

More Misery for Vietnamese Detainees

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Body

Only a few weeks ago, it looked as if the sad saga of the tens of thousands of **Vietnamese** stuck in squalid detention camps across Southeast Asia was finally heading toward a tolerable conclusion. Those who did not qualify as political refugees were headed back, under U.N. monitoring, to a Vietnam that was, if no paradise, at least less impoverished and repressive than the one they fled.

Then House Republicans attached an amendment to the foreign aid bill that calls for reconsidering the asylum claims of those already found ineligible and cutting off funding to monitor and assist returned refugees in Vietnam. This clumsy political gesture touched off riots in the detention camps against any further repatriations and halted the return flow.

Reinterviewing may sound like a generous offer, and many who voted for the provision sincerely wanted to help the **Vietnamese** in detention camps. But the **more** likely result is further suffering.

The amendment, which the Senate has not acted on and which President Clinton opposes, may never become law. And it is not at all clear whether Congress can compel the executive branch to grant political asylum to people who do not qualify.

The story of the **Vietnamese** boat people began nearly 20 years ago, in the years following Hanoi's triumph over South Vietnam. Millions of **Vietnamese** set sail in small boats fleeing ethnic and political persecution and economic **misery**. Many died at sea or fell victim to local pirates.

Those who made it to nearby shores were received with hostility and herded into makeshift camps to await possible acceptance elsewhere. Eventually, **more** than a million were admitted to the United States and tens of thousands were accepted by other countries.

Some 40,000 remain in Southeast Asian camps, **more** than half in Hong Kong. All have been formally found ineligible for asylum under international law, which requires well-founded fear of persecution. Procedural questions have been raised about a small number of screenings, and these might usefully be reviewed. But the House's call for a wholesale reopening will only hold out false hopes and prevent agreement to voluntary return. Meanwhile, cutting off monitoring and assistance funds can only hurt those who have already returned.

The Senate, if it truly cares about the fate of these **Vietnamese**, should avoid repeating the House's mistake.

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