

REFUGEES FROM VIET NAM: CHINA'S VIEW

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The plight of the rapidly growing number of refugees in Southeast Asia has commanded world attention and response ranging from concern to outrage. It is an issue of particular concern to China: Many of the refugees are ethnic Chinese; many have gone to China for asylum.

Magnitude

As of July, 1979, there were about one million Vietnamese refugees, most of whom are of Chinese origin and left Viet Nam in the past two years. How many have died on the ocean is unknown; estimates range from 100,000 to 250,000. In June alone, 57,000 reached UN camps in Southeast Asia; perhaps an equal number died at sea. About 10,000 a month are arriving in China. More and more of the new refugees are ethnic Vietnamese and other non-Chinese minorities. There are about 200,000 refugees in camps in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Hong Kong. [According to press reports in the New York Times (June 11, June 27, July 7) and the Far Eastern Economic Review (June 15), about 80,000 are in Malaysia, 45,000 in Indonesia, 60,000 in Hong Kong, and 8,000 in Thailand. These figures do not include Laotian and Cambodian refugees, about 150,000 of whom are in Thailand]. An additional 250,000 have fled to China. Since 1975, the US has admitted about 220,000, while France, Australia and other countries have accepted about 100,000.

Those in refugee camps face overcrowding and unsanitary conditions that raise the death toll from gastrointestinal disease, particularly among the old and the very young. In Thailand, 4000 are crowded into barracks intended for 1000. On the Malaysian island camp of Pulau Bidong, in an area of four-tenths of a square mile, 42,000 people are crammed into facilities that officials describe as inadequate for a third that number. Officials describe a "thin crust of feces" that covers the island, polluted wells that require the importation of drinking water, and no constructed sanitary facilities to date. Worse is the condition of refugees living on previously uninhabited islands, such as the 17,000 on Indonesia's Anambas island who live in abject squalor, like shipwreck victims, surviving on rainwater and fish. Yet, these vast numbers represent the relatively fortunate who have survived the initial

journey. Because of the use of increasingly unseaworthy craft, Red Cross officials estimate that the number who die at sea may be increasing from 50% to as high as 70%. The horrifying toll by drowning is compounded by the commonplace attacks of pirates who rob, murder, rape and torture. Refugee camps in some areas are noted for the almost total absence of those few personal belongings found among refugees elsewhere, attesting to the magnitude of the piracy. The enormity of the inflow has put severe economic, social and security strains on the Southeast Asian countries that have accepted the majority of the refugees.

Viet Nam's Explanation

Viet Nam has offered three explanations for the exodus of the refugees. The first was that the refugees were capitalists and supporters of the old US-backed regime, who could not adjust to the new order under socialism. This was probably the situation in 1975, immediately after liberation. In June 1978, when over 100,000 people had crossed into China, this explanation was offered once again, this time linking the exodus to the nationalization of private business in the south. However, interviews with the refugees, published in China as well as in Western newspapers, soon established that the overwhelming majority, over 90%, of the refugees in China were from the North. These were people who had lived under socialism for over 20 years and had shared in the suffering, sacrifice and struggle of the people of North Viet Nam in defending the country against the US.

At this point, Viet Nam came out with its second explanation, which was that Beijing was inciting Chinese residents into leaving Viet Nam. On June 30, 1979, Pravda was quoted in the New York Times as accusing China and the West of waging a campaign "to make people forget how the problem originated in reality. ... Peking needed to incite Vietnamese citizens of Chinese nationality to emigrate as an additional pretext for unleashing aggression against Viet Nam." One week later, the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry broadcast a statement rejecting all responsibility and stating that "it is US imperialism and the Peking authorities that have triggered the outflow of hundreds of thousands, and they must be held responsible

Who are the Refugees?

for their heartless acts." There is an implication in this that people of Chinese origin follow the dictates of Beijing wherever they happen to be. If China tells them to give up their land and jobs and abandon their homes of several generations, they would do it.

China has pointed out that this explanation fits in with the accompanying propaganda by Viet Nam and the Soviet Union that China tries to use people of Chinese origin as its agents. Given the millions of overseas Chinese, especially in Southeast Asia, such propaganda can only strain relations between Chinese and other ethnic groups in those countries and also between China and those countries. Such theories of disloyalty of particular national or ethnic groups have historically been used to persecute them, most notably Jews in Hitler's Germany.

