governments were minded to exclude as well as to provide asylum and resettlement opportunities.⁶

At the successor to the IRO, UNHCR was not a passive witness to the global events mentioned above.⁷ According to its Statute (General Assembly Resolution 428 (V) of 14 December 1950), the work of the High Commissioner was 'humanitarian and social and entirely of a non-political character'. His competence extended to the protection of refugees recognised by existing conventions and by the provisions enshrined in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention as being outside their country of nationality and 'having a well-founded fear of persecution'; and he could also enter into discussions with states that were not party to the Refugee Convention.⁸ This provision enabled UNHCR to devise a more flexible response to the proliferation of refugee crises beyond Europe by adopting what became known as the 'good offices' formula, which allowed UNHCR to circumvent the Convention's geographic and temporal restrictions by assisting Chinese refugees in Hong Kong and Algerian refugees in Tunisia and Morocco, as well as Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal. HC Auguste Lindt (in office, 1956-60) explained much later in a private interview that the formula was designed to address the accusation that UNHCR was 'for European refugees only'.⁹ As a leading UNHCR official put it, the exercise of its good offices 'avoids an investigation into the

⁵ B.S. Chimni, 'The geopolitics of refugee studies: a view from the south', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11, no. 4, 1998, 350-74. See also T. Alexander Aleinikoff, 'State-centered refugee law: from resettlement to containment', in E. Valentine Daniel and John Knudsen, eds, *Mistrusting Refugees*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 257-78 (p. 266); Claudena M. Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: the Emergence of a Regime*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 4-5.

⁶ Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁷ The parallel agency with specific responsibility for resettlement was the Inter-governmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM), established in Brussels in December 1951, subsequently renamed the International Organisation for Migration. See Jérôme Elie, 'The historical roots of cooperation between the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration', *International Migration*, 16, no. 3, 2010, 345-60.

⁸ Atle Grahl-Madsen, 'Identifying the world's refugees', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 467 (1983), 11-23. The text of the Statute is available at <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c39e1.pdf>.

⁹ In a 1998 interview with Gil Loescher, quoted in Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics*, p. 9. The UN gave formal approval to the good offices doctrine in November 1957.

reasons which motivated the departure of refugees from their country of origin, the result of which might create problems between the authorities of the country of origin and those of the asylum country'. He added that 'like a fire brigade, the Office tries to help without concerning itself with the underlying causes of the fire' – an odd remark given that fire services certainly do investigate them, but one consistent with the dominant depoliticised discourse.¹⁰ Hence, to change the metaphor, the manifestation of 'new problems' did not mean that UNHCR was asleep at the wheel: on the contrary, it already sought ways and means to provide temporary assistance to refugees who were otherwise excluded from the provisions of the Refugee Convention. In other words, the manifestation of 'new problems' appeared virtually at UNHCR's inception.

The international refugee regime underwent further changes in the late 1960s, in two key respects. First, as UNHCR hoped, the 1967 Protocol enlarged the scope of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention by dispensing with its Eurocentric features. Speaking in 1963, Deputy HC Sadruddin Aga Khan thought it unwise to lobby for an entirely new convention. He indicated that the existing convention 'may not be perfect ... However, if we went back to the General Assembly, composed of over 125 governments, to get a new Mandate, it would be like opening Pandora's Box and would, I think, be very detrimental to the interests of refugees'.¹¹ His view was surely correct. The simultaneous accession of new state signatories now made it possible for Geneva to provide legal protection in other situations as opposed to purely material assistance.

