

## **Facing a "Liquid Auschwitz"**

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The plight of the refugees in Southeast Asia grows worse

The policy was born of desperation, although it seemed shockingly inhumane. Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad announced that his government was going to get tough with refugees from Viet Nam. Not only would Malaysia shoot on sight at any more of the so-called boat people who tried to land on its shores, said Mahathir, but it would push back to sea the 76,000 who have already landed there. If necessary, continued Mahathir, Malaysia would build boats in which to remove them. Said he: "If they try sinking the boats, they won't be rescued. They will drown."

Mahathir's ugly words may actually have done the refugees a service, since the threat shocked the Western world into belated recognition of a human tragedy that is almost beyond solution. One Italian newspaper called the situation a "liquid Auschwitz," meaning that in its size and horror the plight of the Southeast Asian refugees is taking on some of the aspects of Hitler's "final solution."

Malaysia later softened its stand, and Prime Minister Hussein Onn informed United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim that there was no plan to shoot refugees to keep them from landing. Only if no countries are willing to take the refugees already in Malaysia, he added, will his government force the issue by expelling its unwelcome guests.

Mahathir's outburst typified the depth of anger and frustration felt not only by Malaysia but also by several of its neighbors in Southeast Asia. The resources and patience of these countries have been severely strained by the steadily rising numbers of refugees from Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia. In addition to the 76,000 refugees in Malaysia, there are 160,000 in Thailand, 31,500 in Indonesia and 57,000 in Hong Kong, and the governments of these nations are getting more and more worried. Two weeks ago, Thailand repatriated 42,000 Cambodian refugees at gunpoint, sending them back across the border to face turmoil and perhaps death. In Hong Kong, 2,664 Vietnamese who have been stranded aboard the freighter Skyluck for five months staged a hunger strike to protest the local government's refusal to allow them ashore.

By taking a firm stand, the reluctant host governments appear to have two purposes in mind: to try to reduce the flow of refugees at the source, and to get some quick response from the West. In the past four years, 540,000 Indochinese refugees have been relocated. The U.S. has taken 210,000, and 230,000 have reportedly been admitted to China. Most of the remaining 100,000 have gone to France, Australia, Canada and West Germany.

Since last November, the flow of refugees has become a torrent. They are currently fleeing Viet Nam at the rate of 65,000 a month, but are being permanently relocated at the rate of only 10,000 a month. Of these, about 7,000 a month are going to the U.S. The result is that the camps and resettlement areas of Southeast Asia are choked with more than 300,000 refugees. Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has called for an international conference on the plight of the refugees, and the subject is certain to be discussed at this week's summit conference in Tokyo.

The main reason for the exodus is a barbarous policy of racism being carried out by the Hanoi government. The great majority of Vietnamese refugees are ethnic Chinese, and in

effect the government is expelling them for profit. The ancient antagonism between the Vietnamese and their Chinese fellow citizens was aggravated by the recent Sino-Vietnamese border war. That indecisive conflict evidently caused Hanoi to regard its Chinese population of about one million as a potentially dangerous fifth column. Some refugees arriving in Hong Kong and elsewhere say they were given a choice of emigrating or moving from cities to one of the "new economic zones," a euphemism for Viet Nam's rural labor camps.

From those who have chosen to leave, the Vietnamese government has extorted millions of dollars in gold. Peking has accused Viet Nam of becoming "the biggest and most despicable human trafficker of the present age." The U.S. tends to agree. "This is a cynical and brutal policy," Vice President Walter Mondale told TIME last week. "They are just running, people out of the country." Hong Kong government officials say that the trade in human lives has replaced coal as Hanoi's principal source of gold and hard currency. According to some Hong Kong estimates, Hanoi could collect as much as \$3 billion before its Chinese population is completely expelled.

The Vietnamese are conducting this grim policy with the knowledge that large numbers of refugees who leave their native land will never reach safe harbor.

Most of the boat people are set adrift in hopelessly overcrowded craft with inadequate food and water. Many of the vessels have capsized in tropical storms; others have been attacked at sea by pillaging Thai pirates.

Two refugees who landed in Hong Kong reported that they were the only survivors of a boatload of 200. Two who reached Japan late last year said that 139 of their companions had perished. On another vessel, broken down at sea, half a dozen people died before a passing British freighter picked up 295 dehydrated survivors last month and took them to Taiwan. The ship has been tied up in Taiwan's Kaohsiung harbor ever since while the authorities try to make arrangements for Britain to resettle the refugees. Since they have no political power, either in their own country or in any other, they must simply sit and wait.

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