

The Executive Memorandum

The Heritage Foundation

214 Massachusetts Avenue N.E. Washington, D.C. 20002 (202)546-4400

RUSH!

1/19/89

Number

222

ON REFUGEE ADMISSIONS, BUSH SHOULD REVERSE REAGAN

Americans rightly feel a special obligation to help refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos who have fled their countries since 1975. And Americans can be proud of how they have been fulfilling this special obligation. Over 850,000 Indochinese have resettled in the U.S. in the past fourteen years. Ronald Reagan reminded Americans of the plight of Vietnamese refugees during his January 11 Farewell Address. Yet on that same day, at the recommendation of Secretary of State George Shultz, the President cut by 6,500 the number of Indochinese refugees to be admitted into the U.S. this year. This cut is being made partially to offset the enormous increase in Soviet refugees applying to enter the U.S. Soviet refugee applications this year are expected to be almost four times last year's 20,421. The ceiling on the number of Soviet refugees, largely Jews and Armenians, allowed into the U.S. now stands at 25,500.

While it is commendable that the U.S. wants to admit more Soviet refugees, this should not come at the expense of the Vietnamese. Those to whom the U.S. has a special obligation should not be penalized because of the growing cordiality between Washington and Moscow.

The State Department's decision to cut the number of Southeast Asian refugee admissions comes at a time when refugees are fleeing Vietnam, by boat and land, in record numbers. In 1987, some 28,000 boat people reached first asylum countries, the highest total since 1982. A first asylum country accepts refugees temporarily, with the understanding that most will leave for permanent resettlement in the West. Last year, 50,000 boat refugees fled to first asylum countries. The ceiling for Southeast Asians allowed into the U.S., meanwhile, has been lowered each year since 1980, falling from 169,200 in that year to 53,000 last year. The number of individuals actually granted refugee admission under those ceilings generally has declined since 1980.

Cutting Legal Avenues. Hardest hit by the Administration's decision will be those refugees seeking to leave Vietnam through what is called the Orderly Departure Program (ODP). Since 1979, the ODP has provided a means for the Vietnamese government to allow 60,000 Vietnamese to come to the U.S. legally. A cut in this legal avenue of departure will force Vietnamese refugees to escape by sea where they face the dangers of drowning, starvation, or attack by pirates. Thousands already have suffered this fate.

By cutting quotas for Indochinese refugees, the U.S. also will send the wrong signal to the rest of Southeast Asia. Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, in particular, have acted as countries of first asylum for hundreds of thousands of refugees with the understanding that the U.S. and other developed nations would increase the number of

refugees they would accept for resettlement in their countries. With the steady decrease in the number of refugees allowed into the U.S., the first asylum countries of Southeast Asia understandably have been reluctant to let more Indochinese refugees into their own countries. Since January 1988, some of these countries, Thailand in particular, actually have pushed refugee boats back to sea.

One result of these forced "push-backs" has been strained ties between the U.S. and such first asylum destinations as Hong Kong and Thailand. U.S.-Thai relations, in particular, have become strained. Thailand, with 380,000 Indochinese refugees on its soil, believes that decreased U.S. quotas will result in hundreds of thousands of refugees languishing in Thai camps with little hope of overseas resettlement. At the same time, the U.S. government consistently has pressed Bangkok not to repatriate Indochinese refugees forcibly.

State's Questionable Motive. The State Department's decision to lower the Southeast Asian ceiling calls into question the U.S. commitment to the stated American goal of expanding the Orderly Departure Program. The State Department long has sought to obtain the release of 50,000 or more political prisoners and dependents who have been persecuted for their previous association with the U.S.-supported South Vietnamese government. In explaining the decision to decrease the number of these people allowed into the U.S. through the ODP, the State Department claims that the allocations are not needed because talks on political prisoners have stalled. While U.S.-Vietnam negotiations over the release of political prisoners inside Vietnam have been slow, allocations for the same refugees that the State Department claims were set aside for political prisoners could be applied to accelerated processing of other groups such as Amerasians and close family members of Vietnamese already living in the U.S. The State Department's decision seems to be motivated less by an inability to use the Southeast Asian allocations than by a need for slots for the significant increase in Soviet refugees.

The State Department's decision also is ill-timed in light of the upcoming U.N. International Conference on Refugees, tentatively scheduled for this April. Conference organizers, especially first asylum nations, initially held hopes that the U.S. would pledge to accept higher resettlement quotas to alleviate the growing backlog of Indochinese refugees. The latest Administration moves, however, have dispelled much of their early optimism.

Reaffirming the U.S. Commitment. George Bush must understand that, while the U.S. should continue to welcome Soviet refugees, shifting refugee numbers from Southeast Asia will prolong the refugee problem by encouraging the flight of boat people and sending the wrong signals to U.S. friends and allies in Southeast Asia. It also will undercut U.S. efforts to resettle Vietnamese political prisoners, who have suffered greatly during the past fourteen years because of their service to the U.S. Worst of all, it betrays America's obligation to those brave Vietnamese who fought alongside Americans and who now want to live in freedom.

The Bush Administration should restore immediately the 1988 ceiling for Indochinese refugees and should ask Congress to allow larger numbers of refugees to come to the U.S. from both the Soviet Union and Indochina. The new Administration also should announce its intention to send a high-level delegation to the April International Conference on Refugees. Such moves will reaffirm the U.S. commitment to resolving the problem of Indochinese refugees and fulfill the U.S. obligation to the Vietnamese.

Kenneth J. Conboy
Deputy Director, Asian Studies Center