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INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON MIGRATION IN AFRICA IN THE 1950s: AN ANALYSIS OF UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES REPORTS

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Abstract. This article analyses United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports to the United Nations General Assembly (sessions 6–16), examining international cooperation on forced migration in Africa through UN High Commissioner for Refugees activities. The study concludes that the 1950s marked the beginning of dynamic international cooperation in migration. As decolonisation began, migration patterns shifted towards forced displacement. UN High Commissioner for Refugees, initially responsible for a small number of persons of concern, gradually expanded its programmes across regions. States and international organisations supported these efforts through resettlement and local assistance programmes. The Algerian crisis highlighted the need to broaden the scope of the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees. The 1950s can be divided into two distinct phases: 1951–1956, when international bodies first engaged with African migration issues, and 1957–1960, marked by an active emergency response to forced migration.

Keywords: migration; Africa; international cooperation; forced migration; refugees; UN High Commissioner for Refugees; decolonisation.

МЕЖДУНАРОДНОЕ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО ПО ВОПРОСАМ МИГРАЦИИ В АФРИКЕ В 1950-х гг. (ПО ДАННЫМ ДОКЛАДОВ ВЕРХОВНОГО КОМИССАРА ООН ПО ДЕЛАМ БЕЖЕНЦЕВ)

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Аннотация. Проанализированы доклады Верховного комиссара ООН по делам беженцев на 6–16-й сессиях Генеральной Ассамблеи ООН. Международное сотрудничество по вопросам вынужденной миграции в Африке показано через призму деятельности Управления Верховного комиссара ООН по делам беженцев. Сделаны выводы об интенсивном международном сотрудничестве в сфере миграции. С началом деколонизации миграция стала носить главным образом вынужденный характер. Управление Верховного комиссара ООН по делам беженцев, начавшее свою работу в 1950-х гг. с небольшого количества подмандатных лиц, стало расширять свои программы. Данная деятельность (переселение, оказание необходимой помощи на местах и др.) поддерживалась государствами и международными организациями. С началом алжирского кризиса появилась необходимость расширения рамок Конвенции о статусе беженцев 1951 г. С точки зрения сотрудничества по вопросам миграции в Африке в рассматриваемое десятилетие можно разделить на два этапа: 1951–1956 гг. – период знакомства международных структур с проблемами миграции в Африке; 1957–1960 гг. – период активного реагирования на чрезвычайные ситуации в сфере вынужденной миграции.

Ключевые слова: миграция; Африка; международное сотрудничество; вынужденная миграция; беженцы; Управление Верховного комиссара ООН по делам беженцев; деколонизация.

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In recent years, scholarly interest in African studies has grown across various countries, with African migration emerging as a key research area. The 1950s marked the beginning of decolonisation in Africa. While existing literature addresses specific regional migration patterns and rural exodus during this period [1–3], international cooperation receives limited attention, except regarding forced displacement and refugees [4]. This study aims to characterise international cooperation on African migration issues during the 1950s, drawing on UNHCR reports to the UN General Assembly.

The UN High Commissioner's for Refugees (hereinafter – High Commissioner) report to the sixth General Assembly session, covering the first five months of operations, makes no mention of African issues¹.

By the seventh session (June 1951 – May 1952), the reports began addressing African issues, starting with Egypt. The document noted that Near and Middle Eastern governments faced “serious problems of their own ethnic refugees”. Egypt and other Arab nations were “devoting very considerable efforts” to assist Arab refugees, supported by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. Egypt also hosted a small number of refugees who fell under UNHCR's mandate. As stated in the report, “from the first rapid survey of the situation, it would appear that the countries in these areas which have given asylum to the refugees within the mandate of my office are not in a position to take the necessary measures to ensure the final establishment of all of them. The very large numbers of Arab refugees in Egypt, Syria and Jordan and the relatively difficult economic conditions are necessarily the main pre-occupations of the government”².

In the eighth session report (June 1952 – May 1953), the High Commissioner addressed broader migration concerns, particularly through participation of his representative in the third session of the Intergovernmental Committee on European Migration (ICEM)³. The UNHCR office “requested that the committee should concern itself not only with the movement of refugees of European origin from Europe but also with the movement of refugees of European origin from countries outside Europe where they could not be assimilated”⁴. While ICEM agreed to provide technical assistance and funding, the

African continent remained outside this cooperation framework.

