The Southeast Asian Refugees
Background Memorandum

Approximately 450-500,000 refugees have fled Indochina (i.e. Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) since 1975.

Of these, close to 250,000 have been granted asylum in the United States and other Western lands.

International Rescue Efforts

Following the collapse of the Thieu regime in April 1975, the United States accepted an initial 132,000 Vietnamese refugees. Since then, until November of this year, the United States has admitted an additional 50,000 refugees, for a total of 182,000 over the four years. By April 1979 it is expected that the United States will have admitted at least 15,000 more.

Other countries who have granted asylum to the Indochinese refugees include (as of November 1978):

- France -- 43,817
- Australia -- 13,347
- Canada -- 7,560
- Britain -- 644
- Italy -- 225
- Netherlands-- 204
- New Zealand-- 665

Japan is reported to have allowed only one family of refugees to enter its country.

At present, more than 40,000 Indochinese refugees are in transit camps in Malaysia.
More than 136,000 refugees are also presently in Thailand.

The "Boat People"

Of the 450-500,000 who have fled since 1975, approximately 75,000 have left by sea -- the so-called "boat people" -- landing primarily in Malaysia. The other refugees escaped overland, primarily to Thailand.

Many of those who sought to flee by sea are known to have perished. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that only 60 percent of those who escape by sea survive. In recent weeks, more than 350 boat people have perished at sea.

Of the 75,000 Vietnamese who successfully escaped by sea during the last four years, 37,000 have been resettled and another 38,000 are scattered in temporary camps, mainly in Malaysia.

The number of "boat people" has been increasing at an enormous rate over the last few months. Last spring, about 1,500 refugees a month aboard small boats were entering other Southeast Asian countries after leaving Vietnam. In May of this year the number rose to 5,000 and increased to 10,000 in October. It is expected that the number of "boat people" will jump to 20,000 for the month of November.

The Hai Hong Refugees

At present, the following countries have agreed to admit some of the 2,500 refugees aboard the Hai Hong:
France --- 222
Canada --- 604
West Germany - 1,000
Belgium --- 150
TOTAL 1,976

The United States has agreed to admit all the Vietnam refugees aboard the Hai Hong who are not resettled in other countries.

As of December 1, 1978, France has admitted 222 of the Hai Hong refugees; Canada has accepted 479 and West Germany 159.

U.S. Efforts

In April 1978, the U.S. Government decided to admit 15,000 Indochinese refugees annually into the United States; 12,500, or half would be "boat people" and the remaining 12,500 admitted would be Laotian or Cambodian refugees who had fled overland to Thailand.

This November, Attorney General Griffin Bell approved the entry of an additional 2,500 "boat people," the number aboard the Hai Hong, in order to convince Malaysia to grant temporary haven to those refugees aboard the freighter. This action would increase the total number of "boat people" admitted to the United States for the year ending on April 30, 1979 to 15,000.

The decision to increase the number of refugees admitted to the United States stimulated considerable debate within the Administration and Congress. The Human Rights and East Asian Bureaus of the State Department had been pressing for the admission of a larger number of refugees. Attorney General Bell,
who must consult with the State Department and the Congressional committees dealing with refugee affairs before approving the admission of more refugees under his "parole" authority, was initially reluctant to increase the number allowed in under this emergency procedure.

Regarding the Hai Hong refugees, the Administration was of the view that the 2,500 additional refugees to be approved for admission to the United States should come from among those who had already been waiting in camps in Malaysia and that Malaysia should allow the Hai Hong refugees to enter its country at least on a temporary basis.

On November 29, Attorney General Bell announced that he was planning to admit an additional 21,875 Indochinese refugees, about three-quarters of them Vietnamese "boat people" and the rest Cambodians, by the end of April 1979. This would bring to 30,000 the number of "boat people" the United States would admit for the year ending April 30, 1978.

Future Efforts

These actions do not solve the increasingly critical problem of the "boat people" or the general refugee problem in Southeast Asia. The United States is projecting a buildup of approximately 120,000 "boat people" by next spring, considerably more than the number presently in temporary camps in Malaysia.

Partly at the suggestion of the United States, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees will convene a meeting in Geneva on December 11-12 of more than 30 countries to seek international action on the Southeast Asian refugee problem.
Jewish Efforts

As his first act in office, Prime Minister Begin of Israel granted asylum to 66 Vietnamese "boat people" who were rescued at sea by an Israeli freighter.

In the United States, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) has aided in the resettlement of Indochinese refugees in conjunction with local Jewish community agencies and private sponsors. From August 1977 to September 1978, HIAS has assisted in the resettlement of 660 Indochinese refugees or 3 percent of the 22,000 admitted to the United States during that period.

This year, HIAS has agreed to aid in the resettlement of 1,250 Indochinese refugees, or 5 percent of the 25,000 that are expected to be admitted to the United States. At present, however, the numbers of Indochinese refugees that are expected to be admitted to the United States this coming year have increased to 60,000 and HIAS is now discussing the possibility of assisting 3,000, or 5 percent, of this new number.
Efforts of the American Jewish Committee

Last year, Marc Tanenbaum, AJC National Director of Interreligious Affairs, participated in a mission to Southeast Asia arranged by the Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees with the assistance of the International Rescue Committee. The findings of that commission had been instrumental in the decision by the U. S. Government to increase the number of Indochinese refugees granted asylum in the United States.

Last May, at its Annual Meeting, the AJC adopted a resolution urging the U. S. Government to admit under the parole provisions of the immigration law, or under special legislation, the thousands of Cambodian refugees living in camps in Thailand.

On November 22, the AJC issued a statement comparing the plight of the "boat people" aboard the Hai Hong to the Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany aboard the ship St. Louis in 1939 when the United States and other countries refused to grant them haven. The statement called upon President Carter and Attorney General Bell to immediately use emergency powers available for admission of the Hai Hong "boat people" and assistance to other Vietnamese in a similar plight.

At the beginning of December, Rabbi Tanenbaum and two other members of the Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees embarked on a second 10-day mission to Southeast Asia to investigate conditions of Vietnamese "boat people" and Cambodian and Laotian refugees in camps in Malaysia and Thailand.

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The Southeast Asian Refugees
Fact Sheet

Number of Refugees who have fled Indochina since 1975 450-500,000

The General Refugee Problem in Southeast Asia

Malaysia More than 40,000
Thailand More than 136,000
TOTAL More than 176,000
(increasing daily)

The "Boat People" -- (i.e. Those escaping by sea to Malaysia)
Approximately 38,000, increasing at a monthly rate of 20,000.
Projection of 120,000 by Spring 1979.

The Hai Hong Refugees
Total 2,500

Number expected to be granted asylum
(by country)
Resettled as of 12/2/78

France 222 222
Canada 604 479
West Germany 1,000 159
Belgium 150
TOTAL 1,976

(The United States has agreed to accept those not admitted by other countries)

Overall Rescue Efforts Since 1975 (Approximates as of November, 1978)

United States 182,000
France 43,817
Australia 13,347
Canada 7,560
Britain 644
Italy 225
Netherlands 204
New Zealand 665
Israel 66

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