One crucial difficulty concerned the eligibility of groups of refugees. The original Convention required status determination on an individual basis, and the 1967 Protocol left this issue unresolved.¹² In 1968 HC Sadruddin (in office, 1966-77) invited a meeting of UNHCR staffers to consider whether this was practicable as refugee crises proliferated. The upshot was that 'a concept of collective prima facie eligibility, prompted by events, thus gradually took shape. It departed from the individualistic concept linked to the definition of the term 'refugee' in the Statute and Convention and progressed towards a more pragmatic and humane rather than legalistic approach to the refugee problem'. Curiously, although UNHCR had already adopted precisely such a pragmatic approach to Hungarian refugees in 1956 and to Algerian refugees a year later, that is postponing the determination of individual eligibility, apparently no-one pointed out that the pre-war refugee regime had operated precisely on the basis of a group rather than an individual approach.¹³

The second significant measure was the adoption by the Organisation of African Unity of a separate convention in 1969. Inter alia, it stipulated that 'the term 'refugee' shall also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country'. In the light of

¹⁰ Jacques Cuénod, 'The problem of Rwandese and Sudanese refugees', in Sven Hamrell, ed., *Refugee Problems in Africa*, Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1967, pp. 45-53 (p. 46). See also Louise W. Holborn, *Refugees: a Problem of Our Time. The Work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951-1972*, 2 vols, Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1975, vol. 1, pp. 434-49; Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics*, pp. 105-39.

¹¹ Closing statement to UNHCR representatives, 16 May 1968. Records of the Office of the High Commissioner, Box 48, ARC-2/C1, UNHCR Records and Archives.

¹² Sara E. Davies, 'Redundant or essential? How politics shaped the outcome of the 1967 Protocol', *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 19, no. 4, 2007, 703-28; Itty Abraham, 'Contesting the universality of the Refugee Convention: decolonization and the Additional Protocol', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 36, no. 2, 2023, 195-216.

¹³ Sadruddin Aga Khan, 'Legal problems relating to refugees and Displaced Persons', *Collected Courses of the Hague Academy of International Law*, vol. 149, 1976, 289-352 (p. 341).

preparatory discussions, Sadruddin noted in 1966 that 'the principle that the granting of asylum should not be considered an unfriendly act by the country of admission towards the country of origin', making the OAU Convention in some respects 'even stronger than the principles set forth in the 1951 Refugee Convention'.¹⁴

The implications of international refugee law as framed during the Cold War did not escape the attention of refugees. An elderly Chinese woman Tsuh Ming L. wrote from Kowloon to Sadruddin in December 1970:

Re: 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees. Only today I read in the morning paper that you are the Commission for the refugees [sic]. I just wondered if we refugees in Hong Kong are included. According to the date 1951, and since we fled China in middle of 1949, apparently we are covered but I wish to be sure. Will you kindly send me a copy? *I believe it is about time for the members of the United Nations to learn about the actual treatment of the refugees here with documental proof first hand*, because millions have been given or collected under our name, the Hong Kong refugees. Kindly excuse my scrawl, because I am half paralised [sic] and an old Chinese human of 72. My fingers are numbed and have no strength to type. An American university graduate of half a century ago. I sincerely hope that I may be honoured with an early reply from you. Many thanks.

Instead of acknowledging her letter, UNHCR's Branch Office in New York forwarded it to Geneva, presumably to explain the position of the British colonial administration that UNHCR had no competence to intervene on behalf of refugees from mainland China.¹⁵

As already indicated, the long 1970s corresponded quite neatly with the tenure in office of UNHCR High Commissioner Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, and this invites questions as to what distinct perspectives he brought to the position. In many respects, Sadruddin toed the official UNHCR line about 'new problems'. In 1968 he told representatives in Geneva that 'the expression 'fear of persecution' has now a totally different meaning from that it had in the past'. He added, 'This shows that the organisation is alive and has been able to adapt itself to changing conditions'.¹⁶ In more critically reflective mode, he argued in 1973 that:

The facts point to the existence of what is, virtually, *a Fourth World*. A world without representation in this or any other Assembly, yet peopled by millions: refugees, the displaced and often stateless, and others in similar circumstances ... I cannot speak of the African situation without pointing out that the overwhelming majority of refugees of concern to my Office came from territories under colonial administration. It is only natural that, for over a decade, a very substantial share of the UNHCR annual programme has been allocated to assist groups essentially from Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau.¹⁷

¹⁴ Opening Statement by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, to the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, sixteenth session, Geneva, 31 October 1966. See also Aristide Zolberg, Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 28-29.

