
Quebec's Unaccompanied Minors Programs

by
John Forrester

One of the lesser known aspects of the resettlement program for Southeast Asian refugees has been the reception and fostering of almost 500 young people by Canadian families. Quebec in particular saw a considerable influx of these special cases through 1980 and 1981, and even though the flow has dwindled to a barely perceptible trickle in recent months (for a variety of causes), some youngsters do continue to be received and placed with families or individuals.

Children's Centres Established in Southeast Asia

When the flood of refugees from Vietnam was at its height, it was soon realized that, among the family groups leaving that country, a fair number of teenagers had succeeded in getting aboard ships and had made the crossing to Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. Some cases were discovered where parents or other older family members had been lost at sea, and their children reached countries of first asylum already orphaned.

Once they were in the camps set up on Pulau Bidong, on Galang (Indonesia), and at various locations in Thailand, the youngsters had to be given special care in an effort to ensure they were not exploited or abused. Various methods were used, ranging from the ad-hoc arrangements to be found on Pulau Bidong, where large groups of youngsters were more or less supervised by volunteer Vietnamese adults, to the more specifically designed children's centres set up in camps in Thailand, initially by Catholic Relief Services, but also by other agencies. Children in these centres were under the care of house parents drawn from the refugee population, who were responsible for additional food being distributed to their group, and for their general welfare. By and large, the system of children's centres was found to be the best solution in a constantly changing situation, and it did mean that unaccompanied youngsters were settled in one place for some time; efforts to trace parents and siblings could be made in other camps, with the aim of effecting reunification of families prior to resettlement in third countries.

The Quebec Program

In the fall of 1979, the then Minister of Immigration in the Quebec government, Jacques Couture, visited a number of camps in Southeast Asia to determine how Quebec could more effectively con-

tribute to solving some of the problems arising from such heavy concentrations of refugees in small areas of the countries of first asylum. On his return to Quebec, it was announced that Quebec would bring forward all unaccompanied minors for whom suitable foster families could be found. Arrangements were made with four voluntary agencies (two French and two English) for the implementation of the new policy. At the outset, there was considerable misunderstanding as to whether the children arriving in Quebec under the new program were to be adopted by Canadian families or simply fostered until such time as their own families were traced; there was a great deal of misunderstanding with respect to the ages of many of the children and the availability of female refugees. Many Quebec families requested very young girls and were disappointed when they learned that there were few unaccompanied girls and that even fewer were infants.

Due to the confusion of the early stages of the Quebec unaccompanied minors program, it was, perhaps, inevitable that some initial placements had to be reviewed later on. Many foster families did not realize that a Vietnamese boy of 15 had all too often survived years of privation during the period of hostilities in his country, as well as the voyage to a country of first asylum and a period of internment in a refugee camp. In consequence, they were unprepared for the maturity shown by some of the boys received in Quebec. In addition, a number of "false minors" (young adults who had succeeded in passing as teenagers) were encountered; it was very difficult for some foster parents to adjust to the idea of their foster son of 15 turning out to be a young adult of 19 or 20.

A complication peculiar to Quebec arose from the language legislation enacted by the Levesque government; although many refugee youngsters were offered fostering by families of other than French

cultural background, it appeared that all minors so received had to be enrolled in French schools. This question was resolved by placing unaccompanied minors under the guardianship of the sponsoring agencies initially, so that they could be enrolled in schools of the appropriate language sector.

Problems of Financial Support

From a financial viewpoint, families accepting a refugee foster child found that the only support they could expect from Government was the basic family allowance, and a dependent's tax deduction at the end of the year; the usual allowances paid for children in foster care were not available. Although many of the youngsters were in urgent need of dental treatment, no provision was made for this by either the federal or the provincial government.

