

# America's Obligation to Indochinese Refugees

A twelve-person delegation of distinguished Americans organized by International Rescue Committee chairman Leo Cherne visited camps housing Indochinese refugees in Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The delegation, called the Citizens' Commission on Indochinese Refugees, has called on the United States Government to adopt a long-range, open-ended policy to lift the present strict limitations on admitted refugees and to speed up their admission. In a series of meetings with Vice-President Walter Mondale, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and top congressional leaders, the group has recommended six specific actions:

1. The adoption of a coherent and generous policy for the admission of Indochinese refugees over the long range, replacing the current practice of reacting belatedly to successive refugee crises. Such a policy should encourage other countries already participating in the resettlement endeavor to continue their work, and it should also stimulate new countries to join the common endeavor to grant sanctuary. In addition, the firm knowledge that the refugees would be guaranteed a final home would encourage Southeast Asian countries to grant them temporary asylum.
2. A readiness to provide generous financial, technical, and other assistance to Southeast Asian countries for the purpose of permanently resettling some refugees in these countries.
3. The elimination of all existing criteria for admission into the U.S. of the most desperate refugee cases, specifically the boat people from Vietnam, Vietnamese who have come overland to Thailand, and Cambodian refugees. Our government should make clear its firm intention that permanent resettlement for these refugees will in all instances be assured.
4. A more flexible and compassionate application of immigration criteria to Laotian refugees, who comprise a majority of all the refugee cases.
5. The dropping of the distinction between "economic" and "political" refugees, a distinction that is sometimes used to relieve those who would normally assist political refugees from feeling any obligation toward those who have fled. The use of the "economic" classification has even, in violation of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, served as a justification for the forcible repatriation of refugees in some instances.
6. An appeal to all maritime countries to let no ship pass people in danger of drowning, to close no ports to them, and to let no ship be penalized for bringing refugees to port.

The adoption of the refugee policy outlined above would be a concrete demonstration by our government of its concern for human rights. It would also be in our country's finest democratic tradition. We urge our government to take prompt action which would not only relieve the suffering of many thousands of homeless people but would also in many cases save their lives.

The members of the commission were:

- Leo Cherne*, Chairman, International Rescue Committee and Co-Chairman of the Citizens' Commission on Indochinese Refugees  
*William J. Casey*, former Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs and Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission and Export-Import Bank, and Co-Chairman of the Citizens' Commission  
*Monsignor John Ahern*, Director of Social Development, Catholic Archdiocese of New York  
*Professor Kenneth Cauthen*, Colgate-Rochester Divinity School  
*Cecil B. Lyon*, former U.S. Ambassador to Chile and to Sri Lanka  
*James A. Michener*, author  
*John Richardson, Jr.*, President of Freedom House, former Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs  
*Mrs. Thelma Richardson*, civil rights leader  
*Bayard Rustin*, President of the A. Philip Randolph Institute  
*Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum*, Director of Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee  
*Stephen B. Young*, member of Commission on International Human Rights of the Bar Association of New York  
*Albert Shanker*, President, American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

# “Do Not Forget Us!”

Bayard Rustin

*One of America's senior black leaders, Bayard Rustin was organizer of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 March on Washington. His article on the Indochinese refugees and "boat people" appeared in black newspapers in the U.S.*

A new “invisible man” has been born within our midst—the Southeast Asian refugee. Shunted from country to country, over 150,000 of these “invisible people” cling to a precarious existence in scores of refugee camps that dot non-Communist Asia. They have a simple and solitary message for the international community: “Do not forget us!”

Some well-meaning people have said to me: “The black community suffers from record high unemployment. Why should blacks be concerned about Southeast Asian refugees? They’ll only take jobs and housing that black people desperately need.” Such an attitude is understandable, but allow me to describe the enormity and urgency of the refugee problem.

