

23 Oct. 89

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**Factors Affecting the Attitude of Hong Kong People  
Towards Vietnamese Boat People in Hong Kong**

by

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# Through the Tiger's Eye

HK 5 <sup>then 1989</sup> Aug 28 1989



## Vietnamese Boat People In Hong Kong

### *The Context:*

In the past ten years, Hong Kong has responded to the Vietnamese boat people in three distinctive ways, ranging from the initial positive reaction in 1979-1980 to a totally negative reaction since 1988, further aggravated by the June crisis in China. (1) Before 1982, people arriving from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were treated as if they were 'visitors' waiting to catch the coming flights for other places. They were housed in open centers and allowed to have absolute freedom to go out and work. Their refugee status was never questioned. (2) By 1982, with the interest of the traditional resettlement countries declining, and yet the influx of boat people showing no sign of abating, a so-called "humane deterrent" policy was instituted with the intended purpose of discouraging other boat people from entering Hong Kong. The essence of this policy was to "house" subsequent arrivals in "detention centres" run by various law enforcement agencies such as the the police and correctional services, and they were neither allowed to go out permitted to secure employment, though their status as refugees 'reluctantly' recognized. (3) By mid-June, 1988 another policy detaining Vietnamese boat people in "closed centers" and requiring them to go through the screening process to prove that they do indeed have a genuine claim on refugee status - was implemented in response to a

set of factors criticism directed at Hong Kong by UNHCR for placing refugees in detention centres; to the local labour shortage; and to pressure other countries to find a durable solution for the remaining 20,000 refugees in Hong Kong. In an attempt to make this new policy 'acceptable' to UNHCR (who was not in favour of instituting such a screening process without her direct involvement in assessing and evaluating the claim), it was reported that a compromise was worked by U.K and UNHCR whereby the "detention centres" would gradually be "liberalized" by allowing the refugees to go out and secure employment and by transferring the administration of these camps to UNHCR. As of August, 1989, only one of a total of eight such detention centres was administered by UNHCR. In fact, UNHCR has widely been criticized as not willing or unprepared to undertake the unenviable task of running these camps. Meanwhile, in spite of the change of policy, the "liberalization" of the "detention camps" has been argued as an "incentive" for the increasing influx of Vietnamese boat people.

*Some figures:*

As of August 18, 1989, a total of some 54,498 Vietnamese boat people were in Hong Kong, placed in different types of camps. Among these figures, 12,557 arrived in Hong Kong prior to the 'screening' policy implemented on June 16, 1988, with the purpose of "stopping" or "discouraging" other Vietnamese from coming to Hong Kong. In other



words, these 12,557 Vietnamese boat people were given "refugee status" and as such, eligible for resettlement. However, the possibility for them to be accepted for overseas resettlement is not promising because:

(1) The traditional resettlement countries are not taking in "large numbers" as indicated by the following figures:

As August 15, 1989:

Australia.....	415	
Canada.....	1039	
Hong Kong*.....	8	
New Zealand.....	136	
U.S.A.....	750	
U.K**.....	98	
<b>Total</b>	<b>2645</b>	<b>(1988 total:2772)</b>

\*For refugees to be accepted for resettlement in Hong Kong, they have to be ethnic Chinese, with relatives residing in Hong Kong, and with proven ability to adapt (e.g., finding jobs).

\*\*U.K., as the "mother country" of Hong Kong, over the years, has consistently been "low" in accepting refugees from her colony - Hong Kong, which has a direct impact on the Hong Kong people's reactions (largely negative) towards the Vietnamese boat people.

(2) Some of these refugees are not "selected" due to poor health and most importantly, some of them might have criminal records in Hong Kong during their lengthy stay in camps; or, if they had the desirable "skills" deemed necessary for successful resettlement, they could have been "selected" and "left" Hong Kong for other countries; (the average length of stay in camps for these refugees is already 5-8 years); and

(3) Since they are accepted as "refugees" and are allowed to leave the camps for taking up employment in Hong Kong (with chronic shortage of labour in menial jobs, e.g. construction), some of them would like to have the opportunity to accumulate sufficient "funds" prior to resettle in a "foreign" country; and combined with this factor, some would like to postpone the second uprooting process for they have "read/heard" that resettlement countries had pledged in the July Meeting in Thailand to empty the refugee camps in Southeast Asia within three years.

