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Senate

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS OF REFUGEES IN THAILAND

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, in response to the growing humanitarian problems of refugees in Thailand, the American Council of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Service recently dispatched a study team to report on current conditions in the field. Today, the study team has released its report, and I would like to share their findings and recommendations with my colleagues.

As chairman of the Subcommittee on Refugees, I have closely followed humanitarian problems in Southeast Asia, including Thailand.

In the finest tradition of the American people, the United States has extended a warm hand of friendship and help to refugees from Southeast Asia who have come to our shores. At the same time, America must not forget the humanitarian needs among the refugees and other war victims who remain behind, in Thailand and in the countries of Indochina.

This point is eloquently stated by the study team report of the American Council of Voluntary Agencies, and I commend their effort to bring the plight of these people to the attention of the American people. I urge the Department of State, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, to give immediate consideration to their important recommendations, and I pledge to do all I can in the Senate to support their humanitarian goals.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the text of the report and recommendations of the American Council on Voluntary Agencies, regarding humanitarian needs of refugees in Thailand, be printed in the Record.

There being no objection, the report was ordered to be printed in the Record, as follows:

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS OF REFUGEES IN THAILAND

BACKGROUND OF SURVEY

On November 25, 1975, the officers of the Committee on Migration and Refugee Affairs, American Council of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Service, Inc., recommended to the Council's Executive Committee that a survey be undertaken on the humanitarian needs of refugees in Thailand. It was proposed that a survey team visit Thailand to study the refugee situation, prepare proposals on those who must resettle outside of Thailand, and review the care, maintenance and future in Thailand of those who cannot be resettled elsewhere.

The ACVAFS Executive Committee approved the recommendation, and the following people were named to the Survey Team: Donald G. Hohl, Migration and Refugee Services, United States Catholic Conference, Chairman; Elizabeth Thaw, International Rescue Committee; Worthington Linn, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service; Warren Hoffecker, Catholic Relief Services, United States Catholic Conference, Bangkok; Keith Meyer, Young Men's Christian Association, Singapore; Theron Van Scoter, ACVAFS Committee on Migration and Refugee Affairs.

During its eight days in Thailand (December 5-12) the Team visited five refugee camps along the Laos and Cambodian borders (Aranyaprathet, Pua and three in Nong Khai) as well as an established Meo community. It interviewed many refugees, government officials in Bangkok, provincial and district officials in each area, and camp authorities. Appointments were held with Nicholas Morris, Acting Director of the Regional Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Albert Corcos, Area Director of the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, and Ambassador Charles Whitehouse and his staff at the United States Embassy. Meetings were held with representatives of Royal Thai Government, including H. E. Pirapong Kasemsri, Director General of Department of International Organizations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Major Kamol, Deputy Director of the Operation Center for Displaced Persons in Thailand. A special meeting was arranged with Prince Panya Souvanna Phouma, son of the former Lao Prime Minister; Prince Panya had just escaped by swimming the Mekong River. Informal exchanges took place with representatives of other international organizations and Thai citizens. Of particular importance were consultations with the voluntary agencies in Thailand. Additional insights came from the daily press coverage of border incidents and the evolving relationships with neighboring countries.

SITUATION IN THAILAND

A key point in an evaluation of the situation is the fact that the official position of the government is that there are no refugees in that country. Because of the delicate balance Thailand maintains between its neighbors and the non-Communist world its position is that the people from the three Indochinese countries are displaced persons and the facilities provided them are of a temporary nature. The government does not welcome the refugees, but is unable to keep them out; also the UNHCR has received its promise that the refugees will not be forced to return. On the other hand its announced policy is not to make them comfortable nor to provide them with any assistance which appears to put them in a preferential position over the local people, who themselves usually are in dire economic circumstances,

in the community where they reside. In most instances the refugees are forbidden to leave the camp areas. Despite the official policy government authorities appear to be beginning to recognize that Thailand must absorb large numbers of the refugees, but continue to hope that through the efforts of the United Nations many can be resettled elsewhere.

The conditions in each camp vary depending upon the attitude of the provincial governors, their proximity to the camps, and the relative authority of local district leaders. The governors are appointed from Bangkok to the provinces, which have considerable autonomy. In recent years efforts to democratize the system have resulted in local representatives being named to the capitol, but much competition for power exists between these local representatives and the provincial governors.

