Vietnamese Boat People

The ‘Boat People of Vietnam’ seemed to encapsulate all the suffering Vietnam had suffered from 1965 to 1975. Despite the end of the Vietnam War, tragedy for the people of Vietnam continued into 1978-79. The term ‘Boat People’ not only applies to the refugees who fled Vietnam but also to the people of Cambodia and Laos who did the same but tend to come under the same umbrella term. The term ‘Vietnamese Boat People’ tends to be associated with only those in the former South who fled the new Communist government. However, people in what was North Vietnam who had an ethnic Chinese background fled to Hong Kong at the same time fearing some form of retribution from the government in Hanoi.

In late 1978, Indo-China degenerated into wholesale confrontation and war between Vietnam and Kampuchea (Cambodia) and China. In December 1978, Vietnam attacked Kampuchea while in February 1979, Vietnam attacked Chinese forces in the north. These two conflicts produced a huge number of refugees. Many in what was South Vietnam feared the rule of their communist masters from what had been North Vietnam. Despite the creation of a united Republic of Vietnam in 1975, many in the South feared retribution once it was found out that they had fought against the North during the actual war. The rule exerted in Ho Chi Minh City (formally Saigon) was repressive as this was seen as a bastion of ‘Americanisation’. Traditional freedoms were few. It has been estimated that 65,000 Vietnamese were executed after the end of the war with 1 million being sent to prison/re-education camps where an estimated 165,000 died.

Many took the drastic decision to leave the country – an illegal act under the communist government. As an air flight out of Vietnam was out of the question, many took to makeshift boats in an effort to flee to start a new life elsewhere. Alternately, fishing boats were utilised. While perfectly safe for near-shore fishing, they were not built for the open waters. This was coupled with the fact that they were usually chronically overcrowded, thus making any journey into the open seas potentially highly dangerous.

No one can be sure how many people took the decision to flee, nor are there any definitive casualty figures. However, the number who attempted to flee has been put as high as 1.5 million. Estimates for deaths vary from 50,000 to 200,000 (Australian Immigration Ministry). The primary cause of death was drowning though many refugees were attacked by pirates and murdered or sold into slavery and prostitution. Some countries in the region, such as
Malaya, turned the boat people away even if they did manage to land. Boats carrying the refugees were deliberately sunk offshore by those in them to stop the authorities towing them back out to sea. Many of these refugees ended up settling in the United States and Europe. The United States accepted 823,000 refugees; Britain accepted 19,000; France accepted 96,000; Australia and Canada accepted 137,000 each.

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/vietnam_boat_people.htm

Vietnamese London

Read about London's Vietnamese community and how these brave people overcame civil war. And are now gradually emerging as a strong and vibrant community in the capital.

The majority of Vietnamese people were refugees from North Vietnam and first came to the UK after the reunification in 1975. The second wave of refugees were known as the ‘boat people’ and were either victims of the economic crisis under the leadership of the Nationalist Party, or had to flee because of the border war with China.

They made perilous boat journeys along the coast towards Hong Kong, which was under British rule and allowed the survivors to enter the UK.

When we spoke to Mr Thanh Vu, founder of the An Viet Foundation in Hackney, he reflected on those terrible times. He told us: "I was so lucky. Although I was in a 9 metre boat with about 41 other people, a British ship picked us up, where others had ignored our pleas. We were told that if we hadn't been picked up that day we'd have drowned because a storm was coming. And the storm did come the next day". Although safe in Hong Kong, they were placed in detention camps waiting for permission to enter the UK. When the camps closed, the British Government took responsibility for 10,000 Vietnamese and the first few thousands were settled in South East London.

By the time of the second influx, the government had decided to disperse the refugees to the regions. The Vietnamese must have found the isolation of rural areas problematic. Mr Ung, Vietnamese specialist at Refugee Action in Stockwell, points out: "People couldn't settle in the rural areas and so they abandoned their houses, came to London and lived illegally in squats, until some local authorities showed sympathy and moved them into legitimate accommodation on big housing estates in Peckham, Lewisham and other South London areas".

Nevertheless, this was certainly preferable to the re-education camps in the jungle areas of Vietnam, where people like Mr Vu were made to work under nationalist rule. Wearing a painful expression he recalls: "We were fed on rations so small. A piece of meat no bigger than my thumb would have to last me for a whole year!"

Quan Tran who runs the Vietnamese Community Refugees of Vietnam in Tower Hamlets proudly believes that the Vietnamese people in London are
working towards making a mark on the capital. He says, "Last year the organisation celebrated twenty five years of the Vietnamese community in Tower Hamlets, to tell others that we are here to stay and contribute to London and Britain".