Arrival in Quebec

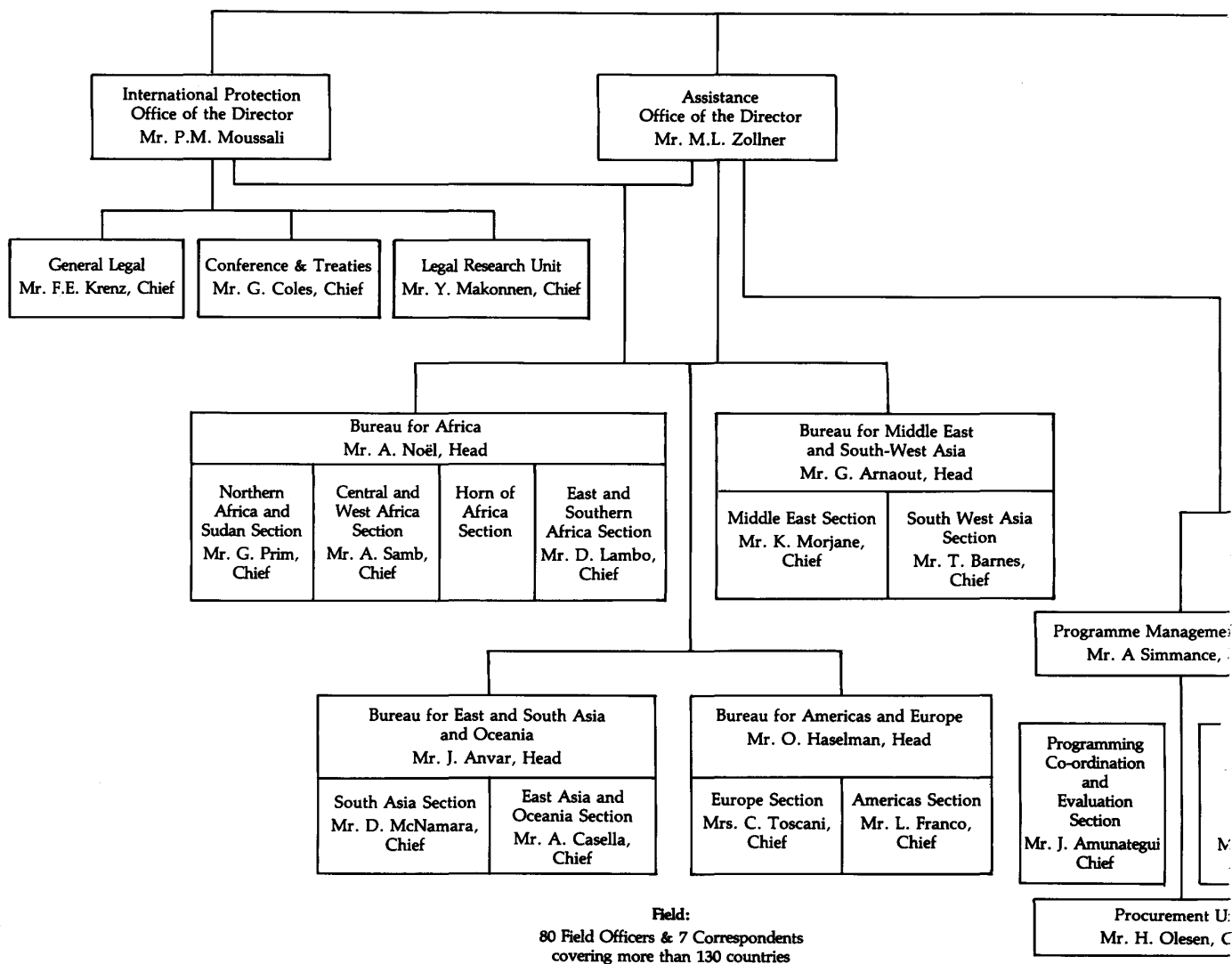
Once the program for unaccompanied minors had been decided, the trickle very quickly swelled to a flood, and the four voluntary agencies found they were in danger of being swamped with youngsters about whom very little information was made available. Urgent requests were made to the provincial and the federal governments for funding for a group home where arriving children could be housed for up to a month, so that files could be put together and efforts made to match each youngster with an approved foster family; the group home would serve also as a place of shelter for any youngster whose initial placing proved to be unsatisfactory. Both governments turned a deaf ear to such requests, even though it was all too apparent that groups of volunteers, however willing, could not keep up the pace of screening foster families: arranging for formal home studies for submission to the Quebec Ministry of Social Affairs; explaining to families that infants were not available for fostering,