More recently, on July 15, Viet Nam's Deputy Foreign Minister, Hoang Bith Son, was quoted by Tass as saying that economic difficulties were one reason for the exodus. Mr Son told Tass that with the discontinuation of US aid to South Viet Nam and of Chinese aid, the country's economic development had been affected. It is true that Viet Nam was devastated by American bombing and expected reparations from the US. But many countries have managed in the past without such aid. Both North Viet Nam after 1954 and Cuba after 1959, to mention recent examples, had to rely on themselves primarily. It has also been noted that while the Vietnamese economy is indeed in shambles, its military development has not suffered. With Soviet help, the Vietnamese army has grown continuously since 1975. This militarization is cited by China as the main reason for the economic difficulties. As for Chinese aid, it was terminated only in June 1978, after over 100,000 had been expelled to China. China has commented that the Vietnamese government is trying to exploit the plight of the refugees in order to get aid for itself.

Viet Nam's explanations for the refugee exodus have not found general acceptance because the suffering of the refugees is too great. They are leaving in ramshackle boats with very few belongings, knowing that perhaps half of them would die at sea, the rest to end up in refugee camps, unwanted and unwelcome. None of the explanations can account for the refugees taking such risks. China has pointed out and others agree that only a deliberate policy of the Vietnamese government could have caused this tragedy.

With the victory of national liberation forces in 1975, many big businessmen and supporters of the US-backed regime fled the country. About 135,000 are estimated to have left Viet Nam in this fashion (New York Times, July 2, 1979). While some of those leaving today can be described thus, the bulk of the recent emigration has been Chinese. In the past few months, the ratio of ethnic Vietnamese is increasing. The Far Eastern Economic Review reports that at Pulau Bidong in Malaysia, 30% of the arrivals last year were ethnic Vietnamese; the figure this year is over 50%. Still, Chinese account for over 70% of the Vietnamese refugees now in UN camps.

There are tens of millions of overseas Chinese, the legacy of generations of emigration caused by the harsh economic conditions of pre-revolutionary China; over 95% live in Southeast Asia. Since 1949, China has maintained the following positions regarding its overseas nationals: first, it encourages Chinese nationals to voluntarily adopt the citizenship of the country in which they are residing. Those who do so are no longer Chinese nationals but nationals of their country of citizenship, retaining ties with family and friends in China. Those who do not wish to change citizenship are urged by the Chinese government to abide by local laws and customs, and to live in friendship with the inhabitants of the host countries. It is hoped that these countries in turn will respect the legitimate rights and interests, traditions and habits of the Chinese nationals.

Chinese in Viet Nam

In Viet Nam, the Chinese population in early 1978 accounted for 1.2 to 1.8 million of its 50 million people, mostly in the South. The Chinese in the North were overwhelmingly workers (particularly dockworkers and miners), peasants and fishermen. According to Vietnamese officials quoted in the New York Times (August 9), 15% of all coal miners were Chinese. Throughout the long years of struggle against the US, they participated side by side with their Vietnamese compatriots, withstanding the worst years of US bombing and helping to build a new society. Many were praised as exemplary workers, many joined the army and the party.



Vietnamese refugees abandon a sinking boat and swim towards the Malaysian coast.

Over 90% of Viet Nam's ethnic Chinese population has lived in the South. While here, too, the class composition has been mostly working and lower middle class, and while Chinese have been found in most occupations, they have traditionally been more concentrated in the retail and wholesale trades, and in the field of transport and communications, partly as a result of French colonial measures.

Divided into five groups according to dialect and place of origin, the ethnic Chinese maintained their language and culture in their homes and through Chinese schools. In 1955, the Communist Party of China and the Vietnamese Workers Party agreed on the principles outlined above with respect to choice of citizenship. In 1956, the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in the South imposed mandatory citizenship on Chinese nationals born in Viet Nam, and barred foreign nationals from many occupations, actions which were repeatedly condemned by both North Viet Nam and by the National Liberation Front (NLF) in the South. The Vietnamese government stated repeatedly that people of Chinese origin were friends, not enemies. All this apparently changed in the last few years. The Vietnamese government has revived the repressive measures of the Diem regime and added new ones.

On May 28, Vietnamese "refugees" in Xianggang (Hongkong) waiting to be sent to refugee camps.



Why Are They Leaving?

Reasons given by refugees for leaving Viet Nam all point to persecution: the closing of Chinese schools, loss of jobs and of food rations, large scale confiscation of homes and savings, harassment and physical intimidation, loss of opportunities for study or work, culminating in 1978 with the demand that Chinese nationals return to China or be placed in work camps.

