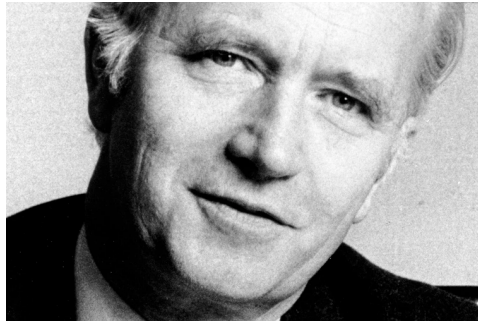




Source: Stoltenberg, 1990, UNHCR

## STOLTENBERG, Thorvald

### Norwegian politician and seventh United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) January-November 1990

By **Michael G. Schechter** · Version 14 November 2014

Was born 8 July 1931 in Oslo, Norway and died 13 July 2018 in Oslo. He was the son of Theodor Emil Stoltenberg, Lieutenant Colonel, and Ingeborg Andresen. On 6 April 1957 he married Karin Heiberg, geneticist and women's rights advocate, with whom he had two daughters and one son.

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## Biography

Stoltenberg grew up in the Norwegian capital Oslo. After graduating from high school, he served in the Independent Norwegian Brigade Group in Germany, a Norwegian expeditionary force stationed in the British zone of occupation at the time. Beginning in 1952 he studied law and international relations in Austria, Switzerland, the United States and Finland. In 1957 he received his Candidate of Law from the University of Oslo, a degree that required five and a half years of legal studies, in addition to the Examen Philosophicum, a compulsory single term entrance examination in philosophy and ethics. He became a member of the Norwegian Labor Party (Arbeiderpartiet) and was strongly involved in aiding Hungarian refugees fleeing from the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary.

Stoltenberg's long career in the Norwegian government, interrupted by international trade union work and local politics, began in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1958 as a temporary substitute secretary. He then worked as Vice-Consul in the Norwegian consulate in San Francisco (1959-1961), became secretary in the embassy in Belgrade (1961-1964) and was Personal Secretary in the Foreign Ministry (1964-1965) and the Executive Office in the Foreign Ministry Secretariat (1965-1970). His assignments included chairing the group of Nordic countries in 1968 that coordinated their efforts in development assistance. In 1970 Stoltenberg became Norway's acting counselor in Lagos, Nigeria. However, that year he acquired the position of international secretary of the Norwegian Federation of Trade Unions (Landesorganisasjonen) and shifted to Under Secretary of State in the Foreign Ministry during 1971-1972 before resuming his trade union work in 1972. Stoltenberg became Under Secretary of State in the Ministry of Defense in 1973 and then worked at the Ministry of Trade and Shipping during the years 1974-1976, chairing the Coast Guard Committee from 1974 to 1975. In 1976 he returned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and participated in the United Nations (UN) North-

South Committee from 1978-1979. He was a member of the Defense Council while serving as Minister of Defense in the Norwegian Labor government from 1979 to 1981. In 1981 Stoltenberg left government service and resumed his function as international secretary of the Norwegian Federation of Trade Unions, also engaging in other international activities. He was a member of the so-called Brandt Commission, the Independent Commission of International Development Issues, chaired by German Social-Democrat Willy Brandt, which in 1980 published the report *North-South: A Programme for Survival*. This report was deliberated in several meetings in different parts of the world. In September 1982 the fourth meeting took place in Brussels, where Stoltenberg and Dutch Christian-Democrat politician Ruud Lubbers participated as special guests, discussing the relations between the European Community and developing countries. In 1984 Stoltenberg observed the Nicaraguan elections as a special representative of the Socialist International. Between 1984 and 1987 Stoltenberg participated in Oslo's local politics, also serving as the city's Deputy Mayor between 1985 and 1987, when he became Minister of Foreign Affairs in another Labor government. Following an electoral backlash against foreigners in Norway in 1989 he lost this position and in October became Norway's Ambassador and Permanent representative to the UN in New York, a position he would only hold for a short time as he was nominated to be UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

When Stoltenberg stepped in to take over as High Commissioner, the organization was suffering from internal squabbles, low morale and significant financial shortfalls. He had assumed the position due to the sudden resignation of Jean-Pierre Hocké, pursuant to a financial scandal where Hocké used a UNHCR fund for the education of refugee children to upgrade his air travel (Norwegian 1989: 17). In October 1989 Hocké had resigned reluctantly under strong pressure from UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, leaving the UNHCR leaderless for a short period. On 20 November the UN General Assembly followed Pérez de Cuéllar by nominating Stoltenberg as the new High Commissioner for a four-year term beginning 1 January 1990, but Pérez de Cuéllar also dispatched a senior official from New York, Kofi Annan, to take over the UNHCR's human resources management between November 1989 and March 1990. Stoltenberg's open personality, his political and organizational skills and his authority among the donor community made him look like the ideal person to handle the dire situation. His challenges included putting the UNHCR's financial house in order and restoring the Office's morale and authority. His 'efforts to cope with the UNHCR's financial crisis and restore government confidence in the Office constitute his greatest achievement during his short time at the UNHCR' (Loescher 2001: 264). In part, he was able to resolve the institutional crisis at the UNHCR in a remarkably brief period of time because, with the exception of the invasion of Kuwait, there were no new major refugee crises while he was in office. Stoltenberg knew that to win the confidence of the UNHCR's Executive Committee he would have to agree to a budget that was dictated by the funds available rather than what was needed. Accordingly, in October 1990 the Executive Committee approved an 11 per cent cut in the 1991 general budget (Macklin 1990: 1). He improved Office morale in part by encouraging staff members to brainstorm a strategy to remedy the institutional crisis. One change that particularly pleased the staff was renaming the Division of Refugee Law and Doctrine to be the Division of International Protection and upgrading this division to the level of the five regional bureaus. In a world where the Cold War was ending, which some thought would result in a huge flow of refugees from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Stoltenberg also established an Ad Hoc Review Group to address changes in transnational migration flows. Their report called on the Office to be more proactive, to address the problems of internally displaced people and to adopt a liberal interpretation of what it meant to be a refugee. Many on his staff were not supportive of these priorities, as they feared that by extending the Office's mandate, it would stretch the Office's meager resources and weaken its ability to achieve its core mission (Loescher 2001: 268). The most dramatic forced migration crisis during his time in office resulted from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990. Millions of migrants, many of whom were from South Asia, fled Kuwait, some taking shelter in Jordan, while awaiting transport to their home countries. However, because they were not technically refugees, Pérez de Cuéllar turned down Stoltenberg's offer to assist them, making the International Organization for Migration the lead organization instead (Loescher 2001: 267). Stoltenberg, who also oversaw several repatriation operations in Central