Regarding Egypt, the report reiterated that “the considerable number of Arab refugees is necessarily a primary preoccupation” for states in the region⁵. It further stated that “the number of refugees in Egypt is greater than in any other part of the Middle East”. Although precise figures were unavailable, the High Commissioner estimated their population at approximately 3000, comprising individuals who had arrived both before and after World War II. He also highlighted the Egyptian government's interest, noting that it had “given... possible assistance and cooperated closely... to establish a working arrangement for the future” with a representative of the office who had visited the country to develop a solution to the refugee problem. However, due to “relatively difficult economic conditions”⁶, employment prospects for mandate refugees remained limited, necessitating resettlement assistance. The Refugee Emergency Fund provided modest grants to refugees in need, though the exact amount went unspecified.

The report covers Ethiopia in addition to Egypt. In March 1950, Ethiopia signed an agreement with the International Refugee Organisation enabling refugee resettlement. This initiative brought approximately 250 refugees to Ethiopia, though near 70 later moved to other countries. A separate programme admitted up to 60 additional refugees and stateless persons⁷. Ethiopian authorities, like their Egyptian counterparts, fully supported the office's representative in addressing refugee matters.

Notably, the report states that “a significant number of refugees are working for the government and can be considered to be well established”⁸.

In the ninth session report (June 1953 – May 1954), the High Commissioner stated, “in my submission to the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly at its eighth session, provision was made for the establishment”⁹ of a UNHCR office in Cairo. By February 1954, both parties had signed the agreement, pending only staff appointments¹⁰.

In 1953, international cooperation enabled surveys of “the number and conditions of institutional cases of refugees in need of institutional care... in various

¹Refugees and stateless persons and problems of assistance to refugees: report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/2011 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/704494> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

²Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to the General Assembly. UN Doc. A/2126. P. 30 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/839476> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

³Now this agency is called the International Organisation for Migration. It has been a specialised agency of the United Nations since 19 September 2016.

⁴Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/2394. P. 6 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/703561> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

⁵Ibid. P. 17.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/2648. P. 5 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/712108> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

¹⁰Ibid. P. 5.

parts of the Near East”¹¹. According to partly incomplete estimates, 10 720 individuals were categorised as difficult refugees under UNHCR’s custody and those in need of special care. European countries accepted some of these cases, though the report omits specific figures for African refugees.

In Egypt, refugees outside government welfare programmes required urgent assistance, particularly “the group of ageing white Russian refugees”¹². The 1954 aid budget of USD 45 000 covered medical care and supplementary food.

The report also examines UNHCR efforts to address the challenges faced by professional categories of refugees who struggle with resettlement. With support from UNESCO, the World Health Organisation, and voluntary organisations, the agency achieved positive results, enabling some of these individuals to find opportunities in countries like Ethiopia and Iran¹³ (the report does not define what constitutes professional categories. – A. S.)

The tenth session report highlights High Commissioner – ICEM cooperation in planning the “transfer of a small group of refugees in Ethiopia to the Central African Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland”, with ICEM providing funding¹⁴.

The High Commissioner recognised the active cooperation between the UNHCR office in Cairo, established in July 1954, and the Egyptian government to clarify the number of persons of concern to the agency in the country. For this purpose, a dedicated bureau was created within the local migration structure. Refugees seeking residence rights and other documents had to apply to this bureau¹⁵.

Emergency assistance to refugees in Egypt, including food, medical supplies, clothing, fuel, and shelter, with 228 US dollars allocated for such support in 1955 was also provided by the High Commissioner. Furthermore, small amounts for emergency relief were paid from the accountable funds of the Geneva headquarters and Cairo office¹⁶.

The High Commissioner emphasised the positive progress in obtaining up-to-date information on the situation of refugees facing “difficult cases” in Egypt and finding solutions to their problems. For example, an effort to establish a home for 30 elderly persons with

assistance from the UN Refugee Fund was mentioned. In addition, the feasibility of implementing a pension scheme in several countries in the Near and Middle East was explored¹⁷.

