

JULY 11-17;

Adrift on a Sea of Diplomacy

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Body

Six hundred and fifty-nine Chinese refugees on three fetid freighters became pawns in an international game last week. Headed for California, they were intercepted by the Coast Guard, rebuffed by a United States already concerned about joblessness and taken in by an eternally impoverished Mexico, ultimately to be returned to China, where they may face jail terms and fines.

Their desires were made plain by a crude sign: "Bread We Want, Freedom We Want." But they ran afoul of the Clinton Administration's crackdown on illegal immigrants seeking political asylum.

For the record, Mexican officials said the sudden reversal of their refusal to take in the refugees was for humanitarian purposes. Privately, they said they were under intense pressure placed on them by the pending vote in Congress on the North American Free Trade Agreement, which would unite the two nations and Canada in a single tariff-free zone.

The refugees began their voyage from China's Fuzhou Province three months ago. They languished for 11 days while diplomats debated their fate. On Friday, State Department official said passengers with genuine claims for political asylum would be heard.

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