¹⁵ UNHCR Records and Archives, Geneva, Fonds UNHCR 17, Records Relating to Protection, Sub-fonds 1, Individual Case Files, Archives of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, IC5572. Tsuh Ming L. to UNHCR High Commissioner Sadruddin Aga Khan, December 1970, my italics. Hereafter abbreviated as IC followed by the number of the case file. The position adopted by the UK government did not prevent it from accepting that the UN campaign for World Refugee Year could extend to Chinese refugees in Hong Kong.

¹⁶ Closing statement to UNHCR representatives, 16 May 1968, as above, my emphasis.

¹⁷ Statement by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, 26 November 1973, my emphasis.

The situation of refugees displaced by colonial rule, including 'freedom fighters' (not a straightforward category), caused endless discussions inside UNHCR stretching back more than a decade without being fully resolved.¹⁸

Sadrudin had become HC in January 1966 at the age of just 32, having already served as deputy HC since February 1962. He was immensely privileged and well-connected, the very opposite of a shrinking violet. Individual refugees sought to capitalise on his sense of self-importance. Thus, a group of Ismaili students originally from East Pakistan wrote to him from Miami in late 1972, 'with due apologies for encroaching upon your Highness's most precious time'. Their 'humble approach' explained that the US Immigration Department had confiscated their passports because they did not have permission to do paid work. They ended this obsequious letter by saying that they were Sadrudin's 'spiritual children' and requested his 'sagacious counsel'.¹⁹ Rwandan refugee Joseph M. addressed the HC in February 1970, outlining what he described as his 'deplorable case which I know will touch you greatly, being compassionate as you are ... like a father and mother in fact'.²⁰ There are many other letters in a similar vein, appealing in Weberian terms not just to legal-bureaucratic but also to charismatic authority.

Apart from dealing with personal cases, preserved in its confidential individual case files, UNHCR devoted considerable efforts to devising what were called 'durable solutions'. Here Sadrudin maintained a strong interest in repatriation, partly to deter those whom he dismissed as 'professional refugees'. The consensus was that repatriation would avoid the expense and other disadvantages of confining refugees in camps for a lengthy period. In a rare public statement on politics in 1968, he noted: 'The fact that the camps stood out like a sore on the political body of Europe perpetuated animosity and political confrontation. If the problems of the camps are solved, then the tensions are reduced'. One way of 'solving' the problem was to ensure that conditions in refugee camps did not become too comfortable, lest they deter refugees from opting for repatriation, a stance taken by UNHCR's predecessor bodies in the aftermath of the Second World War and regularly repeated thereafter.²¹ In line with this sentiment, Sadrudin advocated and supported the repatriation of refugees from India to Bangladesh after the 1971 war, having already been involved in humanitarian relief.²²

In relation to the repatriation of refugees to Sudan after the prolonged civil war, Sadrudin betrayed a simplistic approach, arguing that 'when people want to go back, they just pick up

¹⁸ In 1961 Schnyder had written to the UN General Secretary, saying that although there was a great demand for emergency relief on behalf of Angolan refugees, currently no issues of 'protection' arose and UNHCR did not intend to pronounce on the eligibility issue. Felix Schnyder to Dag Hammarskjöld, 27 July 1961, Fonds UNHCR 11, Records of the Central Registry, Series 1, Classified Subject Files, 1951-1970, 13/7/GEN – 15/0/GEN/ANG Angolan refugees [1961-1966], Folder 1.

¹⁹ IC1079. Mahedi G. and others to Sadrudin, 16 November 1971. The outcome is not recorded.

²⁰ IC1273. See also IC8616, Joseph M. to HC, Geneva, 23 February 1970.

