

Press conference held by Herbert H. Lehman (Washington, 26 February 1945)

Caption: On 26 February 1945, Herbert H. Lehman, former Governor of the State of New York and Director-General of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), holds a press conference in Washington during which he explains to the journalists present the nature of the activities carried out in Europe by UNRRA.

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The Director General: Sorry I am a little late but the meeting of the Central Committee lasted later than expected. Have you had a chance to read this? Are there any questions you want to ask me?

Q: One question, Governor, on this: Have these countries — France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway — formally requested UNRRA assistance?

Director General: No, they have made no formal requests.

Q: You are simply making it available to them by this action?

Director General: That is right. If they come to us and ask us for emergency supplies we hope to be able to furnish them.

Q: The action of the Central Committee is the last action, that is, a —.

Director General: The action of the Central Committee was based on these two Resolutions, which I do want to say were voted for by all the European countries.

Q: Have you had any indication from them that they will ask you?

Director General: Nothing, except what is contained in the Resolutions, which, I repeat, is the result of action by the Committee of the Council for Europe — unanimous action.

Q: Is it expected, of course, that action in itself is not going to ease the shipping problem, but by centralizing at least a part of the relief programs of the countries mentioned here it may make shipping a little easier to get?

Director General: I cannot answer that question but I do want to emphasize just as strongly as I can that this program and the general UNRRA program is dependent on shipping and supplies. UNRRA, in order to fulfill its mission, must have (1) sufficient shipping, (2) sufficient supplies, (3) inland transport and (4) the fullest cooperation of all Governments — both supplying and receiving — in order to make possible the efficient distribution of supplies.

Q: Governor, I understand that inland transport in some of these countries is in such a state that stocks of supplies have been stacked up at the ports. Is inland transport your greatest obstacle in these countries?

Director General: The greatest obstacle, of course, is shipping — no question about it — ocean shipping. The second, as I say, is the shortage of some supplies, and the third, also very important as you see, is inland transport. There is a shortage both of rail and highway transportation. A great deal of the rolling stock, as you know, was destroyed during the course of the war. A great many of the trucks have been destroyed; the military need great quantities of trucks and it is true that one of the problems, even when supplies are at a certain point, is to get them to the consumer who may not be more than 25 or 50 miles away.

Q: Governor, could you tell us whether the French representatives on the Committee of the Council in London brought up this question?

Director General: I cannot tell you whether they brought it up; they voted for it.

Q: You could not say whether they initiated it in the discussion?

Director General: I am not sure about that.

Q: Governor, can one assume that this is a problem of allocation of shipping — the number of ships that go

to France, for example?

Director General: It certainly is a matter of the allocation and the obtaining of shipping. There is no question but that shipping is in short supply.

Q: Can one assume, then, it is a question of competition between the needs as defined by the Army and those as defined by UNRRA?

Director General: It is not a question of competition between the military and UNRRA — it is not a question of competition at all. There is a great demand for shipping, first and predominantly, from the military for military purposes. Then there is need of shipping for civilian supplies for liberated areas, including the supplies that go in under military auspices, under UNRRA, and through purchases made directly by the paying countries, such as France, Belgium, Holland and Norway.

Q: Can you have more civilian supplies for UNRRA without having less for the military?

Director General: Well, I very much hoped that ways may be found to increase the available supply of shipping for the purposes of transporting civilian supplies. How that can be done I, of course, do not know. I have considered it my duty, however, to point out that the question of shipping is the great bottleneck in bringing in civilian supplies to the liberated areas and I have also pointed out the possible political and military implications that may follow failure to bring in civilian supplies for liberated countries. Now, the working out of the schedule of shipping is quite out of my jurisdiction.

Q: Governor, if the ships become available to UNRRA to implement this proposal, under the UNRRA Charter would not these paying countries themselves make a demand on that available shipping?

Director General: They probably would, and it is quite possible that the supplies that we may make available to those countries will be shipped on ships that have been allocated to the countries themselves. In other words, if France asked us to provide them with a certain item it is quite possible that we will ship that item on ships allocated to the French Government, or we may ship it in other ways.

Q: Do you have now, say in England or North Africa, any quantity of supplies which could be made available to relieve immediate suffering?

Director General: We have some supplies.

Q: Then this Committee action has specific meaning in terms of relieving immediate suffering?

