

# The Canberra Times

To serve the National City and through it the Nation

Tuesday, October 6, 1981, page 3

THE CANBERRA TIMES, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1981 — 3

## Vietnamese boat reaches Darwin

**DARWIN:** A Navy patrol boat escorted a 15-metre boat carrying up to 140 possible Vietnamese refugees into Darwin Harbour yesterday.

The boat, expected for some days, was intercepted late yesterday morning by HMAS Assail after a coastal surveillance aircraft spotted it about 100 kilometres from Darwin.

Observers say the boat is in much better condition than most that have made the trip and that there appears to be more passenger accommodation.

A spokesman for the Department of Immigration said in Darwin it was believed that the vessel had travelled from Vietnam. Many on board were believed to be children.

There were no reports of serious sickness among them.

An officer from the refugee section was in Darwin to interview the passengers and this was expected to begin on Wednesday after quarantine and health checks today.

The 140 were to stay on board overnight and go ashore at the quarantine station today. It was understood that the Minister for Immigration, Mr Macphee,

would make a statement on the latest arrivals today.

Sources within the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs said yesterday that the people in the boat would be accepted as refugees.

Mr Macphee is expected to put a formal proposal to Federal Cabinet during this session of Parliament based on a new humanitarian program which could be used to apply to "displaced" persons from all parts of the world, not just Indo-China.

Australia and other nations in the Pacific region are aware of the changed status of most people now leaving Indo-China, economic emigrants and young men wanting to avoid military service in Kampuchea, rather than political refugees.

This has moved at least one country, Thailand, to refuse to accept any more refugees.

The Government has come under fire from the Opposition which says that, to be consistent, Australia should allow entry to refugees from China and Afghanistan, who might have much more claim than the Vietnamese to being political refugees.

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Wednesday, October 7, 1981, page 1

## Officers to interview refugees

DARWIN: Officers of the refugees' section of the Department of Immigration have begun interviewing 146 people who arrived in Darwin on Monday on a 15-metre boat.

Health, customs and identification checks of the new arrivals took up most of yesterday, a spokesman for the department said.

The 146 arrivals are made up of 61 children, 55 men and 30 women and all looked in good health when they stepped ashore yesterday.

They are being examined and interviewed at the East Arm quarantine station in Darwin.

Their condition and questions about where their journey began has led to speculation about whether they are "genuine" refugees.

The boat, the VT838, sailed from Malaysia to Australia.

The Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Mr Macphee, said yesterday that some of the new arrivals might not have come directly from Vietnam.

Investigations were being carried out by a team of officers to establish their true identity, he said in a statement issued in Canberra.

"I will decide the action to be taken when further reports are received", he said.

"I am concerned to ensure that claims to protection and assistance by any who may, in fact, be refugees are given full and sympathetic consideration".

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Thursday, October 8, 1981, page 8

## Two in refugee boatload held

Two people from the boatload of 146 Indo-Chinese who arrived in Darwin on Monday had been taken into custody, the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Mr Macphee, said yesterday in Canberra.

This follows investigations into the background of those on board the vessel, VT 838, and reports that the boat had stopped off the east coast of Malaysia on the way to Australia.

Suspicious that not all were bona fide refugees were strengthened by their relatively strong physical condition.

Mr Macphee issued a statement yesterday saying investigations were continuing and he expected to hold a press conference later this week.

The Government has been reviewing refugee intake policy in the light of claims that increasing numbers are fleeing for economic reasons, rather than political persecution.

Mr Macphee yesterday

stressed that investigations into the nature of the latest arrivals in Darwin were "quite separate" from this policy review.

Information had been obtained about the vessel VT 838 before it had entered Australian territorial waters. It was on this basis that legislation passed last year dealing with arrival of unauthorised vessels was proclaimed on September 30.

The Minister said he had previously foreshadowed action against unauthorised arrivals at Australian ports.

But innocent passengers, including children, would not be victimised.

Parliament had passed the Immigration (Unauthorised Arrivals) Bill in accordance with this policy.

