

Church leaders focus on refugees' plight

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

ROME — Church leaders focused attention in February on the plight of the world's growing refugee population — particularly East Europeans seeking safe haven or employment elsewhere on the continent.

At a major meeting in Hungary, Vatican officials and other experts agreed that host countries in Western Europe cannot turn back groups of refugees without considering the human needs of each individual.

The United Nations, meanwhile, reversing a decision by its high commissioner for refugees, ordered resumption of relief programs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Church officials had warned that suspension of humanitarian aid would only "punish the victims" of the fighting in Bosnia.

The United Nations also prepared to host an international round table to discuss a Vatican document on refugees. The document, issued last fall, urged closer international cooperation to aid the estimated 17 million refugees worldwide.

At a Feb. 1-4 meeting in Budapest, Hungary, some 50 experts studied the pastoral and material aspects of assis-

tance to Eastern Europe's swelling ranks of refugees. The meeting was sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers.

The conference said Europe's economic refugees should receive individual consideration and should not be subject to categorical expulsion. It expressed special concern over deportations of Gypsies, who have no home territory.

While some limits on immigration are inevitable, the criteria used to establish the "level of supportability" must take into account the human needs of new arrivals, the draft document said. Refugees cannot simply be turned back to protect local prosperity, it said.

For its part, the church should do a better job of warning potential refugees about the illusions of an easy life in the West, it said. Local churches should provide those who do migrate with well-trained priests who are "ready to become migrants themselves" in order to offer pastoral assistance, it said.

Archbishop Giovanni Cheli, president of the pontifical council, told the conference that European migration was not simply an invasion of East European have-nots into the West. Fewer than 3 million East Europeans reached the West over the last two years, he said. On

the other hand, such East European countries as Poland and Hungary have become host or transit countries to many times that number of migrants from the continent's poorer fringe, as well as those from Asia and Africa.

The conference condemned the "ethnic cleansing" policies that have forced tens of thousands to flee former Yugoslavian republics, especially Bosnia-Herzegovina. It called on all sides to stop the fighting and engage in serious dialogue.

On Feb. 19, U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali overruled an order to suspend most relief operations in Bosnia, saying U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Sakado Ogata had overstepped her authority. Ogata had shut down the U.N. programs Feb. 17, saying all sides were "playing politics with humanitarian relief."

Archbishop Theodore McCarrick of Newark, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration, was among those who criticized the high commissioner's decision. He said he understood Ogata's frustration and her concern for the safety of U.N. workers.

"However, I have felt firsthand the trauma of having shells raining down on me and I fear that the decision ... will, in effect, punish the victims," said the

archbishop, who has visited the war zone in recent months.

The church's growing role in the refugee question was to be highlighted at a March 9 high-level U.N. round table about the Vatican document "Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity," issued in October by the migrants' commission.

The conference aims to stimulate better international cooperation to aid the growing refugee population, said Archbishop Renato R. Martino, the Vatican nuncio to the United Nations.

The document called for new international agreements and improved individual efforts to help refugees find safety, assistance and acceptance in new lands. It also sought to focus world attention on the root causes that force people to flee their homes: among them war, human rights abuses, collapsing economies and ethnic violence.

Several top U.N. and Vatican officials are scheduled to participate in the round table.

Pope will decide course to unity, prelate stresses

LONDON (CNS) — Any decision about union with Catholics will be made in Rome, Cardinal George Basil Hume of Westminster has reminded Anglicans considering leaving the Church of England over the issue of women's ordination.

The cardinal issued a brief statement following press reports that Anglican dissidents were close to agreement on setting up a national network of former Anglican parishes in communion with Rome.

Catholic sources said such a move would be premature and said an acceptable model for such groups had not yet been worked out.

In his statement, Cardinal Hume said that visible unity would be a gift from God. "Now is an important moment in that process," he said. "It has come upon us in an unexpected way."

He said he had spoken with several Anglicans who wanted to explore the possibility of full communion with Rome and that he had made it clear that the way forward, from the Catholic point of view, would be for the pope to decide.

"He will doubtless listen to the recommendations of our conference of bishops," added the cardinal. The bishops will discuss the issue at their April 19-22 meeting.

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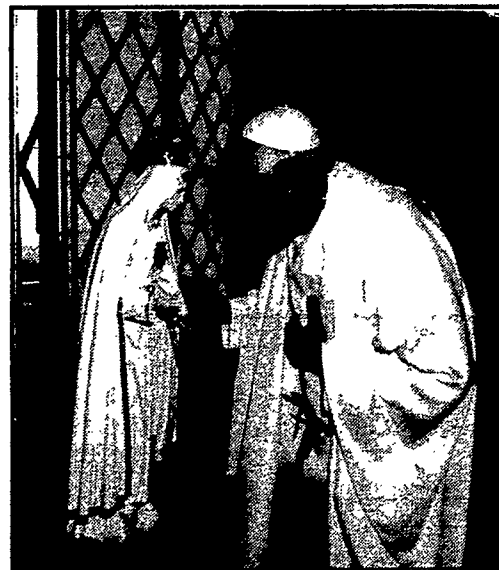
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