Director General: Yes, I do want to point out, gentlemen and ladies, that this is a limited program; it is in no way to be considered a substitute for the general program undertaken by these countries — the paying countries themselves. It is a program calculated to help to some extent in emergency relief situations in particularly devastated areas of the paying countries, but I certainly do not want anybody to get the impression that this is a substitute for the program that France has negotiated, or Belgium, or Holland. Those programs have been developed by each Government. The arrangements with regard to the allocation of supplies, the procurement of supplies and the shipping of supplies have been made directly between liberated countries and the Governments of this and the other supplying countries, including some Lend-Lease arrangements with which you are familiar.

Q: What escapes me, Governor, is the necessity for this action. As I understand it, for the countries that have the means to buy and have been negotiating for the right to purchase supplies, it is not a question of a lack of exchange on their part.

Director General: No, it is not.

Q: It has been a lack of access to supplies, to the availability of supplies and availability of shipping.

Director General: I have emphasized, as you will note in several places here, that our ability to serve will depend on our ability to get shipping and supplies. We hope we may be able to get some, and we will make them available to those countries, if possible.

Q: Is it the thesis that UNRRA may be able to do a better job in getting shipping and supplies for them, than they have done themselves?

Director General: Well, an additional job — I would rather put it that way.

Q: You mentioned that it is possible the supplies will be sent to countries on ships allocated to them. If they are not, won't that make UNRRA's problem of shipping much deeper?

Director General: I am not quite sure I understand you.

Q: Assuming you were not able to send the supplies on ships allocated to France, you have to find more ships than you were looking for.

Director General: Right. We won't find ships unless they give them to us. UNRRA does not control shipping, supplies, inland transport. It will make it more difficult, there is no doubt about it. We will have to do the best we can in our desire to serve these countries.

Q: Would you say it would seem that the Combined Boards are more willing, as soon as shipping becomes available, to give it to UNRRA to implement this program, than to supply the officials of those paying Governments?

Director General: I cannot say that. I have no idea what their attitude would be.

Q: To come to the question I asked about the supplies which may be stockpiled in England and North Africa, could you say generally where they are stockpiled and how quickly they may be made available?

Director General: I cannot say that. We will have to take whatever we furnish to the paying countries out of our reserves for the non-paying countries, for the time being. We have made no provision for those paying countries; we won't unless we are asked to do it. But I do want to emphasize again, this is not to be a substitute in any way for their regular program. This is supplemental — a supplemental undertaking to help, if we can help.

Q: Could you say whether this is likely to bring relief quicker than the French and Belgian Governments could get it?

Director General: I think so, in some ways.

Q: In the distribution in the non-paying countries, UNRRA was supposed to exercise a sort of supervisory jurisdiction for the distribution of relief?

Director General: No, that isn't quite accurate. We do not claim the right to supervise distribution. Under the Charter of UNRRA, supplies going into a country are turned over to the Government or to the authority in effective administrative control for distribution; all that UNRRA has asked for is the right to send in a certain number of people to observe the distribution in order that we can certify to the Member Governments and the contributing Governments and the other members. We have not worked out the details. The general procedure is covered formally in this Resolution, in the fourth paragraph: "That the implementation of this resolution within any country shall as in other cases be worked out by the Director General in consultation with the government concerned."

Q: So far as shipping is concerned, with whom do you deal?

Director General: We deal with the Shipping Board.

Q: Combined Shipping Board?

Director General: Yes.

Q: What countries are represented on that Board, Governor?

Director General: Only the United States and the United Kingdom.

Q: If the French or Belgian Governments came and said “we have supplies and need ships”, would you actually turn over a ship to them?

Director General: We could not; we have no ships.

Q: The ships allocated to you.

Director General: Whatever ships we have, we have to dig out of the Shipping Board and it is hard digging.

Q: I gather from your remark a while ago that you have already discussed with the Combined Shipping Board the need for ships?

Director General: Oh, yes, but we have got some shipping space for Italy, some for Poland and some for Czechoslovakia. We have already shipped some supplies to Italy, and the boats for Czechoslovakia and Poland are about to be loaded.

Q: In case of cessation of hostilities in Europe, are you counting on a lot more ships, suddenly, in a short period?

Director General: I don't want to be quoted on this, but, off the record, I do think when the war is over in Europe shipping might become easier.

Q: Within a short period?

Director General: Personally, I would say so, but I have not enough knowledge of the shipping situation on a world basis, or the plans of the military, to express an opinion.

Q: Does the Shipping Board say to you, you can have so many ships — or do they have to have the approval of the Combined Chiefs of Staff?

Director General: If the Board gives us the right to do so, we can ship many more supplies providing we have the shipping.

Q: Will these paying countries pay UNRRA for whatever relief they receive?

