

CAREF



COMISION ARGENTINA
para los REFUGIADOS
del Consejo Mundial de Iglesias

Buenos Aires, Febrero 16 de 1979

Srta
Ruud van Hoogevest
Coordinadora
Servicio para Refugiados
Consejo Mundial de Iglesias
PRESENTE

Estimada Srta. Van Hoogevest:

Por la presente informo a Ud. del caso del Sr. Osvaldo VILLALOBOS el cual, a nuestro juicio, merece una ayuda del Consejo Mundial que le permita concluir con éxito una difícil etapa que ha afrontado con responsabilidad y seriedad.

El Sr. Villalobos es uno de los muchos casos de refugiados que han tratado con esfuerzo de no mantener un vínculo de dependencia con la Agencia, integrándose a la comunidad local y buscando sus propios medios de subsistencia.

Solicitamos a Ud. su Oficina estudie la posibilidad de otorgar una ayuda especial a este caso, que les permita solucionar su urgente problema de vivienda.

da fraternalmente,

Sin otro particular, le saluda

p. Alicia de Monti
Coordinadora en ausencia de
Lic. Norberto D. Ianni

APM/jn

**WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES****PROGRAMME UNIT ON JUSTICE AND SERVICE**

Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service

REFUGEE REPORT: THE BOAT PEOPLE

The puzzling drama of Vietnam continues, and many people are confused by recent events and how they should regard Vietnam's role in them. What does the exodus of hundreds of thousands of people from Vietnam say about conditions in that country? Should Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia be branded as aggression or praised for having put an end to the Pol Pot regime? Was China's motivation in invading Vietnam punishment for the latter's actions in Cambodia, and will this invasion result in a surge of ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam? Having emerged victorious in 1975 from its long civil war, how could the present government of Vietnam possibly afford in the years that followed to squander the reservoir of international sympathy and good will that might have been drawn upon to assist in the reconstruction of the country?

Such questions give some indication of the perplexing background against which the subject of this report, the boat people, is written. Yet mystery about why Vietnam acts as it does should not be allowed to obscure the fact that a major movement of Vietnamese and other Indochinese people has been taking place. If the reasons behind this movement are better understood, it is likely that the humanitarian responses to it will be better formulated. That is the purpose of this report.

The boat people, who have come to symbolize the Indochinese refugees, will be the focus of this paper, but it must be remembered that they form only a comparatively small part of the total exodus from Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. Moreover, Vietnam has absorbed a major influx of Cambodian refugees, who are estimated to number more than 350,000. This figure, if accurate, makes Vietnam itself one of the world's major refugee recipients.

Why Do They Go?

Since mid-1975 an estimated 600,000 people have fled or left Indochina for temporary or permanent destinations in various Southeast Asian countries and elsewhere in the world. 100,000 of these refugees, mostly from Vietnam, are the boat people. Their exodus has been dramatised not only by the perils they face on the high seas in unbelievably crowded boats of every description, but also by the manner in which they are received once they manage to reach foreign shores. Why do they go?



Refugee movements are often explained in oversimplified terms, but the fact is that they are almost always the result of a whole complex of factors. Judging by what one can surmise in the case of the boat people, and based upon what they themselves have said, one can conclude that this exodus is no exception to the general rule that political, economic, social, cultural and personal reasons in varying combinations all come to bear on the decisions people make about staying on or leaving. Parents say that the future is closed to their children because of the parents' past, that is, identification with the former regime in South Vietnam. Many complain of high taxation and the new kind of economy envisaged for all of Vietnam, which certainly represents a major change for those who were used to the free market system of the past in South Vietnam. Some of the young male escapees are draft dodgers. Family reunification is the major incentive for many.

For all Vietnamese, their country remains one devastated by war. The economy is reportedly on the verge of collapse. There have been calamitous floods and two bad harvests in a row. Tensions remain between the southern and northern halves of the country, made worse by their long political division and the attempts now by the government to impose a planned economy throughout Vietnam. The invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese has in turn provoked the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, a move which may endanger the position of Vietnam's 1.6 million ethnic Chinese.

Any one of these factors might be enough to make some people decide to leave, but taken in combination with one another they portray a society so characterized by fear, instability and uncertainty that very many Vietnamese have decided to risk leaving for what they hope will be a better life elsewhere.

