

Crafting A U.S. Refugee Policy For Asia and the World

By Ambassador Jewel S. Lafontant

As you all are well aware, the problems of refugees are making headlines all over the globe. Two issues in particular have seized the world's attention: the changes flowing from the reforms in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the problems of dealing with the refugees in Asia fleeing Vietnam. I will spend most of my time today discussing the situation in Asia, but to put our conversation in context, I need to say a few words about the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

As President Bush pointed out in his inaugural address, "a new breeze is blowing" across the world. This new breeze has brought many changes to our refugee policy.

For many years the United States has called upon the Soviet Union to liberalize its emigration policies. We believe that freedom of emigration is a fundamental right. After many years of severely restricting emigration, as a result of recent reforms, the Soviet Union is now permitting much larger numbers of people to leave. In 1988, the Soviets granted exit permits to 108,000 people. In 1989, the numbers doubled to over 230,000.

The United States has risen to meet the challenge of increasing Soviet emigration. We have more than doubled our admissions numbers for Soviet refugees over the last two years — from around 20,000 in FY 1988 to 50,000 in this fiscal year. We expect the total number of Soviets resettling in the United States this year, including parolees and immigrants, to be as many as 70,000.

We have made the system for resettling Soviets more efficient and far less costly by moving refugee processing to Moscow. This means that Soviet citizens wishing to migrate to the U.S. must now apply in Moscow and not in Vienna and Rome, as has been their preference in the past. Care and maintenance for Soviet refugee applicants in Vienna and Rome last year cost the U.S. government more than \$35 million. This year, the cost could be as high as \$50 million.

Demand Outstripping Capacity. Even with the increase in U.S. admissions of Soviet emigrants, the demand is far outstripping our current resettlement capacity. A rise in anti-semitism and uncertainty about the political and economic future of the Soviet Union are leading more and more people to seek to leave.

To supplement our refugee program, we have proposed legislation which will permit the U.S. to admit an additional 150,000 people as special humanitarian immigrants over the next five years. We would envisage most of these numbers being applied to Soviet emigra-

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Ambassador Lafontant spoke to the Asian Studies Center Refugee Policy Working Group at The Heritage Foundation on February 15, 1990.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1990 by The Heritage Foundation.

tion. This would allow us to bring in as many as 30,000 people over and above the refugee ceiling each year. It is not clear how Congress will deal with this proposal.

The reforms sweeping the communist world have also brought changes in our policies toward Eastern Europe. As a result of the reforms in Poland and Hungary, as of November 22nd, we have been accepting new applications for refugee status only from Poles and Hungarians who fall into refugee priority 1, which covers individuals such as former political prisoners and those whose lives are immediately threatened. The further dramatic changes in Eastern Europe since November will, over time, have an impact on the rest of our Eastern European refugee program.

America At Its Best. I believe that as Americans we can all be proud of our efforts over the last four decades to champion the rights of the oppressed peoples of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Now that restrictions on emigration are finally beginning to be lifted and reforms put into place, we need to do all we can to help freedom loving people in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to build the kind of institutions at home that will preserve and enhance democratic reforms.

The other region of the world receiving the most attention today is Asia. Our policy toward this region, and Southeast Asia in particular, shows America at its best. Over the last fifteen years the United States has admitted and resettled almost one million refugees from this area – more than have been resettled by all the rest of the world combined.

We have all seen the graphic pictures of desperate people, crammed into leaky boats, crossing treacherous seas in an attempt to escape tyranny. It has long been our policy that people should not be forced to encounter such risks in order to seek freedom from persecution, and, if they do take such a dangerous course, they should be granted first asylum where they land. As you are all aware, the international structure designed to protect those fleeing persecution is now threatened by the specter of forced repatriation and push-offs.

Threat to Asylum. Prior to this most recent crisis, we had achieved several major successes in making the process of seeking refuge safer and more humane for those fleeing oppressive regimes in Southeast Asia. More than a decade after the fall of Saigon, Vietnam's neighbors were feeling increasingly pressured by the continued flow of refugees. By early 1988, countries of first asylum began to take measures, such as push-offs and redirections, designed to discourage Vietnamese boat people from landing on their shores. This posed a serious threat to the practice of first asylum.

To meet this challenge, the United States, working closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), our ASEAN friends, and several other countries, took the lead in creating a new policy framework to deal with the continued flow of Indochinese asylum seekers. The result was the Comprehensive Plan of Action, known as the CPA. The CPA was adopted by acclamation at the International Conference on Indochinese Refugees last June 14th in Geneva.

The CPA has several components, the most important of which from our point of view is a reaffirmation of the importance of first asylum. The agreement explicitly states that all those seeking asylum will be given the opportunity to do so, and sets forth steps designed to put this policy into action. These measures include full and early UNHCR access to new arrivals and screening mechanisms implemented in close collaboration with UNHCR. Since

the CPA was adopted, Vietnam's neighbors have, on the whole, shown great forbearance and generosity in affording first asylum to those who seek it, and we are grateful for their sacrifices.

Despite this generally positive trend, there have been a series of push-offs from Malaysia. While the government in Kuala Lumpur has allowed many boats to land, at least 60 vessels, carrying more than 3,000 people, have been pushed-off or redirected since May. Several deaths have resulted. How many others may have died on boats which simply disappeared is unknown. We have vigorously protested these actions and will continue to press for the preservation of first asylum.

Easing Financial Burdens. The United States is doing its part to support the CPA. We recognize that providing refuge to thousands of Indochinese refugees poses a financial burden on the countries of the region. Last Thursday we announced that the United States will contribute \$11.1 million to UNHCR's appeal for funds to implement the CPA. The United States also stated that it was prepared to consider additional contributions during the course of the fiscal year.