At the outset of the refugee influx last spring the Thai Government ignored the situation as the newcomers set up squatter areas in the compounds of Buddhist Temples or adjacent to border villages. As the situation became acute the voluntary agencies in Thailand began emergency programs. The agencies sought to avoid the impression of undue U.S. presence or of favoritism to the refugees, and they functioned insofar as possible through local groups. In June they formed the Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand. This group under Andrew Bishop, Christian and Missionary Alliance (CAMA), meets formally every two weeks to discuss such matters as cooperation with the Royal Thai Government and the UNHCR, allocation of supplies, etc. At present the Committee includes the Baptist Mission, Thailand; Cambodian Childrens Welfare Association; Catholic Relief Services-United States Catholic Conference; Catholic Council of Thailand for Development; Food for the Hungry, Inc.; International Red Cross Societies; "Joint Action" to Indo-China; Ockenden Venture; Project Vietnam Orphans; Seventh-Day Adventist Mission; Thai Red Cross Society; World Vision Foundation of Thailand; Y.W.C.A., Y.M.C.A., Christian and Missionary Alliance; South East Asia Christian Services.

CAMP OPERATIONS

During the summer the government officially recognized the burgeoning problem, invited the cooperation of the UNHCR, and established the Operation Center for Displaced Persons in Thailand, which coordinates all government activities. Sixteen camp locations became the basis of the operation, although there may be several camps at each location and additional unofficial camps all along the border.

(It was explained to the Survey Team that location of the camps near the border is satisfactory to both the hawks and the doves. The doves feel that this arrangement will encourage the refugees to return as they see

that conditions across the border are better than they originally feared. The hawks consider that the refugees on the border can serve as a buffer against invasion. Skeptics are uncertain as to the loyalties of refugee groups.)

The principal government agency in this program is the Ministry of the Interior; to a lesser degree the Ministries of Health and Foreign Affairs are also involved, as well as other offices.

All supplies are received through the UNHCR and three UNHCR field offices monitor the distribution, which is handled by the Ministry of the Interior. Supplemental distributions are made by the voluntary agencies directly.

In addition to 60,000-70,000 refugees in the camps (the UNHCR has registered 50,000 Lao, 9,000 Cambodians, and 600 Vietnamese as recipients of its program but it appears certain that there are more), it is estimated that some 10,000 refugees are outside the camps. With the dissolution of the Lao Coalition Government in early December and notwithstanding its closing of the border, (the Thai Government closed its side in mid November) known border crossings accelerated from 50 daily in November to 200 daily in December.

The camp situation is deplorable. In the five camps visited, the Team observed that they are crowded, unsanitary and provide a minimum of shelter. Although in principle the UNHCR feeding program allocates 500 grams of rice daily to each refugee, substantial quantities appear to be diverted through the local administration; at the time of the visit it was reported that at one camp no UNHCR food was reaching the refugees. The voluntary agencies supplement the UNHCR food program and provide considerable aid in the areas of medicine and vitamins. The Team saw no soap.

Inasmuch as it seems clear that it will not be possible for most of the refugees to leave Thailand, the question is one of the dimension and nature of assistance from outside. It appears that the voluntary agencies should be encouraged to participate in the evolving situation, to supplement material provided by the UNHCR, and to adapt to the probable eventual resettlement program of the Thai Government. At present, medical care is totally inadequate. For immediate action it appears that the major health problems are dysentery and malnutrition. Many of the refugees were reported to have walked for as many as 45 nights to arrive in Thailand. They were obliged to scavenge for food along the way with resultant serious digestive disorders. Dysentery now prevents effective malnutrition correction, but malaria and bronchial ailments are also major problems. A large proportion of medical services are supplied by the refugees themselves, often with little training.

On several occasions the Team was advised that assistance from abroad could best be channeled when possible through the existing voluntary agencies' structure or the UNHCR and that the supplies most needed fall in the areas of medicines, vitamins and food supplements. Insofar as assistance can also be given to the communities adjacent to the camps, this would tend to reduce the hostility of the local residents. (There is an understandable resentment on the part of the local population that even though they are Thai citizens they are not receiving as much attention as the refugees. They therefore feel victimized by what they believe to be preferential treatment toward foreigners.) It was also urged that, as soon as feasible, assistance of a long-term nature be developed and hope was expressed that it could successfully avoid the "give-away" concept. Such long-term aid would be con-

tingent upon the refugees being moved to more satisfactory locations, and the Team noted that long-term aid plans with this intent are already underway.

THE NEED FOR RESETTLEMENT OUTSIDE OF THAILAND

As to statistics concerning those people for whom continued residence in Thailand would constitute a severe hardship, the UNHCR reports that it has registered approximately 18,000 people who have applied for migration to the United States and other countries. A troubling question is the case of those refugees who potentially qualify for movement to other countries but whose leadership is absolutely essential to the continued wellbeing of their ethnic communities. The selective removal of community leaders which has sometimes occurred in recent months has often left the remainder of their group in a state of turmoil. Serious consideration must be given to the possibility of moving entire communities.

