
Adventist Layman Helps Indochinese Refugees

by Gene M. Daffern

Robert Bainum eased his white Chevrolet into the congested traffic on the capital beltway circling Washington, D.C. He ignored the traffic that hot day in August 1979. Instead, he listened intently to a taped sermon about an Asian Holocaust. He was stunned when he heard the pastor say that each month thousands of Vietnamese refugees were dying in the Gulf of Thailand. By the time he reached his home in Silver Spring, Maryland, Bainum had decided that he must go to Southeast Asia and help rescue the “boat people.”

For two months, though, he stalled. Bainum, a Seventh-day Adventist businessman, did not want to leave his thriving business and his wife and five grown children for an extended and dangerous mission. Then in October of 1979, while in Los Angeles on a business trip, Bainum decided once again that he must go. That day he purchased a ticket and stepped onto a jet headed toward Bangkok. He had no well-defined plan, no organization to back him.

Nevertheless, during the next two years, Bainum’s accomplishments would far exceed his dreams. He would work as a volunteer in Thailand, not once, but six times, raise over \$900,000 for refugee relief — donating a considerable amount himself. Most impor-

tantly, he would found two refugee relief organizations that would send over 200 volunteers into Thailand. And, yes, he would even rescue hundreds of boat people. In the course of these events, Robert Bainum would become an example of Adventist activism and philanthropy.

When Bainum, in October 1979, boarded the plane in Los Angeles headed for Bangkok, he wasn’t certain how he would help. He thought he might charter a boat and sail with it to rescue refugees on floundering boats. Pirates were plentiful, stealing refugees’ money, gold and jewels, often ramming and sinking their boats. He had been told that refugees on 80 percent of all boats that were attempting the 300-mile crossing of the Gulf of Thailand were subjected to robbery, rape or murder. But he says, “I was much more worried about what would happen to me if I didn’t answer the call within me than what would happen to me if I did answer it.”

Arriving in Bangkok, Bainum sought out people involved in existing relief organizations. He was told of the great needs of the Cambodian refugees, the “land people” who were fleeing across Thailand’s eastern border, sometimes at the rate of 10,000 per day. Having no good plan of his own to rescue boat people, Bainum, instead, volunteered his services to the Seventh-day Adventist World Service (SAWS) regional office in Bangkok. Pastor Dick Hall, then SAWS Southeast Asia director, gave Bainum the job of supervising the organization of an 80-bed

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SAWS hospital in the Khao I Dang Refugee Camp. The refugee camp, eight miles from the Cambodian border, is the largest in Thailand and, at one time, was populated by more than 100,000 refugees.

Bainum, a successful businessman since he was graduated from Columbia Union College in 1948, knew how to organize. For 10 years he had run businesses in housing construction and real estate. Then he had begun building nursing homes. Today he is owner and administrator of the Fairfax Nursing Center, a 200-bed, 40-apartment nursing home in Fairfax, Virginia, and one of the major stockholders of Manor Care, a corporation with 60 nursing centers, based in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Bainum spent several weeks recruiting workers, securing construction material — “liberating” it from United Nations red tape — supervising construction, and outfitting the hospital with beds and supplies. Because he had seen to it that a dirt walkway crossed from the road to the SAWS medical unit, important visitors usually inspected the SAWS hospital instead of the other hospitals in the camp. Among the visitors were the sister of the king of Thailand; General Wheeler, the chairman of the United States

Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Leonard Woodcock, U.S. ambassador to the People’s Republic of China.

Since Pastor Hall had asked Bainum to find a way to get food inside Cambodia, Bainum asked every important visitor how he could manage to take supplies into Cambodia. Ambassador Woodcock referred Bainum to an aide who put Dick Hall in touch with people who knew how to cross the border. One night Hall and Bainum drove 17 miles through the jungle on a tractor, accompanied by armed guards and a Cambodian guide. At the border they were met by 40 soldiers of the noncommunist Khmer Serei who provided protection from the occupying Vietnamese communists and the communist Khmer Rouge who were fighting for control of the region. The Khmer Serei soldiers helped them haul food, clothing and medical supplies to Sok Sonn, a village of about 5,000 starving persons, situated just inside Cambodia. Hall and Bainum met with Sonn Sann, the leader of the Khmer Serei and former prime minister of Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk. He was grateful for what they had done and later entrusted them with \$10,000 to bring more food to the village. The men were shocked by what they saw in

