



International Council of Voluntary Agencies  
Conseil International des Agences Bénévoles  
Consejo Internacional de Organizaciones Voluntarias

# talk back

The Newsletter of ICVA

Volume 2-5, 25 September 2000

## SPECIAL ISSUE:

### THE NEXT UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

One of the most crucial positions in the humanitarian world, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees will be announced shortly. The person who will replace Mrs Sadako Ogata when she leaves the post at the end of the year will not be chosen through any sort of transparent process, but through political backroom deals and selective consultations conducted by the UN Secretary-General. NGOs have recently made moves to open up the selection process and to ensure that substantive criteria are taken into consideration. However, in spite of these efforts, the process has remained behind closed doors. Had the process been more open and transparent, the credibility and legitimacy of the next UNHCR might have been greatly enhanced.

In this respect, this issue of *Talk Back* offers a public forum for candidates for the post of UNHCR. In August, ICVA sent a letter, signed by the Chair of the ICVA Executive Committee, Anders Ladekarl, to eight candidates of which it was aware. The letter

was sent to Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister, Lloyd Axworthy; Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General to the Balkans, Carl Bildt; Jordanian Prince Hassan; Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Kosovo, Dr. Bernard Kouchner; Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees, Søren Jessen-Petersen; Dutch Minister Jan Pronk; Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for East Timor and Head of the Mission, Sergio Vieira de Mello; and the former Norwegian Foreign Minister, Knut Vollebæk. Each was invited to present his views on why he is interested in the job and what experience he possesses that would make him a good successor to Mrs Ogata.

ICVA does not favour a candidate but rather seeks to assist in making their candidatures and views known. The publication of their written responses in this issue is with their consent.

Canadian newspapers recently reported that the Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy will be stepping down from his Cabinet position to take up a post as head of a University of British Columbia think tank in January. A reply to the letter was not received from him.

The office of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General to the Balkans, Carl Bildt, replied that he was not a candidate.

The Jordanian Mission in Geneva informed ICVA that Prince Hassan has withdrawn his candidature.

In the corridors of a recent meeting in Geneva of the Humanitarian Issues Working Group under the

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Dayton Peace Accord for the former Yugoslavia, the UN Administrator for Kosovo, Dr. Bernard Kouchner was informally approached about the letter. His response was, "Impolite. I have been in the humanitarian world for 30 years and that's enough."

The Dutch press recently reported the candidature of Minister Jan Pronk of the Netherlands. Minister Pronk has not replied to ICVA's letter.

The replies of the Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees Søren Jessen-Petersen; Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for East Timor and Head of the Mission, Sergio Vieira de Mello; and the former Norwegian Foreign Minister, Knut Vollebæk are reproduced in this issue.

The letter to the candidates, a copy of which can be found at the end of this issue, invited them to elucidate their visions for the refugee agency. They were also asked to provide their views on the current state of the refugee protection system; the declining financial resources to respond to the protection and assistance needs of refugees; the question of the institutional mandate for internally displaced persons (IDPs); and the present state of the international humanitarian system and the proliferation of actors, including NGOs. These issues are generally seen as the immediate challenges for the new refugee chief.

Over the last few weeks, as the race has been heating up, ICVA has become aware of new candidates. Letters have been sent to Italian Member of the European Parliament, Emma Bonino, Italian Senator Gian Giacomo Migone, and Ambassador Maxime-Léopold Zollner de Medeiros from Benin. Should their replies be received after the publication of this issue, they will be reproduced in a future issue of *Talk Back*.

This initiative follows other recent efforts by NGOs to open up the process and ensure that substantive qualifications are taken into consideration during the selection process. In July, the Chairs of ICVA and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR), another major NGO network, wrote in the *International Herald Tribune* that, "the new High Commissioner will need to be a dynamic

leader if he or she is to address the biggest challenge facing the agency: ensuring respect for and renewed commitment to the universal principles of refugee protection and the UNHCR mandate." They invited candidates interested in the job to come forward and present their views.

