
Massacre at Sea

by Roy Branson

One evening last year a Cambodian resistance leader slipped quietly into the living room of an Adventist minister in Bangkok. Out of his leather shoulder bag this soft-spoken, Paris-educated intellectual took the equivalent of \$10,000 in Thai money and placed it on the minister's desk. It was a donation from his father, the head of one of the three groups competing to reclaim Cambodia. The funds were to help continue relief activities for the Kampuchean refugees congregated in camps for which this exiled leader and his father felt responsible.

The relief agency led by Adventists, but independent of the Seventh-day Adventist church, used the money directly to meet the basic, essential needs of the refugees. But the board of the organization wrestled with the question of whether they should put its efforts into helping refugees in the camps loyal to noncommunist Kampuchean exile leaders, or provide services among all three of the principal Kampuchean exile groups, including that dominated by Pol Pot, the former Communist leader of Kampuchea whose ruthless policies are said to have cost millions their lives.

A few months before, in 1981, the managers of Adventist hospitals in Thailand re-

ceived a report from CARE containing a startling proposal. The author, a 1979 graduate of the Loma Linda University School of Medicine, suggested that the Adventists might accept the responsibility for providing medical services to Vietnamese refugee women that a group of French Catholic physicians already actively treating refugees refused to furnish. Dr. Nguyet Mehler, who had spent two months in the refugee camp in Songkhla, Southern Thailand, at the end of 1980, provided the most reliable analysis yet written of gang rapes by Thai fishermen of the women fleeing from Vietnam by boat across the Gulf of Thailand (see pages 28-29). When the rape victims were examined in camp and treated for venereal disease, a significant number were found to be pregnant. The Catholic physicians responsible for health care in the Songkhla camp refused to perform abortions. Because of Dr. Mehler's reference to Adventist medical facilities in Thailand and the prominence of the Bangkok Adventist Hospital in the country, the Adventists were confronted with the issue of whether or not they would agree to abort the pregnancies of the raped Vietnamese women. They decided to perform the abortions. According to *Adventist Health Ministry*, published by the General Conference Department of Health and Temperance (Sept.-Oct., 1981, p. 8), medical personnel from the Haadyai Mission Hospital drove a dental bus 16 miles every Thursday to the Songkhla refuge camp to screen

Roy Branson, the editor of SPECTRUM, holds graduate degrees from Harvard University and the University of Chicago. He recently spent time in Thailand investigating the plight of Indochinese refugees.

rape victims for pregnancy and perform necessary abortions. When "the unavailability of the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) physicians to follow up emergency cases" became clear, "a special permission from the provisional governor's office was acquired to be able to perform the procedure in the hospital."

These and other important questions confront Adventists active in Thailand responding to one of the major problems of our time: the continuing flow of refugees across national borders. In Indochina alone, over a million people have fled their homes since 1975. More than any other country, Thailand has allowed refugees to cross its boundaries and camps to be established where they have been fed, clothed and treated before going on to permanent residences in other countries.

By providing medical, dental, nursing and educational skills, Adventists have helped refugees in many of those Thai refugee camps. While Volunteers International (see pages 30-31) and the Adventist hospitals in Thailand have recruited and coordinated the activities of scores of Adventists, the Seventh-day Adventist World Service (SAWS) has probably been the avenue for the greatest number of Adventists who have helped the refugees. Over 320 people have been able to assist refugees in Thailand through SAWS. At any given time SAWS provides 25 medically related professionals to clinics and hospitals in as many as eight refugee camps. The volunteers come from Australia, Canada, the Philippines, and the United States for a minimum stay of one month.

While Adventists have been clear that they should help the Indochinese suffering from a variety of forces beyond their control, Adventists involved in assisting the refugees have puzzled over whether they have any responsibility to help prevent people from being victimized in the first place. More specifically, it has been hard for some not to notice that thousands of refugees from Vietnam have died before reaching the refugee camps. Those who survived have often suffered barbarous treatment at the hands of marauding Thai fishermen. Some Adventists

have wondered if their resources and energy should extend beyond caring for victims, to helping prevent the atrocities refugees have endured (see pages 29-30).

