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Migrants

NO RESETTLEMENT HOPE FOR VIETNAMESE ECONOMIC MIGRANTS

By: from Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, Feb 8 (Bernama) -- Vietnamese "boat people" determined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to be economic migrants rather than political refugees should not harbour any hope for resettlement in the United States or any other third countries, a State Department official said here Wednesday.

The official, who chose to remain anonymous, said the International Affairs Spending Bill introduced last year in the US House of Representative that prohibits the use of US government funds to send others back to Vietnam against their will "did not become law."

The controversial bill had triggered riots by the Vietnamese in detention camps across Asia, including Hong Kong and Malaysia. A riot in Kuala Lumpur in the middle of last month injured 24 people, including seven policemen.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said the Malaysian government is very firm about repatriating the Vietnamese immigrants as third countries had refused to accept them.

"The third countries have promised to take them off our hands but now they have refused to do so and if they have a right to refuse them, we also have the right to refuse the boat people," Dr Mahathir said in Langkawi recently.

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, Winston Lord, who briefed the international press at the Foreign Press Center here Wednesday, did not give any indication that the US would admit any of the boat people languishing in the camps in Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia.

"We hope to bring the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) to a humane conclusion. We're still consulting with the various parties to see how this can be accomplished and I really can't add much more to what I've said."

Noting that there was some voluntary repatriation from Malaysia in recent days, Lord said Vietnam "is trying to speed up the screening process" and that the US continued to remain concerned that "any returnees to Vietnam be well treated."

"To date we have no evidence that Vietnamese returnees have been mistreated. So this was a major issue during my travels," said Lord, who had just returned from his trip to several Asian countries that included Vietnam.

"We continue to consult with other governments but I can't be more specific than that," he said.

Lord described the US as "the most generous benefactor and recipient of refugees particularly from the Vietnam war era", and asserted, "I want to make it very clear that whatever tactical move made this remaining Comprehensive Plan of Action or any developments in the coming months, let's not forget just how much the US has done and that will continue to be our attitude."

Some 4,500 Vietnamese are still in Malaysia's transit camp after more than 4,700 had volunteered for repatriation.

More than 70,000 had been voluntarily repatriated from the region since the CPA was adopted in 1989 by 51 countries, including Malaysia and the US, to deal with the exodus of boat people from Vietnam.

Virtually all of the Vietnamese left in detention camps in Asia have been declared economic migrants, not political refugees, and therefore have

no right to asylum under international law. -- Bernama