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INFO PRIORITY DHAKA, UKMIS NEW YORK, UKMIS GENEVA, WASHINGTON
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DHAKA TELNO 325 TO FCO AND UKMIS NEW YORK TELNO 3161 TO FCO:
ROHINGYA REFUGEES

SUMMARY

1. BLATTER, AS LEADER OF THE TECHNICAL MISSION, GAVE A CONFIDENTIAL BRIEFING ON 16 SEPTEMBER TO RESIDENT HEADS OF MISSION. HIS ACCOUNT OF THEIR DISCUSSIONS WITH THE BURMESE AND CONCLUSIONS FROM THEIR VISIT TO ARAKAN WAS UP-BEAT. HE CLAIMED THAT THE BURMESE HAD AGREED TO SIGN AN MOU WHICH CONCEDED ALMOST ALL THE MAIN POINTS UNHCR WERE INSISTING ON INCLUDING THE VITAL QUESTION OF A UNHCR PRESENCE IN ARAKAN.
2. THE UNDP RESIDENT REPRESENTATIVE, JEHAN RAHEEM, SUMMONED ALL RESIDENT HEADS OF MISSION TO A BRIEFING ON 16 SEPTEMBER BY BLATTER, THE UNHCR REGIONAL DIRECTOR. BLATTER DESCRIBED IN SOME DETAIL THE IMPRESSIONS HE AND THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE TECHNICAL MISSION HAD FORMED DURING THEIR VISIT TO ARAKAN, WHERE THEY HAD BEEN GIVEN FREE ACCESS NOT ONLY TO ALL THE RECEPTION CENTRES BUT ALSO TO THE THREE MAIN AREAS OF RESETTLEMENT: BUTHIDAUNG, MAUNGDAW AND RATHEDAUNG. THEY HAD BEEN ALLOWED TO SPEAK FREELY TO RETURNEES, UNSUPERVISED BY BURMESE MILITARY OR OFFICIALS. NONE HAD EXPRESSED ANY COMPLAINT AT THE CONDITIONS IN THE CENTRES OR AT THE ARRANGEMENTS WHEN THEY RETURNED TO THEIR HOMES.
3. HE ALSO SPOKE OF THEIR DISCUSSIONS WITH THE BURMESE AUTHORITIES. THESE HAD INCLUDED ONE WITH KHIN NYUNT, WHO HAD BEEN VERY POSITIVE. BUT THE LEADING ROLE WAS PLAYED BY THE MINISTER OF SOCIAL WELFARE, RELIEF AND RESETTLEMENT, BRIG-GEN THAUNG MYINT, RATHER THAN THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS. THIS HE REGARDED AS A FURTHER ENCOURAGING SIGN THAT THE BURMESE WERE NOW SERIOUSLY LOOKING FOR A RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM.
4. BLATTER SAID THAT THE MAIN RESULT OF THE MISSION HAD BEEN AGREEMENT ON THE TEXT OF A MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THE UNHCR AND THE BURMESE WHICH WOULD BE SIGNED QUOTE WITHIN A MONTH

UNQUOTE. THIS MOU SPECIFICALLY CONFIRMED THE PRINCIPLE OF UNHCR INVOLVEMENT IN THE REPATRIATION PROCESS IN ARAKAN AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A UNHCR PRESENCE IN ARAKAN. THESE PRINCIPLES HAD ALREADY BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE BURMESE DURING MRS OGATA'S VISIT (AS ALSO REPORTED IN UKMIS GENEVA TELNO 584).