The experience of Tran Van Hong's family, reported in the New York Times, is perhaps typical. He is a 44-year-old former printer from Haiphong. Last winter he was dismissed from his job without cause, he said in an interview in Hong Kong. He said he was repeatedly detained and interrogated by the security police and threatened with death if he did not either leave the country or report to one of the new rural resettlement zones. Then his two children's Chinese school was closed and they were forbidden to attend regular Vietnamese schools, he said. His wife lost her job in a garage, and a cur-

few during hours of darkness was imposed on an entire Chinese neighborhood. Vietnamese friends came to say that they could no longer remain in contact. The rice ration, a little over two pounds a month, was cut off, Mr Hong said. Finally a policeman put him in touch with the captain of a fishing boat that was to leave for Hong Kong. For the equivalent of \$650 a person, which he paid to the policeman, passage was arranged. "We had to sell our furniture and our clothes," Mr Hong said. "When we got aboard the boat, the police searched us and took the little jewelry we had hidden."

By June 1978, when China finally stopped its aid to Viet Nam in protest, over 100,000 Chinese nationals had already been forced out of the North. In August 1978, while Chinese-Vietnamese negotiations were underway to discuss the problem, four separate incidents of violence occurred in which Vietnamese security forces attacked Chinese nationals awaiting clearance on the Vietnamese side, forcing them to rush the border and killing and wounding many in the process. By the time talks broke down in September, nearly the entire ethnic Chinese population of the North, over 200,000 people, had been expelled.

Victims include not only those who consider themselves Chinese nationals, but also Vietnamese citizens related to Chinese by marriage or by distant ancestry. Following is a June 12, 1979, New York Times account, based on interviews with refugees in Hong Kong:

Nguyen Van Minh, 31 years old, was a Soviet-trained civil engineer from Hanoi and a party member. In April, he says, he was called in by the police and questioned. "You have always been a loyal communist, but isn't your grandmother a Chinese?" the police were said to have asked. When Mr Minh said she was, he was given the choice of a boat or a resettlement area.

In like fashion, Nguyen Van Tri, a 30-year-old postal clerk from Haiphong, was called in by the police. He is an ethnic Vietnamese and his wife is Chinese. "Either you divorce her or you leave with her," he was told.

Even a former Vietcong provincial propaganda official from the Mekong delta found himself condemned because one of his ancestors was Chinese. "I expected more, after 11 years of fighting for the motherland," he remarked in his new refugee camp. He declined to give his name, having left his family behind.

In addition to Chinese, other minorities are also being forced to leave. The Chinese delegate stated at the Geneva meeting on Indochinese refugees that some Vietnamese counties bordering on China are being cleared of people to establish battle zones. A number of minority people are being forced into China as a result. Xinhua the Chinese press agency, reports that since April, all the houses in Man Ma, Vi Giap, Tieu Ha Khau, Binh Trai and Pho Lap villages across from China's Hekou county have been gutted. Man Ma and Vi Giap were burned down by public personnel of Bat Sat district on April 15 after villagers had refused to leave their homes. A total of 85 households, 518 people, became homeless and were driven over the border to Chinese territory.

Government Control of Refugee Traffic

The Vietnamese government has denied that it controls the refugee outflow but most refugee accounts (as the ones above) speak of being processed and put on boats by government officials. Near Vung Tao in the south, for instance, the authorities have set up two transit camps. Refugees are brought to the camps by bus from Ho Chi Minh City and then taken to their boats on other buses. Observers have also noted that the ups and downs of refugee waves correspond to Vietnamese diplomatic moves. In late 1978, when Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong toured the Southeast Asian countries, seeking to convince them of Viet Nam's goodwill, the refugee flow was down to a trickle. Following the invasion of Kampuchea (Cambodia) and the brief conflict with China, the refugees were coming out in tens of thousands. In June, 57,000 refugees reached UN camps in Southeast Asia. But in the first half of July, immediately prior to the Geneva meeting on refugees, the number dropped to 12,000. Viet Nam was criticized by nearly all the 65 countries attending the meeting. Viet Nam promised to "make every effort to stop illegal departures" for a period of time. Subsequently, the refugee outflow has dropped significantly, even though the US Seventh Fleet is now actively seeking out refugee boats and merchant ships are no longer avoiding the refugees.

