



Impact of the Vietnam War on immigration and refugee intake

As well as immigrants, Australia has accepted refugees for many years in response to various international crises: displaced Europeans at the end of World War II, Hungarians after the Soviets crushed the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, Czechs after the Soviets suppressed the Prague Spring in 1968, Indochinese after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Chileans after the army-backed **revolution** that overthrew the Allende Government in 1973, and Polish after martial law was declared in Poland in 1981. Australia also signed the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (developed in 1951, though Australia signed in 1954). However, there was no obligation to stop the entry of refugees being determined by race, so Europeans still tended to dominate this selection process in Australia.

revolution the overthrowing of a government in favour of a new system

The Vietnam War lasted for 20 years, from 1955 to 1975; Australia's involvement began in 1962. Australian troops had played an integral part as allies of the United States, supporting South Vietnam against the **communist** rebels from the north. The war cost the lives of 500 Australian soldiers and wounded 3000. But millions of Vietnamese had lost their lives and millions more were made refugees. Australia felt an obligation to assist these refugees, and a refugee program was established to process them.

communism the political practice of Marxism in which the state or government controls most of the nation's wealth and private property is restricted

The Australian Government's position in the late 1970s is summed up by a statement made by Immigration and Ethnic Affairs Minister Ian Mackellar in 1977. The four key principles of the policy, described by Mackellar, were:

- Australia fully recognises its humanitarian commitment and responsibility to admit refugees for resettlement.
- The decision to accept refugees must always remain with the government of Australia.
- Special assistance will often need to be provided for the movement of refugees in



Source 5.51 South Vietnamese refugees fleeing from the North Vietnamese Army and being transported in a RAAF 36 Squadron Hercules transport aircraft in April 1975

designated situations or for their resettlement in Australia.

- It may not be in the interest of some refugees to settle in Australia. Their interests may be better served by resettlement elsewhere.

There had been Vietnamese in Australia since the 1950s, when the Colombo Plan allowed thousands of Asian students to study at Australian universities. While a few of these students stayed, most returned to Vietnam after finishing their studies. During the Vietnam War, more than half the population was displaced and millions were killed; there were more than 800 000 orphans in South Vietnam as a result of the war. Australian families adopted nearly 600 orphans between 1972 and 1975.

The Vietnam-born population in Australia grew rapidly, from less than 2500 at the 1976 census to around 150 000 in the 1996 census. These numbers then began to level out, so that in 2006 there were around 160 000 Vietnam-born people living in Australia. Not since the migration of large numbers of Chinese during the nineteenth-

century gold rushes had there been such an influx of Asians into Australia. As a percentage of the population, Indo-Chinese refugees were not a large group, but they were new and they were visible. Small areas of Australia's major cities, such as Sydney's Cabramatta, were dramatically changed by their presence.

Beginnings of post-war Vietnamese migration

Refugees escaping from Vietnam left in secret, often after a number of attempts and at great expense. They risked jail and re-education (prison) camps if they were caught. Often people couldn't say goodbye to family for fear that their plans would be sabotaged by informers. Thousands died of exposure, drowning, or as victims of piracy in rickety boats at sea.

The first boat carrying asylum seekers from Vietnam arrived on Australia's northern shores in April 1976 and, in the next five years, more than 50 more boats carrying more than 2000 people



Source 5.52 Two of several small wooden fishing vessels in Darwin Harbour on 2 November 1977. These vessels brought 259 Vietnamese refugees to Australia – 126 men, 44 women and 89 children. [NAA: A6180, 8/12/78/24]



Source 5.53 Vietnamese refugees await processing at Melbourne Airport in the late 1970s

arrived. This was part of a vast outflow of people from Vietnam, most travelling by boat to nearby Asian countries from where they were resettled in third countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia. A small number of asylum seekers came directly to Australia.

All of these asylum seekers were detained so that their eligibility as refugees could be assessed, and some were **repatriated**.

repatriate to send someone back to their country of origin

What was significant about the intake of Vietnamese, and later more broadly Indo-Chinese refugees, was that a comparatively small number actually arrived by boat. However, these boat arrivals attracted most of the attention by the press and the refugees were called '**boat people**'.

boat people refugees and asylum seekers who flee from their native country by boat

The urgent need to resettle the large numbers of Vietnamese refugees led to international discussions and agreements. Australia began to develop its own refugee policy in conjunction with the United Nations. Between 1975 and



Source 5.54 In 1979 when these Vietnamese refugees arrived in Canberra, the government was becoming concerned that too many refugees were arriving in Australia.

1981, 43 393 Vietnamese refugees were resettled in Australia. Overall, the Fraser Government's response to Vietnamese and other refugees was humanitarian, and seen as generous.

Australia also developed an Orderly Departure Program with the Vietnamese Government in 1982, through which Vietnamese could apply to migrate to Australia. A similar program had been developed between Vietnam and the United States in 1979.

Australia accepted its first Vietnamese migrants through the Vietnamese Family Migration Program in 1982. This enabled those with relatives in Australia to migrate directly from Vietnam. It became the main means of migration from Vietnam, so that gradually refugees who were accepted on humanitarian grounds were replaced by settlers with relatives in Australia. This followed the pattern of chain migration established by many migrant groups.



Source 5.55 The Vietnamese community holds an Open Day, Perth, 1979 [State Library of Western Australia, 000977D]

HISTORICAL FACT

Immigration historian Nancy Viviani has described Vietnamese immigration to Australia as occurring in four waves:

- 1 those who left Vietnam in 1975 directly following the end of the war
- 2 a second small wave between 1976 and 1978, who left after the new regime came to power
- 3 the largest number, after 1978, comprising mostly ethnic Chinese
- 4 the so-called economic refugees – those seeking a better life, who arrived in 1989.