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## Towards an Understanding of the Vietnamese Refugee Situation

The reception of refugee quotas in Finland was started in 1986 as Finland became a quota-receiving country under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Since then the quota has been gradually raised from one hundred to the present five hundred annually. In addition to quota refugees, humanitarian immigration also includes those asylum seekers who lodge asylum applications directly upon arrival in Finland, and are granted permission to stay (provided they fulfil the criteria for asylum or resettlement on humanitarian grounds).

Vietnamese represent the largest national group of resettled quota refugees in Finland as they formed the major part of the quotas until 1990. In 1991, Vietnamese numbered just under 2000 in Finland.

Knowledge of the background to refugee displacement and flight helps us to understand the refugees' resettlement predicament and some of the dynamics of the adaptation process. This article presents an account of the events leading up to the Vietnamese boat people crisis in 1979, from which time dates the early phase of Finnish resettlement of Vietnamese refugees. The period up to the

present is also described briefly, as well as some aspects of the refugees' adaptation to Finnish society.

### Historical Background

The Vietnamese war lasted some forty years. Its internationalization had a direct impact on the number of refugees. Not only was the war prolonged, but high technology warfare greatly enlarged the fire zone and indiscriminately engulfed civilians (Zolberg, Suhkre and Aguayo, 1989, 163).

Kolko (1987, 9) states that "The Vietnam War was to involve a vast spectrum of forces and issues. Some are unavoidably complex, entailing the global symbolism of the war and drift and mastery in the direction of modern history. Others are painfully simple, ranging from a soldier's desertion in order to be with his family to the erosion of a peasant's moorings in a world of destruction and lost children. The war encompassed the classic issues of social philosophy, the grandiose problems of world power, the tragedies of countless lives lost and shattered, the shame of corruption and cowardice, the glory of heroism, the consolation of men and women secure in their readiness to make sacrifices, in a word, the entire diversity of human responses and social trends in the century, most of them ageless".

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## **The Wars: 1945–1975**

The 1945–1954 Indochina War against the French colonizers ended with the 1954 Geneva Agreements, which provided for the division of the country into two distinct political entities: a Communist regime in the North and a regime supported by the U.S.A. in the South, called the Republic of Vietnam. Fearing reprisals, about 900,000 persons fled from the north to the south. They included relatives and dependants of native colonial army members, Catholics and some ethnic Chinese business people. As had happened in China and Korea, they fled before the establishment of the new regime (Beach and Ragwald, 1982).

Thus even before the main refugee movement began in the seventies, the Vietnamese had been uprooted from their homes and familiar surroundings by the vicissitudes of war. At the end of 1972, the war had already created some ten million displaced Vietnamese, many of whom hoped to return home eventually or to move to where opportunities existed to create a normal life after their shattering experiences (Kolko, 1987, 464).

The war continued from 1954 to 1975, gradually becoming "internationalised", involving an alliance with China and the Soviet Union in the North and from 1963–1973, an escalation of American commitment in the South. The southern Ngo Dinh Diem regime was overthrown in a coup in 1963. It was replaced by the government of President Nguyen Van Thieu which was supported politically, economically and militarily by the United States until 1975 (Dorais, 1987, 58). A ceasefire agreement had been signed in Paris, on January 27, 1973 by the United States, North and South Vietnam, and the Vietcong, but it was not implemented. In April 1975, the Saigon regime

surrendered. North Vietnam assumed control and began transforming society along communist lines.

## **The Ethnic Chinese**

With the progression of the civil war, the ethnic Chinese suffered discrimination and persecution especially after the death of Ho Chi Minh, who had had friendly relations with China. The ethnic Chinese minority in Vietnam were suspected of collaborating with the Chinese. They were prevented from holding important positions and discriminated against in employment. The ethnic Chinese were a powerful economic force controlling 80 percent of the light industry and almost all marketing of rice in the South. Such a group would naturally be subject to particular scrutiny. In 1976 the Chinese were ordered to register their citizenship, and all Chinese newspapers and schools were closed down (Hitchcox 1990, 37).

For a detailed insight into the position of ethnic Chinese during the events leading up to flight from Vietnam, see Beach and Ragwald (1982). The majority of Vietnamese refugees resettled in Sweden belong to the Chinese ethnic minority — a resettlement policy measure aimed at building up a homogeneous refugee community.