As a result of these factors, refugee camps in Hong Kong are still "crowded" with Vietnamese boat people waiting to be resettled.

A distinction has to be made between these refugees and the other Vietnamese boat people who arrived after the implementation of "screening process" on June 16, 1988. As of August 18, 41,941 arrived and they were detained and subsequently placed in "closed centres." They were not allowed to go out and work. They have to go through the process of "proving themselves" according to the determining criteria in the 1951 Convention on Refugee and 1967 Protocol. It is an extremely slow process and data indicated that, only about 1500 had been screened and very few (about 170) were accepted as refugees. For those who were accepted as refugees, they would then be moved to "detention centres" with the other already accepted refugees and they could go out and work while awaiting "interviews" with resettlement countries. The remaining arrivals from this cohort of 41,941 boat



people, unless their claim on refugee status being accepted/approved, would be "locked up" in camps waiting to be "repatriated" when the "situations" become appropriate.

***Public Attitude Towards Refugees:***

Analysing the Hong Kong people's attitude towards these refugees is a complicated task, because its root cause is not immediately apparent. It involves an acute sense of "helplessness" among Hong Kong people, particularly as a response to the June crisis in China. There is also a sense of "betrayal" and "abandonment" experienced by them in relation to the "right of abode" issue with the U.K. government. As well, a sense of being "victimized" resulting from the "power struggle" between U.N.H.C.R. and U.K. is felt by the Hong Kong people. Hence, they do not want to be "burdened and troubled" by these "uninvited and unwelcome invaders." To understand this composite picture, it is necessary to take note on:

(1) As 1997 approaches (by a negotiated treaty between U.K. and China, with minimal participation of the Hong Kong government and Hong Kong people), Hong Kong will be reverted back to China. This by itself has created what is commonly known as "1997 gitters" resulting in thousands upon thousands of Hong Kong people applying for immigration to Canada, Australia, U.S.A. and other places. However, many of the Hong Kong people, responding to the 10 years of "open door" policy instituted by the Beijing regime, are somewhat "hopeful" or



with a certain level of "guarded optimism" that "business will be as usual" and their "life" will not be greatly or unduly "disrupted and dislocated." However, the June crisis in China had "awaken" them and for many of them, there is no "escape route" from the impending "upheaval" - a sense of helplessness is acutely felt. While they are making attempts to alleviate this sense of helplessness by capturing every opportunity to apply for visas to immigrate (for example, when Singapore announced in early August, 1989 that criteria for accepting immigrants from Hong Kong are greatly relaxed, literally thousands of people lined up the Singapore High Commission over-night to get an application form, and when completed, pay a sum of HK\$1,200.00 for processing), international communities such as U.S.A., U.K., Canada, Australia, and others do not take any interest in "listening" to their impending plight, and least of all, "offerring" to them a sought "escape route." On the other hand, meetings were held to discuss the Vietnamese boat people and, implicitly or explicitly, Hong Kong was "criticized" for her treatments towards the refugees and was "threatened" (U.S. Senator Solaz's visit to Hong Kong in August) to bear the consequence of being rejected by other countries when they themselves would be in a similar situation as a result of the 1997 take-over of Hong Kong by the Chinese government. This indeed has intensified their sense of helplessness and uncertainty in the near future.