In this connection it was agreed it would be well for the voluntary agencies to explore through their international counterparts the resettlement possibilities for such communities in countries such as Indonesia, Micronesia, the Philippines, Australia and Brazil.

As of October 30, 1975, the movement from Thailand to all third countries was 19,918 with 7,106 going to other countries than the United States. In addition Malaysia has accepted 1,208 muslims.

The U.S. Embassy case files as of early December indicated that there are 4100 potential Lao migrants who had applied for parole to the United States (numbers presently exist for only 3400). Also listed in the case files are 3700 Vietnamese and Thai and 3800 Cambodians. This leaves a shortfall of some 8000 parole numbers for those refugees currently registered.

When considering the existing U.S. Embassy case files, it is important to note that the Survey Team has reason to believe that many refugees were inadequately interviewed or overlooked. It appears that the Embassy staff needs to review the entire caseload, including refugees who have not yet been interviewed. There is also a definite need to examine the present qualification categories in the hope that a more flexible system can be developed. Such a system should be based on the two considerations of the need for movement and the capacity to adjust to the American culture.

In light of the constantly changing nature of the refugee population in Thailand, the Team is convinced that it would be preferable not to have to set an arbitrary number limit on migration to the United States. The Team has concluded that, ideally, consideration should be given to all those refugees who have no reasonable resettlement option in Thailand and who are likely to be adaptable to life in the United States. However, in the interests of outlining the size of the problem, the Team reached a conservative estimate that 10,000 additional numbers would be needed for the refugees in Thailand.

While in Thailand the Survey Team explored the need for winter clothing for refugees in transit to the United States. A conclusion was reached that a definite need for distributing winter clothing does exist and the local voluntary agencies will continue to pursue this point with the Embassy. They will also cooperate with the international voluntary agency network to obtain clothing through their respective channels. It is understood that such clothing will be handed out only at the point of departure other than in the camps themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The immediate need of the majority of the 70,000 refugees is for adequate food, clothing, shelter and especially, medical care. The Survey Team recommends that the voluntary agencies explore the possibilities of cooperating with and supplementing the UNHCR and Royal Thai Government in their efforts to take care of the basic needs of the refugees.

The voluntary agencies also should be aware of the long-term necessity for material assistance in Thailand, in anticipation that the Royal Thai Government will carry a heavy burden in the years to come.

2. The Survey Team is of the unanimous conclusion that repatriation cannot realistically be considered as a solution to the refugee problem in the foreseeable future.

3. The Team found that there is a large number of refugees who for valid reasons should be resettled outside of Thailand. The Team also believes that resettlement in the United States is the only viable option for many of this group. Due to the changing nature of the situation in Thailand it is difficult to set a specific ceiling for those to be admitted to the United States. Ideally, resettlement opportunities should be made available strictly on the basis of humanitarian need and on the capacity of the refugee to adapt to life in the United States.

As a result, the Team recommends to the appropriate officials in the Department of State and the Department of Justice that the existing parole criteria (Categories I, II and III) be reviewed with the goal of making them more responsive to the realities of the situation in Thailand. Based upon the number of people identified at the time of this report as needing to come to the United States, and in view of the inadequacy of the screening process, we recommend that a minimum of 10,000 additional numbers be made available. (It is important to understand that the number recommended above reflects only the needs of refugees in Thailand. The team would also recommend that the U.S. Government should consider additional numbers for specific family reunion and hardship cases among the Indochinese refugees who now are located in other countries around the world and for whom movement is the only viable solution.)

4. It is obvious that the migration needs of all refugees in Thailand cannot be met by the United States alone. The Team therefore strongly recommends that additional opportunities for resettlement in third countries be explored by the UNHCR and the voluntary agencies, the latter through their international counterparts. (This recommendation reflects what the Team perceives as a pressing need for large scale movements to third countries.)

AMERICAN COUNCIL OF VOLUNTARY AGENCIES FOR FOREIGN SERVICE, INC.

MEMBER AGENCIES

- * American Council for Judaism Philanthropic Fund, Inc.
- * American Friends Service Committee, Inc.
- * American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees, Inc.
- * American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Inc.
- * American Mizrahi Women.
- * American National Committee to Aid Homeless Armenians (ANCHA).
- * American ORT Federation, Inc.
- * Assemblies of God-Foreign Service Committee.
- * Baptist World Alliance.
- * CARE, Inc. (Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere).
- * Catholic Relief Services-United States Catholic Conference.
- * Christian Reformed World Relief Committee.