

**FACTUAL BACKGROUND TO
THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEE
PROBLEM**

1 Chronological Account of Events and Major Responses

The end of the Indochina War, April 1975

1.1. The end of the Indochina War was accompanied by a massive displacement of Vietnamese people from their homes. As the North Vietnamese forces moved rapidly southwards at the beginning of March, there was an exodus of people from the zones of fighting to places of temporary refuge. This resulted in huge concentrations of refugees in the cities of South Vietnam. At one stage the city of Da Nang had a refugee population of 600 000. As the major cities fell to the North Vietnamese forces (Hue on 20 March, Da Nang on 30 March, Nha Trang on 1 April) an atmosphere of panic developed and it became evident that large numbers of Vietnamese wished to be evacuated from their country. Although precise figures were not available on the number that fled, the Committee believes the magnitude is in the order of 150 000.

1.2. On 3 April 1975, President Ford ordered U.S. Navy vessels and aircraft to help evacuate refugees and on 15 April approval was sought from Congress to evacuate up to 176 000 persons. Almost all of the Vietnamese wishing to be evacuated were moved from South Vietnam in the period 3 April 1975 until 29 April when the U.S. evacuation was completed. By 2 May, the United States forces had evacuated 86 000 U.S. citizens and South Vietnamese by air and sea using military or chartered craft.

1.3. Staging centres were established at Guam and Wake Island for the care and preliminary processing of these refugees. Other reception centres were set up in continental United States at Camp Pendleton, Fort Chaffee, Eglin Air Force Base and Fort Indiantown Gap. By 15 June 1975, 131 399 evacuees had been received into these camps. By 24 May, some 140 000 Indochinese refugees had entered the United States and most of them through the Camp system.

1.4. Other Vietnamese who escaped following the fall of Saigon made their way in small vessels and merchant ships to Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. The number of these people was in the order of 50 000.

The role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the Vietnamese situation

1.5. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950 to 'provide international protection for refugees and to seek permanent solutions to their problems on a purely humanitarian and non-political basis'. Aid work in North and South Vietnam began under the auspices of the UNHCR in 1974. Projects were worked out with the governments concerned not only to facilitate the

return of displaced persons to the villages of their origin but also to contribute to the development of agriculture and to meet certain basic needs such as medical supplies, clothing and food. A total of \$7.8m was contributed towards the UNHCR's program during 1974 and the first half of 1975.

1.6. Emergency relief for South Vietnam began in April 1975 when food, medical supplies, shelter and clothing were shipped by air and sea to the area. In response to the appeal made to the international community, contributions in cash and in kind amounting to over \$27m were received by UNICEF¹ and UNHCR for their joint relief program.

1.7. The UNHCR also undertook repatriation or resettlement assistance to Cambodians and Vietnamese outside their countries, financed by funds received from governments in response to appeals launched by the High Commissioner in May 1976. By 15 July 1976 \$6m had been received.

Australia and the UNHCR in Vietnam

1.8. In overall terms, the decision was taken by the Australian Government to provide assistance to the Vietnamese and Indochinese refugees, under the auspices of the UNHCR. Consequently refugee selection operations, which were carried out in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand by Australian personnel, were conducted following requests from the UNHCR calling on Australia and other countries to indicate the number of refugees which they would accept for 'durable resettlement'.

Australia's monetary contributions

1.9. As early as July 1974 Australia made a grant of \$150 000 to the United Nations Children's Fund for its program in Cambodia. On 3 November 1974 the then Prime Minister announced a grant of \$1 150 000 to UNICEF, the Indochina Operational Group of the International Committee of the Red Cross (IOG) and the UNHCR for humanitarian and reconstruction work in Indochina.

1.10. On 2 April 1975, the Prime Minister announced a further contribution to UNHCR of \$1m for relief work among refugees in all parts of Indochina. The following day the Prime Minister launched an 'Indochina-Vietnam Appeal' with a donation of \$50 000 from the Federal Government. (The appeal, which was conducted by the International Disaster Emergencies Committee of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid, received further donations of \$68 000 from the various State Governments and \$374 000 from the public.) In launching the appeal it was pointed out that Australia had already given \$2.4m to international agencies working in Indochina in 1974-75.

1.11. On 7 April 1975, the Minister for Foreign Affairs announced a further contribution of \$1m to the UNHCR, which would enable supplies purchased previously for the UNHCR to be air freighted to Indochina, as well as allowing for an additional cash grant to be made by Australia.