Loma Linda Medical Graduate Studies Plight of Boat People

The most detailed description of violent attacks, including rape, against women among the boat people comes from a CARE report by Nguyet Mehlert, M.D. The report has been cited in government documents and magazines such as *Newsweek*. Because Dr. Mehlert is not only a physician, but a female, Vietnamese refugee herself, victims of rape provided her with more information on the problem than has been collected by anyone else.

What is not so well known is that Dr. Mehlert graduated from the Loma Linda University School of Medicine in 1979,

and that her report was instrumental in getting Adventists involved in providing special medical care for rape victims among the boat people.

Nguyet escaped from Saigon in 1975, with the help of American physicians at the Saigon Adventist Hospital, where she was taking part of her medical school training. In the United States she made her way to Loma Linda University where the physicians who had helped her were members of the medical school faculty. After marrying Calvin Mehlert, whom she had known in Vietnam as a State Department officer, she took a year’s internship at the Washington

Sok Sonn and made plans to continue supplying the village.

Before returning to the United States, Bainum met Jerry Aitken, a SAWS volunteer in Thailand on a one-month leave from his tree surgery business in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and hired him to keep Sok Sonn supplied with food. Aitken, an Adventist who had been a missionary to Thailand for five years before returning to the United States, speaks Thai fluently. His one-month leave in Thailand has stretched beyond two years and he is still in Thailand as one of the directors of a refugee relief organization Bainum was to found.

The trip to Asia, the first of many, was a turning point for Bainum. "I reached the point in my life where I decided I had enough money and didn't need to make any more, adding money to money. I decided to use my talent as an administrator and manager for the good of people less fortunate than myself. I believe it is necessary to share the wealth I have. In fact, I feel that it's very difficult for me to remain a Christian and not share — especially when half the world is hungry and in need of basic shelter. To be a rich Christian

in an age of hunger is almost impossible."

While in Thailand, Bainum was told by Red Cross and United Nations workers that there were only a few operating trucks in Cambodia, making it extremely difficult to distribute the UN food that was being airlifted into Phnom Phen, the capital. Back in the United States, Bainum offered SAWS headquarters in Washington, D.C., \$200,000 if SAWS would purchase trucks to transport the food. The director of SAWS at that time told him that trucks were not needed in the capital of Cambodia, but offered to accept the donation for unrestricted use.

Undeterred, Bainum, one Sunday morning, made the same offer to the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. Twenty-seven people supported the project, calling it Church of the Savior — International Good Neighbors (COSIGN).

While Bainum was and is a Seventh-day Adventist church member, he had previously participated in the Church of the Savior's Jubilee Housing Program, an apartment house cooperative project for the poor in Washington, D.C. "I believe that at the Church of the Savior I really learned to appreciate the real essence of serving God by working with and sharing the suffering of

Adventist Hospital.

Former associates of her husband in the State Department arranged for Nguyet, under the auspices of CARE, to study the problem of rape among the Vietnamese boat people. During her eight-week stay the latter part of 1980 in Songkhla, Southern Thailand, Nguyet examined, treated, or interviewed scores of rape victims. According to Dr. Mehler's data, women 15-20 years of age among the boat people face a 60 percent chance of being raped, not once but half a dozen, to 40, 50, or more times. Women in 70 percent of the boats suffer rape attacks.

Victims of multiple rape at sea nearly always arrived in Thailand with copious, yellow vaginal discharge, signaling gonorrhea. The women were deeply embarrassed by the odor which is strong and

repulsive and the gathering swarms of flies. Modesty forced them to clutch blankets around themselves, even during hot days. Walking was agony, with their legs having to be spread disgustingly far apart.