## **Refugee Waves**

Scholars recognise in the Vietnamese refugee outflow at least three distinct waves or vintages. The first wave comprised those with close links with the government in the South and the American military presence — high-ranking members of the old elite and government and military officials. Although the possible need for an eventual mass evacuation had been foreseen by the USA and planned for,

when Saigon fell in April 1975, the exodus was chaotic and unregulated, leaving behind many relatives and dependants.

The second wave of Vietnamese refugees in the interim period up to 1978 included middle elite administrators, higher officials, other leading military personnel, intellectuals, many citizens subjected to social degradation, re-education, punishment and internment (Beach & Ragwald, 1982, 19–41). During this period, the number of departures from Vietnam was relatively low, less than 10,000 annually as people were attempting to adapt to the new regime (Pottier, 1982).

Part of Vietnam's adopted policy of national reunification along socialist lines in South Vietnam was the establishment of the New economic zones. Five million people were to be relocated in these zones away from the overcrowded cities to which people had fled. Cessation of American aid and the increasing isolation from international trade had a devastating effect on the Vietnamese economy. The Hanoi Government extended its control over the economy in the South, abolishing private business, nationalizing industrial and commercial enterprises (Hitchcox, 1990, 42).

"In March 1978, the government abolished all "bourgeois trade" in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon); of the 30,000 businesses it closed, 80 percent belonged to Chinese. The simultaneous introduction of a new currency wiped out the savings of most Chinese merchants. Many Chinese were dismissed from their jobs and threatened with transfer to remote "New Economic Zones". The regime denied that it was expelling the Chinese, claiming instead that it was campaigning against unproductive urban elements that stood in the way of socialist transformation" (Dowty, 1987, 173).

"The year 1978 witnessed the exodus of the Sino-Vietnamese to China. Between March and December, about 160,000 Chinese citizens of Vietnam took refuge in China, crossing the land border between the two countries" (Pottier, 1982).

"A climate of coercion and terror was created: travel limitations, relentless surveillance, continuous mobilization into the armed forces, arbitrary arrests. War preparations against Cambodia led to the invasion of this country in December" (Pottier, 1982).

The complete breakdown of relations with China finally came about when, with military assistance from the USSR, Vietnam invaded Cambodia to halt atrocities of the Pol Pot regime.

Border disputes and clashes along the Sino-Vietnamese border had been building up. In February 1979, China invaded four northern provinces of Vietnam. Vast devastation was inflicted in the northern part of the country as a consequence of this engagement with Chinese troops. J. van der Kroef (1986, 11) writes "in February 1979, China administered to Hanoi a brief "punitive" lesson, invading and occupying Northern Vietnam in retaliation for Hanoi's subjugation of Cambodia". Thus at the beginning of 1979 Vietnam was at war with both Cambodia and China. The military occupation of Cambodia required the remobilization of a million and entailed the loss of international assistance (Pottier, 1982).

### **Boat People and the Orderly Departures Programme 1979**

The number of refugees fleeing Vietnam by boat, so-called boat people had increased dramatically at the end of 1978 and in the first part of 1979. The number of refugees arriving in the first asylum

countries in the region increased to more than 50,000 people a month in June (Dacyl, 1992). The exodus of ethnic Chinese increased, many in order to escape mobilization and war with China. Departures by sea became predominant with the ethnic Vietnamese contributing to the "boat people" phenomenon as much as the ethnic Chinese (Pottier, 1982). This comprised the third wave which continued into the eighties.

Gordenker (1987, 159) points out that it was widely accepted that the Vietnamese government had a direct hand in allowing the departure of the "boat people" and that its policies encouraged the flight of those ethnic Chinese who left on foot for China.

The crisis caused by the massive outflow of refugees was responded to with concerted efforts on the part of UNHCR and member states involved — countries of first asylum, countries of resettlement and the source country itself. An agreement was signed in May 1979 to control the outflow through an Orderly Departure Program (ODP). Under international pressure, the government of Vietnam had agreed to take steps to stem the exodus. The Government of SRV (Socialist Republic of Vietnam) and UNHCR agreed on the initiation of the Orderly Departures Program — to facilitate the orderly departure of citizens who wished to leave, the selection being made on the basis of family reunification and very rarely, on humanitarian grounds (Hitchcox, 1990, 74). Dowty (1987, 174) reports that roughly 50–80 percent of attempted illegal exits were stopped, and by 1984, the numbers leaving under the Orderly Departure Program exceeded those leaving illegally. At this time ethnic Vietnamese had much more difficulty than ethnic Chinese in obtaining permits to leave.