²¹ Opening Statement by Prince Sadrudin Aga Khan, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Conference of UNHCR Representatives held in Geneva from 14-17 May 1968; Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics*, p. 177. See also Aleinikoff, 'State-centered refugee law', pp. 261-2, on 'liberal and communitarian' arguments in favour of repatriation, as well as the repatriation of refugees during the 1980s, 'with varying degrees of coercion'.

²² David Myard, 'Sadrudin Aga Khan and the 1971 East Pakistani crisis: refugees and mediation in light of the records of the office of the High Commissioner for Refugees', *Global Migration Research Paper*, University of Geneva, no. 1, 2010; Jakob Schönhagen, *Geschichte der internationalen Flüchtlingspolitik 1945-1975*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2023, pp. 306-36.

their belongings and go. They do not usually have to apply to our Branch Office to get an exit visa or a return visa or any document or stamp'. This view, widely shared among UNHCR staffers, derived from the assumption that cross-border migration in sub-Saharan Africa was the norm, not the exception, reflecting close kinship ties that did not respect international frontiers. Where repatriation was not feasible, Sadruddin counted on what he termed Africans' 'traditional hospitality' as the first step in helping refugees to become 'self-sufficient' in the host country. He also advocated for long-term development assistance to support projects that would benefit refugees and local communities alike.²³ The corollary was that UNHCR together with its major donors dismissed any thought of promoting resettlement in advanced countries.

[Note: in the longer version of this paper, I discuss briefly the resettlement of Ugandan Asian refugees, including the stance adopted by UNHCR.]

Much more problematic during the 1970s, mainly because of the numbers involved, was the plight of refugees from Vietnam, including ethnic Chinese. To summarise a complicated story, UNHCR steered a difficult course, taking account of multiple state actors in Southeast Asia as well as the interests of the USA, Canada, Australia, France, and the UK, none of which manifested any enthusiasm for large-scale resettlement. In addition, UNHCR did not wish to fall foul of the government of Vietnam following the end of the Vietnam war by assigning it responsibility for the post-war refugee crisis; for this reason, UNHCR initially described those who fled as 'displaced persons'.²⁴ Nevertheless, events developed rapidly and required a coordinated response. UNHCR convened an international conference in Geneva in June 1979 at which US Vice-President Walter Mondale attempted to raise the stakes by inviting participants to share the burden by reflecting on the disastrous consequences of the failure to secure international cooperation at Evian in 1938 when the fate of European Jews hung in the balance.²⁵

UNHCR's main efforts were directed towards exerting leverage on regional governments in Southeast Asia that were adopting pushback measures to block immigration and that turned a blind eye to the violence inflicted on so-called 'boat people' who fled Vietnam. (There are disturbing echoes of this today, in the Mediterranean.) At the same time, UNHCR supported the Vietnamese authorities in their efforts to stem clandestine departures by endorsing an Orderly Departure Programme (ODP) in 1979. UNHCR also helped to manage 'regional processing centres' and camps in Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, designed in part to screen refugees for resettlement. Despite UNHCR's stated opposition to refugee camps, many refugees were in practice detained for months and even years. UNHCR meanwhile also advocated 'voluntary' repatriation on the grounds that resettlement acted as a 'pull factor' and, as one Canadian official put it, a 'narcotic' on which refugees would be hooked.²⁶ All of this, needless to say, proceeded without consulting refugees.

²³ Closing statement to UNHCR representatives, 16 May 1968, Records of the Office of the High Commissioner, Box 48, ARC-2/C1, UNHCR Records and Archives. See also Statement by Mr. Felix Schnyder, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the 36th Session of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), 1 May 1963; Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics*, pp. 148-50.

²⁴ Here I rely in part on Sara Cosemans, 'The internationalization of the refugee problem: resettlement from the Global South during the 1970s', unpublished PhD dissertation, KU Leuven, 2021.

²⁵ W. Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: the Indochinese Exodus and the International Response*, London: Zed Books, 1998, p. 53.

