

The Indochinese Refugee Movement to Canada

Chronology 1954-1980

Note: This chronology covers the period 1954 to 1980 ending with the completion of the program to resettle 60,000 Indochinese Refugees in Canada. It will be extended to the 1990s in due course.

Abbreviations

- CEIC: Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (also called Employment and Immigration Canada)

1954: Capitulation of French garrison at Dien Bien Phu (May) followed by Geneva Conference Accords (July) ends French military involvement in Indochina.

1955: Beginning of US involvement in South Vietnam (November) with deployment of military trainers under the Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG). Mission is training only.

1961 – 1964: Steady increase of US military presence in South Vietnam, primarily as trainers/advisers. By July 1964, numbers reach 21,000.

1964: Gulf of Tonkin Incident (August), an alleged North Vietnamese attack on US warships, provides rationale to increase US Military involvement.

1965: US Marines land at Danang (March) as first combat units to deploy to South Vietnam.

1967: 400,000 US troops in Vietnam.

1968: Tet Offensive, tactical victory but strategic defeat for US and South Vietnam. US begins gradual “de-escalation” and “Vietnamisation” as a preliminary to withdrawal.

1970: Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia deposed in US-backed military coup (March). US and South Vietnamese “incursion” into Cambodia follows to disrupt North Vietnamese supply lines into South. Ongoing massive bombing campaign in eastern Cambodia. Beginning of Cambodian civil war which culminates with Khmer Rouge victory.

January 1973: Paris Peace Accords, end overt US Military involvement. US forces leave Vietnam over following months.

April 1975: Pro-western regimes in Cambodia and Laos collapse. Communist Khmer Rouge and Pathet Lao march into Phnom Penh and Vientiane.

In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge initiate a forced evacuation of the urban population into the countryside, ostensibly to create a new communal agrarian society. Phnom Penh and other towns are largely empty.

In Laos, impact of the Pathet Lao victory is slower, except for the Hill Tribes (chiefly Hmong) accused of collaboration with the US.

April 1975: Desperate Vietnamese students from Montreal lobby the Government to rescue their relatives in Vietnam. The Government commits to assist but few relatives are able to leave Vietnam because of strict government exit controls. Over a two week period in April before the fall of Saigon, the Canadian Embassy in that city sends Promise of Visa Letters to 3500 heads of family in Vietnam encompassing approximately 15,000 family members.

April 6 1975: First group Indochinese orphans arrive in Canada.

April 24, 1975: Canadian staff of Saigon Embassy are evacuated.

April 30 1975: Saigon falls to North Vietnamese forces. Approximately 140, 000 people flee South Vietnam by air and sea to US Navy evacuation fleet and neighboring countries.

May 1, 1975: Robert Andras, Minister of Manpower and Immigration, announces that, in addition to Indochinese already sponsored by relatives, Canada will accept 3,000 Vietnamese and Kampuchean refugees without relatives in Canada. 2,000 will be selected from refugees evacuated to United States Refugee Centres and 1,000 from other countries.

May 2, 1975: Canadian team from the Canadian Commission in Hong Kong, arrives in Guam to deal with Vietnamese refugees evacuated by the US military. Between 7 and 23 May they document and arrange transport of 1401 persons to Canada on nine charter flights.

May 1975: US moves the refugees to military bases in the continental USA. Canadian officials from Canadian Consulates in Los Angeles, New Orleans and from Ottawa accept several thousand from Camp Pendleton, Indian Town Gap, Fort Chafee and Ellis Air Force Base and arrange transport to Canada. Notorious Vietnamese General, Dang Van Quang arrives in Canada from the US sponsored by family members in Montreal. Resulting controversy dampens public and political support for Vietnamese refugees.

May 1975: In Laos, US military evacuates Hmong leadership to Thailand and later to the United States. Hmong and other hill tribe members begin fleeing to Thailand.

May 1975: Freighter *Trong Xuan* escapes Vietnam crammed with 3,700 refugees and begins to sink some days later. Passengers and crew rescued by Danish freighter *Clara Maersk* and taken to Hong Kong where those with Canadian relatives (number unknown) are immediately accepted by Canadian visa officers.

May-June 1975: Beginning of “re-education” of members of former South Vietnam’s military and officials. New Economic Zones in countryside announced along with a partial ban on private trade. People start fleeing Vietnam in small boats: beginning of ‘boat people’ phenomenon.

