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NOTE FOR THE RECORD

VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

The Prime Minister had an informal meeting with the Home Secretary and the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary in the Cabinet Room on 9 July at 1230 to discuss the Government's approach to the continuing problem of Vietnamese refugees.

Lord Carrington gave a vivid account of the plight, which he had witnessed at first hand, of the Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong. He said that the approach which other countries, such as the United States, were likely to adopt towards the problem of Vietnamese refugees in general was likely to be conditioned in part by the UK's own policy to the refugees in Hong Kong. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Hartling, had suggested that the UK should accept 10,000 refugees as its contribution towards the international effort which the United Kingdom, together with other countries, had sought to stimulate. Lord Carrington said he was very concerned that if the UK did not come forward with a significant offer, there would be a damaging reaction both internationally and in the British Press.

The Prime Minister said that, in that case, the UK would have to cut down on the level of immigration into the UK, and in particular on the admission of dependants. The Home Secretary pointed out that in this area the UK was bound by the terms of the 1971 Immigration Act; no reductions were feasible. Lord Carrington suggested that the British Government should offer to take 10,000 refugees from Hong Kong alone, and that this intake should be spread over a period of 2 years. The UK should also make it clear that any refugees picked up on the high seas by UK registered ships would be subtracted from this total of 10,000. He thought that any lesser offer would be difficult to sustain internationally. The Prime Minister said that, on humanitarian grounds, she would much rather see the UK take in refugees than immigrants. With some exceptions there had been no humanitarian case for accepting 1½ million immigrants from South Asia and elsewhere. It was essential to draw a line somewhere.

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Mr. Whitelaw expressed the view that the British Press was now coming round towards the view that the UK should take more refugees; Mr. William Deedes felt passionately and the Economist, the Observer and the Guardian were taking a similar line. A recent meeting of the Party's Home Affairs Committee, which he had chaired, had shown that there was a considerable body of opinion in the Party which favoured increasing the UK's intake. A substantial number of members agreed with Reg Prentice's views, as indeed did all his Junior Ministers in the Home Office. Mr. Whitelaw said that if the Home Office were asked to accept 3,000 more refugees annually, this could be done on the basis of existing resources without opening up any additional camps or other facilities.

Mr. Whitelaw went on to say that the refugees and the immigrants were different kinds of people; his own preference would be not to mix the two categories in the same public presentation of the Government's case. He was at the moment endeavouring to find a means of tackling the problem of immigrant male fiancés: his objective would be to stop abuse of the law without frustrating genuine individual wishes. The procedures which he had in mind were a kind of steeple-chase, designed to weed out South Asians in particular. It would in principle be possible to introduce the necessary legislation by late July. He would prefer to do so at a later stage but it would be feasible to bring the legislation forward if this was essential. He had looked at the question of a register of dependents, which had been advocated in the Party's Election Manifesto, but had concluded that this would cost millions of pounds and would employ thousands of Civil Servants. A reduction in the inward flow of immigrants might compensate for a higher intake of Vietnamese refugees.

The Prime Minister said that in her view the 1,500 Vietnamese refugees whom the UK had already accepted recently should be subtracted from the 10,000 quota, if the Government decided to agree to this. Lord Carrington expressed reservations. The Home Secretary said that his own correspondence indicated a shift of opinion in favour of accepting more refugees. The Prime Minister said that in her view all those who wrote letters in this sense should be invited to accept one into their homes. She thought it quite wrong that immigrants should be given council housing whereas white

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citizens were not.

The Prime Minister asked whether a new influx of Vietnamese refugees could be resettled? It might be a matter simply of shifting them from one warehouse in Hong Kong to another in the UK. Mr. Whitelaw undertook to produce a detailed report on how the Vietnamese refugees admitted so far had been processed and on what had happened to them since their arrival. He would put a paper to Cabinet, in consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary. Lord Carrington said that this would have to be done quickly, since the UN Conference was due to meet on 20 July. It was agreed that the paper would come before Cabinet on 12 July.

Lord Carrington said that the UK would also have to offer some money at the forthcoming Conference. The Prime Minister said that if money was to be offered, it would have to come out of the FCO Vote.

The Prime Minister pointed out that throughout the weekend the No. 10 Press Office had been denying Press reports to the effect that the UK was about to agree to accept 10,000 more Vietnamese refugees. The Home Secretary asked whether the UK could not go for 6,000, or perhaps 9,000 spread over a period of three years. Lord Carrington said that in his view the UK would have to accept the target set for it by Mr. Hartling in order to get the Conference, for which the UK had itself called, off to a good start. The Prime Minister mentioned the problem which would face the UK over the refugees from Rhodesia, following Independence, but said that she had less objection to refugees such as Rhodesians, Poles and Hungarians since they could more easily be assimilated into British society.

In a subsequent conversation between the Prime Minister and Lord Carrington alone, it was agreed that the question of the UK approach to the forthcoming Geneva Conference on Refugees should be discussed, not in Cabinet on 12 July, but in OD on 10 July. Lord Carrington would introduce the subject orally and the Home Secretary would circulate his paper.

B.W.

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