¹ United Nations Children's Emergency Fund.

1.12. On 23 May 1975, following the evacuation of Saigon, Australia made a further grant of \$200 000 to the International Committee of the Red Cross for use in Indochina. On 20 June 1975 the Prime Minister announced a further grant of \$1m to the UNHCR for use in Indochina in response to an appeal made by the High Commissioner on 10 June 1975.

1.13. In total, Australian aid to the international agencies working in Indochina was substantial and amounted to \$4.75m.

*The role and use of
Royal Australian Air
Force aircraft in
Vietnam*

1.14. The Australian Government responded quickly to a call on 29 March 1975 for air transport assistance in South Vietnam. Seven RAAF Hercules C-130 transport aircraft were made available immediately whilst others were placed on 'stand-by' in anticipation of further assistance being required. In Vietnam these aircraft were deployed in airlifting refugees within the country², and in moving relief supplies both into Vietnam and between various refugee camps within the country. Following the closure of the Australian Embassy in Saigon on 25 April, RAAF aircraft were used to transport UNICEF and UNHCR relief supplies to Bangkok from neighbouring countries and Australia, as well as to Vientiane for forwarding to Hanoi. From the beginning of May until early June 1975 this type of assistance was undertaken by two RAAF C-130 aircraft provided to the United Nations to continue work elsewhere in Indochina. These aircraft remained at the United Nations' disposal until early June, when the Australian Government was advised that they were no longer required.

1.15. In addition to the relief supplies and evacuation flights the RAAF undertook a series of special flights in evacuating 283 orphan children from Saigon between 4 April and 16 April 1975.

1.16. From 2 April 1975–27 May 1975, RAAF aircraft carried over 1800 tonnes of relief supplies and over 2000 Vietnamese persons.³

*Australian domestic
action*

1.17. The fall of Saigon and the enormous movement of people within and from South Vietnam attracted considerable attention in the Australian news media. The concern of the general public for the plight of these refugees was reflected also in Parliament where a number of statements were made regarding Australia's involvement and concern for the refugees both in debate and in response to the many questions which were asked of Ministers. (Australia's previous involvement in Vietnam, the unparalleled chaos and unexpected rapidity of events leading up to the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, Australia's role in providing monetary

² i.e. 'displaced persons'—those who had fled from their homes. In the Committee's view, whilst 'displaced persons' are not 'refugees' in the technical international sense, they are refugees for all practical purposes and require comparable assistance.

³ The Committee was informed in the submission from the former Prime Minister's Office (Transcript of Evidence, Vol. 1 1975, p. 425) that, in its relief operations in Indochina from March 1975 onwards, RAAF aircraft transported 6377 people. In the submission from the Department of Defence, however, the figure of 2000 refugees and evacuees is given (Transcript of Evidence, Vol. 2 1976, p. 729 and statistical table p. 730-731).

aid, the use of RAAF aircraft in Vietnam, Australia's diplomatic initiatives, cables sent from Australia to North and South Vietnam and the adoption of children were amongst the issues raised in Parliament and elsewhere.)

1.18. On 21 April 1975 President Thieu resigned from office as head of the South Vietnamese Government and Vice-President Tran Van Huong became Interim President.

Announcement of guidelines for the entry of refugees into Australia

1.19. On 22 April 1975, the Prime Minister announced the categories of persons having Vietnamese citizenship who would be eligible for temporary entry into Australia. These categories included:

- (a) Spouses and children of Vietnamese students at present living in Australia.
- (b) Spouses and the under 21-year-old children of Australian citizens subject to completion of Australian citizenship formalities.
- (c) Vietnamese with long and close association with the Australian presence in Vietnam whose life was considered to be in danger (and whose applications would be considered on a case by case basis).

The Prime Minister stated that these decisions had been taken with regard to the principle of maintaining the unity of families.

1.20. By 22 April, the Department of Labor and Immigration had received nominations from Australian citizens, from permanent residents in Australia and from temporary residents in Australia for the entry into Australia of a total of 1987 persons in South Vietnam.

Closure of the Australian Embassy in Saigon

1.21. On 24 April 1975 the Australian Embassy in Saigon was closed and on 25 April the remaining staff, together with United Nations' officials and 78 Vietnamese nationals, were evacuated from South Vietnam by RAAF aircraft.