As a result of what she learned in her work, Nguyet made several suggestions: the dosage of medicine for treating venereal disease had to be increased to conform to accepted United States standards; a rape counseling program using Vietnamese refugee women themselves needed to be set up; because French Catholic physicians in charge of refugee medical care in Songkhla refused to perform abortions, other groups, such as the Seventh-day Adventists, should be asked to abort pregnancies resulting from rape. All her suggestions were acted upon.

poor and hurting people. Somehow, I learned a lesson there I hadn't learned other places.

"I had begun to wonder about my relationship to my church. I remember that once I brought a black woman to evangelistic services at a church in Maryland: I got scolded for it. And then I tried to bring her son to Vacation Bible School. I also found myself fighting American involvement in the Vietnam War and South Africa's racial policies. I began to wonder, was I a wrong person in the church or was I in the wrong church?"

Bainum took part in the civil rights rallies of Martin Luther King, Jr., on the mall in Washington, D.C., and was active in picketing Dow Chemical for manufacturing napalm used in the Vietnam War. Thus, when Church of the Savior Pastor Gordon Cosby inspired him through his sermon in August 1979, heard while he was driving the

Beltway, Bainum was ready to act.

As it turned out, the newly formed COSIGN was unfortunately unable to supply the desperately needed trucks, because of Cambodian government red tape. COSIGN turned its energies to other relief projects, some of the time combining its efforts with those of SAWS in Thailand. Jerry Aitken became a COSIGN employee and continued to supply food to the village of Sok Sonn which Hall and Bainum had found inside Cambodia. For the next 18 months Aitken, with COSIGN, cooperated with Dick Hall who was still leading SAWS in Thailand. In all, they transported nearly 80 SAWS doctors and nurses across the Cambodian border to Sok Sonn and constructed a makeshift hospital there. Denominational lines blurred: one-third of COSIGN's volunteers were Adventists. Bainum even arranged for a COSIGN office in a building on the Ekamai

Refugee Women Face Pirate Attacks

Even though the following account has been edited from Dr. Mehlert's report, the details that remain may offend some readers. But only when the details of the boat journeys are confronted can we grasp the nature of the violence being done every day and night against unarmed refugees in the Gulf of Thailand.

A boat left Rach Gia October 6, 1980, with 78 persons, 17 of them females over 11 years of age. The trip followed the familiar pattern: robberies two days from the Vietnamese shore, followed by raping. October 8, 30 to 40 crewmen from four fishing vessels converged at evening on the motorless Vietnamese boat. Eleven of the Vietnamese women were distributed among the vessels for two hours of gang raping, before being returned to the refugee boat.

A 28-year-old single woman told Dr. Mehlert that the fifth day a boatload of particularly large and heavy Thai fishermen started to tow the refugee vessel. Perhaps because she was ill, vomiting, bleeding from the vagina, and half conscious from being raped two days before by eight men, she was allowed to sleep for a while. She awakened as she was being dragged to the captain's cabin on the fishing boat. She began screaming and kicking. In retaliation the fattest of the fishermen beat her about the face and began strangling her. Somehow she pulled free, ran half the length of the boat, stumbled, fell, and crawled to the stern. From there she managed to hide in the engine room.

The fat fisherman found her and dragged her over to the refugee boat with the help of four others, all of whom proceeded to rape her. She finally pretended to faint, hoping the attacks would stop. The

compound owned by Bangkok Adventist Hospital, 10 miles away.

Furthermore, Bainum was determined that COSIGN not compete with the other relief organizations in Thailand. "We just wanted to fill in the gaps in areas that weren't being taken care of." One of those gaps was the lack of drinking water in the refugee camps and Thai villages. With the influx of thousands of refugees, existing wells quickly dried up as the water table dropped. COSIGN volunteers, led by Aitken, began drilling wells. At first they drilled by hand, using a hand drill devised by Cliff Maberly, an Adventist missionary minister from Australia. In this way nearly 50 wells were dug in six months, not only inside refugee camps, but also in poor Thai villages which were losing their water to the refugees. Two wells were dug in COSIGN's adopted Cambodian village, Sok Sonn, between rounds of shell-

ing from nearby fighting. Eventually, a Japanese Buddhist organization donated \$75,000 for a large well-drilling rig and \$20,000 to operate it. The Quiet Hour radio broadcast added another \$75,000 for operations. Recently, COSIGN received additional funds to purchase a second well-drilling machine.