There have been many reports that the Vietnamese government not only turns a blind eye to the escapees but in some cases actually connives with them to abet their departure. A recent visitor to Hanoi, American Congresswoman Elizabeth Holzman, stated that the officials with whom she spoke admitted the practice but denied that it was Vietnamese policy. These officials, said Ms. Holzman, cast the blame on low-level officials. Certainly the fact that recent boats are larger and their human cargoes bigger suggests that considerable planning and organization lie behind the exodus and that this could hardly take place without some degree of official knowledge and participation. The now-famous freighters Hai Hong and Huey Fong were said actually to have been chartered by a group of Hong Kong entrepreneurs and that the per person "fare" of US\$ 2,000 paid in gold was divided by Vietnamese officials and the businessmen in Hong Kong. If this is true, the traffic in Indochinese refugees has become big business but for all that the fact remains that the boat people and others are still risking their lives in an effort to get out.

The Vietnamese announced in early February 1979 that, with certain exceptions, they would be willing to consider granting exit visas to people wishing to leave, thus legalizing the exodus. A legal departure from Vietnam would be one for which definite arrangements had been made with another country for reception of the person or persons in question.

In late February a delegation from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) went to Hanoi to discuss the matter. The negotiations were reported as successful, so the volume of illegal movement from Vietnam may now be reduced and the pressure therefore eased on other countries in Southeast Asia, which have been complaining loudly about the massive flow. The first Vietnamese to benefit from this agreement will presumably be the approximately 250,000 people waiting in transit camps in Southeast Asia, plus a limited number in Vietnam with close relatives living outside the country. It might also be noted that Vietnam has in fact already signed several bilateral agreements on family reunion but that procedural failures crippled these agreements. The difference this time is that nearly all the people covered by the recent agreement have already left Vietnam, so the burden of making it succeed falls upon those countries willing to accept the boat people and other Indochinese refugees -- in other words, providing permanent resettlement guarantees for them.

Where Do They Go?

Of the some 600,000 people who have left Indochina since mid-1975, the time of the South Vietnamese defeat by North Vietnam, about 200,000 have come to the United States, and more than 80,000 have reached France, Australia, Canada and a score of other countries. At least 200,000 have gone to Thailand, and about 100,000 boat people have sailed to various destinations in Southeast Asia. Throughout 1978 about 50,000 of these refugees were accepted for resettlement, mainly in the United States, France, Australia and Canada, leaving therefore at least a quarter of a million homeless Indochinese people, most of whom are in Thailand and Malaysia, with smaller numbers in Hong Kong, the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries.

This large and growing Indochinese refugee problem was given the international attention it deserves at a Consultation called by the UNHCR in early December 1978. Meeting in Geneva, representatives from 35 countries and several international and non-governmental organizations attempted to come to grips with the matter. Although the response was modest -- US\$ 12 million were pledged toward the UNHCR Southeast Asia Emergency Fund, and resettlement places for 5,000 people were promised -- the significance of the meeting lay perhaps more in the fact that it demonstrated how much remains to be done before this problem is solved. Representatives from the two countries bearing the brunt of the refugee tide, Malaysia and Thailand, were vocal in expressing their disappointment at the results of the Consultation, and in his closing statement the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Poul Hartling, made an urgent appeal to the governments for accepting greater numbers of refugees and for increasing their monetary contributions for refugee assistance. The High Commissioner also correctly pointed out that "governments must have the stamina to stay the course," thereby reminding the nations that more help is needed to generate and sustain public interest in the refugee question. Where such public interest is strongly evident, there legislators will find the political courage to commit their countries to assistance programs that match the size of the problem.

Churches can perform a vital service to the Indochinese refugees by bringing their humanitarian concern to the attention of governments, particularly on the question of enlarging resettlement quotas. This has been done successfully in Switzerland, to cite a recent example, and similar efforts are underway elsewhere in Europe, in North America, and in Australia and New Zealand.

Dilemmas

The countries of Southeast Asia continue to be alarmed at the growing wave of refugees from Indochina. Despite their appeals to the international community to accept more of these refugees on a permanent basis, the number of such resettled refugees continues to be far lower than the number of new arrivals, especially in Thailand and Malaysia. Both these countries, as well as others in Southeast Asia, bear not only heavy administrative and financial burdens, but have to tolerate potentially explosive political situations posed by the refugees' presence. The dilemma here for Thailand is to remain on friendly terms with Vietnam while sheltering increasing thousands of refugees from that country. Thailand sees as its best solution the resettlement in other countries of the great majority of its refugee population.

In Malaysia, whose reluctant acceptance of the boat people is already well known, the dilemma is not only administrative and financial, but also racial. For many years Malaysia has sought ways of giving greater opportunities to its numerically and politically dominant Malay population at the expense of its economically dominant Chinese minority. Thus the arrival of some 60,000 boat people, the majority of whom are Chinese, is cause for alarm in Malaysia. Marine police attempt to turn away vessels loaded with refugees, and those boat people who do manage to reach shore are accepted strictly on a temporary basis. Malaysia wants resettlement guarantees for every one of the boat people, and meanwhile it wants increasing assistance to help take care of the refugees while they are on Malaysian soil.