It is impossible to know how many of the refugees who set out from southern Vietnam for Thailand and Malaysia since 1975 have died at sea, but those who have interviewed survivors vary in their estimates from 50,000 to over 450,000 deaths. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which has the ultimate responsibility for supervising the refugee camps, reports that during a trip that should last three to four days, 80 percent of the refugees who survive have been attacked by fishermen an average of three to four times before reaching shore. Dr. Mehler's CARE report concerning rape noted one case when a nine-year-old was raped, and several when eleven- and twelve-year-old girls suffered gang rapes. Her research revealed that women 15-20 years of age faced a 60 percent chance of being raped, not once but up to 40, 50, or more times.

The treatment endured by the women is barely possible to contemplate (see pages 28-29). Koh Kra is an uninhabited island of three and a half square miles of rock and jungle, bounded by white coral beaches, off the coast of southern Thailand. Until the spring of 1981, Thai fishermen hunted refugee women on that island. According to the UNHCR, one female refugee was severely burned when southern Thai fishermen, attempting to flush her out, set fire to the hillside where she was hiding. Another cowered for days in a cave, waist deep in water, until crabs had torn the skin and much of the flesh away from her legs. By October 1980, 160 refugees had died on that island alone. The total no doubt went well beyond 200 before a detail of six to eight marines was stationed on the island in the spring of 1981 and halted the carnage.

In April of this year two girls were seized at night from their drifting refugee boat by two fishermen who threw them into the water and hauled them back to their Thai trawler. After two days and one night of raping, the fishermen took a large piece of canvas and made a bag. To give it some buoyancy, they

tied plastic bottles around the throat of the bag. The second night the fishermen put the girls in the bag up to their necks and tossed them into the water. All night the girls managed to float with their heads above water. At daybreak another fishing boat discovered the girls, retrieved them from the Gulf, and took them to a police station on shore.

The end of the terrorism is not in sight. Boats continue to set out from Vietnam headed for Thailand, and increasingly a more distant Malaysia. The longer journeys prolong the refugees' vulnerability to attacks. The number of arrivals by boat from Vietnam in 1981 was 74,754, according to the UNHCR, only 1,000 fewer than the year before. A large and continuing reservoir of potential boat people remains in Vietnam. The number of persons incarcerated in re-education camps there may be as few as the 50,000 claimed by the Vietnamese government or as many as the 200,000 estimated by Western observers. If those confined are not allowed to hold jobs when they are released from these camps, they and their families become prime candidates for attempts to cross the Gulf of Thailand.

Some Adventists in the United States involved in helping the refugees almost despair when government officials seem to be preoccupied with devising means of deterring the boat people, rather than stopping acts of piracy against the thousands of Vietnamese who continue to sail from their country each month. Indeed, Secretary of State Haig's Advisory Panel on the Indochinese Refugee Problem reported in the fall of 1981 that it has received a serious but shocking suggestion: the United States should "diminish efforts to control piracy in the Thai Gulf," because "high rates of piracy might conceivably deter refugees from fleeing by boat." The panel rejected the proposal, but subsequently the United States government did stop its six months support for a Thai experiment in combating piracy, and on September 21, 1981, even that ineffective effort was disbanded by the Thai navy. While the UNHCR is trying to raise \$3.5 million to finance another antipiracy program, as of

March 1, 1982, there is no organized program on the part of any government or international organization attempting to reduce pirate attacks against the unarmed boat people.

What is the responsibility of concerned Adventists? Certainly they can contribute their money to refugee relief and volunteer to spend a minimum of a month working in a refugee camp in Thailand. Also, Adventists who remain in this country can help individual refugees and their families.

But should Adventists do more? Would it be appropriate for those who are concerned (not the denomination itself) to call for the United States government to issue an authoritative report informing the public concerning piracy against refugees in the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea? What about arguing that the United States, which got many Vietnamese involved in supporting its side in the Vietnamese war, has a special obligation to mobilize efforts to combat acts of piracy against the boat people, a significant number of whom are identified with Americans or the regime defeated by the present government? Is there a general obligation to present harm if it can be accomplished?

Adventists have contributed a great amount of money, time and energy to help Indochinese refugees who have already been victimized. It is worth pondering whether Adventists have a further responsibility to help prevent future acts of barbarism against these refugees. Those who wish to urge the United States, specifically, to assume greater responsibility for responding to what can only be called a massacre of unarmed civilians on the high seas can write to Congressman Stephan Solarz, Chairman, Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, House Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington, D.C.; or to Senator Alan K. Simpson, Chairman, Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Policy, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Washington, D.C. As of March 1982, neither chairman had ever scheduled hearings on the matter of piracy against Vietnamese refugees nor had their committees released reports on the subjects informing the public of the problem.