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THE ARAB REFUGEES: THEIR POSITION TODAY

By Miss S. G. THICKNESSE

THERE are five disturbing facts about the Arab refugees' position : in the first place, at the end of the third year since the Palestine war there are more refugees needing relief than there were in September, 1948, or even after the armistices of the spring of 1949; secondly, these refugees are now worse off than they were, because clothes have worn out, blankets and tents originally provided are in tatters, and harder than ever to replace on account of the Korean war and "stock piling" and the wool famine; thirdly, three years of destitution, with chances of political settlement and compensation as remote as ever, clearly have damaged the spirit of the refugees; fourthly, nearly a year after the setting up of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, following the recommendation of the Clapp Mission, less than 2 per cent. of the refugees have been found employment; and, finally, contributions from member States of the United Nations promise to be as inadequate and at least as much delayed in payment as they have been throughout these last years.

The increase in numbers is due to the ending of the resources of a proportion of the refugees who originally kept out of the "bread-line" and have now joined it, in many cases leaving villages and swelling the numbers in the semi-organized camps; to the high birth-rate among the refugees; to the difficulty in practice of weeding out from the ration lists destitutes who are not strictly refugees, as well as to small numbers of new claimants for relief appearing after every trouble on the armistice frontiers, and to any expulsion of "undesirables" by Israel, such as the bedouin and the population of Majdal which have recently increased the dangerously overcrowded Gaza area. In the September report of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency it was reported that 860,000 rations were being distributed, 120,000 to refugees in Lebanon, 82,000 in Syria, to 430,000 refugees in Jordan, to 28,000 in Israel and to 200,000 in Gaza—these last representing double the number of the old population of that area.

Although it is understood that contributions of \$2,000,000 worth of clothes for the refugees have been made to Azzam Pasha, and that the British Red Cross is going to help with a clothing appeal in Britain, it is clear that the only solid help for the refugees is that they should find work. But it is exactly here that this hope has been dashed. The latest reports show that the Clapp Mission underestimated the number of refugees; at once underestimated the cost of large works-projects, such as irrigation schemes for Syria and Jordan, and overestimated the sums which the United Nations would make available; and, finally, that it counted on support from Arab Governments for the employment of refugees, and on the refugees themselves for willingness to work on afforestation and terracing even in remote places. Neither the support nor the willingness has been forthcoming. The result is that, with money becoming available



only at the last minute even to cover the cost of rations, the U.N.P.R.W.A., after months of hand-to-mouth existence, could report that only 14,000 of the 860,000 people on their ration lists were working, and even then only on such precarious work as road-making, petty afforestation, or such miscellaneous projects as the Jericho excavations, or in the admirable but extremely limited weaving and handicraft projects organized for the most part by individuals outside the U.N.—for example, by Miss Winifred Coate, of the Church Missionary Society at Zerqa.

Finally, there is the question of finance. Israel, as is well known, has refused to consider compensation apart from a general peace settlement with the Arab States, which even the possibility of a third world war does not seem to bring nearer. Israel has also, as is less well known, made dependent on a peace settlement the release of any of the £P4,000,000 or £P5,000,000 standing to Arab accounts in banks (including over £P1,000,000 in Barclays D.C. and O.) now subject to Israel. The Arab refugees are therefore incapable of helping themselves, and the U.N.P.R.W.A. has asked for a further \$50,000,000 from the member States of the United Nations for July, 1951, to July, 1952—\$20,000,000 for direct relief and \$30,000,000 for the "Reintegration Fund"—and another \$5,000,000 for the special hardship of this winter.

A "negotiating committee" was set up during the last General Assembly meeting at Lake Success to find out who was ready to give aid for Korean and Arab refugees. All the States expressing their readiness to contribute were to meet and settle their individual contributions before the end of the meetings at Lake Success. Again, however, there was delay, and it will be February at earliest before definite promises are made. Before then even the intended amount of Britain's contribution is unknown. From the refugees' point of view, all that seems certain is that, however little money is available for their relief, foreign U.N. administrators in the Middle East will continue to draw salaries (tax free) from twelve to twenty times the size of anything paid to Arabs qualified and fortunate enough to be given similar work. It was this ostentatious inequality, these huge salaries to U.N. personnel, who, however well-intentioned, are able to do so dangerously little, that struck Miss Dorothy Thompson, the American journalist, forcibly during her recent Middle East tour.

