

TESTIMONY OF ALBERT SHANKER,
PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS, AFL-CIO
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIAN AND PACIFIC AFFAIRS
OF THE HOUSE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE
AUGUST 15, 1978

Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee. My name is Albert Shanker and I am president of the American Federation of Teachers, a half-million member union of teachers, college professors and other education and related employees. Our union has a long history of participation in and concern for refugee matters and for the plight of oppressed people around the world. I am also a member of the International Rescue Committee's Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees, and it was in this capacity that I recently visited four refugee camps in Thailand housing homeless Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians. Accompanied by my wife and daughter, I visited a refugee center in Bangkok, the Aranyoprathet camp two miles from the Cambodian border, the Laemsing camp on the Sea of Siam and the Nong Khai camp in the north, facing Vientiane, which accommodates 24,000 Hmongs and Laotians.

Before discussing the situation in these refugee centers, let me supply some of the background of these massive population displacements.

Southeast Asia has become the stage of events the significance of which cannot yet be fully grasped. What has become apparent is the tremendous cost in human suffering and human lives. Since the Nazi holocaust, no country has had to endure what has been imposed on the people of Cambodia. A new variant of Communism has been established there, and for the first time two Communist countries are actually waging war on each other. At the same time, Vietnam

(more)

has developed its own version of forced collectivization and in the process turned on its Chinese minority. In Laos, the hill tribes, the Hmongs as they call themselves, are being decimated and forced into exile.

If these developments are unprecedented, so are the desperate methods used by those who are trying to save themselves by escaping from the ravages of Indochina. Let those who are ready to impugn the motives of the refugees ask themselves whether they can visualize conditions which would lead them to place their wives and children in frail river boats to set out on a sea voyage of hundreds of miles at the risk of never making it; or attempt to cross the Mekong River tied to inflated plastic bags after walking for days, without shoes, and without food, through dense forests.

Yet the refugees continue to come even though they know that the countries to which they are fleeing do not want them and even though they know that they may be pushed back across the river or out to sea where pirates may swoop down on them, stealing their belongings, raping their women and kidnapping their daughters. A new dimension has been added to the horror, as if the readiness to let them drown were not horrible enough.

When the monsoon started, experts thought the refugee flow would subside. The storms of the South China Sea would succeed where the watchdogs and soldiers of the new regimes failed, they told us. It has not happened. The number of those who never reach a safe haven is undoubtedly growing. But so is the number of those who arrive in Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong and the other countries of first destination. In July, 6,000 boat people entered the refugee camps of

(more)

Malaysia, and 600 more made it during the first week of August, bringing their total to close to 15,000. In Thailand the boat people alone now number about 2,500. Hong Kong has reached the same figure. Altogether more than 23,000 boat people are waiting in camps and transit centers from Indonesia to Japan and from Thailand to the Philippines.

And if it was hoped that the refugee movements to the United States, France and Australia would reduce the camp population all along Thailand's Northern and Western borders to manageable proportions, new arrivals from Laos, Hmongs as well as Laotians, have augmented it beyond any previous level. The refugee camp of Nong Khai, facing Vientiane, the capital of Laos, held 18,000 refugees a few months ago. Today it holds 24,000. In all, there are 130,000 in the Thai camps alone. Thus virtually every step that has been made toward solving the Indochinese refugee problem has been overtaken by events before it was implemented. A few weeks ago the United States announced an admission program for 25,000 refugees. Australia offered to take 9,000. The movement planned over a 12-month period has not yet started: no funds have as yet been made available for the transportation and resettlement of the refugees. But there are already more new refugees waiting in the camps than the new U.S. program was devised to accomodate. And as new refugees come, by sea and by land--suddenly also from Cambodia where the soldiers guarding the western frontier were moved east to face the Vietnamese army, thus making escape possible again--the fear rises that Thailand, Malaysia and all others will make good their threat to turn back all those who are still on the way.

(more)

The United States has, for valid reasons, assumed a leading role in the efforts to cope with a refugee crisis of the most poignant nature. It is however, not solely an American responsibility to seek solutions. It is an international problem. The American Labor Movement has been forceful in its support of a generous American policy of long perspective. The Black Community has spoken up in sympathy with "its Asian brothers and sisters in refugee camps." The National Maritime Union has supported President Carter's order to U.S. flag vessels to rescue refugees from boats in danger of sinking. But the message has to be carried to the free nations of the world. This is the time to call an international conference which would come to grips with a problem that will not go away but, if not confronted responsibly, will aggravate the social and economic ills of Southeast Asia.

Let me be specific about steps which the U.S. could take on its own to relieve the plight of the refugees and demonstrate once again this nation's humanitarian commitment.

The Senate has unanimously passed the Dole Amendment which calls upon the President and the Attorney General to issue a parole for all 15,000 Cambodians in the camps. The President and Mr. Bell have indicated that as soon as a similar resolution passes the House, they will indeed act on it, admitting the Cambodians in two groups of 7,500 each.

I understand that there are members of the House who maintain that the nation "just doesn't have the money" to bring the Cambodians to these shores. I would reply that there are from time to time cataclysmic events to which we as a nation must respond.

(more)

In June of 1939, for example, there were 400 Jews aboard the SS St. Louis, traveling from Hamburg to Havana. Turned away in Cuba, they managed to reach the Florida coast, where they were informed by the Coast Guard, on orders of the President, that they would be unable to land at any American port. With no alternative, they returned to Europe, where the flames of war were already raging. More than half of the 400 were later to perish in Nazi concentration camps.

President Carter has called Cambodia the worst violator of human rights in the world today. Do we who claim to speak for human rights now dare to reject a handful of refugees--that one in five who survived the attempt to escape--with the lame and inaccurate excuse that we "just don't have the money"? I hope not.

I urge you to join with your Senate colleagues in a sense of the Congress resolution to permit the entry of these oppressed and exhausted refugees. Thank you very much.