

# Behind the boat people problem

*Pity would be no more  
If we did not make somebody Poor*  
William Blake

by Dave Dellinger

The plight of the Indochina refugees is so heartrending that one hesitates to discuss it realistically, for fear that hard-headedness will be mistaken for hard-heartedness. But the poor of this world will not benefit from the self-indulgent pity promoted by the press, which ignores causes and makes for more refugees. So in order that we may understand what can be done not just to ease the immediate suffering and loss of life but to begin solving the problem at its source, let us consider how the situation got to be so bad.

Unfortunately there is more than enough blame to go around, with the United States, Vietnam, and China all implicated to one degree or another. But anyone relying on the American media would never guess it. The media have seized on the refugees' sufferings — which no one with a trace of compassion could fail to be moved by — to try to convince an American public, nearly overwhelmed by its own problems, that no matter how bad things are here, they would be worse under any alternate economic system or form of government. As ABC News put it recently, "Waiting in line for gas is a small problem compared to the plight of the Chinese boat people from Vietnam."

Specifically, the plight of the refugees is offered as a powerful "Exhibit A" of how much worse things are under "Communist Tyranny" (it being assumed that "Communist Tyranny" is — give or take a few reforms and a more effective president — the only alternative to what we have). And a special effort is being made to woo back into the fold a generation of American dissidents who cut their political teeth on opposition to U.S. war crimes in Vietnam.

It is amazing how selective the media's indignation is. When Malaysia tows overladen boats back to sea, many to sink or fall prey to marauding pirates, *Time* says that "Malaysia insists, fairly enough, that it simply cannot afford to take care of so many exiles." *Time* doesn't stop to ask, with equal "fairness," whether Vietnam can afford to take care of so many exiles from U.S.-devastated areas in South Vietnam and China-invaded areas in the North. It prefers to call the refugees "victims of the cynical racist policies of the Hanoi government."

But Chris Mullen, a British journalist with Southeast Asia credentials and formerly employed by the BBC, reminds us of the numbers and backgrounds of the internal exiles Vietnam has to cope with:

*When the Vietnamese Communists took power in Saigon ... because the suddenness of their victory was unexpected, they captured nearly the entire ruling class of South Vietnam. The Americans had time to take with them only about 20,000 of their most committed friends. Behind they left a South Vietnamese army and police force of 1.2 million men ... over 300,000 civil servants, and a huge community of rich merchants and wheeler dealers — mainly of Chinese origin — none of whom could expect to maintain their old lifestyle under the new order. Many ... had already fled South from the Communists in 1954, but this time they had nowhere else to run .... There were large numbers of prostitutes, drug addicts, and refugees from the countryside, none of whom had any means of*

*supporting themselves. To make matters worse, there have been a series of disastrous harvests, following floods which last year destroyed one-fifth of the country's livestock and inundated 500,000 homes, mainly in the rice-producing Mekong Delta.*

Ignoring all this, *The New York Times* states piously that "the government of Vietnam ... has caused the tragedy." It is as if decades of internal corruption and U.S.-imposed destruction had no lingering effect on Vietnam. And as if the postwar embargo on reparations, trade, and credits has not limited Vietnam's ability to integrate into its economy the 20-million southerners it inherited when the U.S. was forced to leave, taking its 2-billion dollars a year in economic and military aid with it.

## From forced urbanization to forced emigration

During the war the U.S. government practiced a policy of "forced urbanization," under the intellectual leadership of Harvard University's Samuel Huntington. Saturation bombing was combined with the use of flamethrowers, bulldozers, destructive chemicals (such as Agent Orange), and the strafing of livestock to destroy the homes and livelihoods of the people. This forced them into the cities where, the theory was, they could be more easily controlled or eliminated.

Saigon grew to five times its prewar size and was maintained artificially by American airlifts, payrolls and aid. When the war ended, the United States adopted Von Clausewitz's famous dictum and continued the war by other means. It used the embargo as a method of making life miserable, if not impossible, in the cities.

Stripped of sufficient sources of food, raw materials, spare parts, capital, and foreign exchange, the Vietnamese initially sustained the southern economy with supplies left over from the occupation, and goods diverted from the meager resources of the North. For nearly three years, they artificially maintained a standard of living in the South higher than in the North, but lower than former collaborators and profiteers had become accustomed to. Unlike Cambodia, Vietnam had no "forced march" to the countryside and, according to reliable observers, used persuasion rather than compulsion to try to repopulate the agricultural areas and take the strain off the cities.

Of course *The Times* knows this. Or would know it if it weren't so blinded by its anti-Communism. Reporting a day earlier from a country in which the United States still hopes to maintain a dominating influence, Alan Riding wrote in *The Times* that

*Nicaragua's precarious agriculture-based economy has already been devastated (by several months of civil war), condemning this poor Central American republic of 2.5 million people to many years of reconstruction once a settlement is reached .... The return to full democracy through free elections may be delayed by the more urgent needs of reconstruction.*

One is tempted to ask when, during 45 years of U.S. installed and backed Somoza family rule, Nicaragua had "full democracy" and "free elections." (And to remember that although the United States properly rushed relief to Somoza's Nicaragua after the 1972 earthquake, it offered no assistance to



## "Unfortunately there is more than emigration"

Vietnam after last fall's paralyzing floods.)

And, it's clearly a question of politics, not geographical proximity. The press has virtually ignored the plight of Haiti's "boat people," who flee that right-wing dictatorship at the rate of 150 a day, risking an 800-mile journey to southern Florida in flimsy boats, many of which never make it. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service declares 99 percent of the Haitians who apply for asylum "economic" rather than "political" refugees and sends them back.

Nor are Vietnam's boat people Southeast Asia's only refugees. Besides the unfortunates fleeing Vietnam, Chinese citizens, displaced or displeased by China's recent moves to the right, have been flooding into Hong Kong at the rate of 40,000 or more a month for the last six months.

Hong Kong is a British colony, and anyway England has less to prove about Vietnam than the United States. So we read in the June 29, *New Statesman* that

*Behind Mrs. Thatcher's decision to send 1,000 more troops to Hong Kong (to police its border with China) lies a deeper tragedy than the well-publicized plight of the Vietnamese boat people .... There are something like 900 arrests per day. In addition, for each illegal*

*captured and returned to China, up to three succeed in making it into Hong Kong.*

Americans have not had their emotions aroused and manipulated about these Chinese victims. It is perhaps because they come from a country that has recently "taught Vietnam a lesson," is even more anti-Soviet than the United States, and is thought to offer America's multinational corporations vast reservoirs of cheap labor and profitable investment?

*Asia Week*, published in Hong Kong, states that:

*In Vietnam ... the West has a direct accountability, stemming from the wars it fought there, for the situation that has produced the refugee crisis.... U.S. reluctance to normalize relations with Hanoi is perhaps the single most important factor behind the current predicament. American businessmen have been eager to start trading with Vietnam and it is conceivable that such a development will help not only the refugee exodus but such irritants as the stationing of Vietnamese troops in Kampuchea. The shunning of Hanoi satisfies the Kissingerian pique against Vietnam in Washington, but its p...*