December 1975: Vietnam experiences extreme cold followed by drought resulting in a rice shortage resulting in lack of food and economic disruption

May – December 1975: Thai authorities make repeated efforts to normalize relations with Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia in order to maintain a buffer with Vietnam. These efforts meet with only limited success.

December 1975: Pathet Lao proclaim the Lao Popular Democratic Republic. End of moderate regime with arrests, repression and establishment of “seminars”, a Lao version of “re-education.” Many urban middle class members flee to Thailand. By 1977, some 10% of the Lao population has fled to Thailand.

October 1976: 180 residual places in the 3000 Indochinese target announced by Minister Andras in May 1975 are applied to boat people.

November 1976: A group of Cambodian refugees is turned back by Thai authorities at the border and handed over to the Khmer Rouge. It is reported that these refugees are killed in short order.

Thai military begins providing help to anti-Communist Khmer (Free Khmer) guerillas along the border.

December 1976: Between May 1975 and December 1976 a total of 6,353 Indochinese refugees arrived in Canada, 3,601 in 1975 and 2,752 in 1976. Of these 4,200 were accepted because they had relatives in Canada and 2,300 were accepted as Convention refugees. Officials believe Canada has done its part but will continue to accept “boat people” with relatives in Canada.

By end of 1976, 5,619 “boat people” have arrived in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries.

1977: In Vietnam, year is marked by poor weather and related natural disasters, bad harvests and economic collapse. Numbers of people fleeing in small boats increases.

July 1977: Border disputes between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge-ruled Cambodia. Similar incursions occur along border with Thailand.

August 1977: Government authorizes resettlement in Canada of 450 additional boat people.

October 1977: ICEM (International Committee on European Migration) opens an operation in Malaysia to support resettlement activities of US, Canada, France and Australia.

December 1977: Heavy fighting between Vietnam and Cambodia; Vietnamese troops advance on Phnom Penh and eventually withdraw. Border disputes and fighting were preceded by the expulsion from Cambodia of large numbers of ethnic Vietnamese.

December 1977 Mayor of Windsor, Ontario establishes a 13-person committee to help resettle Indochinese refugees in Windsor.

Agreement with ICEM Singapore and Canada to book seats on commercial flights. Refugees for Western Canada will fly via the Pacific and those for Eastern Canada across the Atlantic. This doubles the number of seats available to the Canadian program.

December 1977: 21,276 boat people arrive in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. Indochinese refugees arriving in Canada in 1977 - 854

January 13, 1978: Under a "metered approach" Canada will accept 50 "Small Boat Escapees" families (Program Identifier: SBE) per month. Processing is initially slow. Lack of UN coordination results in several countries processing the same refugees.

January 25, 1978 Employment and Immigration Minister Bud Cullen approves plan to establish a Private Refugee Sponsorship Program. CEIC consults potential sponsoring organizations.

January 1978: Rising tensions between China and Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge are clients of China while Vietnam is aligned with the Soviet Union.

February 10, 1978: US official reports that Canadian SBE program has had a "multiplier effect" on US decision making.

February 1978: UNHCR implements 'Blue Card' registration system in Malaysia to eliminate processing of the same cases by multiple resettlement countries. System is introduced in Thailand during the summer of 1978 but for boat people only.

March 1978: Hanoi nationalizes remaining, mainly ethnic Chinese, private businesses, placing increased pressure on this community.

March 14, 1978: Employment and Immigration Canada proposes a Small Boat Escapee Designated Class under Section 6(2) of the 1976 Immigration Act to simplify procedures. This evolves into the Indochinese Designated Class.

April 1978: Ethnic Chinese in northern Vietnam begin 'returning' to China: according to the Vietnamese voluntarily, according to most returnees, by being expelled. China accuses Vietnam of persecuting ethnic Chinese.

July 1978: China cancels all aid to Vietnam, withdraws its remaining technicians, seals border and claims it has accepted 160,000 ethnic Chinese refugees.

July 1978: Release of pamphlet “Sponsoring Refugees: Facts for Canadian Groups and Organizations” initiates the refugee sponsorship program

Cabinet instructs CEIC to promote involvement of Canadians in assisting Indochinese refugees. Officials hold briefings across Canada and approaches are made to faith communities, voluntary agencies and Parliamentarians to promote awareness of refugee problem and new sponsorship program.

