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FOCUS ON SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES

'The Boat People—Ending In Sight?'

The memories of the 'boat people' exodus have been fading away and world attention has turned to other victims of war and famine as in Bosnia and Somalia. While countries like Canada, the USA and Australia continue to select fewer and fewer from a dwindling pool of 'eligible and qualified refugees' for resettlement, as of September 1992, close to 100,000 asylum seekers were still languishing in camps and detention centres in countries of first asylum in the region: Philippines—5,984; Indonesia—15,642; Hong Kong—49,538; Malaysia—10,632; Thailand—10,172. However unpalatable it is to these asylum seekers, they no longer wield the influence they once did on the conscience of the world. Concerted efforts have been taken by governments of these countries of first asylum and UNHCR to run the final play of this long running drama.

In spite of the numerous demonstrated flaws in the screening process under the auspices of the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA), the screened-out asylum seekers are under increasingly high-handed pressures to return to Vietnam. Based

on the assumption that employment opportunities in camps for the asylum seekers—earning C\$30 a month, equivalent to a prisoner incarcerated in Hong Kong jails—has become a factor in their reluctance to return to Vietnam, the Hong Kong government has decided to terminate the employment of about 14,000 boat people who help

in the detention centres (*South China Morning Post*, March 23, 1993). The Indonesian government has taken steps to make life in the camps more difficult for the remaining population as a means of pressuring repatriation. It was reported that in Galang Camp, fences had been built to restrict movements within the camp, private busi-

Contents:

'The Boat People—Ending in Sight?' <i>Lawrence Lam</i>	1
The Final Phase of Southeast Asian Asylum?	
Some Unfinished Business <i>C. Michael Lanphier</i>	3
Life in the Hong Kong Camps:	
Detention or Ethnocide? <i>Joe Thomas</i>	8
The Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) for Vietnamese	
Asylum Seekers: Some Reflections <i>Lawrence Lam</i>	12
Repatriation and Reintegration of Cambodian Refugees:	
Issues and Concerns <i>Janet McLellan</i>	15
Vietnamese Women in Hong Kong: A Women's Perspective on	
Detention <i>Maryanne Loughry, Margaret McCallin, Gwen Bennett</i> ..	18
IRB Statistics: January 1, 1993 – June 30, 1993	23

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nesses and shops were all closed in early July, 1993, all self-made houses were being demolished, wells were being locked and water was rationed. The boat people were crammed in barracks separated by barbed wires and high fences, much like the detention centres in Hong Kong (*Boat People S.O.S. News Bulletin*, June and July, 1993). As well, the Palawan camp in Philippines, the only camp in the region where boat people are still allowed to go in and out freely, is facing an imminent closure and is exerting pressure on the refugees to return to Vietnam.

Instead of assuring that repatriation is voluntary and the returnees are going back safely and with dignity, UNHCR is doing its part to speed up the return of these screened-out asylum seekers to Vietnam.

In March 1993, UNHCR informed NGOs in the Hong Kong camps that services would be cut to the minimum. Community and Family Services International (CFSI), which employed about 30 social workers and psychologists and about 100 of the Vietnamese para-professionals in the camps, was told that its work would be terminated altogether starting August 31, 1993. Medical services and programs provided by Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) would be cut and MSF was told to leave by July 1, 1993. The cuts to International Social Services (ISS), which ran the bulk of the adult education program, would affect about ten expatriates and about 200 Vietnamese teachers in the camps.

The UNHCR argues that making the camps less pleasant will encourage more volunteers (and therefore more refugees) to return home. However, opponents fear that the move could spark a return to violence and mayhem since it goes against the recommendations made by Mr. Justice Kempster after reviewing the conditions at Sek Kong Detention Centre following the death of 24 and injury of hundreds of Vietnamese refugees at the camp in December 1992. Mr. Justice Kempster recommended that facilities be increased to keep boat people employed

and occupied. UNHCR, on the other hand, believes the work of the NGOs is one of the reasons so few screened-out asylum seekers are volunteering to return to Vietnam.

Furthermore, in July 1993, the cash grants to returning Vietnamese boat people were reduced by one third. Asylum seekers who agree to return to Vietnam within three months of the rejection of their application for refugee status or appeal are entitled to receive US\$ 360 per person after their return. For those who refuse to return to Vietnam within three months, the amount will be reduced to US\$ 240 per person. The grants of US\$ 50 per adult and US\$ 25 per child paid before departure remain unchanged for the time being (*South China Morning Post*, July 27, 1993). According to Brian Bresnihan, the Hong Kong government's refugee coordinator, saving money was not the primary issue and it was necessary to inject new impetus into the voluntary repatriation program. Further reductions in the reintegration grants would have to be considered if the new measures do not boost voluntary repatriation (*South China Morning Post*, July 27, 1993).

It is within this context that the articles included in this issue will hopefully raise some soul searching questions with respect to the true meaning, if there is any, of repatriation. These screened-out asylum seekers have been blamed for leaving and for not returning. Given the appalling and degrading treatments they receive in the camps (at least 65 percent have been in camps for three years or more), can they really be blamed for not being able to make a decision? The orchestrated "The Boat People—Ending In Sight?" drama is evidence that the fund of goodwill and humanitarianism is becoming exhausted and bankrupt. ■

Lawrence Lam, Guest Editor

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