America, resigned in November 1990 to return to his previous position as Norwegian foreign minister, this time in Gro Bruntland's new administration. He explained the timing of his resignation by saying it was a 'critical moment for Norway' (Head of UN 1990, N6). The announcement came as a complete surprise and shock to the UNHCR. Many staff were 'extremely disappointed and felt angry and personally betrayed by Stoltenberg', fearing the Office would return to crisis mode (U.N. Commissioner 1990: A21; Loescher 2001: 268). Uncertainty remained as the new High Commissioner, Sadako Ogata, who was elected in December, would not assume office until Mid-February 1991.

During Stoltenberg's second time as Norway's Foreign Minister (1990-1993), he worked in favor of Norway joining the European Union (EU), but left office before the Norwegian people rejected accession for the second time during the 28 November 1994 referendum. In late 1991 he was rumored to be on the short list of candidates to become UN Secretary-General (Ward 1991: A1), but lost to Boutros Boutros-Ghali. On 3 May 1993, at the height of the Bosnian war, Stoltenberg returned to the UN as the Secretary-General's Special Representative to the Former Yugoslavia, a position he held until 1994. He said the job of being a UN peace mediator in the former Yugoslavia was an obsession, presumably in part because of his earlier service in that country (Hellberg 2010, n.p.). He replaced Cyrus Vance as the co-chair (with David Owen) of the Steering Committee of the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia, a position he held until 1996. While Owen praised Stoltenberg's service, Stoltenberg's reported remarks at a speech in Oslo on 31 May 1995 caused quite a stir, with Bosnia's Muslim-led government calling into question his impartiality in the negotiation process (Barber 1995: 12Inte). Stoltenberg, who had discussed the definition of Serbs in the war in the former Yugoslavia, claimed that his words were taken out of context and that he was not pro-Serb. In 1994 it was rumored that the Norwegian government was going to propose Stoltenberg for Secretary-General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), filling the vacancy left by the death of Manfred Wörner. However, instead a foreign ministry spokesperson announced Norwegian support for the Belgian Foreign Minister, Willy Claes, stating: 'There is no basis to formally launch Stoltenberg as a candidate. We have concluded that Claes has more support than Stoltenberg' (Stoltenberg Out 1994: 10). In November of the same year the European Commission's President-elect, Jacques Santer, named Stoltenberg as the EU's prospective commissioner for fisheries, believing that could help Norway's vote in the referendum on EU membership (McIvor 1994: 239), a vote that ultimately failed. While Stoltenberg's name was mentioned for several important international positions (also in the international trade union movement) during the early 1990s, Norwegian politics seemed to be his first choice.

From 1996 until 1999 Stoltenberg served as Norway's Ambassador to Denmark. He then assumed the Presidency of the Norwegian Red Cross, a position he held until 2008. In October 2000 UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan selected Stoltenberg to chair a group of independent experts on the Iraqi humanitarian situation. His role at the Red Cross also overlapped with his role as Chair of the Board of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, a position he held until 2003. In 2009 Stoltenberg delivered a report for the Nordic countries with proposals for their closer foreign and security cooperation. The fact that his daughter Nini's heroin addiction was publicly discussed, and that she went through rehabilitation programs and became an activist for more humane drug policies in the country, contributed to Stoltenberg's chairing of a government commission to re-evaluate Norway's drug treatment strategies based on the reported success of the so-called Heroin-Assisted Treatment. In June 2010 the commission delivered its report and concluded that Norway should start trials with heroin prescription. Stoltenberg's wife, who had worked for the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation and had continued her career as Chief of the Bureau of Administration and Consumer Affairs, as State Secretary in the Trade and Shipping Ministry, as well as in the Ministry of Industry and as Director General of the Ministry of Children and Family Services, died on 17 October 2012. Their daughter Nini fell ill and died at the age

of 51 on 27 July 2014. Their son Jens served as Prime Minister of Norway (2000-2001 and 2005-2013) and became NATO Secretary General, beginning 1 October 2014.

March 2025: date of death added

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## Archives

Many of Thorvald Stoltenberg's speeches as UN High Commissioner for Refugees can be found at [www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=&comid=4a000ad26&cid=49aea93a4c&scid=49aea93a2f&author=Stoltenberg](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=&comid=4a000ad26&cid=49aea93a4c&scid=49aea93a2f&author=Stoltenberg)

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