The report of the eleventh session also highlighted the African dimension of cooperation between the UNHCR and ICEM. This involved resettling small groups of refugees in other parts of the world with ICEM’s support. These were mainly refugees who had difficulties integrating “in certain areas of the Middle East and in Ethiopia”¹⁸. For instance, the committee successfully secured residence and work permits for around 20 Ethiopian refugees to settle in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

Within the framework of the High Commissioner’s cooperation with the Egyptian government, the registration of refugees under the office’s authority continued to facilitate their acquisition of residence rights and necessary documents. The report noted that the Egyptian Constitution prohibited the extradition of political refugees. However, the state acknowledged the situation of the few “refugees whose presence in the country is considered undesirable”¹⁹. These individuals managed to obtain the required residence documents while awaiting High Commissioner assistance for resettlement.

At the twelfth session, the High Commissioner reported on activities from May 1956 to May 1957. Notably, the accompanying table indicates that Morocco (4283.57 US dollars), Tunisia (2857.14 US dollars), the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (10 025.82 US dollars), and Ethiopia (10 000 US dollars) are among the countries that pledged or disbursed contributions to assist Hungarian refugees, alongside the Union of South Africa, which received 1292 Hungarian refugees from Austria (as of 1 May 1957)²⁰. In 1956, with ICEM support, South Africa received an additional 25 Hungarian refugees²¹.

As noted in the report, “as a result of the events which took place in the Middle East at the beginning of 1957, a number of persons left Egypt for certain countries of temporary asylum in Europe”²². The High Commissioner granted over 70 000 US dollars to host governments and voluntary organisations. This issue was actively discussed at the fourth session of the Executive Committee

¹¹Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/2648. P. 11–12 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/712108> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

¹²Ibid. P. 14.

¹³Ibid. P. 16.

¹⁴Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/2902. P. 2 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/712869> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

¹⁵Ibid. P. 9–10.

¹⁶Ibid. P. 11.

¹⁷Ibid. P. 14.

¹⁸Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/3123/Rev.1. P. 15 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/710945> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

¹⁹Ibid. P. 18.

²⁰Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/3585/Rev.1. P. 3 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/712993> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

²¹Ibid. P. 11.

²²Ibid. P. 5.

of the United Nations Refugee Fund, held in Geneva from 29 January to 4 February 1957²³.

An engaging discussion occurred at the fifth session of the Executive Committee of the fund (3–7 June 1957). The “observer for Egypt stated that he was not clear on the term “refugees from Egypt” to which reference had been made by one of the representatives of non-governmental organisations who had addressed the committee”²⁴. He provided statistics on those who had left Egypt and on the situation of those remaining. The representative of Israel noted that since November 1956, his country had received “nearly 15 000 Egyptian Jewish refugees, the great majority of whom, although technically stateless, had resided in Egypt for many generations and had now been forced to leave this country, while all their property has been sequestered”²⁵. The French representative added that “over 2300 stateless persons from Egypt had been granted asylum in France”²⁶.

Regarding Egypt, the solution to the problem of “difficult” refugees included “building a Home for aged refugees in Cairo”²⁷. Additionally, the Swiss government, “under the UNREF Plans of operations for 1955 and 1956”, had taken in seven individuals and placed them in institutions.

Morocco was discussed in the High Commissioner’s report at the twelfth session: on 7 November 1956, the state joined the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees²⁸. Morocco established the Office for refugees and stateless persons to define refugee status and issue necessary documents, and an Appeals board, which included a UNHCR representative. The latter became the Moroccan government’s advisor on refugee issues²⁹.

The report of the High Commissioner at the thirteenth session covered the period from May 1957 to May 1958. Concerning Egypt (identified in the report as a province of the United Arab Republic (UAR)), the document highlighted the refugees’ plight, mainly due to employment issues. UNHCR assisted in obtaining residence permits and travel documents³⁰.

The report also referenced discussions on refugee issues in the UAR, sometimes specifying the Syrian part

and other times not. It noted that 27 refugees in the UAR “have been finally settled”, and another 30 have been assisted, although not yet settled. The report frequently omits specific regional references within the country³¹, which is worth noting.

The Moroccan Office for refugees and stateless persons “has recognised the validity of the majority of eligibility certificates issued during the period of transition and has itself issued some 700 further certificates”³².

During the period covered by the report, Tunisia was added as another African country of interest. It was noted that the High Commissioner had been asked to assist the refugees who arrived in 1957. High Commissioner provided emergency assistance to these refugees in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ICRC had already been offering such help and accepting the distribution of “food and clothing placed at their disposal through UNHCR or purchased with funds which the UNHCR received from several states for this purpose”³³. Significantly, Tunisia was the second African state to become a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees, joining in November 1957³⁴.