Despite repeated negotiations, Vietnam refused to allow "re-education camp" inmates to leave for the United States, apparently out of fear of creating a political opposition in exile. Those applying for exit permits were reportedly harassed, and severe penalties — including execution — were levied on those caught in attempting to leave illegally. By the end of 1987, 131,000 persons had been resettled under the ODP in more than two dozen countries (Thayer, 1989, 86).

At an international conference in July 1979 in Geneva, it was decided that countries in the region would provide temporary refuge for those who arrived by boat, that the refugees would afterwards be resettled in third countries outside the region (Thayer, 1989, 45). The industrialized countries offered to take more than a quarter of a million Indo-Chinese from camps in the region for permanent settlement. Smyser (1987) considers the response to the plight of the boat people to be one of the most significant gestures of good will on the part of the international community in recent times.

According to the estimates of Pottier (1982), between April 1975 and April 1980, about 900,000 people left Vietnam: 160,000 in 1975 and 580,000 between 1976 and 1980, plus about 150,000 boat people who drowned or were killed by pirates during this period. The ethnic composition of the refugees was 25–30 per cent ethnic Vietnamese and 70–75 per cent Sino-Vietnamese.

After 1979 unauthorised departures from Vietnam decreased greatly and resettlement countries accepted their responsibilities to take in Vietnamese settlers from the camps in Southeast Asia. However in 1987, events took a different turn. Resettlement countries lowered their intake rates to a quarter of the 1980 levels. The number of departures

tures under the ODP fell, while unauthorised departures increased sharply to an estimated 48,000 in 1988. Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong and the region once again faced a crisis situation. After appealing to resettlement countries to continue their programmes, first Thailand adopted a get-tough policy of pushing boat people back out to sea. Malaysia announced that it would close its temporary holding centre in Bidong island and in the middle of 1988 Hong Kong changed its policy of automatically granting asylum, announcing that all arrivals would be considered illegal immigrants and, as such, would not be eligible for resettlement. Instead they would be held in detention until they could be repatriated to Vietnam.

In 1989 the ASEAN countries announced March 14 as a cut-off date after which all boat people arriving in the region would no longer be entitled to refugee status (Thayer, 1989, 46–47). Persons who arrived in camps subsequent to that date are subject to screening procedures — based on the criteria of the 1951 Geneva Convention — to distinguish between “genuine” refugees and emigrants. Of the refugee populations undergoing the screening process, only a fraction are granted the right to resettle in a third country. For those who fail to meet the 1951 Convention criteria, voluntary repatriation is seen to be the only feasible recourse.

Voluntary repatriation is the accepted ideal long term solution to the refugee situation, signifying restoration of the refugee’s homeland. However, it is a complex issue involving aspects of safety and protection, organisation and monitoring, which are difficult to implement. Indeed, repatriation often proceeds before conditions are completely stable.

## National Development and Refugees

The continued flow of refugees from the SRV in the eighties was a by-product of harsh realities of conditions persisting in that country. In many underdeveloped post-colonial countries, the prerequisites for political stability, civilian peace and even human rights, are constantly eroded by the exigencies of a critical economic situation. Frequently the inherited economic base of the country is unsuited to the needs of an emerging nation or is underdeveloped. Political independence is not synonymous with economic independence or national unity.

The Vietnamese government’s military policy in Cambodia triggered off international reactions that led to its economic isolation. As a new national entity, Vietnam has contended with isolation from world markets and international assistance. Economic isolation has had crippling effects on economic recovery, which is a prerequisite of national stability and a climate favourable to human rights.

Kim Ninh (1990, 383) writes, “The event that dominated Vietnam in 1989 was, not surprisingly, the Kampuchean situation. Since its invasion of Kampuchea in December 1978, which drove out the Khmer Rouge and established in its place a pro-Vietnam communist regime, Vietnam has been virtually isolated from the international community. The isolation came about largely as a result of a Western trade embargo, led by the United States in protest against the invasion, which denied Vietnam the foreign investment and the technology crucial to its developmental needs”.

