

Refugees/Displaced Persons in Indochina

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1. REFUGEES/DISPLACED PERSONS IN INDOCHINA*

As a result of the Communist takeover in the three countries of Indochina in 1975 and of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia three years later, refugees have been fleeing from these countries, creating an unprecedented crisis situation in Southeast Asia. In response to this crisis, the United States, France, Canada, and more than 30 other nations have taken in over a million refugees for resettlement. The UNHCR and international voluntary agencies have been providing assistance and protection to hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons on the Thai-Cambodian border and in other Southeast Asian countries of first asylum.

This rescue and relief effort, however, is no longer working, for the following reasons:

1. Reluctance on the part of first asylum countries to provide sanctuary to the continuing refugee flow, even though the influx is at a much lower rate than during the height of the crisis in 1979-80.
2. Increasing reluctance on the part of resettlement countries to welcome refugees, due to domestic political impact and economic recession.
3. A deteriorating situation with respect to a number of protection issues, including forced repatriation, conditions in refugee encampments, and continued piracy directed against refugee vessels on the high seas.

Consequently, large numbers of refugees from Indochina are being denied entry into first asylum countries, the processing rate for third country resettlement has become extremely slow,

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and the lives of tens of thousands of innocent people are in great jeopardy.

Because of this serious situation, it is urgent that the international community take new initiatives and institute effective measures in order to prevent the situation from deteriorating further.

Let us look at some of the alarming facts and statistics of the current refugee situation. As of May 31, 1983, 210,462 refugees and displaced persons were in Southeast Asian camps. Of these, only ten percent have been declared eligible for third country resettlement, leaving almost 200,000 with an uncertain future, most of them stranded along the Thai-Cambodian border or in so-called "humane deterrence" camps established by Thailand as a means of discouraging further refugee inflows. Many of these 200,000 refugees have been victims of armed attacks, caught in the cross-fire between factions of communist and non-communist armies struggling for control on the Cambodian border. Hundreds of refugees have been killed or wounded. The lack of provision for basic needs in the border encampments and "humane deterrence" camps also causes extreme hardship.

Several thousand Cambodian refugees have been forced back across the border. In one instance, on June 8 and 9, 1983, 200 unwilling Cambodians were moved from Khao I Dang to border encampments. In addition, an elaborate in-camp identification system has been implemented; this system sets up the possibility of involuntary movement of thousands more. Early last month, the Thai authorities made it clear that they will start repatriating some of the 70,000 Cambodians from Nong Samet, a refugee encampment inside Thailand, as the beginning of a gradual repatriation of all Cambodians residing along the Thai border. Colonel Khachonklan, of the Thai military's Joint Operations Command responsible for refugee affairs, revealed that Cambodians at Nong Samet encampment will first be sent to areas along the Thai-Cambodian border before going deeper inside Cambodia.

In June, nearly 300 Hmong hill tribes people fled across the Mekong River to seek shelter in Thailand following "chemical bomb attacks" inside Laos. These new escapees, although representing only a tiny increase in the 77,000 Lao-Hmong already stranded in refugee camps, threaten to cause further negative reactions on the part of the Thai government.

The fates of boat people from Vietnam are no less tragic and desperate. Refugees in distress are, not rescued by many passing merchant marine vessels -- a clear violation of international maritime law as well as basic human morality -- because the prospects of these refugees being received by countries of first asylum is so limited.

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Piracy continues to plague those escaping from Viet Nam. Boat people are increasingly exposed to robbery, rape and murder at the hands of pirates, and the anti-piracy efforts instituted by the international community have not proven to be very effective. Over two-thirds of the boats carrying refugees from Viet Nam have been attacked at least two or three times. An unknown number of women and young girls have been abducted, raped, and/or brutally murdered. No one knows the whereabouts or fates of these victims.

Refugee protection is not a new issue -- the UNHCR has been dealing with this problem for many years. It is clear, however, that urgent new initiatives are needed to come to terms with a deteriorating situation. Given the increasingly critical situation, it is time now for the international community to take new steps and devise more effective means of ensuring protection to refugees and displaced persons. No longer can we be content with ad hoc solutions on a crisis-by-crisis basis.

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Statement by Le Xuan Khoa, IRAC Executive Director, at the Working Conference on International Refugee Protection and Care, organized by the National Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Forum, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., August 4-5, 1983.

The root causes of the problem must be addressed by all parties involved. Efforts should be made by concerned people and organizations to urge the Southeast Asian nations and the big powers to restore stability in the region through political consensus and negotiated agreement. In the meantime, resettlement countries must be encouraged to maintain refugee admissions at current levels. Processing backlogs should not be permitted to keep actual admissions far below the numbers a country is willing to accept. With regard to the United States, for example, the INS slowdown/rejection policy has resulted in only 21,878 Indochinese refugees admitted as of May 31 this year, as compared to 53,460 during the same period last year. If this restrictive processing policy is permitted to continue, the most optimistic estimate of refugees admitted to the U.S. during FY 83 will be only 38,000. This number will be at least 24,000 short of the 64,000 ceiling set by the Congress and the Administration for FY 83.

I am glad to be here among you tonight and I would very much like to hear your comments and recommendations.