The Canberra branch of the Indo-China Refugee Association said in a statement last night that there are Vietnamese families in Canberra who would be willing to take care of any unaccompanied children from the boat until the Government decides what to do about them.

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Saturday, October 10, 1981, page 1

MACPHEE STATEMENT

## Refugees racket suspected

Inquiries into the arrival in Darwin this week of 146 Indo-Chinese indicated that it was part of a well-planned syndicate operation to move people illegally into Australia, the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Mr Macphee, said yesterday.

The operation apparently had been planned in Hong Kong and centred in Thailand.

"Inquiries so far indicate that the passengers on board may have come from Taiwan and Hong Kong and paid substantial amounts for their passage to Australia", he said in a statement.

"Investigations have tended to confirm that some of the people . . . had not lived in Vietnam for some years".

Mr Macphee's statement follows speculation about the origins of the men, women and children on board which arose partly because of their healthy physical condition. This suspicion was fuelled when large amounts of cash, \$US24,000 in the case of one couple, was found.

There had been reports that the boat which brought them to Australia, VT838, had stopped off the east coast of Malaysia on the way to Darwin.

Mr Macphee said it appeared that most of the people from the boat were ethnic Chinese. On arrival, they had said they were Vietnamese refugees who had come directly from

Vietnam hoping they would be allowed to stay.

"Detailed investigations are continuing in Australia and overseas", he said.

Two officers from the Royal Hong Kong Police were in Darwin to help.

"There has long been close liaison between Australian and Hong Kong law-enforcement authorities", he said. "The Hong Kong police have great experience with the problem of refugees and illegal immigration, and therefore responded promptly to Australia's request for assistance.

"There is a need for further investigations, particularly to establish the identity of those on board, and this is likely to take at least several more days.

"When the investigations are completed, I will then decide on what action is to be taken and will then call a media conference".

Mr Macphee's announcement coincides with the Government's review of its refugee-intake policy. The Opposition had agreed with the Government that many refugees leaving Vietnam differed from those fleeing the country in the past, in that their motivation was more economic than political.

Mr Macphee emphasised yesterday that investigations about illegal entry into Australia had nothing to do with the review of refugee policy.

He said the review covered refugees from Poland and other parts of the world as well as those from Indo-China.

The review was in respect of the present outflow of people and had no relevance of those who had "settled so successfully in Australia".

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Friday, October 16, 1981, page 8

## Refugees 'racket'

Initial investigations into the status of 146 people who arrived in Darwin recently on board a fishing boat appeared to have exposed "what looks like an extremely serious racket", the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Mr Macphee, told Parliament yesterday.

Investigations into the status of those on board were still continuing and he would make a statement on the matter early next week.

He said it had been determined that the vessel had not come from Vietnam and he expected action would be taken to prosecute at least some of the arrivals.

Mr Macphee pointed out that there

were 60 children on board "and that creates considerable difficulties because they are innocent victims of other people's decisions".

"We are anxious to make certain that no final statement is made until every individual has been interviewed and we are satisfied that we are in a position to make a judgment on the status of every individual on board".

The Government was anxious not to impugn the status of those people who were unquestionably genuine refugees — many of whom were now Australian citizens.

"I know they share everyone else's concern that this racket, if indeed it is, is fully exposed and that action is taken", said Mr Macphee.

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Monday, October 19, 1981, page 7

## Thai boat crew facing \$100,000 fines or jail

**SYDNEY:** The crew members of the Thai fishing boat which arrived in Darwin with 146 people aboard on October 5 are expected to be prosecuted soon under Australian immigration law.

At least six people, including the vessel's master and crew, face fines of up to \$100,000 and 10 years' jail under the Immigration (Unauthorised Arrivals) Act, 1980, proclaimed earlier this month after information about the vessel was obtained before it entered Australian territorial waters.

Most of the other 140 people of Asian origin, including 60 children, are likely to be

charged with being prohibited immigrants and deported.

