

Who's responsible for Vietnamese refugees?

by Mary M. Burdman

In Asia as in Europe, huge numbers of refugees are fleeing their own countries—the greatest number since the end of World War II. Tens of thousands of people have already fled Vietnam, where, according to reports in September, some 10 million people faced starvation. Vietnam has been cut off from loans or aid from the International Monetary Fund or World Bank on U.S. orders, a spokesman for the U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) told *EIR*.

Most “boat people” have fled in the past year, and most of them have gone to the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, which itself is watching thousands of its citizens prepare to flee, after the reality of Hong Kong’s future under the control of the People’s Republic of China was made clear to the population following the Tiananmen massacre of June 4.

The great problem is that both Vietnam and Hong Kong are being shunted aside by the industrialized nations, the United States and United Kingdom in particular, as Hong Kong Legislative Council member Martin Lee states in his interview with *EIR*. British Foreign Secretary John Major, with the full backing of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, announced on Oct. 24 that the U.K. government is preparing to repatriate all those Vietnamese refugees who arrived in Hong Kong after June 1988, by force if necessary. Hundreds of the some 57,000 refugees in Hong Kong, who have been held for months in unsanitary, overcrowded conditions, have demonstrated against forced repatriation, some going on hunger strikes to avoid being sent back. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad announced the next day that Malaysia is ready to send boat people back by force.

Since 1986, the industrialized nations, especially the United States and Australia, have unilaterally reneged on the policy of guaranteed resettlement of all refugees from Vietnam, committing themselves only to take—over many years’ time—“genuine” refugees, who can prove they fled political persecution, the UNHCR spokesman said. This leaves the nations of Southeast Asia to provide for the “economic” refugees, or send them back home. There are some 107,000 refugees from Vietnam in the region: 57,000 in Hong Kong, 23,000 in Malaysia, and the rest in the Philippines and Thailand. Thailand already has tens of thousands of Cambodian refugees in camps on its borders. Free Asia also faces another flood of refugees—from China. At least 100 people a day attempt to enter Hong Kong from the P.R.C., although almost all are caught and handed back.

Since August, Japan has reported that many of the several thousand “boat people” reaching its harbors are actually from mainland China, and is preparing to send at least 700 people back to China immediately.

Britain’s determination to forcibly repatriate at least 40,000 Vietnamese refugees before February—which will be the next calm sailing season—certainly smells of a deal with Beijing. The UNHCR spokesman said that Communist China is “desperate that the Vietnamese refugee problem in Hong Kong be solved by 1997.” Britain has backed down to Beijing over Hong Kong. At the last meeting of the Sino-British Joint Liaison Group in London in late September, the British government made a “subtle” pledge to the P.R.C. negotiators that the Hong Kong government will deal with the outspoken opposition to Beijing there, Hong Kong sources report. The Chinese demanded that Hong Kong disband the groups speaking out against Beijing, and keep tight control on the anti-Beijing press. While publicly rejecting the proposal, Britain actually acquiesced.

Martin Lee is one of Beijing’s principal targets—for good reason. His view on the future of Hong Kong under Chinese rule is, “Hong Kong puppets ruling Hong Kong,” the *London Sunday Telegraph* reported Nov. 5. He and Szeto Wah, the secretary general of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of the Patriotic Democratic Movement, which brought out 1 million people in demonstrations supporting the Chinese students at the end of May, were booted off the Basic Law Drafting Committee by Beijing, which has complete control of the committee. Lee, whose father was a Kuomintang general who fled to Hong Kong from the Communists in 1949, told the *Sunday Telegraph* that he decided to take a stand against China, when he saw Britain back down to Beijing’s demands, beginning in 1985, to control moves toward greater democracy in Hong Kong before 1997. In October, the Chinese National People’s Congress warned Martin Lee that he could be found guilty of sedition when Hong Kong reverts to Chinese rule after 1997—a charge which carries the death penalty. Lee has stated his commitment to staying in Hong Kong.

Interview: Martin Lee

Hong Kong’s dilemma

Mr. Lee is a member of the Hong Kong Legislative Council. He was interviewed by telephone from Wiesbaden, West Germany on Oct. 25, 1989.

EIR: You have stated that the critical situation around the 57,000 Vietnamese “boat people” now in Hong Kong, is

being manipulated by the British government.

