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LONDON OFFICE

OUR REF.

YOUR REF.

From: The Lord Inverforth

MOST URGENT

6th June, 1979.

Dear Prime Minister,

VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

Thank you so much for your letter of the 4th June, received here yesterday evening whilst in fact I was seeing Mr. Nott with the General Council of British Shipping team. Your kind remarks about the Master and crew of the "Sibonga" are much appreciated, as indeed is all the help the Government has given us in resolving this particular problem.

I am pleased to be able to tell you with confidence that Captain Appleby and his staff on board "Roachbank" are of comparable standard to those serving on "Sibonga", so that we can at least be proud of the way the ship continues to be handled in her regrettable predicament.

Nevertheless "Roachbank" continues to cause us vital concern.

I covered all the points which we find so worrying in my letter to you of the 30th May, but a week later - as of today's date - we have the situation completely unresolved, with the ship still at anchor off Kaohsiung with the 293 refugees still under my Company's care. From experience gained on "Sibonga" we know conditions are deteriorating daily, as these refugees (a high proportion of whom are children) were in a pathetic state when they were rescued, and with the best will in the world we just do not have the facilities to adequately deal with the health and specifically hygiene problems with which the care of these unfortunate people presents us.

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There are additional hazards to the safety of the ship. For example, potential outbreak of fire on board through indiscriminate smoking, and the vessel is inadequately equipped to deal with such a situation arising with these numbers on board. This was a major worry for us in the case of "Sibonga".

During the week since I last wrote to you we have been inundated with complaints and threatened action by our Venezuelan charterers and, as I told the Secretary of State for Trade yesterday, it is really not only my own Company which is losing credibility but the British shipping industry as a whole, because we are being made to look ineffective and unreliable as commercial traders.

It would appear to us from our own direct contacts with Taiwan that it is highly unlikely the Taiwanese Government will accept the 293 refugees. I was horrified to hear Mr. Nott say that negotiations might extend for some time. Time for us is so important.

The case of the "Roachbank" is becoming an increasingly embarrassing situation for HM Government as well as for ourselves. We are finding the attentions of the Press more and more demanding but so far we have managed, and indeed endeavoured, to act as discreetly as possible in order not to aggravate the position.

Therefore may I again implore the Government for an early decision before further deterioration of the very delicate situation in which your Administration and our "Roachbank" unfortunately find themselves.

I am sending a copy of this letter, too, to the Home Secretary, the Foreign & Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Trade.

Yours sincerely
Inverforth

The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher, MP,
The Prime Minister,
10 Downing Street,
London, S.W.1.