He also added that the majority of Vietnamese people are Buddhists and are a peaceful community. Many Vietnamese proudly remember the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc who captured the world's attention when he burnt himself to death in front of television cameras in 1963 as a protest against the persecution of Vietnam's Buddhists.

After arriving in the UK, some Vietnamese found jobs in the clothing industry. They worked mostly for Greek and Turkish factory owners and were later able to start up their own clothing companies around London. Other Vietnamese people took over the city's 'fish & chip' shops as Cypriot and Italian Londoners moved out of this sector.

Vietnamese restaurants specialising in popular Viet dishes such, Pho (pronounced foo) is a soup that contains noodles, often eaten for breakfast in Vietnam and considered by some as the national dish of the country. Traditionally made with tougher cuts of beef and bones, the extensive cooking time produces a dish full of flavour and tenderness. The dish has its origin in French cuisine as it was the French who introduced the custom of using bones to make a base stock.

**Did You Know**

- There are around 15,000 Vietnamese refugees in London
- The first refugees came to the UK in 1975
- Vietnamese communities are concentrated in Hackney, Poplar and Thamesmead

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2005/05/26/vietnamese_london_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2005/05/26/vietnamese_london_feature.shtml)
Vietnamese Boat People

Vietnamese boat people refers to refugees who fled Vietnam by boat and ship after the Vietnam War, especially during 1978 and 1979, but continuing until the early 1990s. The term "Vietnamese Boat People" is often used generically to refer to all the Vietnamese (about 2 million) who left their country by any means or method between 1975 and 1995. This article uses "boat people" to apply only to those people who left Vietnam by boat and arrived in another country. (See Indochina refugee crisis for an overview.)

The number of boat people leaving Vietnam and arriving safely in another country totalled almost 800,000 between 1975 and 1995. Many of the refugees failed to survive the passage, facing danger and hardship from pirates, over-crowded boats, and storms. The boat people’s first destination were the Southeast Asian countries of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, and Singapore plus the British colony of Hong Kong. The mass flight of hundreds of thousands of boat people from Vietnam in 1978 and 1979 caused an international humanitarian crisis with the Southeast Asian countries increasingly unwilling to accept ever more boat people on their shores. After negotiations and an international conference in 1979, Vietnam agreed to limit the flow of people leaving the country, the Southeast Asian countries agreed to admit the boat people temporarily, and the rest of the world, especially the developed countries, agreed to assume most of the costs of caring for the boat people and to resettle them in their countries.

From refugee camps in Southeast Asia, the great majority of boat people were resettled in developed countries, more than one-half in the United States and most of the remainder in France, Canada, Australia, Germany,
and the United Kingdom. Several tens of thousands were repatriated to Vietnam, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Programs and facilities to carry out resettlement included the Orderly Departure Program, the Philippine Refugee Processing Center, and the Comprehensive Plan of Action.

BACKGROUND

The Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975 with the Fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese Army and the evacuation of more than 130,000 Vietnamese closely associated with the United States or the government of South Vietnam. Most of the evacuees were resettled in the United States in Operation New Life and Operation New Arrivals. In 1975, the countries of Cambodia and Laos also fell to communist forces, thus engendering a steady flow of refugees fleeing all three countries.

After the Saigon evacuation, the numbers of Vietnamese leaving their country remained relatively small until mid 1978. The cause of the growing numbers of refugees were the increasingly repressive policies of Vietnam. One million people, especially those associated with the former government of South Vietnam, were sent to re-education camps, often for several years. Another million people, mostly city dwellers, "volunteered" to live in "New Economic Zones" where they were to survive by reclaiming land and clearing jungle to grow crops. In addition, the Vietnamese government may have carried out 100,000 extrajudicial executions from 1975 to 1985.

Repression was especially severe on the Hoa, the ethnic Chinese population of Vietnam. The Hoa controlled much of the retail trade in South Vietnam and the communist government increasingly levied them with taxes, restrictions on trade, and confiscations of their businesses. In May 1978, the Hoa began to leave Vietnam in large numbers for China, initially by land. By the end of 1979, resulting from the Sino-Vietnamese War, 250,000 Hoa had sought refuge in China and many tens of thousands more were among the boat people scattered all over Southeast Asia and in Hong Kong.

