

Fridtjof Nansens Rede vor dem Völkerbund (24. September 1921)

Second Assembly of the League of Nations¹

Dr. Nansen, the Delegate for Norway, will address the Assembly.

Dr. Nansen (Norway) – Mr. President and Gentlemen, I think the Assembly expects me to say a few words on the Report which has been so ably presented by the Chairman of the Sub-Committee, M. Motta. This Report deals with the Resolution which I ventured to lay before this Assembly in the very early stages of its deliberation and I take this opportunity of expressing to M. Motta and his colleagues my sincerest and deepest gratitude of the sympathetic attitude they have taken. I know that M. Motta has done everything that he could to help the work we have so much at heart. But at the same time I cannot conceal and I shall make no attempt to conceal – from the Assembly my disappointment at the result of this Report. Frankly, I regret the attitude which has now been taken. The purpose of the Resolution which I brought forward for your attention was to secure the co-operation of the Governments in the great international undertaking to relieve Russia and save that country from famine. It was not my purpose merely to strengthen the appeal to private charities. That I consider to be unnecessary. I think that the famine in Russia is of such dimensions that in itself it constitutes a sufficiently strong appeal, and no word from this Assembly can strengthen that appeal. It was an appeal to the Governments which I was making, and in that appeal I have failed. Let me remind the Assembly in one sentence of the situation which I laid before you. There are at this moment between 20 and 30 millions of people who are threatened with starvation and death, if help is not forthcoming within two months from now their fate is sealed. Everything that is needed to save them is only a few hundred miles away. The necessary transportation can be available at a moment's notice. Agreements have been made for the perfect control and distribution in Russia of the supplies that we may bring. The methods for the execution of those Agreements are ready. There has been raised in the Committee no valid objection against those Agreements or the methods proposed for their execution. No more is necessary to avert appalling disaster than the provision of a relatively small sum of Government money. It is no great sums that we ask for; we have only asked for

¹ Second Assembly of the League of Nations, Fr., 24. September 1921, Provisional Verbatim Record, Geneva 1921, S. 11-14.

£5,000,000. If we got that we think – indeed, we feel convinced – that it is possible to carry out very important work before Christmas and to save the situation to a great extent. The Governments have said that they cannot do it. Let me remind the Assembly that from the very beginning, the charitable organisations themselves urged their absolute incapability to deal adequately with this disaster. The Conference which was called a month ago in this City and on behalf of which I act as High Commissioner, represented sixty-seven charitable or voluntary organisations and thirteen Governments and that Conference said the same thing. It's very first Resolution which was placed before us pointed out the necessity of Governmental action if anything really adequate for the disaster was to be done.

The Governments now throw back the whole responsibility onto the voluntary organisations. I cannot think that that is right. I cannot think that that is wise. I cannot think that that is anything but a disastrous mistake. None the less, we shall go on with our appeal to private charity. We have already made a start. You know, every one of you, that Mr. Hoover's organisation is only ready to feed three million children in Russia. Our organisation has received many gifts. From the Pope we have received one million lire. From the „Save the Children“ Fund in Great Britain we have received a declaration that they are now willing to feed one-quarter of a million children in Russia. The Second International in Amsterdam has given ten million marks. Contributions are being received from many communes in France, and innumerable smaller sums have been received and are being received. The Swedish Government, through the Red Cross, is already starting an expedition, in co-operation with our plans, to Russia in order to work there under our scheme and through our machinery. We shall go on striving through the great voluntary organisations which have accomplished so splendid a service in the cause of humanity during the last few years, to do what is possible to mitigate a small part of the misery which is now in front of Russia. But I fear that it is my duty – and it is a duty which I cannot carry out with deep regret – to make again some observation which I have already had the opportunity of making in the Committee.

We are doing what we can through private charity, but even our charity is being impeded and being very seriously impeded by the campaign of misrepresentation which is being carried on. There are any amount of lies being circulated. I may remind you of one story that went to the papers, which you all remember, namely, that the first train that Mr. Hoover sent in to feed the Russians was looted by the Soviet Army in Russia. It was a lie; but still the same story is repeated over and over again in the Press of Europe. I was accused for having sent an expedition to Siberia, and I understand that it was said that I was bringing arms for revolution. It was a lie. I have seen it in the papers. It is said that my friend, Captain Sverdrup, was in

command of it, but all that he was doing was carrying agricultural machinery to Siberia. That was not so very dangerous, after all. There are many similar stories being circulated. It is perfectly evident that they come from some central agency: I do not know where. It is from somebody who seems very interested in preventing anything being done to save the starving people of Russia. I think that I know what is the underlying thought in this campaign. It is this, that the action which we propose will, if it succeeds, strengthen the Soviet Government. I think that that is a mistake. I do not think that we shall strengthen the Soviet Government by showing the Russian people that there are hearts in Europe and that there are people there ready to help the starving Russian people. But supposing that it does strengthen the Soviet government? Is there any member of this Assembly who is prepared to say that rather than help the Soviet Government he will allow twenty million people to starve in death? I challenge this Assembly to answer this question.

The central point to which the campaign has been directed seems to be the agreement that I made with the Soviet Government. Let me say a few words about that agreement. It is said that by allowing the Soviet Government to have an equal representation on the executive of two men which I propose to establish in Moscow, I am enabling the Soviet Government to impose upon our undertaking a vote preventing us from doing what we wish.