The passengers, who claimed to be Vietnamese refugees, are understood to have come from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Investigations into their backgrounds by the Federal Police, Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs officers and two Hong Kong policemen are understood to have been completed.

The Hong Kong police officers arrived around the time the 25-metre vessel, VT838, docked in Darwin.

The department has said that some of the people had paid money for their passage to a Hong Kong syndicate.

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Saturday, December 26, 1981, page 1

## Asians to leave 'quietly and quickly' for Taiwan

Qantas has confirmed that a Boeing 747 has been chartered by the Department of Immigration to fly 146 Asians, who arrived in Darwin on a fishing boat in October, to Taiwan tomorrow.

Official sources have confirmed the booking.

It is believed the Government has been trying to keep the operation secret and to get the group out of the country as quietly and quickly as possible.

No legal action is to be taken against those responsible for bringing the Asians to Australia, mainly because of the expense involved and the hopelessness of recovering expenses already incurred.

It is believed rumours of the intended deportation, which includes 60 children, during the Christmas holiday period led to last week's escape attempt.

Nine people who made a bid for freedom from the East Arm Quarantine Centre at Darwin were caught.

A spokesperson for the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Mr Macphée, refused to comment on the flight.

The refugees have posed a sensitive humanitarian and policy problem for the Government — and an expensive one.

Mr Macphée has described the incident, in which a boat was disguised as a Vietnamese fishing vessel, a "what looks like an extremely serious racket".

He told Parliament on October 15 that the 60 children involved created "considerable difficulties because they are innocent victims of other people's decisions".

Investigation by Australian officials and police, who travelled to Darwin from Hong Kong, revealed that most — if not all — of the people on the fishing boat came from Taiwan or Hong Kong and not directly from Vietnam.

It is believed that most resided in Vietnam before taking up residence in third countries.

The incident was found to be part of a well-planned syndicate racket to move people illegally into Australia and concerned mostly people of Chinese origin.

Some of the passengers had large amounts of cash, including one couple carrying \$24,000.

When Australian authorities heard of the imminent arrival of the VT838 the

Immigration (Unauthorised Arrivals) Act, passed last year, was proclaimed.

The Act seeks to penalise middlemen, rather than passengers, engaged in illegal immigration.

In the present case it is believed the Government has reversed earlier intentions to take action against alleged organisers who came with the paying passengers.

While court proceedings were under way, already high detention costs would continue to increase and there would be the cost of supplying legal aid.

Authorities are understood to be concerned about the possible reaction of detainees to the news of their deportation.

The decision to deport them has been known for some time, but the plan to hurriedly fly them to Taipei by charter flight has been a closely guarded secret.

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# Gold paves way for refugees' escape from Vietnam

**O**NE HUNDRED and three ounces of gold paved the way to escape for one of the biggest groups of refugees saved by the ship, Cap Anamur.

That was the cost of bribes to provincial and port policemen who turned a blind eye to the movements of the 98 men, women and children involved in the risky bid for freedom.

But, typical of most other escapes, the success of the big party was also due to the many months of painstaking planning, rehearsal and dealings on the expensive black-market for the vital compass, charts and spare parts needed for the hazardous trek across the South China Sea.

The mastermind of the attempt was Mr Nguyen Van Minh, 40, a father of four who had been a computer operator with the South Vietnamese Government before the fall of Saigon in April, 1975. Two years' gaol was the first penalty for his political affiliations.

After that, his background precluded him from a steady job and he was forced to eke out a living as a farmer, something he did not do well. The escape scheme evolved about 12 months ago. It was to involve all of his relations in Vietnam.

"We had no experience with the sea but were able to convince the authorities to let us build a work boat in my backyard", he said. "All members of the family contributed the cost — the amounts varying according to their economic situations.

"We had eight people working on the boat, under the direction of a cousin who is a carpenter.

The project was 35 ounces of gold, which covered everything, including the engine. It was very expensive and we all had to draw on the savings of our respective families over a long period of time".

But for the band of escapees, the big cost was to come later when the final phase of the plan was implemented.

