

Indonesians accused of extorting sex, money from refugees
by David Williams

SYDNEY, Nov 9 (AFP) -- Indonesian officials extorted sex and money from Vietnamese boat people in return for granting them refugee status, an Australian lawyer alleged Tuesday.

The Indonesian embassy in Canberra issued a statement Monday denying the allegations, which lawyer Simon Jeans had previously publicised in radio interviews for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the BBC.

However, Jeans called on third party nations including Australia, Canada and the United States, to investigate his allegations and to reject immigrants found to have paid money to gain refugee status.

He said he worked for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) during the first half of 1992 assessing applications for refugee status from Vietnamese boat people on the Indonesian island of Galang, which holds about 8,000 Vietnamese and Cambodians.

Under an agreed Comprehensive Plan of Action, UNHCR officials made an initial assessment on whether boat people should be treated as refugees and resettled in third party nations, but Indonesian officials had the final say, Jeans told AFP.

Some Indonesian officials had learned Vietnamese in an Australian training program and "they could put the hard word on girls, they might go to their rooms half a dozen times or as many times as they liked and then the girls would get refugee status," he said.

"There were other girls who would have sex with other Indonesians who would then do deals with those doing the screening."

women targetted by the officials were aged 18 to 22, had no relatives and would therefore be the most vulnerable, Jeans added.

Other Vietnamese people who had no reason to be treated as refugees could gain the status by paying on a sliding scale between 3,000 and 8,000 U.S. dollars, he said.

"You paid different amounts of money depending on what stage your case was at."

Boat people would be charged 3,000 dollars to gain refugee status at the interview in Galang, 5,000 dollars for a favourable review in Jakarta after rejection in Galang and 8,000 dollars to sway a final appeal board in Jakarta.

Many Vietnamese-Australian relatives of the boat people had since contacted Jeans in Sydney, asking him how to forward the money to Indonesian officials, he said.

"I have had Vietnamese people ringing me, inviting me to their homes and writing letters, all wanting to find out how to pay the money. I try to tell them not to do it, I tell them paying the Indonesians is exploiting the refugees," Jeans said.

Several refugees whose status had been accepted by UNHCR officials were turned down by Indonesian officials after failing to

come up with the cash, he added.

A statement from the Indonesian Embassy in Canberra said the allegations were "a malicious campaign to discredit the Indonesia government which since 1979 has been temporarily providing an island as an asylum until they were eligible for resettlement in the third resettlement countries."

The embassy said refugee status was not solely determined by Indonesian officials and that all screening was performed under internationally accepted guidelines.

"The screening was finalised in August, which the result of 9,500 screened out wich means that they have to be voluntarily repatriated to their country of origin and 2,500 screened in which means that they are eligible to be resettled in the third countries," the statement said.

A UNHCR official in Canberra said the matter was extremely sensitive and he could not immediately make any comment.

djw/jt/mjc

AFP 090720 GMT NOV 93