The High Commissioner also highlighted the assistance provided to refugees in Tunisia through them, which “so far amounted to USD 116 000”. This aid addressed the urgent needs of refugees during the winter, and the League of Red Cross Societies (LRCS) continued to assist them “with the funds obtained in response to the joint appeal launched by the league and the International Committee of the Red Cross under the terms of the resolution adopted by the Conference of Red Cross Societies at New Delhi on 10 December 1957”³⁵.

By May 1958, the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland and the Union of South Africa had received 60 and 1300 Hungarian refugees from Austria and Yugoslavia, respectively³⁶. Additionally, with the support of the ICEM, 17 and 8 individuals were resettled in these countries, respectively³⁷.

Notably, there were two critical resolutions by the United Nations General Assembly:

- resolution A/RES/1166(XII), which requested the Economic and Social Council to establish an Executive

²³Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/3585/Rev.1. P. 27, 28, 36, 41, 42 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/712993> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

²⁴Ibid. P. 54.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid. P. 17, 18.

²⁸Ibid. P. 6.

²⁹Ibid. P. 7.

³⁰Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/3828/Rev.1. P. 9 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/714091> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

³¹Ibid. P. 16.

³²Ibid. P. 9.

³³Ibid. P. 6.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid. P. 5.

³⁷Ibid. P. 11.

Committee of the High Commissioner's programme to replace the Executive Committee of the United Nations Refugee Fund³⁸, as noted in the High Commissioner's report³⁹ and subsequently implemented;

- resolution A/RES/1286(XIII), which first addressed the issue of Algerian refugees in Morocco and Tunisia and recommended "to continue his action on behalf of the refugees on a substantial scale and to undertake similar action in Morocco"⁴⁰.

The reports from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth sessions, covering the period from May 1958 to March 1961, demonstrated international cooperation in addressing the problem of Algerian refugees in Morocco and Tunisia. These sessions adopted resolutions mandating that UNHCR continues its concern for these refugees⁴¹.

Notably, the first report notes a rise in the number of refugees to 180 000. It states that "as the High Commissioner's office is non-operational, the League of Red Cross Societies has agreed to undertake the distribution of relief supplies". Both entities appealed to states "for funds and supplies". The High Commissioner remarked that the involvement of the LRCS "is a guarantee of the essentially humanitarian and not political character of the operation"⁴². The same report also mentioned 200 000 refugees in Tunisia and Morocco⁴³.

Furthermore, the report notes that "the UNREF programme has been replaced by UNHCR programmes, each designed to deal with a specific refugee problem or a specific aspect of a refugee problem... The relief operation for refugees from Algeria in Tunisia and Morocco falls outside these programmes as it is financed from emergency funds specially contributed for this purpose"⁴⁴.

The reports of the High Commissioner for these three sessions of the UN General Assembly should be viewed holistically, as the agency's activities in Africa largely focused on the Algerian refugee crisis.

In 1957, the refugee problem worsened in Tunisia, prompting the government to request High Commissioner assistance. During 1957–1958, the ICRC facilitat-

ed contributions totalling 116 000 US dollars. Additionally, under a bilateral agreement, nearly 1 mln US dollars worth of goods were sent to Tunisia. Following an ICRC and LRCS appeal to the National Red Cross, Red Crescent, and Red Lion and Sun societies in 1958, the Tunisian Red Crescent received donations of money and goods from 42 societies, amounting to more than 1 mln US dollars by the year's end⁴⁵.

The situation in Morocco was similarly challenging, prompting the High Commissioner to send a special representative to assess the refugee situation there⁴⁶. According to the report, goods for refugees did not arrive in sufficient quantities, and certain products (such as olive oil and sugar) had to be cut back and replaced with cheaper alternatives (like wheat). In March 1959, "one government, which was already making wheat available for refugees in Tunisia, generously agreed to provide wheat and rice for refugees in Morocco also". Several states responded to the High Commissioner's appeal by stating they "had already provided or intended to provide various supplies through their Red Cross or Red Crescent societies". By 30 April 1959, donations had been received from Laos (1000 US dollars), Liechtenstein (700 US dollars), Monaco (400 US dollars), and the United States (250 000 US dollars), with British and Dutch firms contributing soap⁴⁷.