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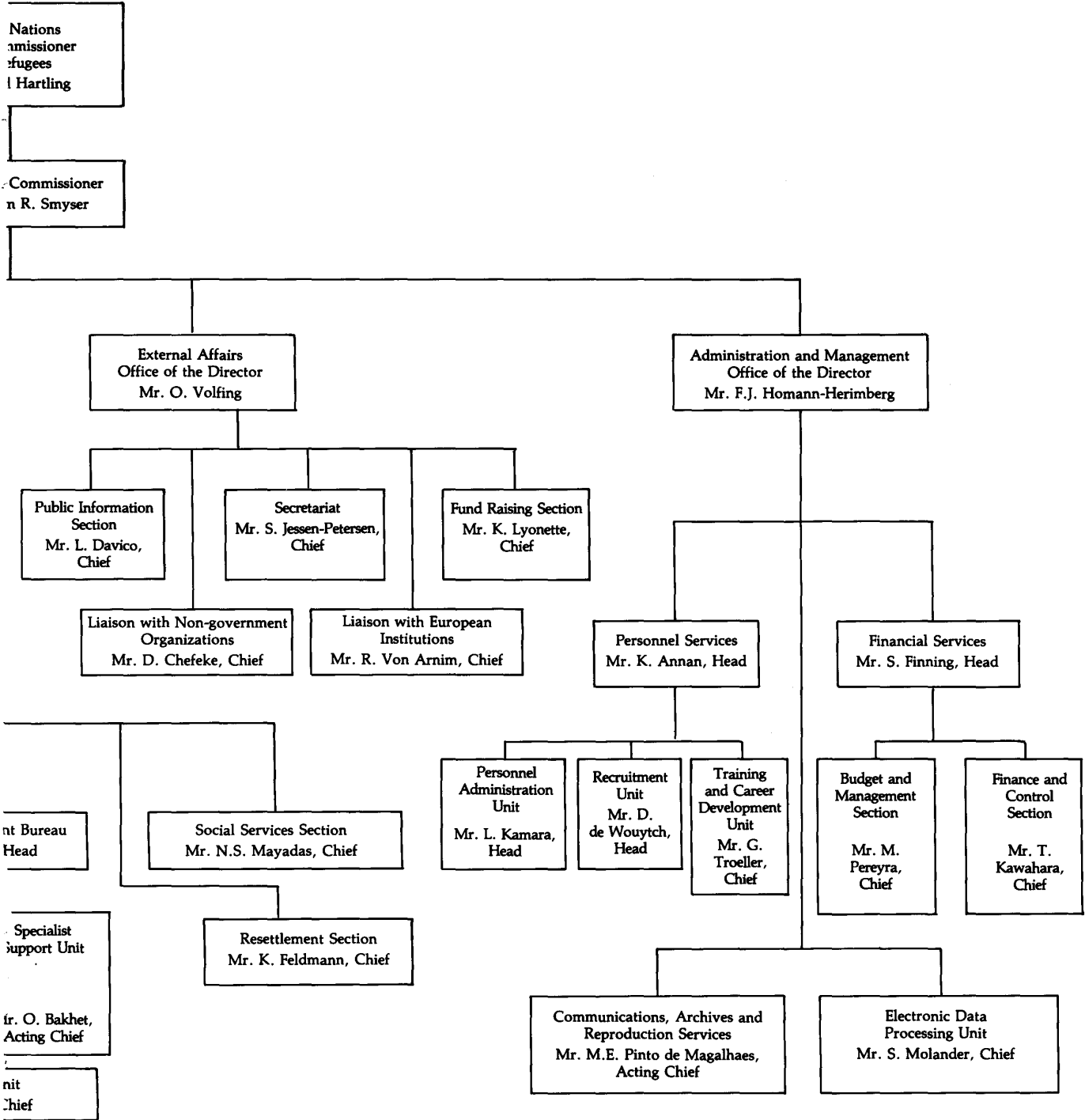
Organization of the United Nations

United Nations
High Commissioner
for Refugees
Mr. P.M. Moussali

Deputy High Commissioner
Mr. William J. Shafer



High Commissioner for Refugees



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and endeavouring to get older children accepted; attending endless meetings called by Canada Immigration, Quebec Immigration, Quebec Social Affairs, or all three; and trying to maintain a semblance of normal, orderly domestic and professional activities.

In the case of Terre des Hommes CANADA, a parish in the West Island area of Montreal stepped into the breach and provided funding for an ad-hoc group home (staffed by a young married couple) for a limited period of time. Through most of 1980, all unaccompanied minors received by this agency were channelled through the group home — a three-bedroom apartment which very quickly began to resemble one of the children's centres in Southeast Asia as bunks were installed and clothing had to be strung across rooms to be dried. Younger children were placed fairly rapidly — between 8 and 12 days after their arrival — but boys in their mid or late teens sometimes had to stay in the group home for as long as six weeks before a suitable family could be found.

