The Indochinese Refugees in Sweden

by Howard Adelman

It is hard to compare the Indochinese refugee settlement in Sweden to the Canadian experience. The discrepancies are legion. In numbers alone the Swedes host only 2,300 boat people, though family reunification programs have increased that number to about 3,000. There are 30 times that many in Canada. The Swedish effort was largely a government affair; the largest component in Canada was undertaken through private sponsorship. Though the Swedish group differed in language, religion, ethnic identity and their rural or urban origins, the group was *relatively* homogeneous. Nevertheless, in spite of and perhaps because of these and numerous other differences, the study, entitled *A New Wave on a Northern Shore* and published by the Swedish government, is very instructive. It was undertaken by Hugh Beach, a cultural anthropologist at Uppsala University, and Lars Ragvald, a sinologist at Stockholm University (who was also a member of the Swedish selection delegation during all four trips to the refugee camps.)

After providing a fairly extensive historical background in a study focussed on resettlement, the authors review the selection process, the stages of resettlement, family reunification and the employment and job training provided for the refugees. The historical survey is primarily relevant for its discussion of the overseas Chinese in Vietnam and the general thesis that there is an inverse correlation between the improvement in relations of overseas Chinese and China itself and a deterioration in relations of the overseas Chinese to the host country. Foreign Asians had always been identified with the weaknesses of Vietnam wherever it was colonized. Correspondingly, the Chinese were commonly persecuted or expelled under strong nationalistic governments, just as the Chinese bourgeoisie were manipulated and used within the few economic niches to which they were restricted by successive colonial powers. The economic conditions (the cessation of American aid, the cut-off of capital inflows, the isolation of Vietnam from international markets) of 1977–78 decimated the financial base of the Cholon bourgeoisie who also resisted relocation to new rural economic zones. The tensions between Hanoi and China added to the discrimination pressures (loss of jobs, reduced food rations, unequal pay and relocation efforts) on the overseas Chinese to leave Vietnam.

Sweden's refugees almost all stem from this group — those who fled the North in 1979 following the Chinese attack on Vietnam, those who fled the South following the economic reforms and the Vietnamese expulsion moves, and those who fled Pol Pot's murderous regime in Cambodia only to flee from their first refuge in Vietnam.

When Canada had pledged to take 5,000 Indochinese refugees in 1979, Sweden's quota was 250. In June, Canada increased its intake from 5,000 to 8,000 with an additional 4,000 targeted for the private sector. Sweden added 1,250 to its quota, one-half of its total new refugee quota. Following the July meeting in Geneva when Canada made its famous pledge to accept 50,000 Indochinese refugees, Sweden pledged to take an additional 750 (bringing its total to 2,250). With the 1980 quota of another 750, the total refugee intake into Sweden was targeted for 3,000, a figure which includes those brought in under the family reunification program.

The Swedish selection criteria were directed to those who spoke Cantonese (Sweden was the only resettlement country to have a language criterion), to those who comprised whole families, to those who were not acceptable to other countries and to those who were disabled, sick or in need of immediate help. The decision to select Cantonese speakers was based on two arguments: the lack of personnel in Sweden who spoke Vietnamese and the fact that a majority of "Boat People" were of Chinese extraction. (In fact, the Cantonese of many of the refugees was poor, and many spoke other dialects.) The decision to take whole families was intended to ease the adjustment problems as well as limit the numbers who would be taken in under family reunification programs. These self-interest and pragmatic criteria were balanced with the humanitarian concern for the needy, sick, and disabled.

For 4–6 months, the selected refugees initially went to accommodation centres operated by county employment boards where they were provided with clothing, medical care, language instruction and orientation programs. As in Canada, the health problem that caused the most worry to the Swedish public, for whom the concern was just as greatly exaggerated, was hepatitis. There too, dentists refused to treat Indochinese refugees who did not have a bill of health declaring them hepatitis-free. Similarly, the Swedes found that mental and emotional problems afflicted the refugees increasingly the longer they were there — primarily because of the trauma of family separation. Another parallel was the virtual uselessness of the initial information booklets provided to the refugees. The material was so dense, decontextualized and irrelevant to immediate needs, that the booklets were frequently discarded. Finally, the Swedes also found out that six months was insufficient for the refugees to learn Swedish, given the totally different native language structure.

One unique factor of the Swedish program was the family reunification program. While Sweden attempted wherever possible to bring out all relatives from a particular family (even when the family was distributed among a number of refugee camps), many refugees chose to go to Sweden because of Sweden's embassy in Hanoi and the perception that Sweden could be more effective in arranging the emigration of relatives still in Vietnam. Of the 1,100 entrance permits granted to people in Vietnam, 500 people had reached Sweden by the end of 1981. All of these were recent arrivals and almost no reunification occurred earlier. This parallels the Canadian experience and seems to belie the belief (which we shared) that the obstruction to reunification of Vietnamese to Canada was a reprisal for the Tory government's characterization of Hanoi's behaviour as akin to that of the Nazis.