Some months ago, while serving on a delegation organized by the International Rescue Committee (an organization that has provided much assistance to refugees from Nazi Germany and to the victims of apartheid and repression in Africa), I had an opportunity to speak with many refugees currently living in Thailand. They all told me the same stories; they all had the same fears. If they return home, they said, the Communist regimes will almost certainly kill them. Many complained about the lack of food in the Thai camps, yet they fear their own governments more than they fear starvation.

Of the refugee groups I encountered, the Cambodians were the most determined to resist returning to their now desolate homeland. When the brutal Khmer Rouge forces seized control of their country over two years ago, more than fifteen thousand people fled to Thailand, frequently with only the clothing on their backs.

At present thousands of Cambodians are crowded into four camps in eastern Thailand. Most of these destitute people have lived in these poorly equipped camps for two years or more. Resettlement programs have advanced at a snail’s pace; few foreign countries have any interest in “undesirable” and semiliterate Cambodians. Moreover, recent border clashes between Thai and Khmer Rouge troops have made the Cambodian refugees suspect in the eyes of the Thai Government.

Cambodia’s neighbor to the east, Vietnam, has produced thousands of its own refugees, many of whom have taken to the high seas in dangerous little boats. These courageous “boat people” have suffered heavy losses in their quest for freedom. According to several reliable sources, as many as half of these people perish at sea (about the same mortality rate suffered by black slaves crossing the Atlantic from Africa), either through

starvation, drowning, or exposure. Merchant ships that pass these imperiled human beings rarely, if ever, offer assistance. And the Thai Government has become increasingly reluctant to grant them landing rights on Thai shores.

Vietnamese “boat people” who somehow survive the rigorous sea journey presently live in two temporary camps near the coastline. Since 1976 the number of refugees in these camps has risen to over 2,000. Another inland camp serves 1,500 Vietnamese who escaped through Laos.

I talked to several Vietnamese, and they all described the “New Vietnam” as a harsh and oppressive society. Common people, they told me, have been uprooted and forced to relocate in areas far from friends and family. Others have been sent to the so-called New Economic Zones. And still others have been compelled to change occupations. Trade unions, religious groups (both Buddhist and Christian), and student organizations—all of which once flourished in South Vietnam—have all but disappeared.

Two ethnic groups from Laos—the Lao and Hmong peoples—have even more refugees in Thailand than the Vietnamese and Cambodians combined. At present over 72,000 Laotian refugees live in nine densely populated camps in the northern sections of Thailand. The refugee community includes urban and rural people, as well as a contingent of former military and government officials.

Conditions in Thailand’s refugee camps, at least the ones I visited, are far from uniform. Certain camps have better facilities than others, but none of them deserves to be called a “home.” Given its limited resources, the Thai Government has, I believe, made an honest effort to provide decent facilities. Yet most refugees lack toilets, adequate food and clothing, and even personal privacy. All of these amenities, which most of us consider indispensable, have become highly prized luxuries. Indeed, life itself has become a costly luxury for these people.

It would be easy and politically expedient conveniently to forget these beleaguered people. We could, I suppose, soothe our collective conscience by sending a few dollars to the camps. But in seeking a “painless solution” blacks would ignore a basic lesson of the civil rights movement: the black struggle for freedom is intimately linked with the universal struggle for freedom, whether it be in South Africa, the Soviet Union, or Indochina.

How can we help these people? They do not want handouts or a “free ride.” Instead, they want a fair opportunity to rebuild their shattered lives and earn a decent living. And there is only one way we can help—we must open the doors of America. Black people must recognize these people for what they are: brothers and sisters, not enemies and competitors.

# The Urgency of the Problem

Stephen B. Young

*Stephen Young toured Indochinese refugee camps in Southeast Asia as a Vietnamese interpreter with the Citizens' Commission on Indochinese Refugees. He spent three years in Vietnam with the Agency for International Development and three years in Thailand when his father, Kenneth T. Young, was U.S. ambassador.*

I return from Southeast Asia profoundly moved by the plight of the refugees with whom I helped members of the Citizens' Commission on Indochinese Refugees communicate. As Americans, and as human beings, we must take positive actions to reflect our common humanity with the Vietnamese "boat people," Cambodians, and Laotians and help mitigate their suffering. Members of the Citizens' Commission, despite their divergent views on the war in Indochina, have concluded that U.S. Government policy on opening America's doors to the refugees must reflect the urgency of the problem. I heartily concur.