20 July 1978: Responding to requests from the UNHCR, US Government, the Thai Government and interested Canadian groups Cabinet approves Thailand Overland Refugees program (TOR) for Cambodian and Lao refugees in Thailand. Refugees are to arrive at a ‘metered’ rate of 20 families per month up to an unannounced ceiling of 1,000 persons. Processing of refugees to commence when a visas office is opened at the Canadian Embassy in Bangkok in November 1978.

September 1978: Freighter, the *Southern Cross*, chartered by a Hong Kong smuggling syndicate, leaves southern Vietnam with 1,200 refugees on board and eventually beaches on an Indonesian island. Visa officers from the Canadian High Commission in Singapore accept 81 refugees with links to Canada.

September 14, 1978: A paper prepared by Employment and Immigration Canada and titled “Towards an Integrated Canadian Refugee Policy” recommends an “Annual Refugee Plan” as part of the Annual Immigration Levels Plan required by the 1976 Immigration Act and argues for closer coordination between External Affairs, CIDA and CEIC

October 1978: Worst flooding in recent Vietnamese history; 1978 rice crop is short by 7.5 million tonnes; further economic hardship

October 1978: Detailed instructions outlining selection criteria for Small Boat Escapees (SBE) and Thailand Overland Refugees (TOR) under the forthcoming Indochinese Designated Class Regulations stress need to keep extended families together.

November 11, 1978: Two Canadian officers arrive in Bangkok to establish a visa office at the Canadian Embassy. Their mandate is to process SBE and TOR refugees from camps in Thailand.

November 23, 1978: Edmonton Interfaith Immigration Committee holds workshop on sponsorship of Vietnamese refugees.

November 1978: The second freighter, the *Hai Hong*, organized by a Hong Kong syndicate, leaves southern Vietnam with 2,500 refugees (mostly ethnic Chinese) on board and arrives off Port Klang, Malaysia. After an urgent debate within Government, Employment and Immigration Minister Bud Cullen announces that Canada will accept 600 refugees from the *Hai Hong*. Operating in adverse conditions four federal and Quebec officials accept 603 refugees in three

days. Media attention makes this a pivotal event which raises awareness in government, media and the public of the growing Indochinese refugee problem.

November, 1978: Mennonite Central Committee in Canada meets to discuss Government's new refugee sponsorship program.

December 1978: after months of border skirmishes, Vietnam launches a full-scale invasion of Cambodia. Khmer Rouge resistance proves ineffective.

December 7, 1978: Indochinese Designated Class Regulations approved by Governor in Council establishing a simplified basis for selecting and processing Indochinese refugees.

December 11-12, 1978: UNHCR consultation meeting in Geneva draws attention to growing number Indochinese refugee arrivals in first asylum countries in the region and the need for more resettlement opportunities.

December 20, 1978: Canadian Cabinet decides 5,000 Indochinese will be admitted under Canada's first 'Annual Refugee Plan'. Charter flights are planned to transport these increased numbers to Canada.

By the end of 1978, the number of boat people arriving in Southeast Asia totals 106,489. Refugees arrived in Canada in 1978 total 1,944 including 604 from the Hai Hong.

1975 – 1978: TOTAL: Indochinese refugees resettled in Canada: 9,151

January 1979: Vietnamese forces occupy Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge flee to the western part of Cambodia. The Vietnamese military installs a pro-Vietnamese client regime headed by Heng Samrin.

February 1979: Sino-Vietnamese War. China describes fighting as "punishment" imposed on an erring "younger brother" for invading Cambodia. "Punishment" fails to result in Vietnam withdrawing from Cambodia.

March 1979: The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) signs Sponsorship Master Agreement with Employment and Immigration Canada which simplifies sponsorship procedures for its congregations. Other churches follow quickly.

Canadian visa officers in Hong Kong, Bangkok and Malaysia put thousands of refugees in process to meet the target established under the Annual Refugee Plan.

China announces phased withdrawal of forces from northern Vietnam.

April to June 1979: Dramatic increase in boat arrivals in countries surrounding the South China Sea: from 26,602 in April, to 51,139 in May, to 56,941 in June. The number of ethnic Chinese arriving in China reaches 250,000.