Refugees also speak of having to pay large sums of money, by Vietnamese standards, to be allowed to leave. Payments have ranged from \$300 to \$3000 per person, although it is thought that the average amount may be decreasing as sources dry up. Viet Nam has denied extorting such payments. In early August, a Ho Chi Minh City newspaper, Tin Sang, reported that five men had been convicted of duping 400 Chinese into paying about \$3000 each in gold to secure exit visas. Vietnamese officials suggest that Chinese can get exit visas without paying bribes but that the Chinese mistakenly believe it is necessary. However, refugee accounts speak of official payment schedules. The Far Eastern Economic Review (June 15) interviewed about one quarter of the boat organizers who landed in Malaysia in May. According to them, there is an official tax of about 3 ounces of gold per head (about \$900 at world prices); local officials have to be bribed separately. Identical schemes operate in most of the major southern coastal provinces. The organizers, usually wealthy Chinese, are sought out by government officials. The organizers put up the tax for everyone and then collect from the passengers. Richer refugees pay for poorer ones. Organizers report three types of refugees: those who pay four to five times the official tax; those who pay only the tax; and those who borrow what they can to contribute.

Considerable sums of money are being sent by overseas friends and relatives to the Vietnamese government for this purpose. In just one month, during April 1979, \$242 million were transmitted to the Vietnamese National Bank in Ho Chi Minh City to pay for the departure of refugees. In Viet Nam's hard-pressed economy, refugees have become its leading cash

export, which from all other sources totalled only \$416 million in all of 1978.

China has compared the treatment of ethnic Chinese in Viet Nam to the persecution of Jews under Hitler, pointing to a number of parallels – calling them capitalists, accusing them of foreign loyalties, banning them from trade and other activities, expropriating their property, sending them to camps, etc. In a New York Times interview published on August 7, Viet Nam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach said the Chinese "are mostly big businessmen and they don't like the socialist reformation of South Viet Nam. They would like to go away." In a later interview, published on August 21, he accused China of fomenting subversion inside Viet Nam, using the ethnic Chinese as a "fifth column."

On August 9, 74-year-old Hoang Van Hoan, deputy chairman of Viet Nam's National Assembly and a member of Viet Nam's communist party since its founding in 1930, said at a press conference in Beijing that Hanoi's treatment of ethnic Chinese was "even worse than Hitler's treatment of the Jews." Mr Hoan, who escaped to China recently, said the Chinese "have been expelled from places they have lived in for generations. They have been dispossessed of virtually all possessions – their land, their houses. They have been driven into areas called new economic zones, but they have not been given any aid. How can they eke out a living in such conditions remaining new land? They gradually die for a number of reasons – diseases, the hard life. They also die of humiliation."

Viet Nam's Motives

Why is Viet Nam pushing out people in such numbers? What does the government hope to achieve? The Chinese offer a number of motives. One is "to sidetrack the widespread discontent within its country" by fanning up "enmity between the different nationalities and stepping up their repression of Vietnamese of Chinese descent, Chinese nationals and Vietnamese minority nationalities to such a degree that they can hardly survive and are forced to flee the country at the risk of their life."

Secondly, Hanoi "then took advantage of this tragic situation by extorting from them and even looting their property. In this way, it has accumulated large sums out of the misery of the refugees."

A third motive is "to create difficulties and unrest for the Southeast Asian countries." The Vietnamese government is destabilizing the entire region with the refugee crisis. The neighboring countries are forced to divert their meager economic resources into accepting and caring for the hundreds of thousands of refugees. The political strains are becoming more and more apparent. "What is worse, Hanoi planted spies in the ranks of the refugees so that they may infiltrate into Southeast Asian countries as its fifth column there."

Finally, an important motive of Viet Nam is to discredit China. Soviet and Vietnamese propaganda try to convince the world that Chinese everywhere have a greater loyalty to Chi-

na than to the countries of residence so that no country can trust Chinese. The Chinese delegate at the Geneva meeting said that Hanoi seeks "to create chaos and incite racial discord and fan up anti-Chinese sentiments in Southeast Asia."



a refugee's account of the horrors of the voyage.

Root Causes

Some people believe that the root cause of the refugee problem is socialist transformation. Supporters of the Vietnamese government say that in every socialist revolution there are discontented people who leave. Echoing this view, curiously, are a number of opponents of Viet Nam, especially people who supported US intervention in Indochina and who oppose socialism. They point to the refugees and draw the conclusion that socialism means minorities get persecuted and small businesses get wiped out.

China disagrees with both points of view. China does not consider Viet Nam's policies to be socialist. China believes that a socialist government must take special care to protect the rights of minorities and make them feel secure. With regard to private business, it believes that any takeover should be gradual, winning over the people in the process; small business may continue under socialism for a very long time.

