TRACING RELATIVES OF SOUTHEAST ASIANS

COMPUTER NETWORK IN CALGARY
by Bill Laberis, Computerworld

Joe Caruana of Calgary has established a tracing system for family reunification using a network of volunteer computer operators. Caruana’s service deals only with Vietnamese and has records back only as far as 1975.

An international microcomputer network is helping unite the thousands of former “Boat People” who were separated from family members while fleeing Vietnam...and scattered throughout the world.

Using 2,100 microcomputers in 23 countries, Family Reunification Services (FRS) has located 900 missing family members since its founding just six months ago.

Vietnamese who know about FRS initiate the reuniting process by filling out a personal data questionnaire available through refugee resettlement groups around the world...Someone, say a Vietnamese man living in New York and looking for his wife, fills out the 25-question form, describing his wife by marriage and all family names, ages, places of birth, place last seen, and so on. He also fills out a data profile of himself, a file of which is sent to FRS headquarters in Calgary.

A tape of his wife’s profile is then sent from one microcomputer operator to another until it has reached the 2,100 operators in 23 countries. Each operator codes the data to be programmed into his own system.

If the missing wife should herself fill out a questionnaire in any one of the countries where the FRS operates, a microcomputer there will match her profile with the file of her made out by her husband and entered at an earlier date. The computer registers a “find”.

The good news is relayed back to Calgary where FRS then begins the arduous task of physically reuniting the family, working within statutory limitations of international immigration laws.

Despite its early successes, the project has not been without its problems, many of which develop in the questionnaire phase of the process.

For one thing, a 20-year-old American would be listed as 21 years of age by the Vietnamese, who consider a newborn to be one year old.

And some Vietnamese women retain their birth names, while others write their first name last and their last name first, sometimes including their mother’s maiden name and sometimes not.

And once FRS came within hours of sending an anxious wife in France winging to the waiting arms of a husband in New York - but not her husband.

Rewarding Moments

“We've had our share of rewarding moments, too,” Caruana said. “Recently we had a pretty definite match between a woman in Saskatchewan and her four-year-old son in Wellington, New Zealand, but we weren't absolutely sure.”

FRS sent a photo of the woman to Wellington. The child took one look at it, then burst into tears, crying for his mother. The two were reunited, and the woman, who speaks no English, has phoned Caruana several times since then, saying "Cam onh" over and over again - Vietnamese for “Thank you”.

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THE RED CROSS
by Patricia McCarthy, Tracing & Reunion Section

Each month the Canadian Red Cross Society receives around 500 requests for Southeast Asian Tracing and Family Reunion. Sponsoring groups, individuals, and refugee organizations should direct their inquiries to their local Red Cross branch (not the National Office). Only the local Red Cross branch is in a position to obtain and clarify all information necessary. The enquirer will complete a form giving the following information about the person being sought:

- full name - father’s name
- date of birth - mother’s name
- place of birth - spouse’s name
- names, dates and places of birth of any children
- last known address of the person sought and its date
- relationship of the enquirer to the person sought
- the reason for the search, and details of the circumstances surrounding the request for the search

Because of the large number of requests we receive, we must give priority to enquiries for close family members, i.e. husband, wife, children, mother, father, brother, sister. It is not possible for us at present to search for friends or acquaintances. A search usually takes months to complete, as every Red Cross Society shares our problem of overwhelming numbers of enquiries.

Kampuchean refugee child at the Sakaeo Camp Tracing Office. Photo: UNHCR
fertile country, and with luck it will soon become self-sufficient in food. The difficulty is getting over the next hurdle - restoring the society culturally and psychologically, and helping Kampucheans to stand on their own feet and again be able to produce the material things they need. This is made very difficult by the United States forbidding their non-governmental agencies to send anything but straight emergency aid and trying to influence the international agencies to do the same.

Return from Thailand

In the refugee camps in Thailand, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Red Cross are trying very hard to get the Khmer people to return to their own country. Many of them are young men who are badly needed at home. Any who return receive goods and help to re-settle in their former homes or wherever they wish.

One of the great difficulties is that Pol Pot still maintains an army on the border of Thailand and Kampuchea and is constantly attacking the people within Kampuchea. The Vietnamese army tries to control this but Pol Pot's army, the Khmer Rouge, retreat into the refugee camps in Thailand, rest and eat food contributed by the international agencies, are re-armed by China and return to kill and pillage. The refugee camps are all controlled by the Thai army and when the international agencies try not to feed the soldiers, the Thai army interferes.

At least 30,000 Khmers had agreed to go home, and a flight to Phnom Penh had been arranged as it is too dangerous to cross the border by land because of the many armed groups. However, the Thais refused to allow the flight as it would imply recognition of the Vietnamese-supported Phnom Penh government. The UNHCR and the Red Cross have been looking into the feasibility of transferring the refugees to a third country, possibly Burma, and flying them home from there. But just before I left Thailand, the United States, after taking very few Khmers to date, suddenly started to take about a thousand a month. This destabilized all the camps - no one wants to go back to a poor, struggling country when they can come to the land of their dreams, the promised land, America.

Canada must help

I came back from Southeast Asia very concerned, for it is a danger point where the United States, the Soviet Union and China are using other countries for their own purposes, and there is a great danger of a collision of those interests which could involve all of us.

With great generosity Canadians have welcomed thousands of refugees from Southeast Asia, and for those individuals who were helped it has been a wonderful thing. But for the overall problem in that part of the world it has only been a band-aid treatment. What is needed is an end to sending arms to the region, and massive development aid so the countries can live in peace and feed their own people.

Canada as a country could follow the example of her generous citizens and give the kind of aid these countries need to care for their people at home.

As Pierre Trudeau said in Parliament June 15, Canada has an obligation to help people from the Third World who are suffering the ravages of hunger and war. "If we say no, then they are doomed and so are we."