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PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT
TESTIMONY OF RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1979

U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs
of the Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Washington, D.C.

Mr. Wolff. Rabbi Tanenbaum.

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STATEMENT OF RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM
NATIONAL INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DIRECTOR,
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Rabbi Tanenbaum. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

For the sake of the record, let me identify myself. I am National Interreligious Affairs Director of the American Jewish Committee. My portfolio involves responsibility for our relationships with the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and major Christian bodies in this country and in other parts of the world. I say this in order to make clear that I am not an expert on refugee or rehabilitation problems.

I came to this concern over Indochinese refugees through the invitation of Leo Cherne and his colleagues at the International Rescue Committee. May I say, not parenthetically, that as a result of my two visits to all the major refugee camps of boat people and land people over the past year in most of the countries in Southeast Asia, and having witnessed

first-hand the extraordinary lifesaving work that the International Rescue Committee has done, that I am persuaded-- as a personal opinion-- that Leo Cherne and the International Rescue Committee are worthy candidates for the Nobel Peace Prize. They were there before almost anyone else was there, as they have been present to most of the world's major refugee tragedies since the Nazi holocaust began in the 1930s.

Mr. Wolff. Just parenthetically, they were one of the first people to come to this committee to ask that this problem be aired.

Rabbi Tanenbaum. My experience on two fact-finding missions to all of the refugee camps in Southeast Asia literally changed my life. My exposure to the Cambodian problem began in December, 1978, when I went to Aranyaprathet, which was among the first major camps in Thailand that received several thousand Cambodian refugees.

I walked through that medical clinic and saw some 125 men, women, and children in that desolate clinic starving, children who were bags of bones, with bloated stomachs, hair turned orange by virtue of protein malnutrition. I saw a mother who was a starved wraith of a person, and yet going through the ritual of putting the flap of her breast into the mouth of a child, and she did not have enough nourishment to sustain her own life. Both of them collapsed and died. And I saw one physician and one nurse running through that clinic, trying to ward off death, and in most cases unsuccessfully.

That was an experience whose only antecedent for me was Bergen-Belsen and Dachau. These were the same starved bodies, wracked with fever and disease, of Jewish men, women, and children. The only difference now was the pigmentation of their skin.

As an American Jew, as a Jew, I came away from the Nazi experience

with an obsession that is an obsession for most Jewish people today; it is epitomized in a paraphrase of a verse in the Book of Leviticus: "You shall not stand idly by while the blood of your brothers and sisters cries out to you from the earth."

It is simply inconceivable that we are here calmly discussing statistics and conventional approaches as though this were just another social problem. It is inconceivable to me that 40 years after the Nazi holocaust that the international community can respond so blandly to the destruction of three million human beings in Cambodia, and then consider casually-- as if it were a daily weather report-- the horrendous fact that if this food is not gotten through in the next few months, some 200,000 people will die, and by extrapolation an estimated two more million people may well perish before our eyes within the period of the next six months or so.

I simply cannot understand how the international community can go on with its conventional affairs and not feel the urgent sense that the sanity of mankind is at stake here.

That really is the issue -- whether the human community can continue to indulge the conceit of regarding itself as sane and civilized and endure the reality that there are now several million people desperate for food, whose very lives hang on having food brought to their mouths now, at this moment.

The cruel irony is that there is the capacity to provide that food now. It is on the borders of the country, and the whole issue of whether human beings will be kept alive or will die depends on politics and ideology, that is, the callous presumption that business is usual.

In my perspective of moral philosophy, states and ideology are created for the sake of serving human beings. Human beings are not created for the purpose of serving the state or politics or ideology. To the degree that the international political conflict between the Pol Pot forces and the Heng Samrin regime, and that of their foreign sponsors, represent an obstacle to saving lives, to that degree does that conflict represent a central moral and human issue which world leadership must resolve. The saving of human lives is the supreme issue, not the shoring up of one or another regime.

As Leo Cherne has made clear, as the Catholic Relief Services and others have made clear, the food can be made available today. The funds have been allocated. But if we allow this issue to continue to be another routine political problem, it will be months before that food will be gotten through. That means that tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of human beings will die before our eyes, and to me that is a moral obscenity. I cannot see how the human community can allow that to go on without recognizing the price we will pay in moral anarchy.

The whole question of the value of life is at stake, and the whole meaning of human existence is at stake.

How many Nazi holocausts, how many Cambodian genocides can the world endure and regard itself as worthwhile to continue?

I made a suggestion today in response to something Leo Cherne said at this morning's meeting (in the Capitol). It seems to me that it is absolutely essential that in addition to the extraordinary contribution made by this committee and Congress-- whose record has been, I think, one of the most glorious chapters in American history in terms of reflecting the generosity

of American people and concern for this issue-- that an initiative must be taken now, not two months from now, now, to bring about an emergency conference through the United Nations of the major nations of the world, including the United States, the Soviet Union and Vietnam and Cambodia and China, before whom the issue of life and death survival is put.

There was a conference in April of the international community regarding Vietnamese boat people. It did make a difference.

I am persuaded if we can create that kind of forum on which the eyes and ears and concern of the world are focused-- above all, on those nations who are standing in the way-- that some battering through of that resistance must take place now, not three months from now. To that end, we have discussed today, and Leo Cherne has responded affirmatively with his colleagues, to a proposal for a meeting with U.N. Secretary General Waldheim, especially during this Christmas-Chanukah season. This is the time of the vernal equinox, which is the darkest period of the year. But it is also a period of light, and in this moral darkness we must find a way to bring some light to these people by calling a conference shortly-- it is a little more important than even holiday vacations-- to make it possible for us to save as many lives as we can day by day.

I just want to say in closing, Mr. Chairman, that there is a proposal for organizing a truck convoy, an international truck convoy, and I am hoping that we can do everything possible to assure that that takes place within the coming weeks, and that we realize that the time factor is critical for the survival of a great many human beings.

In my work I travel throughout the United States. The American Jewish

Committee conducts interreligious programs with Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, Greek Orthodox, Black churches, Hispanics, and Muslims in almost every city in the United States. I have been traveling through virtually every city in this country since I have come back from Southeast Asia, helping organize Christians and Jews in programs of sponsoring refugees, of receiving refugees, organizing programs for rehabilitation, jobs, housing, medical care, social welfare, education, legal aid.

I have never seen such a mood among the American people of care and compassion and wanting to be present to relieve the suffering and hurt of so many millions of people.

The Catholics, Protestants and Jews in this country have already brought to this country 75 percent of the quarter of a million refugees who are here since 1975. Christians and Jews have become "a community of conscience," and with the leadership of this committee and groups like the International Rescue Committee, I think we can really make a fundamental difference in saving human lives and restoring some sense of personal confidence and trust and meaning about being a human being in the kind of world in which we live today.

Mr. Wolff. Thank you very much.

(End of partial transcript of the hearing of December 18, 1979, testimony of Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum.)