

# THAILAND CLOSES LONG-USED REFUGEE CAMPS

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## **Body**

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The Thai Government has closed three refugee camps housing Vietnamese and Laotian exiles, among them the Songkhla reception center on the Gulf of Siam, where arriving Vietnamese "boat people" have been sheltered for more than a decade.

Another camp for Vietnamese at Sikhiu in Northeastern Thailand is also being closed, along with a camp for Laotians at Ubon, also in the northeast.

At the same time, however, American immigration officials have begun accepting thousands of Laotians for resettlement in the United States, after a Thai decision late last year to make the Laotians available for interviews, according to refugee officials.

This year, Laotians - both "lowland" Lao from Vientiane and the Mekong River valley and tribe people from the Laotian highlands - are expected to dominate the 23,000 places set aside for immigration by ethnic Indochinese. Nearly 90,000 Laotian exiles are now in Thai camps, and more arrive each month.

Interviewed by Officials

Under an agreement between Bangkok and Vientiane that went into effect last July, Laotians arriving in Thailand - many by swimming or taking boats or rafts across the Mekong - are interviewed by local officials at their point of arrival.

Those determined not to be refugees are held in police stations awaiting repatriation to Laos. But Laos has so far refused to take any of the exiles back, despite the accord. More than a thousand of them are now living in one police compound alone at the Thai river town of Nakhon Phanom.

As camps around Thailand close, Vietnamese refugees will be moved to a resettlement reprocessing center in eastern Thailand, officials say. Future Vietnamese arrivals will therefore go straight to the center, at Phanat Nikhom, theoretically making their movement to a third country much more certain and quicker.

Some refugee workers are concerned that when this news reaches Vietnam, as all news about refugee matters quickly does, more people may again risk the pirate-infested Gulf of Siam. Recently, many Vietnamese boat people had been heading away from Thai waters toward Malaysia, Indonesia or the sea lanes leading to Singapore, where pirate attacks are rare and resettlement is faster.

Camp a Safety Hazard

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Most exiles from Laos will be grouped with other Laotians at the large camp at Na Pho near the Mekong River, or will be returned voluntarily to Laos, officials say. The Na Pho camp, built for about 15,000 refugees, now houses more than 32,000 and has long been considered a safety hazard. In late February, a fire at the enclosure destroyed the homes of 7,000 people, camp workers say.

The move to reduce by three the 11 refugee camps in Thailand - the country of first refuge for about a million and a half Indochinese refugees since Communist governments came to power in 1975 in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos - is seen by Thai and international refugee officials as an attempt to constrict and finally phase out the long-running refugee program here.

Officials in Thailand, which still provides shelter to more than 125,000 refugees and about 240,000 displaced Cambodians camped along the Thai-Cambodian border, say they are concerned that the flow of resettlement to Western and other nations has been reduced.

Many refugees remaining in Thailand have been rejected by most if not all resettlement countries, and Thailand does not want them to become a permanent burden on a tightening local economy. Thailand is suffering the results of falling commodity prices, and many farmers who live in the areas where the refugees are temporarily housed are complaining of food and other supplies going to the camps.

Questions are again being raised about the future of Thailand's best-known refugee center, Khao I Dang, several miles from the Cambodian border in eastern Thailand. Thai officials indicate that this center, with more than 25,000 people, some of whom have been in the camp nearly a decade, will sooner or later be closed also.

Its inhabitants, unable to find homes in the West, are expected to be moved back to the Cambodian frontier.

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