(2) The sense of "betrayal" and "abandonment" is directly related to the British government in her (a) negotiation with the Chinese regime

in Beijing. By and large, the "wheeling and dealing" are conducted, in minds of Hong Kong people, without their "input" and their "interest" is not being considered. They believe that the British government has failed to negotiate a treaty with the Chinese regime that would guarantee their 'security and stable future' in Hong Kong; and (b) providing them with an "escape route" in terms of granting them the right of abode in U.K. had the situations after 1997 demanded. As over 3 millions of the 6 millions Hong Kong people were born there, as British subjects holding British passports, they believe that they have the inalienable rights to this claim - right of abode in U.K. However, not only that the British government has denied them this right, and in spite of increasing opposition towards the Vietnamese boat people, she has insisted on maintaining Hong Kong as the first port of asylum - that is, imposing upon her colony to continue the 'open door policy' for incoming Vietnamese boat people while she has been perceived as neither increasing her involvement in resettling these boat people, nor seeking to secure a viable solution with the international communities to boat people crisis in Hong Kong, nor making substantial contribution either in financial terms or in kind to the running and maintaining of refugee camps. For example, in view of recent disturbances in different refugee camps, it was suggested that instead of over-stretching the limited resources in the Police force in Hong Kong, the British army stationed there and supported by the Hong Kong taxpayers should be drafted in to keep order. However, this suggestion was

turned down due to reason(s) that this British army is not "trained" for civilian and/or police duties. The rejection was interpreted by the Hong Kong people as another indication of British government's policy of "betrayal and abandonment." Worse, some Hong Kong people have interpreted this rejection, in conjunction with other issues mentioned e.g., maintaining Hong Kong as the first port of asylum, as a hidden agenda by the British government to breed Hong Kong to death before the 1997 turn over.

(3) As Hong Kong continues, reluctantly, to be the first port of asylum for the continuing influx of Vietnamese boat people, she is not directly involved in the decision-making process. Any decision made is seen as a 'power struggle' between the two major players in the game - UNHCR and U.K. with U.S.A. calling the tune behind the scene, while Hong Kong is either totally ignored or at most, allowed to assume the role of "spectator". They feel "victimized" as "pawns" in the game. For example, with repatriation as the "game" played between the major players, UNHCR insists on, with the support of U.S.A., that this has to be done completely voluntary on the part of the Vietnamese boat people, and the British government has yet to clearly spell out her position, the Hong Kong government, in spite of overwhelming support of Hong Kong people for 'repatriating' those Vietnamese boat people who are "screened out" as non-refugees back to Vietnam, has been asked to approve additional funding to construct new refugee camps to reduce the over-crowding conditions in some existing camps (temporary holding



centres) on the one hand, and to improve the living conditions for the Vietnamese boat people on the other. While the major players continue to find a solution to settle the score and the Hong Kong people continue to ante the UN's share of running the camps (UN has yet to reimburse HK\$ 5 million for the fiscal year of 1989, to the Hong Kong government), repatriation is seen as a "farce." Firstly, the number of Vietnamese boat people, voluntarily repatriated, is small in comparison

arrivals. For example, on August 18, 1989, as the third group of some 121 Vietnamese boat people leaving for Vietnam on board of a jet, some 548 boat people arrived in Hong Kong waters. Secondly, since each repatriate was given a certain sum of money (US\$50.00) by UNHCR prior to departure and often times, they used this sum of money to buy "luxurious items" in Hong Kong to bring back "home, the repatriation is seen as an 'invitation' to other Vietnamese in Vietnam to come to Hong Kong. Indeed, there were reported cases that among the 'newly arrived' Vietnamese boat people, some were 'ex-repatriates' UNHCR in Hong Kong initially denied this and later admitted that there might be a few cases. Nevertheless, the sense of 'victimized' as a result of not being able to be "master of one's own home" is deeply and widely felt by the Hong Kong people.

In addition to the above-mentioned factors underscoring the largely negative attitude towards the Vietnamese boat people in Hong Kong, a fuller comprehension of Hong Kong people's reaction to the Vietnamese boat people requires a close examination on the following factors:

) *Feeling of Jealousy* With the impending 'take over' of Hong Kong by the Chinese regime, many Hong Kong people are trying to find an 'escape route' by emigrating to other countries. In contrast to the Vietnamese boat people, it appears that the chance for them to leave is much better than the Hong Kong people since they are still the subject of discussion in the international communities. However, while the Hong Kong people are 'crying out' for attention to their impending plight and "making attempts to alleviate this increasingly "heightened level of anxiety, they are at the same time forced to support others by letting them having the very chance which they have come to believe as the very "solution" to their 'problems. Hence, in spite of the appalling living conditions in camps, they are at least a step ahead of the Hong Kong people in terms of leaving for other secure places before inevitable establishment of a larger refugee camp in Hong Kong, time, for the Hong Kong people