Together with the American NGO network InterAction, support was offered to the UN Secretary-General in ensuring that the next High Commissioner is selected on the basis of his/her ability to meet UNHCR's challenges. A letter, sent to the Secretary-General in early July, requested a meeting with him. In order to present a nomination to the General Assembly, the Secretary-General engages in a round of consultations with stakeholders, i.e. governments, concerning this position. However, the three NGO networks, which sit on the UN's humanitarian coordination body, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, felt that NGOs should be recognised as major stakeholders, given their place in civil society and work with refugees. "We hope to bring the needed transparency and accountability to the process of selecting Mrs Ogata's replacement," the letter said.

The reply from the UNSG's Executive Office, which was not received until mid-September, explained that the Secretary-General was not able to meet with the NGO network heads due to his extremely demanding schedule during the General Assembly, which began in early September. While known for his frequent language on "the new partnership with civil society," the UN chief's delayed response seems to indicate that he has not attached much priority to meeting with NGOs on this issue. Perhaps, he fears implications for the future nominations of other UN agency heads. In any case, copies of the candidates' replies have been sent to the Executive Office of the Secretary-General for his good advice.

Finally, since the process takes place behind closed doors, there is always the possibility that a mystery candidate will be selected. Any other candidates, of which ICVA is unaware, are invited to take advantage of this forum provided by ICVA. Responses or reactions will be published in a future issue of *Talk Back*.

In the meantime, as the race continues, we thank those who have taken the time to respond in writing and who have agreed to the publication of their replies.

*ICVA Secretariat*

#### **Talk Back Editorial Team**

Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop, ICVA Coordinator  
Manisha Thomas, ICVA Information Officer

**RESPONSE FROM ASSISTANT HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES,  
SØREN JESSEN-PETERSEN**

14 September 2000

Dear Anders,

Let me first say how much I welcome the interest of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) in the future of our organisation, and particularly in the nomination of the next High Commissioner.

Regarding the request contained in your letter, I can confirm that I would indeed be honoured to continue serving UNHCR in the future. However, given the fact that I am presently occupying the position of Assistant High Commissioner, I feel that it would be difficult for me at this particular point in time to comment more specifically on the issue of Mrs. Ogata's succession.

Needless to say, I very much look forward to continuing a constructive dialogue with ICVA, and indeed with the NGO community as a whole, on the common challenges ahead of the humanitarian aid community.

Yours sincerely,

With best wishes,

Søren Jessen-Petersen

Mr. Anders Ladekarl  
Chair of the ICVA Executive Committee  
48, chemin du Grand-Montfleury  
1290 Versoix  
Fax: 950 9609

**RESPONSE FROM SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UN SECRETARY-  
GENERAL FOR EAST TIMOR AND HEAD OF THE MISSION,  
SERGIO VIEIRA DE MELLO**

Dili, 4 September 2000

Thank you for your letter of 22 August asking for my views on UNHCR.

Given the very real impact the position has on the lives of millions of refugees, displaced persons and asylum seekers, candidates for the position should indeed be measured against the highest moral and professional standards as well as against their ability to provide the institution with a vision. I fully support the spirit of your initiative, but for the reasons outlined below it would not be appropriate for me to respond in the manner you requested.

I have been a career staff member of the United Nations for 31 years (a significant portion of which was with UNHCR). On joining the Organization each staff member commits himself or herself to the principle that they are available to serve the United Nations in whatever position the Secretary-General deems most fit. The UN Charter stipulates that personnel working for the United Nations should not be influenced by any Government or other body exterior to the United Nations.

These two principles governing all permanent staff of the United Nations make it improper for any staff member to try and influence the Secretary-General by seeking support outside the Organization for a specific position. I am prepared to continue with or take on any assignment that the Secretary-General deems fit and would not wish to suggest otherwise by advocating publicly that I thought I was particularly suitable for any one position.

I do hope you have more luck with others to whom you have written and regret that I can not respond in a more satisfactory manner to your pioneering initiative.

With warm regards.