Hong Kong, which for many years has been one of the most crowded places on earth, feels itself threatened by inundation if the boat people continue to arrive. Some 13,000 refugees are there awaiting overseas resettlement, but as elsewhere the influx of new refugees far exceeds the resettlement departures. Adding to Hong Kong's woes was a dramatic increase in 1978 of both legal and illegal migration from China.

Attitudes toward the boat people have also hardened in the Philippines, where boat people are given temporary sanctuary in camps that are becoming massively overcrowded following the biggest influxes ever in recent months. Singapore refuses to allow foreign vessels to bring ashore refugees who were picked up in international waters unless there are pledges that they will be resettled elsewhere within three months.

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Any Hope of Solution?

Even if the dilemmas just described are gradually resolved by the new emigration plan for Indochinese refugees, certain other measures need to be taken on an urgent basis. Primary among these is caring for the basic needs of the tens of thousands of boat people and other refugees now living in overcrowded camps throughout Southeast Asia. This is a program in which the World Council of Churches' Refugee Service is deeply involved through its partners in Thailand, Malaysia and Hong Kong. In cooperation with UNHCR, these three partners -- the Church of Christ in Thailand, Church World Service, USA (which coordinates voluntary agency efforts in Malaysia), and Hong Kong Christian Service -- meet the refugees' requirements for food, clothing, shelter, medical attention, and the development of self-reliance projects, all in addition to the lengthy processing necessary for overseas resettlement.

The resources and capabilities of these agencies are stretched to the limit as each attempts to cope with unprecedented new numbers of refugees. The pleas to the world by the Southeast Asian countries to understand and respond to the problem they have with the boat people are supported by the WCC's partners there. These are appeals whose political reasoning is in the circumstances plausible and whose call for compassion and humanitarian action deserves a much wider response.

Yet such a response, though a desperate necessity, is not enough. Better care of the boat people at reception facilities in Southeast Asia must be accompanied by simultaneous streamlining of the processing procedures that govern the refugees' entry into countries of resettlement. The procedures of some nations are exemplary; those of others take up to two years to complete. In fairness to the refugees as well as the Asian lands in which they are waiting, the countries accepting refugees permanently should attempt to achieve rough parity for the time and requirements needed to process and move people under Indochinese resettlement quotas.

Nor is that enough, for even if the refugees are better cared for and processing procedures improved, it is clear that such measures are all really in reaction to the problem rather than an attempt to get at its roots. Inevitably a great deal of thought must be devoted to the question of how to achieve greater stability throughout the Indochinese peninsula. As stated in a Note on Vietnam by the High Commissioner to the Geneva Consultation, "International assistance could help redress the devastation caused by war and successive natural calamities and influence the decisions both of those who might wish to repatriate voluntarily and of those who might otherwise consider leaving for economic reasons." In other words, a hopeful -- but long-term -- solution lies in eliminating the reasons for Vietnam's refugee flow. This means nothing less than restoring to that country the sort of conditions which do not make people desperate to leave. So far, only Sweden and the Federal Republic of Germany have pledged increased commitments to the rebuilding of Vietnam as one way to help stem the refugee exodus from that country (although Sweden has suspended its pledge until Vietnam withdraws from Cambodia). The possibilities of expanding this approach to include many more countries in a truly large-scale effort to help Vietnam rebuild and restore itself

should be seriously and urgently considered. Successful efforts were made after World War II to rebuild devastated Europe and Japan, so the task now of helping one small Asian country back to stability should not be impossible and might also have the added advantage of reconciling Vietnam with some of its past and present adversaries.

But attempting to get at the roots of the problem in the way just described will take a long time, and meanwhile thousands of people risk the perils of the sea or live in squalid refugee camps. For their sakes, all concerned individuals, groups and organizations should pressure their governments now to provide permanent resettlement opportunities for the Indochinese refugees. This is the single most important step that can be taken at this time. It applies to countries which heretofore have accepted no refugees. They should be urged to do so. It applies to countries which up to now have contributed money to help but nothing else. Important as money may be, the much more urgent need is resettlement guarantees in as many countries as possible. The necessity of expanding resettlement opportunities also applies to countries which have already accepted refugees. They must be urged to take even greater numbers if any humane and timely solution to this emergency is to be found.

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2. Delete my name from your mailing list.

3. Add the following name(s) and address(es) to your mailing list:

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