Ninh (1990) explains that the search for a Kampuchean solution that would be acceptable to all parties, was a difficult task in the face of the level of infighting

among the three factions headed by the Khmer Rouge, Son Sann, and Sihanouk, which comprised the resistance coalition. The conference on the issue called by the French Government for the governments of the region in August 1989 in Paris brought no substantial agreement on major points, but Vietnam began its withdrawal in September without any international monitoring. Vietnam's withdrawal from Kampuchea in 1989 after a decade of costly involvement underlined the leadership's determination to develop and modernize the domestic economy. The withdrawal from Kampuchea was aimed at removing the primary obstacle to its obtaining the kind of funding necessary for its developmental needs. Ninh quotes the Far Eastern Economic Review (27.4.89, p. 68):

"The prospects for trade, aid and inward investment are beginning to look brighter. Not only are an increasing number of trade delegations arriving in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, but the IMF, World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are also making plans".

In 1993 Vietnam looks forward to emergence from economic isolation even approving of continued US presence in Asia and the Pacific. Vietnam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam hopes that US President Clinton's term will open a new era in relations between the two countries: "We all know what grave consequences have been suffered by our people because of the Vietnam war and the United States' trade embargo. In the present situation we heartily welcome all measures which contribute to forgetting the past, promoting mutual understanding and turning over a new page in relations between the USA and Vietnam" (Helsingin Sanomat, 26.1.1993).

Today, as a result of diaspora, Vietnamese find themselves in communities all over the world. Kinship networks span many continents and remain resilient even after decades of separation. Much research has been done on different aspects of Vietnamese resettlement and adaptation especially in the major receiving countries like USA.

### **The Social Adaptation of Vietnamese Refugees in Turku, Finland**

The aim of my recent study was to examine the life conditions of Vietnamese refugees in Turku, Finland, in order to understand the nature of their social adaptation. The study was a qualitative case and field study based on interviews of 57 adults and a period of participant observation. The interviews were conducted in winter-spring of 1991-1992.

The Vietnamese ethnic group was found to have a low level of cohesion but members were bound by strong emotive ties of belonging, the individuals felt that they belonged to the group. Some professed cognitive belonging, being aware of, and appreciating common group interests and needs. A core of persons could be said to belong at the dispositive level, being committed and ready to act in the common interest of the group (see Allardt and Starck, 1981, 209, on the concept of belonging). Common community activity, such as the organisation of traditional festivals or mother-tongue classes for the youth, depend largely on the input of this core of individuals committed to the common group interest.

Within the larger ethnic community, close-knit sub-groups with very high levels of interaction functioned in the capacity of mutual assistance networks. Mutual assistance was very comprehen-

sive and varied. In times of crisis there was a high level of mutual commitment. The traditional and valued style of collective living seems to be recaptured in the new environment. The observed social resources of the sub-groups point to the importance of building refugee communities of viable size to lay the groundwork for spontaneous self-help mechanisms.

The subjects interviewed all belonged to at least one sub-group. The sub-groups were overlapping in that some persons belong to more than one group and could move flexibly over class, education and other such group-delineating boundaries. Through these flexible group members, there exists a loose cohesion in the community.

Because of the high interaction level, the sub-groups could be assumed to be functioning as reference groups. In these groups it would be possible for members to maintain ethnic and group identity, a source of strength in the adaptation process.

For the Vietnamese, regular contacts with the wider Finnish society occurred mainly in the work place or school. Those who were unemployed reported that they were at a loss for contacts with the wider society. Vietnamese have not found common hobbies, for example, with Finns. However, social contacts with friend families met through the Red Cross Programme were kept up in just under half of the cases, and were rewarding. In two cases, contacts with Finns were closer than with fellow countrymen.

This can possibly be accounted for by the desire of the individuals in question to avoid the informal social control of the closely knit sub-groups. Contacts with Finns would probably be freer of constraints.

A remarkable factor is the willingness and enthusiasm of the Vietnamese women to enter the labour force. Refugees explained that in Vietnam, women had participated in supporting their families even though not necessarily in the formal sector. The Vietnamese women were generally ready to enter the labour force after language courses, without delay for cultural or other reasons. Given the exigencies of the employment market, the rooting process of the family thus can proceed on many fronts since many family members can have contacts outside the home and ethnic group.

Subjects professed an explicitly non-aggressive posture toward the host society and other groups. Their common comment was that "We do not wish to disturb". This attitude could be explained by their war and conflict saturated historical past in Vietnam. For many, their own lives and that of their family, had been disrupted repeatedly by war. The flight to safety means in day-to-day life, a desire for peaceful community relations. This also indicates that for the group resettling in Turku, resettlement means having, at last, the opportunity to earn a living, to help their relatives, and see their children educated — in peace.

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