Yours sincerely,

Sergio Vieira de Mello

Anders Ladekarl  
Chair of the ICVA Executive Committee  
Versoix, Switzerland  
Fax No. +41 22 950 9609

**RESPONSE FROM FORMER NORWEGIAN  
FOREIGN MINISTER,  
KNUT VOLLEBÆK**

Oslo, 12 September 2000

Mr. Anders Ladekarl  
Chair of the Executive Committee  
International Council of Voluntary Agencies ICVA  
48 chemin du Grand-Montfleury  
1290 Versoix CH

Dear Mr. Ladekarl,

Thank you for your letter of 22 August 2000 in which you ask me to set out my vision for the refugee agency. Given the indispensable role of the voluntary agencies in the humanitarian field, I appreciate and welcome your involvement in the selection process.

Let me first state my great respect for the way the present High Commissioner, Mrs. Sadako Ogata, has led the UNHCR for the last ten years. She has been a remarkably effective advocate for the protection of refugees through some of the most difficult conflicts of our time. She has earned for herself, and for the UNHCR, a unique place within the UN system and in the international humanitarian community in bringing protection and relief to some of the world's most vulnerable groups.

During Mrs. Ogata's term in office, the UNHCR has strengthened its partnership with other UN agencies, with regional organizations and with the voluntary agencies. Norway has co-operated closely with the UNHCR and ICVA in strengthening this partnership, for example through the Partnership in Action (PARinAC) process.

It is the prerogative of the Secretary-General to nominate the next High Commissioner for Refugees to the General Assembly. The selection process is not an election campaign, and this is why it would be inappropriate for me to set out any detailed platform for what I would do as High Commissioner.

After my period as Chairman-in-Office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 1999, I was approached by some countries and asked whether I would be available for international positions. I worked very closely with the UNHCR during my year at the helm of the OSCE. I had already come to appreciate the importance of the High Commissioner, its mandate and its mission during earlier stages of my career, for example as Deputy Co-Chairman for the UN in the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia in 1993. My political background as Foreign Minister of Norway

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## Response from Knut Vollebæk

in 1997-2000 has also given me wide experience of the whole range of tasks related to international crisis management. This includes the emergency preparedness and humanitarian component, where Norway is a substantial donor and plays an active role.

I have therefore indicated that I am available for the position as High Commissioner for Refugees, and have received the full support of the Norwegian Government for this candidature.

I would like to make two key points about how I see the tasks facing the UNHCR:

- First of all, protection is at the core of the mandate and work of the UNHCR, and must remain so. The instruments of international protection are under debate today, and sometimes even under attack. It will be as important in the future as it is now to have a strong advocate at the helm of the UNHCR who can voice the need to ensure protection for refugees, displaced persons and particularly vulnerable groups like refugee women and children, and who can continue to lead the agency effectively through a period of rapid global change to maintain the unique role and mission of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.
- Secondly, the partnerships between UNHCR and the increasing number of humanitarian actors must be further strengthened. The challenge is to make sure that all actors work together and not against each other. I am firmly convinced that to achieve this, a strong, multilateral dimension is required, and that a better resourced and co-ordinated UN system with effective agencies like the UNHCR must take a lead in this process.

If we are to ensure a stronger international protection regime, we need strong and viable partnerships between the UNHCR, regional organizations, UN member states, and the NGO community. The NGO community has become ever more important for the UNHCR, both as implementing partner in the field, in advocacy functions and in providing the NGO perspective on issues dealt with in the Executive Committee and the Standing Committee. To put these partnerships effectively to work with a well managed and highly profiled UNHCR would be one of my main ambitions as High Commissioner.

Yours sincerely,

Knut Vollebæk

## LETTER SENT BY ICVA TO THE CANDIDATES

Versoix, 22 August 2000

Re: The Next UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

As you are well aware, the process of selecting the next High Commissioner for Refugees is well under way. We are writing to you as we have heard from various sources that you have been mentioned as a potential successor to Mrs Sadako Ogata. Given the importance of the position of the HCR for refugee protection, we find it unfortunate that the selection process is not a more open and transparent one.