5. BLATTER STRESSED THAT THE GUIDING CONSIDERATION NOW FOR THE UNHCR WAS TO AVOID A THIRD EXODUS. THIS MEANT SETTING UP LONGER TERM ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE RETURNEES. THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME REPRESENTATIVES ON THE MISSION HAD BEEN HELPFUL AND HAD GUARANTEED THE SUPPLY OF RATIONS FOR UP TO TWO MONTHS FOLLOWING THE REFUGEES RETURN TO THEIR HOMES. UNHCR WOULD ALSO SEEK TO SET UP COMMUNITY LEVEL MICRO-PROJECTS TO IMPROVE COOPERATION BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS. BUT HE ALSO HOPED THAT OTHER AGENCIES WOULD PLAY A ROLE, PARTICULARLY THE UNDP. (IN SUBSEQUENT DISCUSSION AT THE MEETING RAHEEM CONFIRMED THAT THE UNDP WERE ALREADY WORKING IN SOME OF THE TOWNSHIPS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NE ARAKAN UNDER THEIR REVISED PROGRAMMES. THIS DID NOT FOR THE MOMENT INCLUDE THE THREE REFUGEE AREAS. BUT THE UNDP WOULD AS A FIRST STEP SET UP LIAISON OFFICES THERE). BLATTER SAID THAT HE ALSO HOPED THAT BILATERAL FOREIGN ASSISTANCE WOULD BE FORTHCOMING.

6. OTHER POINTS WHICH CAME UP DURING THE BRIEFING:-

A. THE IMPORTANT QUESTION OF THE RESTORATION OF PROPERTY WAS COVERED IN THE MOU.

B. SO TOO WAS THAT OF THE FORM OF DOCUMENTATION WHICH WOULD BE GIVEN TO RETURNEES AND THEIR RIGHTS OF FREE MOVEMENT AND NON-DISCRIMINATION.

C. FIGURES FOR THE NUMBER OF REFUGEES CLEARED (130,000) AND HOW MANY REMAINED (220,000) WERE THE SAME AS HE GAVE AT HIS AUGUST BRIEFING IN GENEVA. NUMBER RESETTLED IN ARAKAN WAS 35,000 AND CURRENT FLOW RATE WAS 3,000 PER MONTH. BLATTER HOPED THAT WITH THE RESTORAL OF CONFIDENCE FOLLOWING ESTABLISHMENT OF A UNHCR PRESENCE THE RATE COULD INCREASE SUFFICIENTLY FOR THE BULK TO BE RESETTLED WITHIN TWO YEARS (A VIEW GREETED WITH POLITE SCEPTICISM BY SOME OF THOSE PRESENT).

D. UNHCR HOPED TO EXPAND ROLE OF MYANMAR RED CROSS. BUT ICRC REPORTED THAT THEY HAD STILL MADE NO PROGRESS IN GAINING ACCESS TO ARAKAN THEMSELVES.

E. THE NUMBER OF UNHCR PERSONNEL LIKELY TO BE INVOLVED IN ARAKAN WOULD BE A MINIMUM OF FIVE INTERNATIONAL STAFF WITH A SUPPORTING STAFF ALSO IN AN OFFICE IN RANGOON. IT WAS NOT CLEAR WHETHER IN BOTH CASES THEY WOULD BE UNDER UNHCR'S OWN NAME IN EVERY CASE, BUT THE IMPRESSION WAS THAT THIS POINT HAD NOW BEEN CONCEDED TOO.

F. TEXTS AND DETAILS OF THE AGREEMENT WOULD REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL UNTIL SIGNATURE OF THE MOU.

7. COMMENT. BLATTER TOLD ME PRIVATELY AFTERWARDS THAT HE WAS UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THAT MANY DIFFICULTIES STILL REMAINED TO BE OVERCOME, DESPITE THE APPARENT CHANGE OF BURMESE ATTITUDE. HIS EXPERIENCE IN 1978 LED HIM TO EXPECT THIS. BUT HE THOUGHT THAT THEY WERE UNDER STRONG EXTERNAL PRESSURE TO APPEAR TO BE ADOPTING A MORE REASONABLE STANCE. HE BELIEVED THAT THE BURMESE WOULD SIGN THE MOU WITHIN THE PROMISED INTERVAL. THIS IS ALSO BORNE OUT BY A PRIVATE COMMENT TO RAHEEM BY OHN GYAW WHO ADMITTED THAT THEY WOULD HAVE TO SIGN IT BEFORE THE UNGA. BUT WHETHER THE MOU WILL REALLY CONSTITUTE THE EXPECTED KEY TO A SOLUTION SEEMS TO ME OVER-OPTIMISTIC.

HARTLAND-SWANN

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