

In Hong Kong, Search Goes On For Vietnamese; 'Boat People' Rioted, Fled Detention Center

The Washington Post

May 11, 1996, Saturday, Final Edition

Copyright 1996 The Washington Post

Section: A SECTION; Pg. A24

Length: 699 words

Byline: Keith B. Richburg, Washington Post Foreign Service

Dateline: **HONG KONG**, May 10

Body

Police continued a massive manhunt tonight for about 150 **Vietnamese** "**boat people**" who escaped from a rural **detention center** after a predawn **riot** that left buildings and cars ablaze, a dozen police and prison guards injured and the colony's tough refugee repatriation policy in confusion.

Some 2,000 police, using **riot** equipment and tear gas, regained control of most of the Whitehead **detention** camp, and helicopters dropping water extinguished the raging fires after more than 10 hours. But about 400 **Vietnamese** tonight remained barricaded in a small section of the prison, hurling homemade spears at police from rooftops.

The escapees, including women and children, were reported to have looted homes in the rural fishing village of To Tau, in **Hong Kong**'s New Territories area near the Chinese border. Some are believed to have stolen speedboats and sampans to flee to other parts of the colony. Police threw up roadblocks and were stopping vehicles and boarding buses **searching** for the **Vietnamese**. Residents in the area were warned to keep their doors locked.

Police superintendent Charles Mitchell told the Associated Press that prospects of recapturing the escapees were "very good." "They stand out like sore thumbs. They only intend to do damage, not to fight us."

There have been periodic outbursts of violence at the camps, and several escape attempts, but police and government officials said this daylong rampage was by far the worst. The violence erupted as **Hong Kong** is trying to speed up its forced repatriation of the remaining 18,000 **boat people** here -- whom it calls economic migrants, not legitimate refugees -- before the colony reverts to Chinese sovereignty on July 1, 1997.

Officials were quick to say that today's violence would not affect the controversial forced repatriations, which must be accelerated if the colony is to meet China's demand that all the refugee camps be cleared by the 1997 transition.

"This incident has not lessened our resolve," said Anson Chan, the colony's highest-ranking civil servant, who is the acting chief executive until Gov. Chris Patten returns from a trip to the United States.

"We remain as determined as ever to repatriate all **Vietnamese** migrants to Vietnam as soon as possible," she said.

Security Secretary Peter Lai also told reporters that the **riot** would not slow down the program.

But the repatriations were likely to be slowed now because the **Vietnamese** burned down the Whitehead camp's main administrative building, which housed all refugee records and identity documents.

In Hong Kong, Search Goes On For Vietnamese; 'Boat People' Rioted, Fled Detention Center

The repatriation policy has been criticized by some refugee advocates, who see it as inhumane, and by some members of the U.S. Congress who feel that the refugees should be given another chance to be interviewed for possible resettlement in the West. Some of the refugees claim to have worked for the American-backed Saigon government during the Vietnam War.

The Clinton administration has endorsed a plan for Vietnamese to be interviewed and screened again, but only if they first return to Vietnam.

The rampage began in the predawn darkness, on a day when about 1,000 boat people were due to be transferred to a holding center to await their forced repatriation to Vietnam.

Police said the riot was a "well-planned operation," involving about 3,000 Vietnamese out of a total of 8,600 at Whitehead. They set fire to buildings and cars and took at least 15 prison guards hostage, while others used makeshift tools to cut through a wire mesh fence and escape.

More than 200 Vietnamese initially escaped, but about 70 were captured by nightfall. The guards were later released, one with a stab wound in the leg. Officials said 43 policemen, guards and Vietnamese were injured in the melee. The riot left 26 buildings gutted or damaged, and 53 cars and buses destroyed by the fires.

An official of the New China News Agency, which acts as the de facto voice of mainland China in the colony, blamed the British policy of accepting the migrants for the continuing tensions. He repeated Beijing's warning that all the Vietnamese boat people must be out of Hong Kong before Britain hands the territory back to China.

Graphic

Photo, garrige ho/reuter, Hundreds of Vietnamese sit on the roof of the Whitehead detention center during a riot over forced repatriation.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: RIOTS (90%); REFUGEES (90%); RESETTLEMENT & REPATRIATION (89%); POLICE FORCES (79%); CIVIL SERVICES (79%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (78%); RURAL COMMUNITIES (78%); IMMIGRANT DETENTION CENTERS (78%); FIRES (77%); CORRECTIONS WORKERS (77%); REFUGEE & RELIEF CAMPS (77%); VIETNAM WAR (73%); CORRECTIONS (72%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (69%); WAR & CONFLICT (66%); EXECUTIVES (60%); US CONGRESS (60%)

Company: ASSOCIATED PRESS (55%); ASSOCIATED PRESS (55%)

Industry: MARINE VESSELS (78%); HELICOPTERS (56%)

Geographic: HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM (79%); UNITED STATES (93%); VIET NAM (92%); CHINA (92%); HONG KONG (92%)

Load-Date: May 11, 1996

In Hong Kong, Search Goes On For Vietnamese; 'Boat People' Rioted, Fled Detention Center

End of Document