Doors Close on Unaccompanied Minors

By October 1980, all four agencies in Quebec were showing signs of fatigue, and at a meeting called by the two levels of government, the two French agencies and one English agency announced that they were not in a position to continue receiving unaccompanied minors. It began to look as if the door to resettlement in Canada, which had been opened ever so slightly for less than a year, was about to be closed to unaccompanied minors. In spite of having serious misgivings about the magnitude of the task ahead, Terre des Hommes CANADA's (TDH) Secretary-General and Director of Special Programs decided that their agency would still accept unaccompanied minors, though on a somewhat reduced scale, and only as foster families became available. In 1981, the Quebec government decided that only children specifically requested by name would be considered for resettlement in foster families, thus placing one more obstacle in the way of getting youngsters out of the camps.

Three Year Survey

After three years of operation, certain

trends become apparent as we survey the progress made by most of the unaccompanied minors brought forward so far. The strong family structures of Indochinese people were noticeable as many youngsters made conscious efforts to adapt to Canadian ways and tried hard, sometimes a bit too hard, to integrate into another type of family environment.

We soon observed that in families where the role of each person was clearly defined, a young refugee would adapt to his particular place in the family structure. However, if the roles of the foster parents were in any way ambiguous, difficulties were likely to arise.

Most youngsters were eager to try and pick up the threads of their schooling, and here too, we observed that a carefully structured program which kept the student going from class to class throughout the day was more in keeping with what they had been accustomed to until 1975. Minors who were enrolled in English schools were required to follow the same courses as their Canadian peers, though it was found that in many cases, language teachers, both English and French, gave them additional attention after classes. The procedure followed in French schools, designed to give the newcomer a sound basis in the language first of all, gave rise to a number of problems; teenagers spent up to a year in a "classe d'accueil" before they were assigned to a regular grade, with the result that there was sometimes an age differential of as much as three or four years between an Indochinese student and his Canadian fellow students.

Many of the unaccompanied minors received in Quebec in 1980 and 1981 have turned 18, and are entitled to become independent if they so desire; it is encouraging to record that so far only about 18% of them have left their foster families to go and live alone or with other Indochinese teenagers. A cynic might argue that those remaining with their foster families once they have reached the age of majority know when they are on to a good thing — shelter, meals at regular hours, all the material advantages to be gained from family life. This might hold true for a few minors, but by far the majority of them show that they appreciate the security and well-being, and they are prepared to do everything possible to integrate as fully as they can into their new families and communities.

The other side of the coin shows that in some cases a young Indochinese male may experience real difficulty in accepting that a woman may be the head of a household. This role is unfamiliar to him and all too often friction results if he is required to carry out instructions given by a woman. Yet he accepts women teachers and, later on, women in positions of responsibility in the workplace, but his initial contact with a woman in a position of authority in the family has sometimes given rise to problems in the short term. However, a woman who has already brought up her own children and has reached the status of being old enough to be a grandmother, whether or not she is a grandmother, commands a special degree of respect from unaccompanied minors. Invariably, we are asked about relations between the sexes when a youngster is fostered by a family where there are teenage girls. The only answer we can give is that it depends on each person's values, as circumstances vary from one youngster to another.

"False Minors"

Our experience with "false minors" is worth mentioning. In the early months of the program we heard all sorts of stories about men of 25 to 28 passing for teenagers, but as we began to look carefully at the few authentic cases which came to our attention we found that, once again, wild rumours had been accepted at face value. The widest age spread we could prove, because the youngster eventually furnished documentary evidence to back up his claim, was of a young adult almost 21 years of age who had declared his age as 15; he could have passed quite easily for 16 or 17.

After some months, Canada Immigration set up a procedure by which consideration could be given to amending the declared age of a "false minor", and

Announcement

Symposium on the Problems and Consequences of Refugee Migrations in the Developing World.

The symposium will be held between August 29 and September 1, 1983 at the Gull Harbour Resort Hotel, Hecla Island Provincial Park, Manitoba. For more information contact: Dr. J.R. Rogge, Department of Geography, The University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3T 2N2. Phone: (204) 474-8391.

this decision was communicated to all TDH CANADA youngsters in both official languages, and in Chinese and Vietnamese. Of the estimated 12 "false minors", only three requested an amendment. Most of the others preferred to retain the lower age, as this gave them the advantage of two or three years more in the regular school system.

