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Statement
on
SMALL BOAT
REFUGEES IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA

ADMINISTRATIVE
COMMITTEE
NATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

February 16, 1978

We urge the President and Congress to respond in a more forceful and humane manner to the anguished cries of the men, women, and children who, seeking a new life of freedom, are fleeing Southeast Asia by land and in small boats.

The number of these refugees, 60% of them children, has grown in recent months due to oppressive actions by new Communist regimes in some nations in Southeast Asia which are forcing families to undertake an almost suicidal endeavor in search of asylum.

As is generally the case in large-scale refugee movements in hostile circumstances, some do not reach their goal and there is a corresponding loss of life.

In the Southeast Asian turmoil there are firsthand reports of the terrors of the overland march from Laos and Cambodia and of the loss of life of an estimated 50% in the almost suicidal small boat movement from Vietnam. For every two persons who start out, only one survives.

In Thailand there are approximately 100,000 refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. They have found a highly temporary asylum in 13 separate refugee compounds controlled by the government of Thailand. Approximately 5,000 new refugees are entering Thailand each month, around 1,500 by small boat from Vietnam and more than 3,000 overland from Cambodia and Laos. Despite traditional kindness founded in national history and religion, the Thai government is in a most precarious position from internal and diplomatic points of view, since the country is surrounded by well-armed Communist nations.

There is no way of knowing how many refugees have been turned back at the borders by local Thai officials. The United States press reported some months ago that a group of 29 had been returned to Cambodia and immediately executed.

Among the tragic aspects of this refugee movement is the reluctance of larger vessels plying the South China Sea to pick up those in distress in small boats. Past experience has taught the masters of these vessels that to do so can involve them and their shipping companies in many complications. Some countries, learning that refugees are aboard a vessel, will not permit even the crew to disembark. No landing rights are given to refugees, and the ship must keep them on board while hoping to reach a port that will grant temporary asylum. In some instances ships have sailed nearly around the world, dropping off refugees in South Africa, Kuwait, Italy, and other places.

It is an appalling fact that, after braving the terrors of the sea, refugees find that what awaits them is not really asylum. A proliferation of reports indicate that their boats are often driven off shore or towed back to the open sea. These refugees have no alternative but to seek haven in other countries bordering the South China Sea (the Philippines, Korea, Macao, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) or, in desperation, to set sail in their small, unseaworthy craft for Australia, over 3,000 miles away.

On August 11, 1977, the U.S. government authorized the admission of 7,000 boat cases and 8,000 land-based refugees. On January 25 of this year, the Attorney General authorized the admission of 7,000 additional boat refugees. These admissions are stopgap measures. Some type of established admission procedure is needed to avoid unimaginable disaster.

The government of France has instituted a humane procedure and is accepting approximately 1,000 refugees each month as it has done for some time. The governments of Australia, Canada, and some nations of Europe have made more limited commitments.

In appealing to the President and Congress to respond in a more humane and forceful manner to the tragic situation of the small boat refugees in Southeast Asia, we are not unmindful of the responsibility of the business world and of the Church itself in this matter. The business world, particularly the shipping interests of the United States, must not abandon these men, women and children to the perils of the sea. The ancient tradition of rendering aid to the occupants of boats and ships in distress on the high seas must be continued by American ship masters and crews, and indeed by the masters and crews of the ships of all nations.

As for the Church, we renew our commitment to aid the refugees of any nation, regardless of religion and political ideology. We call on the dioceses, parishes, and individual Catholics of the U.S. to expand their works of mercy through sponsoring and resettling those refugees who will come to our shores. We are mindful of the words of Pope Paul VI: "The pastoral care of migrants has always attracted the motherly attention and the solicitude of the Church. In fact, it has never ceased throughout the centuries to help in every way those who, like Christ in exile in Egypt with the family of Nazareth, were compelled to emigrate to lands far away from their country." (*Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*)

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