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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

Top Copy on: Vietnam, R2, 15 June 1979
Refugees.

Dear Sir,

Vietnamese Refugees

When the Governor of Hong Kong, Sir Murray MacLehose, called on the Prime Minister on 14 June at 1800 in the House of Commons, there was some discussion of the problem of Vietnamese refugees. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary was present. I have recorded separately the discussion of the need for reinforcement of the Hong Kong garrison.

The Prime Minister asked Sir Murray MacLehose how the Hong Kong Government could deal with the Chinese and Vietnamese refugees who reached the colony by water. Sir Murray said that it was impossible to send them back. Refugees who were put to sea from Thailand could hope to end up eventually on the virtually unadministered islands of the Indonesian archipelago; but from Hong Kong there was no destination which they could hope to reach. Hong Kong could only do its best to accommodate refugees and hope for some form of international solution to the problem. The Prime Minister asked whether she should not send a further message to the UN Secretary General and Lord Carrington mentioned Mr. Blaker's forthcoming meeting with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Hartling. Sir Murray MacLehose said that he would be asking the Americans to increase their settlement quota for refugees from Hong Kong. It was also essential that the office of the UNHCR in Hong Kong should be enlarged; but the UNHCR was desperately short of funds.

In further discussion, it was agreed that something should be done to make world opinion more aware of the scale of the problem. The Prime Minister suggested that some of the large press corps who would be in Tokyo to cover the Economic Summit should be persuaded to accompany Lord Carrington on his visit to Hong Kong after the Summit meeting. Lord Carrington and Sir Murray MacLehose agreed that this would be valuable, particularly if French and non-aligned journalists could be included in the party. I should be grateful if you would arrange for this possibility to be pursued and for a report in due course on the action taken, for the Prime Minister's information.

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Turning to the possibility of an international conference on refugees, Sir Murray MacLehose said that its object might be to secure bids from other countries, perhaps spread over a period, on the number of refugees which they would be willing to accept. He hoped that the UK would feel able to make a bid of her own. The Prime Minister explained the difficulties created for the British Government by the pressure of 2 million immigrants on our large cities and by the negative attitude of public opinion. Lord Carrington made the point that if the UK could not offer to take more people, the British Government would at least have to offer to give more money. Any UK offer, either to accept more refugees or to provide more financial help, could of course be made conditional on other countries doing the same. The Prime Minister expressed serious doubt as to whether the UK could offer to take any more refugees; she asked whether ships registered in other countries than the UK picked up large numbers of refugees in the South Pacific. Sir Murray said that they did but that, since it was the policy of the countries concerned to take in refugees so rescued as a matter of policy, less publicity surrounded incidents involving non-UK ships. Lord Carrington commented that a number of UK ships were now changing their usual routes in order to avoid encountering Vietnamese refugees.

Lord Carrington and Sir Murray MacLehose both stressed the difficulties which might arise if the UK, having pressed for an international conference, found herself unable to make a positive contribution to it.

As you know, I have already asked for advice (in my letter to you yesterday) on the position which the Government should adopt towards the next batch of refugees picked up by UK ships (probably those on the Norse Viking) and on whether further action should be taken with the United Nations. ^(P)

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 Campbell*

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

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