Director General: If they have the foreign exchange they will continue to be expected to pay, but that is subject to arrangement between UNRRA and the paying country. To put it simply, the Central Committee tells the Administration you do not have to hold your shipment of supplies until the country is adjudged to be a non-paying country. In other words, you can go ahead and ship and then make your arrangement.

Q: Are there adequate port facilities in Western Europe now?

Director General: I cannot answer that question. There are port facilities but I do not know if they are

adequate.

Q: Governor, what specifically would be the next step, now you have adopted this Resolution?

Director General: If any of these Governments ask us to get supplies for particularly devastated areas we will do our best to get them; we would go to the Shipping Board and we would interest them and the supplying Governments. As I have pointed out, we can do nothing without the support of the Member Governments. We must have that support in respect to the United States Government and the United Kingdom Government, who are supplying Governments or who control shipping. Without their help we cannot fulfill our mission.

Q: Governor, what a lot of people in Europe want to know is the net difference now in their prospects of getting something to eat. It comes down to a case of what the individual hungry citizen may have. Your reply to that question suggests that if one of those countries asks for assistance there still is no assurance they would get relief supplies quickly.

Director General: I cannot emphasize too often that this is not a substitute for the regular program.

Q: No, sir, but as an emergency measure?

Director General: Well, we certainly would go out and do our best if they wanted blankets or repair materials or some item of food in short supply. We would go out, whether they are paying countries or non-paying countries, and do our damndest to get the supplies for them. That is all I can answer.

Q: There are not now supplies available over there for distribution?

Director General: Not unless we can get them from the Governments — not in the UNRRA reserve — because we get all our supplies from the Governments. UNRRA does not do its own purchasing; it gets its supplies in this country through FEA, and from FEA through the Treasury Department or Food Program. Similarly, in England, through the Supply Administration and in Canada through the National Procurement Agency.

Q: Governor, do you expect as a result of this Resolution you will have some formal requests from those countries for aid?

Director General: I think we will, but I do not think we will in very large quantities, nor are those supplies to take care of the large program. This is simply an emergency and supplemental program.

Q: Have you any idea which countries might ask for supplies first?

Director General: I cannot say.

Q: In view of the emergency nature of this program, is it far-fetched to presume you hope to get a priority on ships for long-term civilian supplies?

Director General: It is important for these supplies to be gotten to the sovereign countries, whether sent in by the military, by UNRRA, or the Governments themselves. I would not say we expect to get a priority but we would certainly expect to get our fair share of ships. Unless we do, we cannot do the job.

Q: Did I understand you, sir, to say a little while ago that you thought you were perhaps in a better bargaining position with the Combined Boards than these countries themselves?

Director General: I wouldn't say that.

Q: Do you feel you are?

Director General: I wouldn't say that.

Q: Are you in a better position to get more shipping now to those countries than, say, yesterday, before this Resolution?

Director General: That all depends on the support we get from the Governments. If we get the support of the Governments — yes; if we cannot — no.

Q: Governor, on that point I understand that France has 26 ships allocated, and perhaps 39 eventually, within the next three months' period. Now, if the Governments approached you and offered any one of these ships, or a number of these ships, for your purposes —

Director General: Which Government?

Q: I am referring to France.

Director General: No, because they haven't approached us at all in this connection, but if France called on us for, we say, 50,000 blankets, then we will have to decide whether we can ship them in a ship allocated to us direct or use some of the supplies in a ship allocated to France.

Q: If France made a request of that sort would UNRRA go to, say, the British Government and request they give up certain stockpiles they have there?

Director General: UNRRA certainly would; they would go to any Government.

Q: What are the leading countries that have stockpiles?

Director General: I cannot answer that. Of course, the great supplying countries are the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand and some others.

Q: Governor, do you think that this action might result in loosening up some of the stores in the United Kingdom?

Director General: I don't care to speculate.

Q: Governor, without reference to any particular country, you have had dealings with the Combined Shipping Board in the past over the question of shipping for UNRRA members. That's right, isn't it?

Director General: Yes.

Q: Would you mind giving, in percentages, how much you asked for and how much you got?

Director General: No, I could not do that.

Q: Would you mind saying what arguments were put up for whittling down your request?

Director General: One very good argument — the shortage in available shipping.

Q: Yes, but there also enters into such an argument the question of priority between this member and that member.

Director General: That they have not done. They simply explained to us there is a great shortage of world shipping.

Q: The military can use all shipping, can't it?

Director General: UNRRA hasn't the authority or the power to regulate the use of ships as between the military and civilian purposes. On that, we have to depend on the decisions of the Shipping authorities, but in their conversations with us they do not tell us what their detailed arrangements are as far as purposes, or otherwise, between the military and other countries and UNRRA. They simply tell us that there is a shortage of shipping.