In June 1980, during Bainum's third trip to Thailand, he acted on his original impulse to help the boat people. He arranged for COSIGN volunteers to move one of the well-drilling machines to the port of Songkhla in Southern Thailand, the location of the main refugee camp for the boat people. Wells were dug inside the camp and in the adjoining communities. Bainum also found a need for English classes. Volunteers taught refugees during their three- to six-month stay in camp, preparing them for immigration to English-speaking countries.

fishermen paused to talk to each other. Suddenly, she felt a hot, slicing pain on her abdomen. Looking down, she saw blood flowing from her navel and her external genitalia. One of the rapists held a bloody knife in his hand. Her screams proved to the fishermen that she had not fainted. They resumed their raping.

By now, one of her legs was somehow caught by a projection on the deck and she could not spread her legs widely enough to satisfy the rapists. Thinking she was still trying to avoid them, one of the rapists took his knife and made parallel cuts on the inside of her thigh. The deck beneath her became slippery with blood. The raping continued with the fat man persisting for unendurable lengths of time. At that point, she did in fact faint.

Some time later she was shocked awake by a pail full of ice water dashed over her whole body. Hoping to avoid further attacks, she crept to the deck of the refugee boat, only to be met by fishermen guards who heaved her back to the Thai boat.

The second day of the orgy her knife wounds were soaked in mercurochrome, as was another refugee's sanitary napkin, which was then placed over her vagina.

Frequently, the fishermen came by and pinched her breasts roughly to see if she could still react. Some removed the sanitary napkin, only to leave when they saw the bloody mess around the vagina.

That evening, one fisherman pulled her over to pails of water, cleaned her with soap, clothed her, pushed her to the rail of the fishing boat, and dropped her back on to the refugee boat being pulled alongside. There, another Thai fisherman rubbed some perfumed liquid on her body and covered her mouth with his hand, forcing her to inhale some kind of aromatic spirit. When she showed signs of reviving, the fishermen gathered around. Four of them recommenced raping her. Finally, she reached a state of collapse and was left naked and moaning on the cabin floor.

The other 10 females were raped in similarly brutal fashion, except for the knifings. Apart from the 28-year-old, a girl of 13 was raped more than any other victim because of her desirably young age. When the fishermen left, they abducted two of the women and took them to Koh Kra Island, where they endured still further gang rapes. Finally, a UNHCR boat rescued them from the island.

In Songkhla, Bainum daily saw the victims of Thailand's fishermen-pirates crowding into the camp. Firsthand, he heard the stories of robbery, rape, and murder. When he returned to Washington, Bainum suggested that COSIGN sponsor a rescue boat. He was so concerned about the violence against the unarmed refugees, he said, that he thought that he would be willing for the rescue boat to be armed, prepared to conduct citizen arrests of pirates, if necessary. The proposal not only failed to be approved, but the meeting of the COSIGN board broke up in some disarray.

While continuing to lend his support to COSIGN, Bainum decided to form yet another organization — Volunteers International — which he felt could be more flexible and could provide less costly ways to send volunteers to Thailand. The key concept of the organization is that every volunteer pays his own expenses for a minimum of a month. If volunteers agree to assume the \$13 a day it takes to support themselves, including food, local transportation, lodging, and incidentals, Volunteers International will arrange with U.S. airline companies to fly the volunteers to Thailand free of charge.

Since its organization in October 1980, Volunteers International, a nonprofit, tax-exempt foundation with an annual budget of \$600,000, has been headed by Robert Bainum, president and chairman of a nine-member board. In 1980, Dick Hall left SAWS to become Asian director for Volunteers International and Jerry Aitken departed from COSIGN to become associate director. Three other full-time, salaried employees now work for Volunteers International. Most members of the board are volunteers. Glenn Rounsevell, vice president of the organization, is owner and director of a 12-grade private school in Fairfax, Virginia. He volunteers his time to recruit and interview volunteers. He has traveled to Thailand five times in the last two years, first drilling wells and setting up English schools for COSIGN and later beginning English schools for Volunteers International.