Evidence grows that the Vietnamese authorities are actively facilitating the departure of boats, large and small, filled with 'class enemies' and ethnic minorities – especially Chinese

April – May 1979: The flood of Cambodian refugees into Thailand begins and Khmer Rouge are forced out of food producing areas within Cambodia. Numbers increase with realization that insufficient rice has been planted to sustain the population

May 1979: A Matching Centre is established at Immigration HQ to pair refugees with sponsors and destine unsponsored refugees to communities across in Canada.

May 22, 1979: Canadian Federal Election. No political party wins a majority of seats in the House of Commons but Joe Clark's Progressive Conservatives form a minority Government.

June 4, 1979 Clark Government sworn in. Ron Atkey becomes Minister of Employment and Immigration while Flora MacDonald becomes Secretary of State for External Affairs. Both become very active in the Indochina file.

June 18, 1979: The Government announces an increase of its annual target for Indochinese refugees from 5,000 to 8,000 and asks the voluntary sector to sponsor an additional 4,000 refugees under the new Private Refugee Sponsorship Program.

June 8 – 12, 1979: Thai military forcibly repatriates 42,000 Cambodian refugees.

June 28, 1979: Mennonite, Christian Reformed, Lutheran and Presbyterian Churches submit 388 sponsorships for 1,604 Indochinese refugees

June 24, 1979 Operation Lifeline founding meeting hosted by Professor Howard Adelman of York University. CEIC Ontario region officials acquaint participants about sponsorship program.

June 27, 1979 Ottawa Mayor Marion Deware meets community leaders and decides to take half of the 8000 of the Government's June 18 commitment - hence Project 4000

Late June 1979: Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore announce they have "reached the limit of their endurance and decided that they would not accept any new arrivals."

Indochinese Refugee arrivals in Canada January 1 to 10 June 1979- 4,319

July 12, 1979 City of Ottawa's Project 4000 launched at Lansdowne Park Rally

July 16, 1979. Cabinet decides to accept 60,000 refugees over three years. Before announcement number is reduced to 50,000. Immigration Minister Atkey launches regular newsletter on Indochinese refugee program.

July 18, 1979: Ministers Flora MacDonald and Ron Atkey announce Canada will resettle 50,000 Indochinese by the end of 1980. They announce “matching formula” where the Government will accept one refugee for each refugee privately sponsored. The 50,000 comprises 8,000 announced in June, 21,000 sponsored by private groups matched by 21,000 government assisted.

July 20 – 21, 1979: With the principle of “first asylum” under threat, the United Nations hosts a conference in Geneva to consider the problem of Indochinese refugees.

Geneva Conference averts the immediate crisis and concludes with a three way international understanding between countries of origin, countries of first asylum and countries of resettlement

1. ASEAN countries will continue to provide temporary asylum;
2. Vietnam will try to prevent illegal departures and promote orderly departures;
3. Developed countries will accelerate rate of third country resettlement.

The above regional and international consensus lasts into the late 1980s.

At Geneva Foreign Minister Flora MacDonald announces that Canada will accept 50,000 refugees

International resettlement of Indochinese, which had amounted to around 9,000 per month in the first half of 1979, rose to 25,000 for the latter half of the year

July 25, 1979: The establishment of the Refugee Task Force at Employment and Immigration Headquarters to coordinate Indochinese refugee program,

July 31, 1979: 3,800 refugees are sponsored by 747 sponsorship groups in Canada.

July 1979: The Canadian Government charts 76 flights to transport 15,800 refugees by the end of 1979. The monthly rate of arrival increases from 1,000 to 3,000 and then to 5,000

July 1979: National Defence and Employment and Immigration establish Staging Areas (reception centres) at Canadian Forces Bases at Longue Pointe (Montreal) and Greisbach Barracks (Edmonton) to receive arriving refugees.

July 27, 1979 - August 26, 1979: Hong Kong airlift. In response to pressing demands for immediate action and because of a lack of available commercial aircraft, CEIC arranges for 11 charter flights with National Defence aircraft to transport refugees from Hong Kong. This allows time to reinforce the visa offices in Singapore and Bangkok and to build inventories of travel ready refugees to fill commercial charters in the fall of 1979 and into 1980.