In 1959, the form of assistance to refugees in Morocco and Tunisia began to evolve. Beyond food distribution (with 60 distribution points – 37 in Tunisia and 23 in Morocco) and medical care (including laboratories and mobile clinics), sewing rooms, mat-weaving workshops, and other employment opportunities were organised for refugees⁴⁸.

The report emphasises that the expansion of the assistance programme was made possible by significant contributions from states, international non-governmental organisations, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies. It underscores the special roles of the LRCS, Moroccan and Tunisian authorities, and the Red Crescent societies in these countries⁴⁹.

Significantly, in 1959, contributions amounting to 1 487 656 US dollars were made to help Algerian refugees

³⁸International assistance to refugees within the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/RES/1166(XII) [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/207272> (date of access: 01.09.2023).

³⁹Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/3828/Rev.1. P. 17 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/714091> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

⁴⁰Refugee in Morocco and Tunisia. UN Doc. A/RES/1286(XIII) [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/206913> (date of access: 01.09.2023).

⁴¹Refugees from Algeria in Morocco and Tunisia. UN Doc A/RES/1389(XIV) [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/206379> (date of access: 01.09.2023) ; Refugees from Algeria in Morocco and Tunisia. UN Doc. A/RES/1500(XV) [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/205890> (date of access: 01.09.2023) ; Refugees from Algeria in Morocco and Tunisia. UN Doc A/RES/1672(XVI) [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/204571> (date of access: 01.09.2023).

⁴²Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/4104/Rev.1. P. 1 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/715928> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

⁴³Ibid. P. 35.

⁴⁴Ibid. P. 2.

⁴⁵Ibid. P. 10.

⁴⁶Ibid. P. 27.

⁴⁷Ibid. P. 10.

⁴⁸Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/4378/Rev.1. P. 5 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/715259> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

⁴⁹Ibid. P. 5.

in Morocco and Tunisia. This amount only includes contributions made directly to High Commissioner and does not account for bilateral contributions requested by the High Commissioner or funds and goods provided to LRCS⁵⁰.

In 1960, the High Commissioner noted the continuation of the assistance programme for Algerian refugees in Morocco and Tunisia, primarily supported by High Commissioner and the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The cost of food and clothing was estimated at 7 mln US dollars, and the High Commissioner anticipated that these funds would be provided as long as the programme was needed⁵¹. An additional 160 milk distribution points for children were also established (100 in Tunisia and 60 in Morocco)⁵².

The 1950s witnessed the beginning of significant international cooperation in migration in the second half of the 20th century. Given the colonial nature of most African territories (with only Egypt, Liberia, Ethiopia, and the Union of South Africa that could be counted as independent at the start of the decade) and the subsequent process of decolonisation, international cooperation on migration issues was initially limited. Colonial empires attempted to resolve these issues within their territories. However, as decolonisation generated internal and international conflicts, migration increasingly became forced.

High Commissioner engaged with new territories to assess the need for refugee assistance, starting with

Egypt and Ethiopia. It then had to respond to new challenges: the refugee exodus from Egypt due to the Suez crisis and the emergence of refugees in Morocco and Tunisia resulting from the Algerian War of Independence.

The cooperation between UNHCR and the ICEM on refugee resettlement, along with other UN agencies, international organisations, and governments (e. g., Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Tunisia), demonstrated both the importance of international collaboration and the central role of the High Commissioner in migration issues in Africa.

The Algerian crisis starkly illustrated the need to extend the scope of the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees. It also served as a positive example of international cooperation in the humanitarian field, with individual states, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations worldwide aiding Algerian refugees.

The 1950s witnessed two distinct phases in international migration engagement in Africa. The first phase (1951–1956) saw the introduction of international structures to the continent. Then, from 1957 to 1960, there was the first active response to forced migration emergencies. In 1961, a new era of international cooperation began. At its sixteenth session, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the new African region, addressing the issue of Angolan refugees in the Congo and recommending that the UNHCR provide assistance⁵³.

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⁵⁰Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/4378/Rev.1. P. 20 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/715259> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

⁵¹Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UN Doc. A/4771/Rev.1. P. 2 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/716623> (date of access: 12.06.2024).

⁵²Ibid. P. 10.

⁵³Problem raised by the situation of Angolan refugees in the Congo. UN Doc. A/RES/1671(XVI) [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/204570> (date of access: 12.06.2024).