2) *Sense of Injustice*. As a substantial portion of the Hong Kong people left China for Hong Kong in 1949 when the People's Republic of China was established, some still have relatives or even family members in China. The Hong Kong immigration regulations have made "family reunion a difficult and long-drawn process. In addition, in an attempt to stem the flow of "illegal immigrants" from China entering Hong Kong, a policy of "immediate repatriation" was instituted between Hong Kong and China. In other words, if a person from China being caught by the Hong Kong police in their routine check of identity paper (every



Hong Kong resident by law has to carry his/her identity card for inspection when asked by police) and cannot produce one, that is, not a legal resident in Hong Kong, will be immediately sent back to China. There are cases that even relatives and/or family members of Hong Kong residents, bypassing the "normal process" of obtaining immigrant visas, being sent back to China. For example, in August, 1989, a legal resident of Hong Kong, went on a hunger strike to protest the government's decision of not allowing his son to stay with him in Hong Kong. This case, once vividly reported in the media, has intensified the feeling of injustice which has aptly reflected and captured by the following statement: "We spend millions of dollars for the Vietnamese boat people, why can't we afford to accept this little boy?!"

(3) *Location of Camps:* In an effort to alleviate the over-crowding conditions in the refugee camps particularly the temporary holding centres, new camps are to be constructed. However, the decision as to where the camp should be constructed is by and large made by the government without any consultation with the local people. Recently, the government has decided to build a new refugee camp within the vicinity of a reservoir in an outlying district. This choice has drawn criticism and protest from the Hong Kong people. Their reaction to this has undoubtedly been related to what they have been exposed to via the media - reporting instances of Vietnamese boat people polluting the water in and around their refugee camps. Therefore, the Hong Kong people do not believe, in spite of numerous assurance from the



government that security measures and other amenities built in the new camp would make it virtually impossible for the Vietnamese boat people to do anything that would pollute the drinking water of the Hong Kong people, that the government is taking seriously about their legitimate concern and instead, the government is taking order directly from U.K to improve the living conditions for the Vietnamese boat people so as to appease the UNHCR and other international communities for her humanitarian treatment towards the refugees. Nevertheless, their concerted effort including sit-in, demonstration, camping on the proposed refugee camp site for nine days (ultimately removed by police) and suggesting an alternate site, failed to convince the government to change the decision. As such, they deeply feel that not only their legitimate concern has totally been ignored, but more importantly, the interest and welfare of the Vietnamese boat people have unreasonably been prioritized."

Combined with these various factors, reports saying that Vietnamese boat people were given priority in medical treatments (reluctantly admitted by one clinic close to a refugee camp saying that they did not want too many boat people waiting there for treatment) have effectively "hardened" the negative attitude of the Hong Kong people towards the Vietnamese boat people as "unwanted and unwelcome people" in the midst of their already limited and congested living space, not to mention their deeply felt "uncertainty" about own future

### *Concluding Remarks:*

The analysis on Hong Kong people's attitude towards Vietnamese boat people has underscored the importance that solution to the "boat people crisis" has to address to the concerns deeply felt by the Hong Kong people. As a recent survey indicated (August, 1989) that about two third of the Hong Kong people urged the Hong Kong government not to approve additional funding for building new refugee camps and, a greater portion of them would like the Hong Kong government to "press" the British government to end the policy of making Hong Kong as the first port of asylum, even though they realize that their 'opinion and effort' would become a futile exercise. However, without addressing to their concerns directly, efforts and measures taken to ease the plight of the Vietnamese boat people in Hong Kong, particularly those currently in "closed centres" would merely be fallen into "deaf ears". The reason is: administrators and workers running these camps are themselves Hong Kong people who share and identify with these concerns. Ultimately, it is conceivable that the Vietnamese boat people would become the scapegoats and victims