The majority of the foundation's board is

comprised of Adventists. Many of its volunteers have also been members of the denomination, although Volunteers International also welcomes those who are Christians in other denominations, and humanitarians, such as Rounsevell, who is a member of no denomination. The volunteers are placed with other relief groups in Thailand, but also work in the projects run directly by Volunteers International: teaching English, drilling wells, digging reservoirs and operating a mobile dental clinic. Among Adventist institutions, the faculty and students from Union College have responded with notable enthusiasm. As of January 1982, a total of 22 volunteers from across North America were working in three refugee camps, according to Rounsevell.

Some of the projects of Volunteers International have been possible because of a dis-

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covery Jerry Aitken made on a business trip to Japan. When he learned that the United States Army was closing one of its hospitals in Japan, he convinced United States officials to give the \$1.5 million worth of hospital equipment, along with several trucks and other vehicles, to the Bangkok Adventist Hospital. The military even agreed to ship the equipment to Bangkok Adventist Hospital at its own expense. In addition to benefiting Bangkok Adventist Hospital, the army surplus included several buses, one of which local Thai officials asked Volunteers International to convert into a mobile dental clinic and outfit with the modern dental equipment from the army hospital. Volunteer dentists recruited by Volunteers International can now extend dental care into not only refugee camps, but poor Thai villages. As a footnote,

Bainum states that over 1,200 persons have become Seventh-day Adventists, baptized by Aitken, an ordained Adventist minister, during the course of his work for the Vietnamese refugees in South Thailand.

In early 1981, Bainum became concerned about the health care of rape victims arriving in the Songkhla Camp. Little attention was being given to the estimated 1,000 rape victims in the camp of 7,000 persons. In March of 1981, Volunteers International sent Bainum and three rape counselors to Songkhla. Candy Spitz, Jackie Miles and Cathy Craigs, all from the Washington, D.C., area, interviewed rape victims and their family members for 10 days and furnished Volunteers International with a written report. The report suggests that a self-help guidebook for the rape victim and her family is needed which would contain a step-by-step procedure to help victims verbalize what they are feeling and experienced. The three women recommended continuing counseling for the three-month period of confinement in the refugee camp and a follow-up system in the United States, such as a national toll-free number to provide referral to a local counselor.

Even after working with three different agencies, including two that he founded, to extend help to thousands of refugees, Bainum still remains concerned about the need that he first heard about from a taped sermon while driving his car that hot Washington day in 1979. He has taken some direct action to assist the boat people who continue to suffer and die in the Gulf of Thailand. He outfitted a 200-foot cruiser with an airplane radio and sent up a Cessna 180 to look for refugee boats. The plane, with its pilot and three spotters, flew out of Malaysia to report refugee boat locations to the rescue cruiser. Unfortunately, the cruiser ran aground on its first voyage. The plane, however, continued

to fly two or three times a week for a month.

The plane spotted refugees in trouble and then radioed for help. Once, a Norwegian freighter was diverted by the plane to a drifting boat and rescued 111 refugees. Another time, 39 women were discovered stranded on a tiny rock island. The plane succeeded in getting a boat to pick up the women who had been victims of gang rape. On another occasion, 60 refugees were spotted in a boat that had been rammed. All were eventually saved. In all, 339 persons were seen by the plane's spotters and rescued.

Later, when the Thai government established an antipiracy unit with two planes and two ships, largely paid for by the United States government, Bainum stopped sending his search plane aloft. Since then, however, the Thai government has stopped its antipiracy program. No planes have flown to locate refugee boats in distress since September 1981, although thousands of Vietnamese escaping Vietnam to find freedom in Thailand and Malaysia risk rape and death on the seas. Bainum now hopes that increasing attention in the United States can be focused on the savage attacks on the boat people and that public opinion will eventually force the United States and other governments to do something effective to stop the piracy.

While Bainum is disappointed that he has not been able to rescue even more refugees, he is grateful to have been able to assist people who want to volunteer to help Asian refugees. Furthermore, he remains optimistic about what Christians can do. "Anytime you complain about something wrong, you usually have the power to change it," he says. "It isn't enough just to feel bad. We all have a tremendous amount of power to change things. The longer I live, the more I have found that evil things can be changed when you start to do something about them."