Q: You do not go in and say "we would like X number of ships" and they say "just a moment" and say "you can have X - Y"?

Director General: We try to be pretty persuasive.

Q: And don't they try to be persuasive, in reply to you?

Director General: They don't have to be persuasive.

Q: I realize they don't have to be, but I am interested in knowing if they try to be persuasive.

Director General: I cannot answer that question. The fact remains we have to have the shipping to do the job.

Q: With reference to that question, the shipping that has to be made available, can you say what consequences would come of not supplying it?

Director General: I have already said in a speech I made last week that failure to bring in civilian supplies to the liberated countries, whether those supplies are the responsibility of and brought in by the military, or by UNRRA, or by the Governments, in my opinion, may lead to serious military and political implications.

Q: Could you amplify the military?

(No answer by the Governor.)

Q: Governor, is the military doing an adequate job on that score now?

Director General: I certainly cannot comment on what the military is doing.

Q: I was just wondering for guidance. Governor, I believe not to attribute to you, whether you could tell us whether there is fair reason to speculate you have a better chance of getting some of the British stores through a Resolution of this type than those nations would have directly.

Director General: I cannot answer for the British Government; I do not know. I would hope they would make available to us any surplus stocks that they had, which were needed.

Q: When you refer to supplies, where do you expect to get the majority of those supplies?

Director General: Where?

Q: Yes.

Director General: I have already answered that — either the United States, the United Kingdom or Canada.

Q: Are there any estimates on the size of supplies abroad?

Director General: None that I have seen.

Q: It would be feasible to feel that these supplies are sufficient for the emergency needs of those paying countries?

Director General: I cannot answer that question; I haven't got the figures. I don't know how much may be held by the military; I don't know how much may be held by the United Kingdom.

Q: Can't those figures be obtained by UNRRA, Governor?

Director General: I doubt it.

Q: Would you say, sir, that the failure to get supplies in there soon might have serious consequences for UNRRA as a going concern, itself?

Director General: I wasn't thinking about that. I was thinking about the countries, about the whole over-all situation. I cannot answer more than say that UNRRA, if it gets shipping and supplies, can do a job, and if it cannot get shipping and supplies it is going to be greatly handicapped in doing a job. There are no illusions about that.

Q: Is this going to detract from UNRRA's operations in non-paying countries?

Director General: I hope not. It would depend, of course, on the amount we would make available, but I do not think that is serious.

Q: What has been the attitude of those countries?

Director General: They all voted for it — the European countries — unanimously.

Q: At the end of the Resolution passed by the Standing Technical Subcommittee on Welfare, it is stated: "Success will depend on close collaboration with the Military authorities of whose cordial cooperation the Subcommittee has been assured." Does that mean the Military authorities know of this proposal, approve of it, and are cooperating?

Director General: I cannot answer that question. I do not know from where those assurances came. I think, though, in line with all your questions, it is important to state the Resolution passed by the Welfare Subcommittee on which the Resolution of the Committee of the Council for Europe was based, because it does describe the limited character of this undertaking.

Q: When you said there were stockpiles in the United Kingdom and North Africa, did you just list those because they were nearest to the scene, or because —.

Director General: I said I think there were some stockpiles in Europe, some stockpiles here; I did not say North Africa.

Q: Does that mean, Governor, that an UNRRA mission can go into those countries and utilize those stockpiles?

Director General: If they can get the shipping for it and if they can get it released.

Q: If the stockpiles are already there?

Director General: They will have to have shipping and they have to have it released by the Governments.

Q: I understand there were 126 ships marooned in the British Channel due to lack of port facilities and inability to have stocks of supplies inland. In France, isn't that one of your major difficulties?

Director General: I cannot discuss that because I do not know whether your facts are right.

Q: Governor, if you were to request Britain to release some of its stockpiles for supplying France, on French request, and they turned you down, just how persuasive could UNRRA be then?

Director General: The Resolution of the Committee of the Council for Europe was voted for by the British representative and the Resolution today, which was passed by the Central Committee, was voted for by the British representative, so I think we have a right to expect and count on their full assistance. I think you will notice I emphasized that very definitely in my own statement.

Q: Was voted today, unanimously, Governor?

Director General: Yes.

Q: Was there a discussion as to how this might be implemented, Governor?

Director General: Nothing of any definite character.

THE PRESS: Thank you very much, Governor.

(Press Conference adjourned at 6:35 p.m.)