

Journal Review

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The mass movement of Vietnamese refugees by boat—"boat people," as they were commonly known in 1978-79 and throughout the 1980s—has appeared to come to an end in the 1990s. The International Conference on Indochinese Refugees, which was held in Geneva in June 1989, has resulted in the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) to solve this continuing saga. The CPA is a response to the growing unease among resettlement countries about their commitment to resettle all refugees whose reasons for leaving have been increasingly perceived and interpreted as seeking better economic opportunities rather than fleeing persecution. The key elements of the CPA include deterring clandestine departure, promoting and revitalizing the orderly departure program, implementing a screening and determination process in the region—Hong Kong and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries—and repatriating screened-out nonrefugees. This Special Issue has made a significant and timely contribution for scholars and other interested parties to critically reflect upon the questions of the *root causes of and solutions to* this massive refugees movement.

The Special Issue begins with an article by the editor, Chan Kwok Bun. It poses a set of cogent questions that comprehensively capture the themes emerging from and analysed by the ten articles selected for this Special Issue. The first set of questions, such as why refugees continue to leave and how and why they have been viewed and treated by countries of first asylum and countries of resettlement, have clearly demonstrated the complicated interplay

of various political, economic, ethnic and social forces in the international, regional and domestic arena. It argues that within the past five to seven years, the international community's imputed motives, intentions, perception and interpretation have resulted in categorically labelling the boat people as bogus refugees. Hence, measures of "humane deterrence, restrictionism, detention, determination and repatriation (forcibly if necessary)" are rationalized as appropriate and viable, and have been collectivized into an international consensus as the final solution to the seemingly unending burden no one wants to inherit.

Another set of questions deals with the paucity of reliable and valid information regarding conditions of life in camps and their impact on the asylum seekers' everyday life, in particular, under the prevailing circumstances that are characterized, if not exacerbated, by the increasing globalization of humane deterrence and restrictionism. Clearly, the perception of the camps' temporariness and transitoriness, and of the refugee phenomenon as largely a sporadic and nonrecurring one, has resulted in a very limited knowledge of refugee camp life. More importantly, Chan Kwok Bun has accurately identified that the first asylum countries' vehement efforts to deny researchers access to camps for fear of bad press have effectively restricted them from systematically and comprehensively collecting pertinent information.

The third set of questions concerns the theoretical constructs and approaches through which refugees in camps are viewed. Should they be viewed as victims of prison-like regimes, people whose experiences are ones of helplessness, meaninglessness and alienation? Or should they be viewed as copers, survivors or even warriors, who create "culture" in adapting to the physical, interpersonal and social environment, and who actively organize themselves to cope with the stress of forced relocation and displacement, and resist repression and victimization by institutions and social forces? Researchers, policymakers and non-

governmental organizations, as well as relief workers, should note the methodological and practical implications of these questions. It is imperative to understand how refugees go about doing things together and how they make sense of and gain control over their everyday lives in order to accumulate reliable and comprehensive knowledge about refugees, and to formulate policies and design programs to alleviate and solve refugee problems effectively.

Ten articles are organized into four groups. The first group deals with conceptual issues, in particular, the pitfalls of the simplistic distinction between free and forced migration. The second section consists of five articles that examine and analyse the various policy responses of Canada, Thailand, Singapore and Hong Kong to the Indochinese refugees. While Canada, Thailand and Hong Kong have been directly affected by the boat people crisis, Singapore has been the one least affected. While other countries' policy responses have changed over the years, Singapore's policy towards the Indochinese refugees has been consistently negative, irrespective of sensitivity to potential sources of conflict in neighbouring states and phenomenal economic growth. Singapore has justified its policy by its limited land and space and its desire to maintain racial harmony by striking a balanced ethnic mix. Singapore believes the exodus is a deliberate attempt by the Vietnamese regime to destabilize the region. Unless resettlement is guaranteed and expenses are underwritten by non-Singapore sources, no refugee boat or refugees rescued at sea would be allowed to enter Singapore waters and given asylum. The author concludes that it is highly unlikely Singapore will ever change and relax its policy of admitting refugees into the republic.