The first bribe, three ounces of gold, was paid to a Communist Party official in Ho Chi Minh City, to win a document stating that he was a communist cadre. With this document he was able to go ahead to the port of Vung Tau, 125 kilometres south-east of Ho Chi Minh City and book the 98 people into a hotel. Such a big group movement to the coast would have been impossible without official sanction.

The cover for the hotel booking was that the party wished to have a vacation to celebrate Vietnam's national day — September 2.

His next bribe, two ounces of gold, was paid to provincial police in Co May province — through which the 98 would have to travel en route to the departure point at Vung Tau.

But the biggest outlay came in Vung Tau itself, where the port police benefited to the extent of a cool 98 ounces — one ounce for each person wanting to escape. They would not interfere when the boat made its move towards the open sea.

"With everything arranged I returned to Saigon [he doesn't call it Ho Chi Minh City] and had everybody placed on small buses", he said. "Then we headed off on our 'vacation' with me travelling behind the buses on my motor cycle.

"At the checkpoint in Co May province I simply went up front to identify the party and we were allowed through without question.

"We were not betrayed because the policemen take a risk by receiving bribes. The government doesn't know about it and, after two or three times, the policeman himself must flee. First there is the danger of him being caught and second, he may have too much money to be able to spend it without arousing suspicion.

Report: **NORM AISBETT**  
Picture: **DAVE TANNER**

"There was one policeman on our boat in this situation".

He believed he was well-prepared for the flight to sea because, during his two years in gaol, he had been the avid pupil of a former naval officer who taught him navigational skills. ("I was already thinking of escape", he said).

And he had packed the 14-metre boat with 1,000 litres of water, 700 litres of gasoline, 150 kilograms of rice, 400 kilograms of dried food, 30 kilograms of sugar and assorted canned meals and lemons. Five fishing lines were an added precaution.

"We knew that a ship was operating at sea picking up refugees but we did not know its name", he said. "And, if we did not meet that ship we intended to reach Singapore in four or five days".

Officers and crew aboard the Cap Anamur were not so sure the venture would have succeeded as people jammed into boats often become so seasick that they cannot eat. There are also the dangers that come with amateur navigators.

In a refugee camp on the Philippines island of Palawan, we saw the physical wreck of a man who had spent 44 days at sea — on what "should" have been a five-day trip. He survived by eating the flesh of some of his 18 dead companions.

While Minh and his 97 family members probably owe their freedom to the lavish bribes, there are those who have made it, with a mixture of grit, ingenuity and sheer courage.

Nguyen Van Thuat, 36, is such a man. The father of three was leader of a seven-metre craft located by Cap Anamur with 31 people on board — seven of them children.

At first sight they appeared the poorest of the refugees rescued by the ship, their clothing drab and dirty. They were to be the most intellectual and progressive of the lot.

Their appearance was all part of a plan to slip through the cordons of port police and coastguard vessels by looking just as they did — poor fishermen.

Thuat had been the director of the research department of the South Vietnamese House of Representatives before the fall of Saigon and his decision to escape dated back to that event. His former position precluded him from getting any job till 1977 when he was able to drive a small truck for a workshop.

But life was tough and, with the help of a friend who is a northerner, he received a permit to build a boat. He knew nothing about boats or the sea.

With the assistance of a local carpenter and the outlay of seven ounces of gold, the craft was prepared about six months ago.

"To escape we had to cross about 100 kilometres of water controlled by the police", he said. "So every day that we went fishing we observed where the police boats were and where to hide if necessary.

"We left on our escape at 4am and were very tired and tense after 10 months of planning. If we failed we would be arrested and the punishment would be very severe.

"For the others, three years jail. For me, perhaps eternal imprisonment because I was the organiser.

"We passed several police boats but they were not attracted by us. We were lucky".



One day before their arrival in the Philippines, the 695 refugees rescued by the Cap Anamur stage a "thank-you" gathering for the ship's captain and crew.



An outrigger takes the refugees ashore at Puerto Princesa on the Philippines island of Palawan, where they entered a transit camp.