²⁶ Robinson, *Terms of Refuge*, pp. 52, 198, 273-4; Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2019.

In the event, Western governments did resettle significant numbers. In Britain, the newly elected Thatcher government not only wished to deter mass entry to Hong Kong but also challenged the right of Vietnamese refugees to come to the UK, mindful of the prevailing economic recession and the commitment to a reduction in public spending. Nevertheless, it eventually provided visas for around 19,000 refugees including those rescued at sea by British vessels. In July 1979 the British Home Secretary wrote to Thatcher in confidence that 'if we are to take more Vietnamese refugees we must be especially vigorous in controlling immigration generally'. It also became clear that the UK government expected voluntary bodies to assume much of the responsibility for assisting the refugees; in practice, many refugees mobilised on their own behalf. There were other, broader implications. In the UK, as in France, Vietnamese 'boat people' were portrayed as victims of communism whose political persecution trumped other considerations. Politicians meanwhile informed the electorate that they had or would strive to bring migration under control. This became a familiar stock in trade.²⁷

Although France expressed concerns about immigration, it made an exception on 'humanitarian' grounds for them as well as refugees from Cambodia and Laos, especially those who could demonstrate a close connection to France. For its part, UNHCR expressed serious misgivings, arguing in private that the programme exaggerated the extent of persecution and was providing a backdoor entry for 'economic migrants'. But its reservations, shared by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless people (OPFRA) counted for little. Significantly, while turning a blind eye to illegitimate claims made by Vietnamese refugees, French society lapped up stories of fraudulent applications by refugees from Zaire for whom no special case was made, whereas French employers welcomed refugees from Indochina as a 'docile' and pliable labour force, unskilled and non-unionised.²⁸ UNHCR was bypassed.

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What remained the same and what changed in relation to UNHCR and migration during the long 1970s? Although this belongs to a separate discussion, the confidential case files reveal that UNHCR continued as it had in the 1950s and 1960s to receive requests from European refugees for assistance, such as from elderly Russians in China who wanted to be enabled to resettle in France or Switzerland and live out their remaining days in comfort. These requests were usually granted in cases where UNHCR enlisted the support of charities in facilitating transportation and accommodation.²⁹ Non-European refugees from various backgrounds also contacted UNHCR to explain their predicament. Many of them were African refugee students who wanted to gain qualifications in host countries and who told heartrending stories of the persecution that they and their families had suffered. They were usually referred to International Student Services, a topic that deserves further study.

²⁷ Becky Taylor, *Refugees in Twentieth Century Britain: a History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 209-70 (quotation on p. 219); Jordanna Bailkin, *Unsettled: Refugee Camps and the Making of Multicultural Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 64-70.

²⁸ Karen Akoka, 'France: boat people brought by plane', in Becky Taylor, Karen Akoka, Marcel Berlinghoff and Shira Havkin, *When Boat People were Resettled, 1975-1983: a Comparative History of European and Israeli Responses to the South-East Asian Refugee Crisis*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 47-77; Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, *Escape from Violence*, p. 167; Loescher, *UNHCR and World Politics*, p. 208, quoting an internal UNHCR memorandum in April 1981.

²⁹ Peter Gatrell, 'Raw Material: UNHCR's Individual Case Files as a historical source, 1951-1975', *History Workshop Journal*, 92, 2021, 226-41.

In institutional terms, UNHCR underwent significant expansion, a remarkable development given that the original Statute envisaged that its operation would be reviewed after three years. Thanks in large part to its response to the refugee crisis in Southeast Asia, member states' contributions to its annual budget increased dramatically, and this led to a threefold growth in its personnel, albeit that many qualified candidates were reluctant to work in the field. It was now without question 'on the map'. In 1981 UNHCR received the Nobel Peace Prize for the second time (the first being in 1954), a signature of international legitimacy. Sadruddin himself made the same point back in 1968, namely that UNHCR had 'gained a measure of universal recognition that it never had before'.³⁰ This was a far cry from the early years when its very survival seemed uncertain.