Some older teenagers who had been in camps for as long as four years had considerable trouble in adapting to family life; each time a youngster had to be moved it meant that one more prospective foster family was no longer available for a new arrival. Approaches were made to the Director of the federal Katimavik program, and in 1981 our first applicants were accepted for a full 9-month program; inevitably, there were one or two disappointments, but 2/3 of the minors accepted completed the Katimavik program and found, to their surprise and pleasure, that they were offered jobs in their final locations. As of this date (January 1983), all our former Katimavik participants are still in full-time employment. Two 18-year olds are currently preparing their applications for the federal Coast Guard College in Nova Scotia.

Present State of Government Programs

So much for the past. What of the present state of the government programs for unaccompanied minors? Officially, of course, Canada continues to receive young Indochinese refugees as foster families become available. It is sometimes stated that few families are willing to assume this task; that prospective foster parents hear of difficult cases; that "false minors" are still found among the small numbers of arrivals, etc. On the other hand, officials do not mention that the only financial aid available is the basic family allowance and a tax deduction for a dependent child at the end of the year. In a time of financial stringency, it is obvious that many families must think very carefully about taking on additional obligations, but this does not mean that they are unwilling to do so.

The long waiting period is yet another factor. Although the youngsters are already in children's centres, it seems to take anywhere from five to as long as eleven months for all the bureaucratic procedures to be completed. When we

are looking at teenagers, such a period of time can make a considerable difference to the eventual resettlement!

Numbers of Unaccompanied Minors

How many unaccompanied minors are we talking about? In June 1982, some 600 Kampuchean youngsters who had been in refugee camps and on the Thai border for as long as six years in some cases, were made available for resettlement in third countries when the UNHCR ended its tracing program. Many of these youngsters were presented as difficult cases; they had survived the horrors of the Khmer Rouge period, only to be left, apparently forgotten, in such places as Kamput and Sakeo.

A special meeting was convened in Bangkok early in August by a few voluntary agencies from the United States, Australia, France and Canada, to examine the plight of this special group of unaccompanied minors. Through the respective embassies in Thailand, the governments concerned were asked to give urgent consideration to Kampuchean resettlement, particularly as the government of Thailand showed signs of growing weary of the interminable delays.

The United States responded with a commitment to admit up to 200 additional unaccompanied minors, and small groups began arriving in New England as early as the end of September; Australia accepted up to 45 initially, with the possibility of more being taken for resettlement by the end of 1982; France received the request and promised urgent action.

No commitment was received from Canada or Quebec about these youngsters who had been waiting for so long for a solution to their tragic situation. Indeed, three boys of 14 who were accepted for resettlement in the ordinary process in July 1982 are still in Phanat Nikhom holding centre. Prospective families had been screened and a formal request submitted to Quebec by early October. Requests for other children appear to be stalled in the files of the Quebec Department of Immigration.

How many unaccompanied minors remain interned in camps in Thailand and Malaysia? Precise figures are difficult to compile since the policy of "humane deterrence" came into force, but in July 1982 reliable sources in

Thailand estimated that there were about 350 unaccompanied minors in the main Vietnamese camp in Si Khiu, and 500 more in the Laotian camp at Napho. Informants in Malaysia tell us that a core of about 200 minors await resettlement.

Overcrowded Camps

Many of the problems encountered in Thailand stem from overcrowding in the camps. Si Khiu was built to hold about 5,000 refugees, and now 10,000 are interned there. Scabies and skin infections are common, but the signs of physical and psychological deterioration are much more worrying. As in all such situations, gangs form within the refugee population and use their strength to deprive the weaker, more vulnerable majority of any additional supplies of food, medical supplies, or other basic items which might be procured from the local population.

Canadian Resettlement Policy

Recent statements by federal officials that refugee intake must be reduced while the unemployment situation in Canada remains serious do not appear to recognize that unaccompanied minors are not going to make immediate inroads on the working force. Teenage boys require time to become resettled in their new families, to try and complete their interrupted schooling, and to get some vocational or professional training before they can start to look for full-time jobs. As their foster families must assume responsibility for their support, it cannot even be said that they are going to cost government more than a comparable Canadian teenager would cost for educational and social services.

So much remains to be done, both in Canada and in the remaining camps in Southeast Asia. So much initiative appears to have been lost between 1980 and 1983.

John Forrester is foster father of two boys from Southeast Asia. He is also director of Special Aid Programs, Southeast Asia for TDH CANADA. TDH (Terre des Hommes) is an organization concerned with children in distress. This summer, TDH CANADA will be trying to do something for children in the closed camps of Si Khiu and Napho. Suggestions and donations would be most welcome. Mr. Forrester can be contacted at TDH CANADA, Box 34, Westmount, Quebec, H3Z 2T1.