The Vietnamese government and its officials profited from the outflow of refugees, especially the often well-to-do Hoa. The price for obtaining exits permits, documentation, and a boat or ship, often derelict, to leave Vietnam was reported to be the equivalent of $3,000 U.S. dollars for adults and one-
half that for children. Many poorer Vietnamese left their country secretly without documentation and in flimsy boats, and these were the most vulnerable to pirates and storms while at sea. These payments were often made in the form of gold bars.

There were many methods employed by Vietnamese citizens to leave the country. Most were secret and done at night; some involved the bribing of top government officials. Some people bought places in large boats that held up to several hundred passengers. Others boarded fishing boats (fishing being a common occupation in Vietnam) and left that way. One method used involved middle-class refugees from Saigon, armed with forged identity documents, traveling approximately 1,100 km to Danang by road. On arrival, they would take refuge for up to two days in safe houses while waiting for fishing junks and trawlers to take small groups into international waters. Planning for such a trip took many months and even years. Although these attempts often caused a depletion of resources, people usually had several false starts before they managed to escape.

**EXODUS in 1978 – 1979**

Although a few thousand people had fled Vietnam by boat between 1975 and mid-1978, the mass exodus of the boat people began in September 1978. The vessel *Southern Cross* unloaded 1,200 Vietnamese on an uninhabited island belonging to Indonesia. The government of Indonesia was furious at the people being dumped on its shores, but was pacified by the assurances of Western countries that they would resettle the refugees. In October, another ship, the *Hai Hong* attempted to land 2,500 refugees in Malaysia. The Malaysians declined to allow them to enter their territory and the ship sat offshore until the refugees were processed for resettlement in third countries. Additional ships carrying thousands of refugees soon arrived in Hong Kong and the Philippines and were also denied permission to land. Their passengers were both ethnic Vietnamese and Hoa who had paid substantial fares for the passage.

As these larger ships met resistance to landing their human cargo, many thousands of Vietnamese began to depart Vietnam in small boats, attempting to land surreptitiously on the shores of neighboring countries. The people in these small boats faced enormous dangers at sea and many thousands of them did not survive the voyage. The countries of the region often "pushed-back" the boats when they arrived near their coastline and boat people cast about at sea for weeks or months looking for a place where they could land. Despite the dangers and the resistance of the receiving countries the number of boat people continued to grow, reaching a high of 54,000 arrivals in the month of June 1979 with a total of 350,000 in refugee camps in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. At this point, the countries of Southeast Asia united in declaring that they had "reached the limit of their endurance and decided that they would not accept any new arrivals."

The United Nations convened an international conference in Geneva, Switzerland in July 1979, stating that 'a grave crisis exists in Southeast Asia for hundreds of thousands of refugees." Illustrating the prominence of the
issue, Vice President Walter Mondale headed the U.S. delegation. The results of the conference were that the Southeast Asian countries agreed to provide temporary asylum to the refugees, Vietnam agreed to promote orderly departures rather than permit boat people to depart, and the Western countries agreed to accelerate resettlement. The Orderly Departure Program enabled Vietnamese, if approved, to depart Vietnam for resettlement in another country without having to become a boat person. As a result of the conference, boat people departures from Vietnam declined to a few thousand per month and resettlements increased from 9,000 per month in early 1979 to 25,000 per month, the majority of the Vietnamese going to the United States, France, Australia, and Canada. The worst of the humanitarian crisis was over, although boat people would continue to leave Vietnam for more than another decade and die at sea or be confined to lengthy stays in refugee camps.

**Pirates and other hazards**

Boat people had to face storms, diseases and starvation, and elude pirates. The boats were not intended for navigating open waters, and would typically head for busy international shipping lanes some 240 km to the east. The lucky ones would succeed in being rescued by freighters or reach shore 1 – 2 weeks after departure. The unlucky ones continue their perilous journey at sea, sometimes lasting a few months long, suffering from hunger, thirst, disease, and pirates before finding safety.

A typical story of the hazards faced by the boat people was told in 1982 by a man named Le Phuoc. He left Vietnam with 17 other people in a boat only 23 feet (7 mts) long to attempt the 300 mile (500 km) passage across the Gulf of Thailand to southern Thailand or Malaysia. Their two outboard motors soon failed and they drifted without power and ran out of food and water. Thai pirates boarded their boat three times during their 17 day voyage, raped the four women on board and killed one, stole all the possessions of the refugees, and abducted one man who was never found. When their boat sank they were rescued by a Thai fishing boat and ended up in a refugee camp on the coast of Thailand. Another of many stories tell of a boat carrying 75 refugees which was sunk by pirates and only one person survived. The survivors of another boat in which most of 21 women abroad were abducted by pirates said that at least 50 merchant vessels passed them by and ignored their pleas for help. An Argentine freighter finally picked them up and took them to Thailand.

