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London Daily Express, UPI Photos

Behind the rhetoric in Uganda —the expulsion of the Asians

At the beginning of August 1972, General Idi Amin Dada of Uganda ordered all non-citizen Asians to leave the country within 90 days unless they were given special permission to remain. During the next three months, 45,000 Asians were forced to find new homes abroad, including 5,000 who have settled in Canada. General Amin has been acclaimed by some as the saviour of Uganda and decried by others as a black racist. However, any examination and explanation of his action should ignore the rhetoric about the man and concentrate on a review of the history and socio-economic role of the Asian community in Uganda and in East Africa as a whole.

The Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama encountered merchants from Arabia and the Indian subcontinent trading in spices, skins, ivory, gold and slaves in all the major towns along the East African coast during his voyages of discovery at the end of the fifteenth century. It was not until almost four hundred years later, however, when the British colonial administration recruited labourers from the sub-continent to help in the construction of

the East African Railway from the port of Mombasa to Kampala, that settlers arrived from Asia in any numbers. An estimated 32,000 reached East Africa during that period and more than 7,000 of them remained there. As a result of continuing immigration, the number of Asians totalled more than 350,000 by the early 1960s or slightly more than 1 per cent of a total population of 30 million. They included approximately 150,000 in Kenya and 100,000 each in Tanzania and in Uganda.

Under British colonial rule, Asians could not own farm land (except in Tanganyika) and most of the early arrivals found positions in commerce, the skilled trades and the middle ranks of the civil service. Later generations turned to manufacturing and the professions. They quickly emerged as the East African middle class. In the ranks of the British colonial administration and the large British companies, they occupied the middle ground between senior British officials on the one hand and African clerks on the other. Colonial society was rigidly structured. Each racial group lived in its own residential area, with its own schools and clubs. The Africans understandably resented the privileged position occupied by the Asians and, as a prosperous minority that remained aloof and exclusive, they were the

Of the 45,000 Ugandan Asians forced to find new homes abroad, about 5,000 were granted entry to Canada. Pictured (left) is a group of refugees from Uganda trudging toward processing point in London. A young Asian mother and child (centre) wait in Montreal airport for accommodation arrangements to be completed and Bryce Mackasey (right), then Immigration Minister, welcomes a group of Ugandan children among the first party of Asians to arrive in Montreal.

This article was prepared in the African Affairs Division of the Department of External Affairs.