Canada's policy responses to this refugee crisis have been characterized by a steady decline in selecting and accepting these refugees for resettlement. The combined effect of several factors, such as a rise in nascent racism, the emerging distinction between political refugees and economic migrants, a growing scepticism towards

refugee claims, compassion fatigue (as witnessed by the decline of private sponsorship programs) and minimal media coverage of the current refugee crisis in Southeast Asia, have contributed to the decline. However, Graeme Hugo and Chan Kwok Bun's article argues that a long-term solution to the refugee problem in Southeast Asia depends on a cooperative approach to relieve the refugee burden on first countries and enhance economic development. As Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, it is not obligated to provide protection to refugees and to observe the principle of *nonrefoulement*. However, over the years Thailand has given temporary refuge to Indochinese refugees for humanitarian reasons.

Thailand's policy has been marked by occasional open-door policies, followed by periods of heavy restrictions. The magnitude of the influx, national security considerations and dynamics of repatriation programs are crucial factors underlying Thailand's policy responses to the Indochinese refugees. As the political and economic conditions in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have not significantly changed, Chantavanich and Rabe's article predicts that the future of the Indochinese refugees in Thai camps is fraught with uncertainty and Thailand's policy responses will therefore be determined accordingly.

Two articles in this group examine Hong Kong's policy responses to the arrival of the boat people. Chan's article documents the interplay of external and internal factors—Hong Kong's political relations with Britain and China, and the complex interactions between public opinion, the mass media, the Hong Kong government and the Vietnamese refugees. These factors underscore the evolution of Hong Kong's policy, which is distinctly marked by an initial surge of humanitarian sympathy, an interim stage of strong ambivalence, and then the current stance of outright hostility demonstrated by the forced repatriation of fifty-one Vietnamese back to Hanoi in December 1989. The underpinnings of humane deterrence and restrictionism

have clearly been translated into determining how these refugees should be treated in camps. The dehumanizing and degrading camp conditions are indeed sobering experiences that are rationalized as necessary means to deter other Vietnamese asylum seekers from imposing a burden on Hong Kong people who feel that they are caught between their own uncertain future with China and the Vietnamese refugees entering Hong Kong.

Following up on Chan's article, Hitchcox questions if the growing acceptability of repatriation is a solution or expedient to the Vietnamese asylum seekers in Hong Kong. She wonders if the screening process is objective and independent of the prevailing geopolitical climate in assessing Vietnamese asylum seekers' refugee claims. The

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author raises doubts that the mandatory screening policy may have been implemented as an effective and efficient means (smokescreen!) to justify voluntary and/or forced repatriation. She concludes convincingly that the meaningful solution to the Indochinese refugee problem hinges exclusively on the international community's commitment and measures to lift economic sanctions and assist in reconstructing a hopeful, developing future in Vietnam. Failure to tackle the exodus at source will prolong the crisis.

The third group of papers consists of two pieces focusing on the impact of camp administration policies, the social structure and social organization of refugee camps, and the state, camp officials and relief workers on camp residents. These two papers have amplified the third theme delineated by Chan in his introductory article regarding the perception of refugees as "victims characterized as one of helplessness and meaninglessness" or as "copers/survivors actively organizing

themselves to cope with the stress and forced relocation." Ample evidence has been presented to support the latter claim. Mollica's paper examines the mental health crisis in Khmer border camps and concludes that a comprehensive mental health program that is sensitive to existing political conditions and culturally appropriate to Khmer traditions and values will be administratively practical and cost-effective, and provide Khmer displaced persons with the technical skills and knowledge necessary to rebuild a Khmer mental health system in camps, and ultimately in Cambodia when repatriation becomes a reality.

Knudsen's paper delineates Vietnamese refugees' strategies of coping with life stress in camps. To many refugees, depersonalization of life in the camps represents a hopefully temporary sojourn before being accepted for resettlement in a third country. Knudsen has observed and documented how creatively and resourcefully these refugee/camp dwellers resist the possible negative implications of a relief program's therapeutic intervention (because a diagnosis may be seen and interpreted as a threat to their chances of being selected) and deal with the stress from the discontinuities in their lives. The Vietnamese refugees realize how important their self-presentation is, so they use strategies learned in Vietnam to maintain a continuous balance between anonymity and exposure in order to be recognized as resourceful rather than problematic people. Knudsen concludes that signs of successful camp adaptation may in fact be evidence of coping with the relief workers rather than with problems related to the refugees' lives.

The last unit of the Special Issue consists of two papers that give an overview of the refugees' resettlement in Japan and Australia. In spite of the lingering myth of cultural homogeneity and consensual models of social solidarity, the increasing internal and external pressure and censure have forced Japan to sign international agreements on the status of refugees, leading Japan to accept Indochinese refugees for resettlement. Observations