It has been urged that this agreement which establishes such an executive, would give the other representative greater freedom and greater control. But I ask this Assembly to judge whether I by dealing with one representative of the Soviet Government, shall be more free than Mr. Hoover, who will have to deal with many and deal with the whole Government. I ask them to say whether any agreement can override the necessity for the free consent and co-operation of the Soviet authorities. My purpose is to carry out the relief without bringing in any kind of politics and without dealing with any political party if it is possible to avoid it. But no relief can be carried out in any country and least of all in Russia against the wishes of the Government authorities. Mr. Hoover's agreement, no less than mine depends and must depend at every moment, on the goodwill and the consent and the co-operation of the Soviet.

It is not because they are mine that I am so anxious to secure the approval and the support of this Assembly for the agreement and the plan which I have made. It is needless to say that I will sacrifice them any moment and would do so gladly if only there were anything to take their place. But I see nothing. There is no other plan, and there can be no other plan, and those precious weeks that we now have before us are so vital for successful action before they are passed.

We have heard a great deal in the Committee about the Conference at Brussels, which has been asked to meet on October 6th. The Members of the Committee expressed their warmest confidence that this Conference which is called a Conference of Governments, will solve the financial problem of bringing help to Russia. I hope, and sincerely hope that they are right. I hope nothing so ardently as that the Brussels conference may fulfill every hope that is reposed in it. But I may point out that great doubt has been expressed as to whether the conference in Brussels will be able to do anything. Unless the Governments reverse the decision which they have now taken, I do not see how that Conference can attain anything. Let me warn you that if that Conference should proceed, first by sending a Commission of Enquiry into Russia, and then when it has received the Report of that Committee has prolonged negotiations with the Soviet Government in order to attain a new agreement for action instead of mine, and if, when that agreement has been made, they are to create a new machinery for the execution of the agreement, their surety and help inevitably will come too late.

Let me say one more thing. I do not believe that the people of Europe will sit with folded hands through the snow months of winter and watch the millions of Russia starving to death. The situation is the following.

In Canada, this year, the crop is so good that Canada will be able to export three times as much as is necessary to meet the difficulty caused by the famine in Russia. In the United States the wheat of the farmers is decomposing in their stores because they cannot find purchasers for the surplus. In the Argentine the maize is lying in such abundance that they cannot get rid of it, and it is being used as fuel in the locomotives because that is the only way in which they can use it. Between us and America, ships are lying idle. We cannot find employment for them, and on the other side in the East, 20 or 30 million people are starving in death because they cannot get that which is lying, without anybody to take it, in America. Is it possible, that Europeans sit quietly and do nothing, and look at them without bringing those things over and saving the people on the other side? I consider that to be impossible in the long run, I feel convinced that the people of Europe will compel the Governments to reverse their decision. I believe that the greater number of those Governments who are represented in this room to-day will join the ranks of this few who have already acted, for let me remind you that a number of the smaller Governments are already giving help.

As I mentioned before, the Swedish Government is acting, and it is acting in the organisation which I have created. The Estonian, the Latvian, and the Lithuanian Governments have also given help. It was on the initiative of the Czecho-Slovak Government that the Conference at

Brussels was called on August 15th. As to my own Government, I may say that it has already given considerable gifts for the relief of the famine in Russia. I have just received a telegram from my Government, informing me that the Norwegian Parliament has unanimously placed further credits at my disposal in accordance with my agreement with the Soviet people. Their total contribution will now come up to nearly one and a half million kroner.

These are beginnings. I believe that the other Governments will follow. When they do, and not now, it will be the moment for the League to come in. No such great enterprise as this, if the Governments engage themselves in it, can be appropriately and economically carried out or carried out in any satisfactory way, without the help of the League, and through the League.

As M. Motta said yesterday, this is the place for an international undertaking, and I entirely endorse that view. It is an undertaking which cannot be effective without the help of the League, which I think is the most efficient way carrying out such undertakings. Let them turn to the League for assistance and let us see no hypocrisy, let us face facts as they are. The Governments are not able to give £5,000,000 at this moment, they cannot do it, they cannot find amongst themselves sufficient money, which only means about half the amount which it costs to build a battleship, in order to meet the famine in Russia. If they only sacrificed the cost of half a battalion of troops alone they could be able to find the money. They cannot do it. Then let them say so frankly, but do not let go on summoning Committees and Conferences, and discussing day after day and month after month while people are dying.

The mandate I received from the Conference for which I act, is to go on appealing to the Governments of the world. I shall go on and try to rouse the countries of Europe to avert the greatest horror in history and I believe whatever this Assembly may decide, we shall be able to do something to alleviate the dire distress which exists. But it is a terrible race we are running with Russian winter, which is already silently and persistently approaching from the north. Soon will the waters of Russia be frozen. Soon will the transport be hampered by frozen snow. Shall we allow the winter to silence for ever those millions of voices which are crying out to us for help? There is still time, but there is not much time left. Do try to imagine what it will be when Russian winter sets in in earnest and try to realise what it means when no food is left and a whole population is wandering through barest land in search of food; men, women children, dropping dead by thousands in the frozen snow of Russia. Try to realise what this means and if you have ever known what it is to fight against hunger, and to fight against the ghastly forces of winter, you will realise what it means and what the situation

will be. I am convinced you cannot sit still, and answer with a cold heart that you are sorry and cannot help. In the name of humanity, in the name of everything noble and sacred to us, I appeal to you, who have women and children of your own to consider what it meant to your women and children perishing to starvation. In this place, I appeal to the Governments, to the people of Europe, to the whole world, for their help – to act before it is too late to repent.

(Loud Applause)