In conjunction with the CPA, the resettlement countries agreed to admit refugees present in countries of first asylum prior to certain cut-off dates, which vary by country. The United States has agreed to take the lion's share of these "longstayer" refugees, 40 percent, or up to 18,500 over the next three years. We plan to resettle 11,000 in the first year of the CPA.

As a further demonstration of our support for the CPA, we will also resettle up to half of the new arrivals who are determined to be refugees. Overall, for the current fiscal year, we have allocated 25,000 admissions spaces to Indochinese refugees from first asylum countries.

The CPA also helped reinforce and enhance another very important part of our refugee policy, the Orderly Departure Program, or ODP. I am happy to say that recently we have seen substantial progress in the ODP. One of our most important humanitarian interests in the region has been the resettlement of Amerasians. In fiscal year 1987 only 490 Amerasians and accompanying family members were admitted to the United States. Last year we raised the number to over 8,000 and expect to come close to doubling that number this year by admitting as many as 15,000. To help these young men and women and their families adjust to life in the United States, we will provide them with English language lessons and cultural orientation at a training center we have established at Bataan in the Philippines.

Emotional Arrival. Some of the best news of all came early last month, when the first of the former reeducation camp prisoners finally arrived in the U.S. The pictures of their emotional arrival were truly moving. This breakthrough was the result of a seven-year diplomatic effort by the United States to obtain their release. Last July 30th we reached an agreement with the Vietnamese to facilitate their departure. Pursuant to this agreement, over 600 have already arrived in the U.S. and we hope to resettle as many as 7,000 before the end of this fiscal year.

Despite all of the progress we have made to date, the CPA framework is now gravely threatened by the British policy of mandatory return of Vietnamese currently living in camps in Hong Kong who have been determined not to be political refugees. Our policy in

this regard is very clear. As President Bush stated last October 13th, we oppose "forced repatriation of refugees to a country like Vietnam... people who seek freedom ought to be given a chance."

We do support voluntary return of non-refugees and believe it should be given a chance to work. The CPA provides that voluntary repatriation should be given first priority and that every effort should be made to ensure that it succeeds. The fact that almost 3,000 Vietnamese volunteers in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia are waiting for repatriation shows that much more can still be done.

Seeking A Consensus. As you many know, a meeting of the Steering Committee was held in Geneva last month. The meeting was successful in a number of respects. Consensus was reached on full funding of the CPA, rescue at sea, putting in place the UNHCR monitoring structure in Vietnam, accelerated processing and transportation of voluntary returnees, and on implementation of new procedures to assist unaccompanied minors. However, the meeting was concluded without resolving one of the most critical issues: repatriation of those found not to be refugees. Although the U.S. is opposed to mandatory repatriation, in order to preserve first asylum and achieve a consensus, we proposed a twelve-month moratorium on mandatory return. This would allow time to demonstrate the effectiveness of voluntary return and to put into place additional protective measures. We also insisted that even if a consensus were reached to accept this plan, the U.S. would enter a reservation spelling out its opposition to involuntary return. Despite our best efforts to reach an agreement, the British and other countries refused to go beyond a six-month moratorium.

We are working hard to find a consensus that will preserve first asylum, emphasize voluntary repatriation, ensure fair screening procedures, and provide sufficient time to give the process a chance to work. The stakes are too high to allow the international framework we worked so hard to create to fall apart.

In discussing this issue we must remember that even a fully functioning CPA and all the efforts of the resettlement and first asylum countries I have spoken of are not lasting solutions to the refugee problem in Southeast Asia — they are merely means of alleviating the pain. The reason so many people are taking desperate and dangerous measures to escape is that they see such extraordinary actions as a far better alternative than life under the current regime. The exodus will not end until Vietnam reforms its political, economic, and social systems.

African Crises. Before I conclude, I would like to draw your attention to another problem which, while just as serious as the situations in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, has not been in the headlines and has received much less attention. I am speaking of the plight of African refugees. Another famine is building in northern Ethiopia. As many as 5 million people are affected, and unless food can be distributed very soon, many will be forced to migrate in order to survive. Thus, once again, we could be faced with the need to feed hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian refugees.

The United States has taken the lead in the international effort to help resolve this crisis. We have already committed 165,000 metric tons of food (of a total donor commitment of 434,000 metric tons) and are working hard to see that the organizational and logistical measures necessary to meet the emergency are in place. Still, more help is needed. If we are to help people such as those in Ethiopia we must fully fund our assistance program. A small

amount of money can help a great many people in these situations. In a time of rising need, it is critical that we receive adequate funding for overseas assistance to refugees.

Conflicts in Sudan and Somalia have also created large populations of refugees. There are 385,000 Sudanese refugees in Western Ethiopia and 335,000 Somali refugees in the east. The United States, together with other concerned nations, has organized a multi-donor mission which will go to Ethiopia in two weeks to look into the assistance and protection problems facing these refugees.

The brutal civil war in Mozambique has also generated large numbers of refugees. Over 800,000 people have fled to neighboring Malawi alone. We are concerned about the capacity of Malawi to absorb this tremendous influx. The refugee population equals about 10 percent of the country's population, and in parts of the south, refugees outnumber Malawians. I plan to visit the area next month to assess the situation. We must be sure that, despite our present budget problems, we contribute our fair share to the support of these people who desperately need our help.

Light of Liberty. I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. It is because of efforts of groups like yours that we are able to bring important issues such as these before the public and the Congress. I think that as Americans we can be proud of our efforts to assist refugees. We have given more aid to refugees than any other country and, over the last decade, have resettled more people fleeing persecution than all of the rest of the world combined. The humanitarianism, generosity, and love for liberty of the American people have served as a shining example for the rest of the world. Let's keep that light shining.