Lee: At the moment, the Hong Kong people and Hong Kong government are getting a very bad press, particularly in the United Kingdom and the U.S.A. I am aware of numerous articles being written pointing out very clearly that we, the people of Hong Kong, would like the other free countries to take us by the millions, because we do not like to be returned to a Communist regime in 1997; yet at the same time, we are being “uncharitable” to the over 50,000 unwanted people from Vietnam—we would like to send them back to Vietnam against their wishes, and return them to another Communist regime.

I am terribly worried about the reputation of Hong Kong overseas, because that is going to result in these other countries not wanting to take more people from Hong Kong, and not giving us passports and so on. Yet I take the view that this is entirely the responsibility of the British government, because the Vietnamese refugees and the problems they have created fall within external relations and must be a matter for the sovereign state, which is Great Britain. I have been trying very hard to persuade the people of Hong Kong not to urge the Hong Kong government and British government to adopt the mandatory repatriation policy.

My suggestion is that since the U.S.A. is so very much against this program, the U.S. government should either provide the island of Guam, or arrange with the Philippines to provide a big island, so that all these boat people can be shipped safely to this island which can be used as a holding center, and those who are found to be genuine refugees will be taken by other countries, and those found not to be genuine refugees will be allowed to live and work on that island until the time comes that the Vietnamese economy can be put right again, in which case they can all be sent home to Vietnam. . . .

The unfortunate thing about Hong Kong is that we are a very tiny island, overpopulated [Hong Kong includes the most densely populated areas on Earth—ed.], and we have been paying for all of these people coming from Vietnam until half a year ago, when we decided we would not pay anymore. The British government is now paying, but even now the British government’s total payment is less than one-tenth of Hong Kong’s payment. But at the same time, the British government has been telling various countries, the U.S.A. and so on, on an “off the record” basis, that it doesn’t really wish to pursue such an inhumane policy, but that it is pushed into doing so by the people of Hong Kong. That puts us in a very bad light indeed, and everybody puts the blame on us.

True enough, the great majority of the people of Hong Kong do not see the serious implications for them. They thought they could solve the problem by scrapping the policy of “first asylum.” I told them, in vain, unfortunately, that even if we were to scrap that policy, international law still requires us to take these people, at least by giving them

temporary refuge, so as to ascertain who are the genuine refugees and who are not. Then there is another principle, under international law, that we cannot return them anyway, unless we are sure that they will not be persecuted back home. . . . Unfortunately, these messages are falling on deaf ears. The people of Hong Kong are getting a little impatient, and they just want to get rid of them.

EIR: Is not Hong Kong itself a refugee city? Some 2.5 million of its 5.5 million people came from China since 1949.

Lee: Yes, of course most of us are here because we have run away from a Communist regime, or were born of such parents. Hong Kong is a refugee city, but it is typical of the refugee mentality that, once I am here, I don’t want anyone else to come.

EIR: Your solution would be action from the U.S. and British governments?

Lee: I think they should take it collectively. All the governments concerned should put their act together, because this is a problem that will take years to resolve. I do not agree with the mandatory repatriation policy. But unless this other proposal that I have described to you is taken on board, there is no other alternative.

The U.S. government is taking a very illogical stance, because they agree with screening, in accordance with United Nations practice. But those screened out, what do you do about them? There is no answer at all from the U.S.A. They are not willing to take them, not willing to provide an island, and yet they say “no” to Hong Kong, when we want to repatriate them to Vietnam.

The British government’s attitude toward refugees can be summed in a short sentence: They don’t want them, and they don’t want to pay for them. So, today they are trying to send the Vietnamese people home, against their will, and in 1997, they will be quite happy to hand us over to the Chinese Communist regime. The trouble is, Great Britain is getting away with it.

EIR: It appears that the Hong Kong colonial government is backing down to Beijing. The Political Adviser of Hong Kong, William Ehrman, has said that Hong Kong will not become a center of subversion against Communist China.

Lee: I don’t think it is backing down. He is agreeing that Hong Kong must never be allowed to be used as a base of subversive activities. I agree with him there. But, the point is, we are *not* being subversive at all in Hong Kong. We are exercising our freedom of speech, we are criticizing the Beijing government like the rest of the world. But, of course, we are too close to them, and we are being handed over to them soon, so they are now trying to bully us into silence, even under the Brits, and we will not allow that to happen, because we know only too clearly, that, if today I lose my freedom of speech, tomorrow, it is your turn.