

Vietnam



HOME OFFICE  
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31 July 1980

Dear Michael

K.A. Jackson

TIMES ARTICLE ON VIETNAM REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA

You asked for briefing on yesterday's Times article.

The article appears to have been stimulated by a local officer of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. It is based upon the false premise that the United Kingdom contribution to accepting boat people from Vietnam is to be judged by the numbers we take from Malaysia. We have always made it clear that we would take the bulk of our refugees from Hong Kong. This policy is well understood by UNHCR. Our processing arrangements have already led to the acceptance of around 9,000 Vietnamese refugees in all, and are expected to get us near to completing the 10,000 quota by the end of this year. This hardly justifies a statement that "Britain's performance has become an open joke among the other resettlement countries".

The commitment made by the previous government to take 250 refugees from camps in Malaysia has already been more than met.

The article is wrong in suggesting that the United Kingdom took the initiative in inviting UNHCR to submit details of ten cases of handicapped people. UNHCR asked locally that the cases be considered and our representative there agreed without commitment. Our policy is to include handicapped people among the refugees we accept but, as the bulk of our acceptances are from Hong Kong, so too do the handicapped people come from Hong Kong. It might have been better to have rejected the proposal immediately or to have reached a decision more quickly, but reluctance to reject a proposal out of hand hardly merits the kind of criticism levelled in the article.

We are taking this up with UNHCR.

Yours sincerely  
A. P. Jackson

(A P JACKSON)

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OVERSEAS

# Britain is accused of playing with lives of Vietnam refugees

From David Watts  
Kuala Lumpur, July 29

United Nations officials have accused the British Government of "playing with the lives" of Vietnamese refugees after the withdrawal of an offer to resettle 10 handicapped people in Britain.

The Kuala Lumpur office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is particularly bitter at the refusal of the Home Office to allow the refugees to enter Britain as the original offer was seen here as an attempt to compensate for what the United Nations sees as a derisory effort by Britain to help to ease the plight of displaced Indo-Chinese in Malaysia.

Amid much publicity a year ago, Mr Thatcher and Lord Carrington, the Foreign Secretary, took the lead internationally in setting up the Geneva conference on displaced people from Indo-China. But in the succeeding months that beginning has not been followed up with a commensurate practical effort and United Nations officials in Malaysia are now apt to consider it a purely political gesture.

The complaints about the 10 refugees are particularly vehement not solely because of the reversal of the offer but because it took the British bureaucracy six months to make up its mind on the matter.

A spokesman at the British High Commission said that there had never been any commitment to take the handicapped refugees.

To which a spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees rejoined: "We were asked early this year to submit 10 special cases for consideration. Handicapped cases take a lot of processing and obviously you do not go to all that trouble unless there has been a clear indication that they will be taken. The implication

was clear—they would be specially and favourably considered outside any other quotas."

The official reason for the rejection of the displaced people by the Home Office was Britain's commitment to take refugees from HongKong. United Nations officials, however, point out that that commitment was well known before the offer was made to the handicapped Vietnamese.

A United Nations official said: "They should not waste our time, their own time and play with the lives of these handicapped families". The official noted that Britain had fallen far short of its pledges given at the time of the conference in Geneva a year ago.

"It is better not to make any offer at all. Other European countries have equally pressing commitments but they still take their share and applications are processed in half the time that it takes in Britain. Britain's performance has become an open joke among the other resettlement countries."

Britain, however, prepares homes for many refugees before they arrive, unlike some other resettlement countries.

At the time of the July conference, according to the United Nations, Britain said that it would take 250 displaced Indo Chinese from camps in Malaysia. Since then, 174 refugees have gone from Malaysia to Britain.

Since the beginning of the big outflow of refugees and displaced people from Indo China in 1975, Britain has taken 328 refugees from camps in Malaysia while France and West Germany have taken 10 times that number.

It is likely that the 10, who were not seriously handicapped, will find homes in Sweden and Switzerland, which have an exemplary record in taking handicapped refugees.

Critical three months