

Vietnamese Boat People Assistance Programme

26 April 1996

*situation report no. 4
period covered: April, 1996*

The orderly repatriation of Vietnamese Boat People from camps in Malaysia to their homeland began on 18 April and is expected to be completed in May. The Malaysian Red Crescent is providing services to the returnees throughout the journey, right up to their arrival in Vietnam.

The context

The saga of the Vietnamese Boat People (VBPs) whose exodus to surrounding countries began over 20 years ago, is now entering its final chapter.

Of the more than 250,000 Vietnamese refugees who landed in Malaysia, the majority were resettled over the years in third countries. Most of those who remained behind were unable to qualify as refugees under the UNHCR screening procedure and were deemed illegal immigrants. When UNHCR indicated early this year that funding support for VBP camps in south-east Asia would cease as of July 1996 the Malaysian Government, through its National Task Force, decided to arrange the orderly repatriation of people in this category. The first group left for Vietnam on 18 April.

Since the beginning of the VBP influxes in the late seventies the Malaysian Red Crescent Society (MRCS), supported by Federation funds and delegates, has played a critical role in providing humanitarian relief and management of the VBP camps, first on the island, Pulau Bidong, then on the mainland, at Sungai Besi. Twenty years later, with the Federation's presence now limited to support through its Regional Delegation in Kuala Lumpur, the MRCS is playing a final and equally important role -- that of assisting the VBPs on their journey home.

Latest events

After the Malaysian Government's decision to close the existing camps and repatriate the remaining Vietnamese, the National Task Force drew up a phased repatriation programme for the transfer of groups of pre-selected immigrants. Four trips were scheduled, on 18 April, 2 May, 9 May and 16 May, with 317 people in the first group, and 346 in the second group. Numbers for the third and fourth journeys are still under review. The groups in May will include hard core opponents of repatriation.

The journey begins with the initial transfer by bus from the transit camp at Sungai Besi near Kuala Lumpur to the east coast port of Tanjung Gelang. From there the returnees embark on a Malaysian Navy vessel for the two day crossing to the Vietnam port of Vung Tau.

The first group, consisting of 165 men, 107 women and 45 children, mostly from the Dong Nai, Song Be, Long Anh and Tay Ninh provinces, left as scheduled on 18 April. The UNHCR and the Malaysian Task Force co-ordinated the transfer with Vietnamese Government officials.

The transfers began in the morning and, although sadness and despair were evident among those who had been in Malaysia for many years, including those born there, the processing and embarkation proceeded smoothly, with no violence or disruption. After some initial tension the Malaysian authorities, Police and Armed Forces, present in considerable numbers, handled the departure in a restrained and often sensitive and compassionate manner.

The crossing to Vietnam also went well and the arrival and disembarkation on Vietnamese soil was uneventful.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

After the government's decision to begin orderly repatriation the MRCS decided to provide services throughout the process.

A detailed plan of action, covering logistics, health, first aid, water and sanitation, social services and counselling, was drawn up. The plan provides for a rotation of four Special Teams, each with an experienced Team Leader, to accompany the VBPs at all times, from Kuala Lumpur to the end of the journey in Vietnam.

The teams comprise eight members including nurses and social workers drawn from MRCS staff and volunteers. Col. (R) Tony Joseph, Team Leader for the first group transfer, stated on his return from Vietnam: "The presence and contribution of the MRCS proved to be absolutely essential throughout the process... The simple knowledge that the immigrants were accompanied by well known faces provided both confidence and a calming effect."

The MRCS provided round the clock support and health and first aid services and assisted in liaison and advising the Armed Forces personnel. In addition it co-ordinated food distribution and water and sanitation services.

The preparations and execution of the services undertaken by the Society went very well, but as in all complex actions there were lessons to be learned. Detailed debriefings are being held to assess and recommend improvements and to prepare the next team to better address the problems that arose.

The following already identified points will be given priority.

* MRCS staff must be present with the immigrants in the ship's hold 24 hours a day, working in shifts.

* Body searches for weapons and other restricted goods, although carried out quite quickly and without confrontation before the first journey, should be done more discreetly.

* Because there were delays at the disembarkation point and these are likely to continue, extra food should be taken on board.

* The conditions in the hold were very hot and more water will be needed in future.

* Although radio communication between the team was good, extra sets will be carried next time.

* Sanitation proved a problem and there were long line ups for the latrines

* Closer management of baggage, personal items, meal cards, medical records etc. is needed

* More boiled water should be available for milk.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The MRCS was commended for carrying out its work in a low profile, professional and humanitarian way. Relations with government authorities were cordial and professional. The media in Malaysia covered the action comprehensively and was supportive, sympathetic and fair.

Conclusion

The role of the MRCS so far in this sensitive and complicated programme has enhanced both its own reputation and that of the Movement. The operation has been professionally executed, and action taken to apply lessons learned to the perhaps more difficult and demanding transfers in the coming weeks.

Xusheng Yang
Desk Officer
Asia/Pacific Department

Jerry Talbot
Director
Asia / Pacific Department