Needless to say, institutional self-congratulation tells only part of the story. The measures endorsed by UNHCR in the long 1970s encompassed repatriation and regional containment, the latter aptly described by one scholar as 'remote control'.³¹ Major Western donors regarded repatriation as the most desirable option and funded UNHCR accordingly. Where this was not possible, they supported programmes of long-term development, technocratic and top-down in character. The regular invocation of 'self-help' might have been the mantra of successive high commissioners, but it did not mean inviting refugees to participate in devising development projects. Ironically, refugees who demonstrated initiative by finding prospective routes of their own to destinations in the Global North were demonised rather than applauded. Even those, such as Ugandan expellees and Vietnamese refugees who arrived via organised resettlement schemes, initially struggled to gain acceptance. Meanwhile, host states scored a political point about recognising the human rights of refugees who were eligible for admittance as victims of persecution by 'despotic' regimes.

What of the culture of UNHCR? In January 1977, towards the end of his tenure in office Sadruddin posed rhetorical questions about its *raison d'être*:

UNHCR was, and to a great extent still is, a Western European club. It was quite natural, when the Office was created and the composition of the United Nations was entirely different, that the criteria for recruitment, including dedication and devotion to the cause of refugees, should have been something that Western Europe should have produced and provided for the Office. Today, as a result, we are increasingly trying to recruit more people from the Third World. There is still a very great imbalance.³²

This was a remarkable admission, which might explain why Sadruddin, an insider-outsider, left office abruptly.³³ In any case, it raises an interesting issue, namely whether the veterans

³⁰ Oral Statement of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to UNHCR headquarters staff, 21 January 1971. Compare the Opening Statement by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Conference of UNHCR Representatives held in Geneva from 14-17 May 1968; Robinson, *Terms of Refuge*, p. 286

³¹ Fitzgerald, *Refuge Beyond Reach*, pp. 12-17. UNHCR would subsequently call the 1990s 'the decade of repatriation'.

³² Verbatim record of Statement of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to UNHCR headquarters staff, 24 January 1977. He added, 'in 1977 I will try, in principle, not to extend colleagues, because this is the only way to renew the cadre and open up opportunities to Third-Worlders' [sic]. Recognising that qualified people were often snapped up for the civil service of new states, he concluded, 'We have to continue to look for people from the Third World'. Did his expressed aim alienate the long-serving personnel in Geneva?

³³ Gil Loescher ascribes this in part to his narcissistic personality (and his ambition to become UN Secretary-General) and his reliance on a small coterie of confidants. Perhaps the more dyed in the wool staffers resented his relative youth and wealth. Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics*, pp. 141, 201.

of UNHCR viewed European refugees as people like themselves – witnesses to totalitarianism – but deemed refugees from the Global South as a different kind of humanity.³⁴

UNHCR continued to evolve. Along with numerous aid agencies, it provides humanitarian assistance to refugees in numerous sites of displacement. It continues to strive to stay on the right side of donor states, above all the USA, while sometimes acting as a ‘surrogate state’ in poorer countries.³⁵ Apart from bland and innocuous statements about the ‘complexity of population movements’, it rarely makes any public comments about the root causes of displacement, lest by assigning responsibility to state actors for forced displacement it cause offence.³⁶ Meanwhile, the lack of genuine accountability towards refugees remains an unresolved issue.

³⁴ This requires further research. There was probably a view in some quarters of UNHCR that Vietnamese refugees belonged to the category of ‘classic’ victims of totalitarianism.

³⁵ Amy Slaughter and Jeff Crisp, ‘A surrogate state? The role of UNHCR in protracted refugee situations’, *New Issues in Refugee Research*, no. 168, Geneva: UNHCR, 2009.

³⁶ *The State of the World’s Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*, UNHCR: Geneva, 2000, p. 280.