1.22. At this time the Department of Labor and Immigration had received nominations for residence covering 3667 persons, which included 970 nominated by persons permanently resident in Australia together with 2697 nominated by students and other temporary residents. Of these 3667 persons, a total of 342 persons was approved for entry to Australia under the guidelines of 22 April and the Australian Embassy was notified of them prior to its evacuation on 25 April 1975.

1.23. Sponsorships covering a further 1183 people were received from 25-30 April when the Republic of Vietnam capitulated to the opposing forces. Further nominations continued to be received, but at a much slower rate. By 10 July 1975 they covered 5269 persons, of whom an additional 200 were approved for entry to Australia. Of these 5629 persons, a total of 542 was approved—355 for permanent residence and 187 for temporary residence.

Follow-up action

1.24. On 27 April 1975 a list of 366 persons—consisting of the 124 Vietnamese family groups and individuals who had been approved for entry to Australia—was cabled to Australian diplomatic posts in Manila, Bangkok, Jakarta, Hong Kong, Vientiane, Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. It included the 342 persons mentioned previously and 24 others who had been approved for entry to Australia on the basis that their long and close association with the Australian presence in Vietnam had endangered their lives.

1.25. The names of a further 200 Vietnamese persons subsequently approved for entry were also cabled to the above posts and to other Australian diplomatic missions as the approvals were given.

*Change of South
Vietnamese
Government*

1.26. On 28 April 1975 General Duong Van Minh took over from Tran Van Huong as President of South Vietnam, and ordered the United States of America to evacuate. By 29 April the US evacuation of its own nationals as well as most Vietnamese refugees was complete. On 30 April the Saigon Government surrendered unconditionally to the Provisional Revolutionary Government and North Vietnamese forces.

1.27. By 2 May 1975 United States ships had ceased their evacuation tasks off the coast of Vietnam and sailed for Guam and Subic Bay in the Philippines. Other Vietnamese made their way in small vessels or merchant ships to a variety of locations in Asia, including Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Singapore. By 4 May 1975 a number of ships and small vessels had arrived in Singapore from South Vietnam and within a few days the number of refugees in Singapore totalled about 8000 persons.

1.28. On 5 May 1975, the Australian Prime Minister gave approval for officers of the then Department of Labor and Immigration to be sent to Guam to arrange documentation and travel for Vietnamese people located there who had been approved to come to Australia under the 22 April guidelines. The decision was also taken to grant assisted passage upon request by any Vietnamese person approved for entry to Australia.

1.29. On 6 May 1975 the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam was recognised by Australia. A communique was issued on that day by the UNHCR which announced the arrival of two UNHCR officials in Guam to assess the situation.

1.30. By 10 and 11 May most of the refugee ships had left Singapore after the local authorities had allowed them to reprovision and refuel. It is believed that most went to Guam or Subic Bay. At this time there were approximately 20 000 refugees in Guam, and an estimated 72 000 in Subic Bay or at sea. Some 4000 Vietnamese refugees had also arrived in Hong Kong, most of whom had been rescued at sea by a Danish ship.

1.31. By 8 May 1975 two Australian officials had arrived on Guam and set up facilities at Orote Point in order to search for persons approved to come to Australia prior to the fall of Saigon.

1.32. The first of the refugees from Guam began to arrive in Australia during May 1975. On 18 May, 61 refugees were evacuated to Australia by RAAF aircraft and since then a further 11 are known to have arrived from Guam and Wake Island on scheduled air services at Australian Government expense. In addition, 36 Vietnamese approved for entry to Australia were located in the United States. Air fares for these were also met by the Australian Government.

1.33. In response to an approach by the UNHCR, the High Commissioner was informed on 14 May 1975, of Australia's willingness to accept refugees from Hong Kong and Singapore for permanent settlement in Australia.

1.34. On 28 May a team of Australian selection officers left for Hong Kong to commence interviews among Vietnamese refugees there with a view to approving persons to come to Australia. On 19 June 1975 the Prime Minister announced that 201 Vietnamese refugees would arrive in Sydney from Hong Kong on the following day. On arrival in Sydney all of the refugees went to the East Hills Migrant Hostel.

1.35. On 24 June 1975 the major refugee camp on Guam—Orote Point—was closed. With the exception of approximately 1600 persons who wished to be repatriated to Vietnam, all refugees had been approved for entry on either a permanent or temporary basis to the U.S., Australia or other countries willing to accept them.

1.36. On 4 July 1975 the Department of Labor and Immigration received UNHCR dossiers covering 273 Vietnamese refugees in Singapore, and on 20 July a team of Australian selection officers were despatched to Singapore to begin the processing and selection of Vietnamese refugees. The team also travelled to Perhentian Island in Malaysia to select further refugees for admission to Australia.

