

Refugees Still Roam Southeast Asia

By Neil Kelly
London Observer

BANGKOK, Aug. 13— Three months after the guns stopped firing in Indochina, tens of thousands of refugees are still looking for a country to take them in.

In Thailand their numbers grow daily. There are now more than 50,000 here. In a three-day period recently, 2,500 Cambodians escaped into Thailand, and every day 100 or more refugees arrive from Laos.

Apart from 130,000 in the United States, most of the war refugees are now in Thailand with other small groups scattered around Southeast Asia. Inside Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia there are hundreds of thousands of other people who are refugees in the sense that their homes were destroyed in the war and they have nowhere to go.

Other nations have responded to the flight of the refugees less generously than they promised when the Indochina tragedy was being played out four months ago.

Countries did not state clearly the number of refugees they would take in. One of the few to do so was Canada, with a promise to accept 400 families. Britain

and France said they would take people who had close relatives already living there. Australia promised to consider cases presented to it by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

Malaysia has already accepted 1,150 Moslems from Cambodia, and 26 Cambodians have been flown to new homes in France. A few refugees have gone to Australia but neither the Australian embassy nor the United Nations office in Bangkok could say exactly how many.

Those who have found new homes in other countries total no more than 2,000. So thousands of refugees appear destined to remain in camps in Thailand or on the run from Thai authorities as illegal immigrants—a threatening development for a country as politically sensitive as Thailand.

Thailand says officially there is no permanent home for them here, although in practice no refugee is likely to be repatriated forcibly. The Southeast Asian representative of the U.N. High Commission for Refugees praises "the traditionally humanitarian attitude" of the Thai authorities towards the refugees.

Nevertheless, it is a worrying and expensive problem for Thailand. In the northeast part of the country there are millions of inhabitants who are Laotian, not Thai. In the same area, there are still 50,000 pro-Hanoi Vietnamese refugees from France's war in Indochina.

These "outsiders" have been treated as second-class citizens by the Thais and by the Bangkok government. Consequently they form the bulk of the Communist-activated insurgents who could make Thailand vulnerable to the next Communist thrust in Southeast Asia.

Naturally, Thailand fears that many of the new arrivals are not genuine refugees but have been sent by the new Communist governments in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia to strengthen the insurgents. Certainly, large quantities of weapons are coming into Thailand with the refugees.

For the U.N. experts, seeking new homes for the refugees is a continuous task which, they admit, may take years. All refugees are interviewed by a U.N. official and asked the key question: "What are your wishes?" The alternatives are explained—a new home in a number of countries but not necessarily the country of first choice, or to return home.

More than 2,000 Vietnamese and 32 Cambodian refugees evacuated by the Americans in the last days of the war have decided to return home. The United Nations expects this number to rise as more and more of them despair of finding permanent homes and jobs in the United States.