August 1979: The Canadian team in Singapore shifts its focus to the growing refugee population in Indonesia. By the fall, the visa office in Singapore is coordinating airlifts out of Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. In Geneva, Canada participates in negotiating and joining the Disembarkation Resettlement Offers (Disero) scheme to facilitate rapid resettlement of refugees rescued by ships of countries that do not resettle refugees.

August 8, 1979: First charter flight arrives at Longue Pointe, Montreal.

August 14, 1979: First charter flight arrives at Griesbach Barracks, Edmonton.

August 30, 1979: Matching system re-designed to allow the Matching Centre to handle 5,000 arriving refugees a month and match 80% with sponsors.

September, 21 1979: 17,147 refugees sponsored by 3,122 sponsorship groups in Canada.

October November 1979: Between 600,000 and 800,000 starving Cambodian refugees arrive on the Thai border setting off a new humanitarian crisis.

November 29 1979: government target for 21,000 privately sponsored refugees is exceeded as 4,622 groups sponsor 25,059 .

November 13, 1979 Cabinet considers the implications of sponsorships exceeding the 21,000 target. It decides it will no longer match each privately sponsored refugee with a Government Assisted Refugee and will subtract one government refugee for each sponsored refugee over 21,000 to hold the 50,000 ceiling. The savings will be applied to Cambodian relief.

December 5 1979: Immigration Minister Atkey and Foreign Minister Flora MacDonald announce the Cabinet decision at a breakfast meeting of sponsorship movement leaders. The reaction is negative.

December 13, 1979: Minority Government of Joe Clark loses confidence vote in the House of Commons. General Election called for February 1980.

1979: Indochinese refugee arrivals in Canada by year end: privately sponsored 8,211; relative sponsored 615; government assisted 10,043. TOTAL 23,583

January 4, 1980: 33,114 refugees are sponsored by 6,003 private sponsors in Canada.

February 8, 1980: \$1.3 million is allocated to cover administrative costs of organizations coordinating sponsorship activities (Indochinese Resettlement Grants Program) and to top up the Immigrant Settlement Assistance Program for agencies providing direct assistance of refugees.

February 16, 1980: Joe Clark's Progressive Conservatives lose the election to Pierre Trudeau's Liberals.

March 3, 1980: Trudeau Liberal Government takes office. Lloyd Axworthy becomes Minister of Employment and Immigration.

April 2 1980: Minister Axworthy announces that 10,000 additional Government Assisted Refugees will be accepted by the end of 1980 bringing the total 1979-80 target for Indochinese refugees to 60,000.

July 1980: Thai authorities open Phanat Nikhom camp as a central processing center for Cambodians under consideration for third country resettlement.

December 8 1980: Flight #181, the final charter of the program, arrives from Bangkok at Longue Pointe, QC carrying the last of 60,049 refugees. The symbolic 60,000th refugee is a Cambodian destined with his family to a sponsoring church in Goderich, Ontario.

1979-1080 Canadian Indochinese Refugee program

Privately Sponsored 32,281 53.8%
Sponsored by relatives 1,790 3.0%
Government Assisted 25,978 44.2%

Total: 60,049

Sponsorships: By the end of 1980 7,675 sponsorships had been filed by private sponsors for 39,904 refugees - some of whom would arrive in 1981.

Charters Flights:

	1979	1980	Total
Bangkok	22	30	52
Hong Kong	23	22	45
Kuala Lumpur	31	25	56
Singapore	7	21	28
Total			<u>181</u>

International Effort: Between July 1979 and July 1982, more than 20 countries, led by the United States, Canada, France and Australia resettled 623,800 Indochinese refugees.

In 1986, the UN HIGH Commission for Refugees awarded the Nansen Medal to the people of Canada "in recognition of their essential and constant contribution to the cause of refugees within their country and around the world"

Source of statistics:

Employment and Immigration Canada: The Indochinese Refugees: the Canadian Response, 1979 and 1980 (1981, Department of Supply and Services)

Minister Ronald Atkey, Minister of Employment and Immigration: Indochinese Refugee Newsletters Vols. 1 and 2.

Chronology compiled by Robert Shalka and Mike Molloy, Canadian Immigration Historical Society. Comments, corrections and additions welcome.