

200 Vietnamese Refugees Flee Detention Camp in Hong Kong

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Body

About **200 Vietnamese** boat people, facing a forced return home, fled a **detention** center in **Hong Kong** today after battering down the gates.

In the chaos of the uprising, other people in the **detention camp** set fire to barracks and the administration center and briefly held 15 **camp** officers hostage. The escapees, who included women and children, fled into the surrounding hills and towns in predawn darkness.

Firefighters battled blazes in the **camp** for most of the day, and guards and policemen in riot gear lobbed hundreds of tear-gas shells in an effort to retake control. By afternoon, a semblance of order had been restored and the hostages had been rescued from the **camp**, called Whitehead, where 8,600 **Vietnamese** were being held.

[But the violence flared again on Saturday, Reuters reported, as police officers tried to move 350 **refugees** from the Whitehead **camp** to another at High Island.]

More than 18,000 **Vietnamese refugees**, some of whom have been here for more than eight years, are being held in what amount to prison **camps** in **Hong Kong**, waiting to be returned to Vietnam. They are among 35,000 boat people who remain in Southeast Asia among the 800,000 who have fled to these countries from Vietnam, usually in small boats, since the fall of Saigon to the Communists in 1975.

Under an effort that began in 1989 to weed out economic migrants from political **refugees**, virtually all of the **camp** residents have been interviewed by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for **Refugees** and have been declared ineligible for asylum in the United States or elsewhere because they would not be expected to face political persecution upon returning home.

With the host countries anxious to close the **camps**, the United Nations agreed in March to end financing for them by June 30.

Over the years, **Hong Kong** has tried to persuade **refugees** to return to Vietnam. The Government says periodic efforts in the United States Congress to reopen the issue of asylum for **Vietnamese** in the **camps** have hampered that effort. The government of **Hong Kong**, a British crown colony, has said that it hopes to send the **Vietnamese** home before **Hong Kong** reverts to Chinese rule on July 1, 1997. China has insisted the **Vietnamese** be returned.

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Recently, Vietnam agreed to cooperate with Hong Kong in speeding up the forced repatriation. But the Government's efforts were stymied last month when a high court ruled that some refugees were illegally detained. The Government quickly moved to close the loophole.

Chief Secretary Anson Chan, the highest ranking civil servant in the territory, described the violence as "deplorable" but said it would not change Government plans. "We remain as determined as ever to repatriate all Vietnamese migrants," she said. "This incident has not lessened our resolve."

As the day wore on, squads of police fanned out across the New Territories, Hong Kong's piece of the Chinese mainland, erecting road blocks, searching housing developments and combing the hills around the camp looking for the escapees.

Local television showed plainclothes police capturing young Vietnamese men as they ran through the grounds of an apartment complex in Shatin, one of Hong Kong's many residential towns. Roadblocks and car searches created traffic jams.

Although the police estimated that 200 Vietnamese may have managed to escape, the torching of the camp's administration building made it difficult to determine the precise number. Sixteen other buildings were destroyed by fire and more than 40 cars were burned.

"We don't know exactly how many have escaped," said Toby Emmet, a senior police officer.

Meanwhile, in clouds of tear gas, the police and guards battled Vietnamese at the camp. Wielding clubs and makeshift spears, the Vietnamese fought squads of officers wearing helmets and protective vests and carrying plastic shields. Inmates clambered onto the roof of the camp's residential barracks.

Balls of fire boiled from camp buildings as helicopters wheeled overhead dropping water from huge tanks. About 22 police, firefighters and camp officers were injured, although none seriously, the police said. No information was provided on any Vietnamese injuries.

By late afternoon, the police said, 61 Vietnamese had been recaptured. They said that some of the camp's residents were being moved to other detention centers because the barracks had burned.

"This is certainly something much more ferocious than anything we've seen before," said Selina Chow, a member of Hong Kong's legislature, in an interview with a local radio station.

A spokesman for China's de facto embassy here, Zhang Junsheng, attributed the breakout and upheaval to British mismanagement.

"I hope in the brief 400 or more days left, the British Government can act responsibly," Mr. Zhang said on local television. "This has created great pressure economically and spiritually since" the Vietnamese "keep on making trouble."

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