UNHCR began compiling statistics on piracy in 1981. In that year, 452 boats carrying Vietnamese boat people arrived in Thailand carrying 15,479 refugees. 349 of the boats had been attacked by pirates an average of three times each. "578 women had been raped; 228 women had been abducted; and 881 people were dead or missing." An international anti-piracy campaign began in June 1982 and reduced the number of pirate attacks although they continued to be frequent and often deadly until 1990.

Estimates of the number of Vietnamese boat people who died at sea can only be guesses. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees,
between 200,000 and 400,000 boat people died at sea. Other wide-ranging estimates are that 10 to 70 percent of Vietnamese boat people died at sea.

Refugee camps

In response to the outpouring of boat people, the neighboring countries with international set up refugee camps along their shores and on isolated small islands. As the number of boat people grew to tens of thousands per month in early 1979, their numbers outstripped the ability of local governments, the UN, and humanitarian organizations to provide food, water, housing, and medical care to them. Two of the largest refugee camps were Bidong Island in Malaysia and Galang Refugee Camp in Indonesia.

Bidong Island was designated as the principal refugee camp in Malaysia in August 1978. The Malaysian government towed any arriving boatloads of refugees to the island. Less than one square mile (260 ha) in area, Bidong was prepared to receive 4,500 refugees, but by June 1979 Bidong had a refugee population of more than 40,000 who had arrived in 453 boats. The UNHCR and a large number of relief and aid organizations assisted the refugees. Food and drinking water had to be imported by barge. Water was rationed at one gallon per day per person. The food ration was mostly rice and canned meat and vegetables. The refugees constructed crude shelters from boat timbers, plastic sheeting, flattened tin cans, and palm fronds. Sanitation in the crowded conditions was the greatest problem. The United States and other governments had representatives on the island to interview refugees for resettlement. With the expansion of the numbers to be resettled after the July 1979 Geneva Conference, the population of Bidong slowly declined. The last refugee left in 1991.

Galang Refugee Camp was similarly on an island, but with a much larger area than Bidong. More than 170,000 Indochinese, the great majority Boat People, were temporarily resident at Galang while it served as a refugee camp from 1975 until 1996. After they became well-established, Galang and Bidong and other refugee camps provided education, language and cultural training to boat people who would be resettled abroad. Refugees usually had to live in camps for several months—and sometimes years—before being resettled.

In 1980, the Philippine Refugee Processing Center was established on the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines. The center housed up to 18,000 Indochinese refugees who were approved for resettlement in the United States and elsewhere and provided them English language and other cross-cultural training.

1980s surge and response

Between 1980 and 1986 the outflow of boat people from Vietnam was less than the numbers resettled in third countries. In 1987, the numbers of boat people began to grow again. The destination this time was primarily Hong Kong and Thailand. On June 15, 1988, after more than 18,000 Vietnamese had arrived that year, Hong Kong authorities announced that all new arrivals would be placed in detention centers and confined until they could be resettled. Boat people were held in prison-like conditions and education and
other programs eliminated. Countries in Southeast Asia were equally negative about accepting newly-arriving Vietnamese boat people into their countries. Moreover, both asylum and resettlement countries were doubtful that many of the newer boat people were fleeing political repression and thus merited refugee status.

Another international refugee conference in Geneva in June 1979 produced the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) which had the aim of reducing the migration of boat people by requiring that all new arrivals be screened to determine if they were genuine refugees. Those who failed to qualify as refugees would be repatriated, voluntarily or involuntarily, to Vietnam, a process that would take more than a decade. The CPA quickly served to reduce boat people migration. In 1989, about 70,000 Indochinese boat people arrived in five Southeast Asian countries and Hong Kong. By 1992, that number declined to only 41 and the era of the Vietnamese Boat People fleeing their homeland definitively ended. However, resettlement of Vietnamese continued under the Orderly Departure Program, especially of former re-education camp inmates, Amerasian children, and to reunify families.

