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Bill Opposes Vietnamese Repatriation

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Efforts by the United States and other countries to end the long, unhappy story of refugee "boat people" from Vietnam by sending most of the remaining refugees back to their native land would be disrupted by a controversial provision of the international affairs spending bill under consideration in the House.

The measure would allow as many as 20,000 refugees not now entitled to admission to the United States to enter the country and prohibit the Clinton administration from spending federal dollars to send others back to Vietnam against their will.

To its sponsors, led by Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-N.J.), the bill is an effort to right a wrong by granting entry into the United States to thousands of people who faced hardship or persecution because of their association with the U.S. side in the Vietnam War.

Smith said the refugees were victims of an "egregiously flawed" screening process. He said independent investigators reported that "hundreds, perhaps thousands had been wrongly rejected," and that the issue had been "swept under the table for the sake of expediency."

But to the State Department, to many refugee relief organizations and to allied countries that have supported the repatriation program, it is a last-minute effort to abort an internationally accepted solution to a problem that has lingered for years, and can only raise false hopes among those stranded in squalid camps in Hong Kong and Thailand.

The 41,000 people in those camps have already been screened and judged ineligible for resettlement in the United States, Canada, Australia or other Western countries participating in a joint "Comprehensive Plan of Action" for resettling the refugees.

Any requirement that they be screened again to see if they meet criteria established in the House bill would only provoke a strong reaction in Hong Kong and Thailand, the countries of "first asylum" where the refugees are not welcome, according to Le Xuan Khoa, director of the Washington-based Southeast Asia Resource Action Center.

"We need to avoid more violence and loss of life" in the camps, he said, speaking three days after a riot forced evacuation of a camp in Hong Kong. The best option for the refugees, he said, is to return to Vietnam, as more than 70,000 have already done, and then apply to immigrate from there.

Assistant Secretary of State Phyllis Oakley said the "first asylum" countries have barely tolerated the Vietnamese presence because they knew the Comprehensive Plan of Action would soon remove the refugees and empty the camps in an orderly process approved by 50 countries and accepted by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

"The idea was that those countries in Southeast Asia would stop pushing folks back into the sea because it would be resolved in an orderly way," she said.

"We're very much opposed" to the House bill, she said, "because we would be seen as abrogating an international agreement that has done much good."

Almost a year ago, prominent advocates for refugee rights said in an "open letter" to Vietnamese refugees that there was no longer any point in delaying the repatriation process because the United States, its partners in the Comprehensive Plan and the "first asylum" countries were adamant that the books had to be closed.

"Those in the camps who have been rejected for refugee status must understand that with few exceptions they will eventually have to return home to Vietnam," the letter said.

According to Khoa, Oakley and diplomats from countries participating in the resettlement program, passage of the House bill would restore exactly the hope that the refugees were told last year no longer exists, and would stiffen resistance to voluntary repatriation.