Not all of the problems resulted from difficulties in obtaining exit permits. Entrance permits first had to be obtained from the Swedish National Immigration

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Board. Since Swedish family reunification is based on the core nuclear family — parents and children — this factor alone cut down the number of eligible applicants. When nephews (and nieces) who had migrated as part of an extended family attempted to sponsor their own parents, they were not permitted to if they were 20 years of age or over. When the word "family" means one thing to the Swedish authorities and another to the Boat People, it is not surprising that a great deal of confusion, misunderstanding and bitterness would arise over the family reunification program, especially given the expectations of the refugees who opted to go to Sweden. Nevertheless, Sweden has, proportionately, been considerably more successful in its reunification program than other countries of resettlement.

One similarity between the Canadian and Swedish experiences should be noted — the extremely rapid and successful adaptation of the refugees to a new work milieu in which they frequently establish themselves as the most expert and productive workers. They are lauded for not "taking advantage" of the Swedish welfare system. Similarly in the schools, "The Indochinese are described by their Swedish teachers as the most ambitious, hard-working and respectful students they have ever encountered."

One unique experiment proved to be an enormous success — the employment of a home-language teacher from the Indochinese group in Gnosjö. On the other hand, the Swedish Red Cross "contact family" program (which parallelled the Canadians "friendship family" program) in which a local Swedish family hosted an Indochinese family, proved to be a failure. With very few exceptions the contacts rarely lasted past several visits. One also sees other advantages in Canada for the Indochinese refugees compared to the situation in Sweden. Our multilingual programming in radio and television is envied, for example, in contrast to the Indochinese in Sweden who live in a cultural vacuum. On the other hand, we have to envy their family pedagogue program, individuals assigned by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare to serve as links between the Indochinese refugees and Swedish society with an ideal ratio of one pedagogue to 50 refugees for 2-3 years after arrival.

Global Refugee Policy: The Case for a Development Oriented Strategy

"Global Refugee Policy: the Case for a Development Oriented Strategy", a public issues paper of The Population Council (a John D. Rockefeller III, independent non-profit organization instituted in 1952) prepared by Charles Keely with Patricia Elwell, proposes a shift in focus from relief and resettlement to development. The study is divided to four parts: (1) a discussion of the international definition of a refugee; (2) an overview of their numbers, location and origin; (3) a sketch of the international response to refugees; and (4) conclusions arising from these discussions. The central issue is dealt with in the first section, and the historical background is relegated to the third section.

The two issues raised about the 1967 Protocol definition are familiar — the meaning of persecution and the requirement that a refugee be outside the country of nationality; i.e., individuals fleeing areas of armed conflict are not refugees. (By contrast, the Organization of African Unity Convention on Refugees extended its definition to include victims of war or civil conflict who need only leave their place and not their country of habitual residence.) In addition to the problems of the narrowness of the definition, there were also problems of interpretation. What is persecution? Given a government's role in economic policy, whatever the ideology of that government may be, bourgeoisie (mainly Chinese) may suffer in Vietnam or small landowners (mainly Indians) may suffer in Central America from government policies which deprive these groups of an ability to make a reasonable or even minimal living. Are they persecuted? The distinction between political and economic refugees becomes muddied.

Thus, people fleeing civil strife, people fleeing from a country with an ideology antithetical to the host country (self-exiled Europeans), people who, after having fled, might very well be persecuted upon return (Haitians), people fleeing oppressive economic policies — all have been granted refugee status under various humanitarian guises without qualifying under the U.N. definition.

However, seeking the basis of refugee policy on a clear definition of "Who is a refugee?" may be itself a source of the problem. Instead, the starting point should be the realities of displacement, for the definition itself is rooted in the particularity of the post-World War II experience in Europe. That perspective stressed resettlement in third countries when the emphasis now should perhaps be given to in-place activity and a development context.

This is Keely's central thesis. Aid should be shifted *from* maintaining camps and seeking resettlement *to* channelling resources to asylum countries for development aid and assistance to the indigenous population. Included in such a shift in emphasis would be our attitudes to humanitarian traditions. We would have to attend to the slow pace of indigenous economic and political solutions as well as the bureaucratic shifts that would be required from domestic human service agencies to foreign ministries and agencies.

When we shift from the strategy issues for dealing with refugees to the actual data on the refugees themselves we see how conceptual issues intersect with facts. Are displaced persons from civil war to be included in the numbers? When are former refugees considered to be firmly resettled and excluded from the calculations? Whose counts are to be relied upon — agencies', those of first asylum countries, etc.?

But, whatever the basis, it is clear that almost all refugees are in developing areas with half of them in Africa. This fact, along with the analysis of the historical background of solutions to the refugee problem rooted in Europe, is used to reinforce the thesis of shifting *from* a resettlement strategy as the back-up to repatriation *to* a development strategy of aid to countries of first asylum in the developing world.