More than a hundred thousand people may be scattered in camps all over Southeast Asia. Thousands who flee each month to Thailand face the real possibility of being forced back to their country of origin and certain death or of being forced out to sea if, as most Vietnamese do, they flee by boat. Still, an estimated 1,200-1,300 Vietnamese escape by boat each month.

Governments throughout Southeast Asia perceive that the U.S. is not committed to a long-term solution to a problem that the war in Indochina created. They perceive that they cannot afford large-scale intrusion of Indochinese aliens, that they cannot afford to care for them financially, and that they cannot afford to strain relations with the new Communist powers in Indochina by overly hospitable treatment of refugees. Thailand, to which most refugees have come, has adopted particularly harsh measures in response to its perception of lack of U.S. interest. We were told, for example, of instances in which Thai officials sent back to Cambodia Cambodians who were promptly shot in view of the Thais. Other refugees have been forced back to Laos.

The new government of Thailand, led by General Kriangsak Chamanan, indicated to the commission that it would henceforth take a more generous attitude toward refugees. But at the local level of border policemen and provincial governors, who make the decisions that affect the lives of refugees, nothing has changed.

Many Thai officials fear that the new refugees may be pro-Communist security risks, a counterpart of the Vietnamese who left their country in 1954 to form in Thailand a community that in many instances has provided a base for antigovernment insurgents. Paradoxically, having lived under Communist rule, the Vietnamese refugees with whom I spoke may be the least pro-Communist people in the world. For example, in three camps of Vietnamese I heard from teenage boys

that under no condition would they go to France. They knew that the Communist party there had a chance of coming to power, and they wanted nothing to do with a country that might go Communist.

Thai officials now ignore their society's Buddhist values of compassion and are reduced to publicly dismissing Cambodia's barbarity even as it shocks, disgusts, and frightens them privately. The Thai Government feels abandoned by the U.S. on this issue. The U.S. embassy in Bangkok had not been directed to implement a long-term refugee policy. Our officials there have made no efforts to take advantage of popular Thai attitudes toward refugees, such as those exhibited by the Thai Red Cross, to influence a more humane policy by the Thai Government.

The lack of an American policy has also shaped the attitude of Singapore toward the Vietnamese "boat people." Singapore will not accept refugees without guarantees they will be resettled elsewhere within ninety days. Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew's policy is to offer the Americans a carrot and a stick to prod us into adopting the kind of generous approach we are urging on him and the Thais. The carrot is the offer of a small island to serve as a transit camp for all "boat people" coming to Singapore or picked up at sea. The stick is a refusal to let "boat people" ashore, coupled with a demand that ships arriving with "boat people" picked up at sea post a bond if they want to transact business in Singapore.

Another reason for urgency is that ships transiting the South China Sea now commonly ignore "boat people," and some lines have rerouted their ships to avoid areas where the "boat people" are likely to be found drifting. This occurs because ships find it difficult to obtain permission to disembark the refugees and must assume financial responsibility for them.

The solution to this problem lies more within the provenance of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) than it is subject to American initiatives. Transit camps, one near Singapore within easy reach of southbound ships, and one near Macao or Hong Kong along the line of passage of northbound vessels, need to be established. If ship masters know that the "boat people" they rescue will have nearby havens, they will be more willing to obey the law of the sea as far as the succor of people in distress is concerned.

The number of Indochinese refugees that the U.S. accepted each year as part of a long-term international project would be modest—less than the 20,000-30,000 immigrants per country we already receive annually from East and Southeast Asia.

Upon its return from Southeast Asia the Citizens' Commission on Indochinese Refugees called on presidential assistant Zbigniew Brzezinski. He remarked that if America does not now help those refugees, then it would no longer be "America." I agree.