Potential candidates are not given adequate opportunities to present their views on why they should be chosen. Making publicly known the qualities and abilities that a candidate has and why a candidate is interested in the position *prior* to the selection would do much in terms of increasing the legitimacy of the person chosen and enhancing the credibility of UNHCR as an international organisation.

The International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) is a global advocacy network of more than 70 non-governmental organisations. ICVA focuses its information exchange and advocacy efforts primarily on humanitarian affairs and refugee issues. In its capacity as global focal point for the UNHCR-NGO Partnership in Action (PARinAC) process, ICVA also facilitates NGO input to UNHCR's Standing and Executive Committees. ICVA is also a member of the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

ICVA would like to see the selection process for the next UNHCR opened up to other "stakeholders," including NGOs. A transparent selection process would help to ensure the increased accountability of governments and the UN. Considering the importance of the position in terms of the present challenges facing the agency in today's increasingly restrictive environment, the selection process should focus on why each candidate is interested in the job and what qualifications he/she has that would make him/her a suitable choice.

In this respect, ICVA is writing to each of the potential candidates (of which we are aware). We would like to provide a forum for each candidate to elucidate his/her visions for the refugee agency. We would like to hear why you think you would make a good successor to Mrs Ogata.

We hope that you will provide us with your views on why you are interested in the position and what is your practical experience in working with refugees or in the humanitarian field. We also hope that you will provide your views on issues facing the agency, including the current state of the refugee protection system and your vision for it; the need to reaffirm respect for the universal principles of refugee protection and UNHCR's mandate; the declining financial resources to respond to the protection and assistance needs of refugees; the question of the institutional mandate for internally displaced persons (IDPs); and the present state of the international humanitarian system and the proliferation of actors, including NGOs.

These are only some of the more pressing issues on which we feel potential candidates should be given the opportunity to express their opinions. Other issues, relating to diplomatic skills, fundraising abilities, and the skills to manage a large and complex organisation might also be considered. We are hoping that you will take this opportunity and feel free to address any issues additional to those included above.

*see over*



## Letter Sent by ICVA to the Candidates

Once responses are received from the candidates, ICVA will publish these in a special issue of its newsletter *Talk Back* prior to the September session of UNHCR's Standing Committee and annual session of the Executive Committee. *Talk Back* is distributed primarily via e-mail to ICVA's members, other NGOs, individuals in UN agencies, government missions in Geneva and abroad as well as the UN Secretary-General's office. It is also posted on the ICVA website ([www.icva.ch](http://www.icva.ch)). Hard copies of this special issue will be made available for distribution at UNHCR's Standing and Executive Committee meetings.

We would ask that you kindly send us your views by 6 September at the latest to the ICVA Secretariat by fax (+41 22 950 9609) and e-mail ([secretariat@icva.ch](mailto:secretariat@icva.ch)). The ICVA Secretariat will not edit the length or content of the views that you provide.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or the ICVA Secretariat (Coordinator, Mr. Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop) if you have any questions or require further clarification.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

Anders Ladekarl  
Chair of the ICVA Executive Committee

P.S. If ICVA has been misinformed about your candidature we very much apologise for the inconvenience.

Distribution:

The Honourable Lloyd Axworthy  
Mr. Carl Bildt  
Prince Hassan of Jordan  
Dr. Bernard Kouchner  
Minister Jan Pronk  
Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello  
Mr. Knut Vollebæk  
Assistant High Commissioner Søren Jessen-Petersen

Cc:

Secretary-General Kofi Annan  
Ambassador Raimundo Perez-Hernandez y  
Torra (Chair of UNHCR's Executive  
Committee)  
Mrs Sadako Ogata

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ICVA Secretariat  
48, chemin du Grand-Montfleury  
1290 Versoix  
Switzerland  
Tel.: +41.22.950.9600  
Fax: +41.22.950.9609  
[secretariat@icva.ch](mailto:secretariat@icva.ch)  
[www.icva.ch](http://www.icva.ch)