

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