**Resettlement and repatriation**

The boat people comprised only part of the Vietnamese resettled abroad from 1975 until the end of the twentieth century. A total of more than 1.6 million Vietnamese were resettled between 1975 and 1997. Of that number more than 700,000 were boat people; the remaining 900,000 were resettled under the Orderly Departure Program or in China or Malaysia. (For complete statistics see Indochina refugee crisis)

UNHCR statistics for 1975 to 1997 indicate that 839,228 Vietnamese arrived in UNHCR camps in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. They arrived mostly by boat, although 42,918 of the total arrived by land in Thailand. 749,929 were resettled abroad. 109,322 were repatriated, either voluntarily or involuntarily. The residual caseload of Vietnamese boat people in 1997 was 2,288, of whom 2,069 were in Hong Kong. The three countries resettling most Vietnamese boat people and land arrivals were the United States with 402,382; Australia with 108,808; and Canada with 100,012

**Vietnamese refugees resettling in Western countries**

The Orderly Departure Program from 1979 until 1994 helped to resettle refugees in the United States as well as other Western countries. In this program, refugees were asked to go back to Vietnam and waited for assessment. If they were deemed to be eligible to be re-settled in the US (according to criteria that the US government had established), they would be allowed to immigrate.

Humanitarian Operation (HO) was set up to benefit former South Vietnamese who were involved in the former regime or worked for the US. They were to be allowed to immigrate to the US if they had suffered persecution by the communist regime after 1975. Half-American children in Vietnam, descendants of servicemen, were also allowed to immigrate along with their
mothers or foster parents. This program sparked a wave of rich Vietnamese parents buying the immigration rights from the real mothers or foster parents. They paid money (in the black market) to transfer the half-American children into their custody, then applied for visas to emigrate to the USA. Most of these half-American children were born of American soldiers and prostitutes. They were subject to discrimination, poverty, neglect and abuse. On November 15, 2005, the United States and Vietnam signed an agreement allowing additional Vietnamese to immigrate who were not able to do so before the humanitarian operation program ended in 1994. Effectively this new agreement was the extension and also final chapter of the HO program.

The Roman Catholic Church, given its long history with the Vietnamese people, facilitated the relocation of a large number of Vietnamese boat people through its many Orders and charities. Involved in this work was the work of the Vietnamese Refugee Office of Caritas Italiana, a major Catholic Italian charity, under the leadership of Monsignor Tran Van Hoai.

Hong Kong adopted the "port of first asylum policy" in July 1979 and received over 100,000 Vietnamese at the peak of migration in the late 1980s. Many refugee camps were set up in its territories. Frequent violent clashes between the boat people and security forces caused public outcry and mounting concerns in the early 1990s since many camps were very close to high-density residential areas.

By the late 1980s, Western Europe, the United States and Australia received fewer Vietnamese refugees. It became much harder for refugees to get visas to settle in those countries.

As hundreds of thousands of people were escaping out of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia via land or boat, countries of first asylum in South-East Asia were faced with the continuing exodus and the increasing reluctance by third countries to maintain resettlement opportunities for every exile, they threatened push-backs of the asylum seekers. In this crisis, the Comprehensive Plan of Action For Indochinese Refugees was adopted in June 1989. The cut-off date for refugees was March 14, 1989. Effective from this day, the Indochinese Boat people would no longer automatically be considered as prima facie refugees, but only asylum seekers and would have to be screened to qualify for refugee status. Those who were "screened-out" would be sent back to Vietnam and Laos, under an orderly and monitored repatriation program.

The refugees faced prospects of staying years in the camps and ultimate repatriation back to Vietnam. They were branded, rightly or wrongly,
as economic refugees. By the mid-1990s, the number of refugees fleeing from Vietnam had significantly dwindled. Many refugee camps were shut down. Most of the well educated or those with genuine refugee status had already been accepted by receiving countries.

There appeared to be some unwritten rules in Western countries. Officials gave preference to married couples, young families and women over 18 years old, leaving single men and minors to suffer at the camps for years. Among these unwanted, those who worked and studied hard and involved themselves in constructive refugee community activities were eventually accepted by the West by recommendations from UNHCR workers. Hong Kong was open about its willingness to take the remnants at its camp, but only some refugees took up the offer. Many refugees would have been accepted by Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, but hardly any wanted to settle in these countries.

The market reforms of Vietnam, the imminent return of Hong Kong to China by Britain and the financial incentives for voluntary return to Vietnam caused many boat people to return to Vietnam during the 1990s. Most remaining asylum seekers were voluntarily or forcibly repatriated to Vietnam, although a small number (about 2,500) were granted the right of abode by the Hong Kong Government in 2002. In 2008, the remaining refugees in the Philippines (around 200) were granted asylum in Canada, Norway and the United States, marking an end to the history of the boat people from Vietnam.