China cites Viet Nam's attempts at regional dominance as the root cause of the problem. Viet Nam considers itself the natural leader of all of Indochina. It keeps 30,000 troops in Laos and effectively runs that country. It has invaded Kampuchea (Cambodia) and is occupying that country with over 150,000 troops. All this has led to increased militarization of Viet Nam. The military forces have increased almost 50% since liberation in 1975 to about 1.5 million persons in a population of 50 million.

According to China, Viet Nam's hegemonism or drive to dominate the entire region is, as with Hitler's Germany, rooted in national chauvinism. This sense of superiority over oth-

ers was a minor aspect in the past; but it has flowered since 1975 because of Viet Nam's military strength and because Viet Nam's hegemonist ambitions fit in with Soviet global strategy. China points to Soviet military aid, which has actually increased since the end of the war in 1975 to about \$200 million a day at present, and which now includes sophisticated fighter aircraft, bombers and other equipment not given to Viet Nam while it was fighting the US. China says that the Soviet Union encourages militarization and an expansionist foreign policy as well as economic policies that abandon self-reliance and increase dependence on the Soviet Union. Groups that could work together are set against each other: in Viet Nam, this has taken the form of reviving Diem's anti-Chinese laws, denying the Chinese residents' patriotism, and expropriating small business.

Solutions to Crisis

The US has decided to take in 7000 more Indochinese refugees every month, bringing the monthly figure to 14,000, and has sent ships of the Seventh Fleet to the region to pick up boat people. The US is accepting more refugees than any other country except China. While the US is critical of Viet Nam for expelling its Chinese population, there is a tendency to emphasize refugee resettlement over a solution to the problem. Some in the US are even using the misery of the refugees to justify our past intervention in Indochina and as anti-communist propaganda; to this end, they would like to see the refugee flow continue.

Other countries want to deal with the root causes even while extending humanitarian help to the refugees. Singapore's foreign minister said that while he was glad for the 7000 additional refugees to be admitted to the US each month, the American action was politically a "bad thing." He said, "The refugees are a weapon of war. For every 7000 you take, Viet Nam will send out 14,000. For every 14,000 they will send 28,000, and so on."

The five members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) - Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore - announced formally on June 30 that they would not accept new arrivals and condemned Viet Nam "for the unending exodus of illegal immigrants," for promoting instability in the area, and for its invasion of Kampuchea.

Singapore's foreign minister, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, proposed a two-point plan of action to force Hanoi to stop the exodus. The first step would be a concerted campaign "to make Viet Nam ashamed, show it as a culprit and an international pariah." The second part would be to "bleed the Vietnamese in Kampuchea." Mr Rajaratnam said the Cambodians fighting the Vietnamese invaders should be regarded as patriots.

China put forward a five-point proposal at the Geneva meeting in July. First, the refugees now stranded in the ASEAN countries and Hong Kong require immediate relief and resettlement. China wants all countries, especially the developed countries, to help. China has already taken in over

250,000 refugees, spending over \$450 million on resettlement (not counting what local officials have spent). Still, China is willing to receive from other countries' camps another 10,000 refugees who would want to settle in China. Also, China has contributed about \$1 million to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Second, Viet Nam should take back any refugees who wish to return, guarantee their safety of person and property, and resettle them. It should also help those who want to leave do so in an orderly manner, cooperating with the UNHCR.

Third, ships of all countries should rescue "boat people" and take them to transit camps.

Fourth, all countries should provide financial assistance to the relief effort. They should suspend their economic aid to Viet Nam and use the aid funds to help the refugees until

Viet Nam changes its policy leading to the exodus.

Finally, the Vietnamese government should change its policy of creating and exporting refugees and stop discriminating against people of Chinese descent and other minorities.

The Chinese delegate pointed out that the gravity and urgency of the question of Indochinese refugees does not confine itself to the scope of the present tragedy, but is still growing. It would be an exercise in futility if one were to discuss the relief and resettlement of the refugees while evading the root cause of the problem, namely the internal and external policies of Viet Nam; for the more you resettle, the more they will expel. The situation will continue to deteriorate. "Unless we tackle the problem of the export of Indochinese refugees at its source," he said, "we can hardly claim to have fulfilled humanitarian and moral responsibilities incumbent on us all."



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Vietnamese refugees on the beach at Kuantan, a port city in the east coast of Malaysia

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