

U.S. AID BILL WOULD HELP BRING BOAT PEOPLE HERE

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Body

Kim Viet Ngo moved to San Jose in September after almost six years in a Philippine refugee camp, leaving her husband behind.

Kim, a former Catholic nun, said she escaped Vietnam because of religious persecution. Her husband, an aspiring chemist, fled after being harassed by officials because of his family's opposition to the communist government.

He could be one of 20,000 boat people resettled in the United States if a foreign-aid bill scheduled for a House vote today becomes law. The bill, which would commit \$30 million to bring these refugees to this country and others, has sparked criticism from the United Nations and a threatened veto from President Clinton.

At issue is whether the refugees, the last of more than 800,000 who fled to camps after the Vietnam War, should be repatriated to their homelands under an international agreement signed by the United States in 1989, or allowed to settle in this country by seeking political asylum. Since the war, about 2 million Vietnamese have resettled overseas, including 90,000 in the San Jose area.

Opening the floodgates?

Opponents claim the House measure would undermine the U.N. program and open the gates to a flood of new immigrants at a time of growing support for restrictions on immigration. Supporters say the number of resettled Asians still would not exceed the annual quota of 40,000.

News of the legislation has raised hopes and sparked unrest in camps in nine Asian nations, including a riot in Hong Kong two weeks ago and a protest Monday by 4,000 refugees who broke out of their camp in Malaysia. More violence was reported Wednesday night at Hong Kong's High Island Detention Center where the camp kitchen and an adjacent office were set on fire.

"This is a very special class of people," said Rep. Christopher Smith, R- N.J., sponsor of the resettlement legislation. "Americans should understand that except for the grace of God any one of us could have ended up in one of those oppressive countries."

Smith's proposal would cover about half the 46,000 refugees left in the camps. The plan would prohibit using U.S. funds for repatriation and could reopen the screening process for some already denied refugee status. Clinton wants to commit \$25 million to a U.N.-backed repatriation effort.

"This was a lifesaving undertaking," a State Department official said of the U.N. program. "The plan has worked; 72,000 people have returned home since 1989, voluntarily and safely. We're willing to help them go back. This

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amendment would prevent us from providing funds for reintegration programs and the welfare of people who have already returned."

The United Nations effort began in 1989 with an agreement signed by 78 countries and agencies to repatriate Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians defined as "economic migrants" and to resettle legitimate political refugees.

Refugees protest

In March, the United Nations decided to repatriate the remaining camp residents by the end of the year.

That decision sparked a wave of protests from refugee groups in this country, particularly advocates for Vietnamese, who make up the largest number of camp residents. Smith's s legislation emerged as a response.

"We support this bill because the system in the camps is so corrupt," said Loc Vu, executive director of the Indochinese Resettlement and Cultural Center in San Jose. "People who can't pay local government officials with money or sexual favors are sometimes denied refugee status."

Rep. Norman Mineta, D-San Jose, has been flooded with letters from Vietnamese in his district, where some of those refugees would end up. He is among Democrats splitting with Clinton on the Smith amendment.

"I believe the United States has a responsibility to ensure that people who have legitimate claims to political refugee status not be sent back to their country of origin simply because of a faulty screening process," Mineta said in a statement.

Barbara Francis, a representative for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, acknowledged that her agency "did find evidence of corruption in Indonesia where local UNHCR staff were involved . . . but we are satisfied that overall, the procedures have been fair.

"It's not easy on the Vietnamese, it's not easy on us, but if you're screened out, you have to go home. We've had no reports of persecution; some harassment, but that was to be expected."

Such explanations are of little comfort to Kim.

"I hope they pass this bill, because then the United States can look over my husband's case again," Kim, a volunteer for a refugee resettlement group, said through tears. "We're wasting our lives while we're apart. We can't go back to Vietnam. Life was bad in the camps, but at least we were together."

A State Department official who doubted the Smith amendment would pass warned there is no way to make countries abide by what Congress decides.

Notes

RELATED STORY, PAGE 18A

Graphic

Photo;

PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tear gas wafts through the Hong Kong detention center for Vietnamese boat people as police try to quell rioting.
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