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Vietnam (P+2)
Refugees

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Visit by Lee Kuan Yew'
10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

20 June 1979

Dear Sir,

THE PRIME MINISTER'S DISCUSSION WITH THE PRIME MINISTER OF SINGAPORE,
MR. LEE KUAN YEW, AT 10 DOWNING STREET ON 20 JUNE 1979:
SOUTH EAST ASIA AND THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

The Prime Minister's tete-a-tete discussion with Mr. Lee Kuan Yew at No. 10 this morning, which lasted for one hour, concentrated mainly on oil/Middle East and on the problem of the Vietnamese refugees. I have summarised the exchanges on oil and the Middle East in a separate letter to Paul Lever. The following is a summary of the main points which arose during the discussion of South East Asia and the Vietnamese refugees.

Mr. Lee Kuan Yew gave the Prime Minister a substantial survey of the origins and underlying causes of the problem of the Vietnamese refugees. For over eight years, Mr. Lee said, the Soviet Union's propaganda organs had been saturating South East Asia with warnings of the threat which was being created to many governments in South East Asia by their ethnic Chinese minorities. The Russians depicted the ethnic Chinese throughout South East Asia as a fifth column, intent on changing the established order. Mr. Lee recalled that at the Bandung Conference in 1955, China had agreed to allow the overseas Chinese to choose between Chinese nationality and that of their country of residence. The Indonesians were firmly convinced that the large ethnic Chinese minority which they had acquired as a result of this decision had been substantially involved in the coup of 1975 and had actively supported the Communist Party of Indonesia. Thousands of ethnic Chinese had been butchered as a result. There were similar ethnic tensions in Malaysia and in other South East Asian countries. Mr. Lee pointed out that there were approximately 400,000 Ethnic Chinese in North Vietnam and 1.5 million in South Vietnam.

Mr. Lee went on to say that during the cultural revolution in Peking, the Bandung understanding had been reversed: the Red Guards had demanded that the overseas Chinese who had retained

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Chinese nationality should be disavowed. Those who had chosen to return to China had been ill-treated and humiliated. The arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976 had been followed by a further switch in Chinese policy. Mr. Lee recalled that in January 1978, the Peking Daily had published a major statement of the Chinese regime's attitude towards the overseas Chinese; this was along the lines of Bandung understanding but emphasis had been placed on the fact that people of Chinese descent, irrespective of their present nationality, retained an undeniable affinity with China. The statement was a thinly veiled appeal to the overseas Chinese to assist in the modernisation of China. Mr. Lee said that, for him, the statement amounted to a direct appeal to the Chinese population of Singapore over the heads of the Singapore Government. About this time, Mr. Lee went on, there were rumours of problems, inspired and encouraged by the Chinese Embassy, between the Vietnamese Government and the ethnic Chinese. Relations between China and Vietnam had deteriorated; the Chinese had cut off aid to Vietnam and Vietnam had joined COMECON. Vietnam had then embarked on the invasion of Cambodia, in the full knowledge that, as a result, China would do everything possible to subvert and disrupt the countries in Indo-China. This had led the Vietnamese regime to the conclusion that they would be compelled to expel from Vietnam the entire ethnic Chinese population of the country, together with everybody of Vietnamese nationality who was disaffected.

Mr. Lee told the Prime Minister that the implementation of this policy amounted to an attempt to blackmail the entire world. The Vietnamese knew very well that the expelled would cause trouble wherever they went, by upsetting the racial balance of the countries which gave them refuge. The Vietnamese were transporting thousands of ethnic Chinese every day across Cambodia, in order to dump them over the border into Thailand. The purpose of this was to impose an unacceptable strain on the Thai economy and on Thai society in order to subvert the regime. From all this, the main gainer was the Soviet Union: eight years of Soviet propaganda about the threat proposed by the Chinese minorities would have been proved up to the hilt. Moreover, the fate of the Vietnamese refugees would enable the Russians to expose President Carter's human rights campaign as a sham; China would be isolated and South East Asia destabilised. The Vietnamese, for their part, would enhance their image as the torch-bearers of revolution in the region: they were willing to commit any atrocity in the cause of creating socialist man. Mr. Lee noted that the Vietnamese were exceptionally polished international actors, as their performance at the Geneva Conference on Refugees, in December 1978, had shown.

Mr. Lee made the further comment that the whole problem of the ethnic Chinese in South East Asia was given only very sporadic attention by the media. If it would cause no embarrassment to the Prime Minister, he might use the occasion of his present visit to London to try to correct this. The Prime Minister made it clear that she would have no objection

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whatsoever if Mr. Lee were to do so. Mr. Lee said that the problem of the Vietnamese refugees had to be linked to the activities of the Soviet Union, since otherwise it was incomprehensible.

The Prime Minister told Mr. Lee that she had felt strongly that Taiwan should have agreed to accept the refugees from the United Kingdom ship Roachbank: she was grateful for Mr. Lee's agreement to make an approach to the Taiwan authorities but the outcome had been disappointing. Mr. Lee explained that, for the Taiwanese as for him in Singapore, it was not simply a lack of space although population density could not be increased indefinitely. The more serious difficulty was the fact that the non-Chinese minorities would bitterly resent the take-over of any more land by the ethnic Chinese and that this would create political problems. The Taiwanese, for their part, were primarily concerned by the possibility of subversive infiltration by Chinese Communist agents posing as refugees: they had even refused to take back some of their own Generals who had been imprisoned in Communist China, on the grounds that they would have been brainwashed. Mr. Lee said that, in his view, the best solution would be for the United Nations to purchase one or more islands, from Indonesia, Malaysia or the Philippines, to which the refugees could go. They were hard-working, talented and productive people and, given an island and twenty years, they could create another Singapore. Neither he nor, for example, the Indonesians would welcome this, but it would solve the problem.

Concluding the discussion, the Prime Minister said that the free world would have to find a way of providing a refuge for those who fled from Communism, just as the Soviet Union invariably took in its own sympathisers. It would be essential to put forward practical proposals at the forthcoming conference which the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had agreed to convene.

I am sending copies of this letter to Tony Butler (Home Office), Tom Harris (Department of Trade) and Martin Vile (Cabinet Office).

*Yours ever,
Gordon Corbett.*

J.S. Wall, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.