1.37. On 6 August 1975 the Prime Minister announced the Government's intention to settle approximately 300 more Vietnamese refugees, about two-thirds of whom would come from St John's Island, Singapore and one-third from Perhentian Island, Malaysia. On 9 August 323 refugees arrived in Brisbane and were accommodated at Wacol Hostel.

1.38. On 21 January 1976 the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs announced that a further 800 Indochinese refugees would be admitted to Australia, most of them from refugee camps in Thailand. A selection team left for Bangkok on 2 February 1976 and following the mission's activities in Thailand, 568 persons were subsequently brought to Australia by chartered aircraft during 19-24 March 1976. They comprised 279 Laotians, 228 Cambodians and 61 Vietnamese refugees.

*Resettlement of
refugees as part of
an overall program
administered by the
UNHCR*

Vietnamese students in Australia

1.39. As the North Vietnamese forces moved further south the Vietnamese students in Australia became increasingly fearful for the safety of their families. Their immediate reaction was to try to bring their families to Australia. From the beginning of April these students submitted applications to the Department of Labor and Immigration nominating relatives for entry to Australia. By 25 April the Department had received 2697 nominations from students and other temporary residents, consisting of 802 on behalf of members of families, 1700 for brothers and sisters, and 195 for distant relatives and friends.

1.40. A further 970 Vietnamese were nominated by other persons permanently resident in Australia. These comprised 212 nominations for families, 441 for brothers and sisters and 317 for distant relatives and friends.

1.41. At the beginning of April the criteria for entry of Vietnamese persons were governed solely by the existing quite restrictive immigration policies.⁴

Deferral and eventual waiving of the return-home obligations of Vietnamese and Cambodian students

1.42. On 3 April 1975 the Australian Government announced its decision to allow those tertiary students from Vietnam and Cambodia who were presently studying in Australia to defer their return home. Although it was hoped that these students would be able to return to their own countries and contribute to their reconstruction when peace was restored, their status as temporary residents was extended until 31 December 1975.

1.43. On 13 June 1975 the situation was modified to permit private students from South Vietnam to apply for resident status on the completion of their studies. Similar applications from sponsored students were to be held over until the completion of their studies when a decision would be taken in the light of developments in their home country.

1.44. On 11 November 1975 the policy was further modified to allow government-sponsored students from South Vietnam and Cambodia to apply for resident status in Australia irrespective of the degree of success or stage they had reached in their studies. The decision also enabled private students who were still studying, or who had abandoned their studies, to apply for resident status if they did not wish to return home. The effect of this was the waiving of the return-home obligations of Vietnamese and Cambodian sponsored students.

1.45. The Committee notes that early recognition was given by the Government to the fact that many of the private students had lost contact with their families and were, therefore, without means of support. The resulting arrangements which were made to help alleviate the financial difficulties experienced by these students are outlined briefly in Chapter 4.

⁴ Refer to p. 18 footnote ⁴ for details.

Role of voluntary agencies

1.46. The facilities of voluntary agencies in Australia were offered to the Australian Government early in 1975 to assist with the resettlement of refugees. They estimated that they could handle about 2000 sponsored cases per annum. A meeting was held in March 1975 between representatives of voluntary agencies and government departments, apparently in order to make an estimate of the number of refugees Australia could and/or should accept from Vietnam. In the event, however, nothing was determined. Instead the Government resolved that the international agencies such as UNHCR and the Red Cross were the appropriate authorities to assist in the provision of relief in Indochina; and looked upon Australia's involvement mainly in terms of a financial commitment rather than as a practical one of providing direct and unilateral offers of refuge to the displaced persons from South Vietnam and Indochina generally.

Resettlement study

1.47. On 23 July 1975 the Prime Minister announced that the Government had commissioned a survey of Vietnamese refugees who had recently settled in Australia. The study was to encompass such things as 'the refugees' reasons for leaving their own country; their social characteristics; their aspirations in their new homeland; what Australian government assistance in maintenance and welfare they requested, needed and received; the problems they thought they might have to face in settling in Australia; and how these compared with the problems actually encountered; the problems of culture and language difference they had to face, and what happened to their cultural identity in the process of resettlement, and to what extent—if at all—they suffered from racism'.⁵

⁵ Transcript of Evidence, Vol. I 1975, p. 450.