Vietnamese Boat People

Pirates’ Vulnerable Prey
On April 27, 1983, a boatload of 31 men, women, and children fled Vietnam. Several days later, as they crossed the Gulf of Thailand, pirates robbed the vulnerable party and then attacked a second time with grievous consequences. Three women, aged 25, 26, and 30, were abducted. Twelve of the group were clubbed, knifed, and thrown into the sea. Another 12 drowned; their boat sank as the pirates attempted to tow it. This one boat, these 31 disfigured or lost lives, are but one episode in a continuing story.

Since 1975, more than 575,000 Vietnamese have fled their homeland by sea. An unknown number have died or been kidnapped on the open water, never to be heard from again. Although today fewer people attempt to escape Vietnam by boat than in past years, an average of 2700 per month still land in asylum countries of Southeast Asia. These people are attacked by pirates with staggering vehemence and frequency: half of the refugee boats that arrived in Thailand in 1983, as well as a smaller but still significant number that landed in Malaysia, had been victimized.

These pirates are not of the swashbuckling variety; rather they are common thugs and murderers on the high seas. They hurt people, almost casually, with women experiencing the worst of the violence. In recent months, some of the most heinous piracy attacks have occurred. In October 1983, pirates repeatedly raped 23 of 25 Vietnamese girls and women aboard a boat during a two-day attack. Some of the victims were hospitalized in critical condition.

Piracy on the open sea is not a new problem; it is not unique to Southeast Asian waters. Nor is it exclusively or even primarily a “refugee problem.” However, in the waters off of Thailand and Malaysia, pirate attacks against boat people have justifiably become an issue among those concerned about refugees. Though Thailand currently receives a relatively small percentage of total boat arrivals in Southeast Asia, the persons who flee to that country are most subject to attack. In this continuing tragedy, the factors causing people to flee their homeland, the reception they receive in nearby countries of first asylum, and the long-term prospects of resolving their political-legal status have merged with age-old questions of how to deal with opportunism and gangsterism.

Among refugee protection issues worldwide, piracy is unique in one respect. Here, the danger to refugees is not posed by hostile or repressive government authorities or by ideological conflicts among nations. To the contrary—those governments most in a position to eliminate the violence are allies in a Cold War context. The victims may ultimately become fellow citizens of the same Western democracies which, with their Asian allies, can create a climate in which piracy can be controlled.

Those charged with protecting and aiding refugees—national governments and international agencies alike—have taken steps to combat piracy and to
Vietnamese boat people can face numerous dangers—the most savage being attacks by pirates—as they attempt to flee their homeland.

draw broader attention to the problem. These efforts—from arranging the logistics of surveillance to urging governments to contribute needed funds and resources—are complex, and the complexities cannot be ignored.

But neither can they be used to excuse the limited success anti-piracy efforts have had to date as evidenced by the continuing high level of violence. Some crimes are so heinous that failure of authorities to come to grips with them amounts to dereliction. Piracy against Vietnamese boat people is such a crime.

This paper examines piracy in the Gulf of Thailand and measures that have been taken to stem it, focusing largely on Thailand. It concludes with recommendations for improving those measures. The paper incorporates information from interviews carried out by staff of the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) on a recent fact-finding trip to Thailand and Malaysia and reflects investigations by other private as well as government parties since that trip. Statistics are based largely on reports of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).
Introduction

Piracy has been a part of life throughout the waters of Southeast Asia for hundreds of years, despite nations' historical resolve to combat it. "It was an evil so old, so widespread, and with so many facets," writes D.G.E. Hall in his History of South-East Asia, "that it baffled efforts (to suppress it) for many years, for it was an honorable profession which was connived at, promoted, or even directly engaged in by the highest potentates... And nowhere else in the world is geography so favorable to piracy."

In the early 1800s, the Dutch and the English, prominent powers in the region, formally resolved to protect their shipping from attacks off the coast of Malaysia. The U.S. shared the concern over pirate attacks, and its first commercial treaty with the Kingdom of Siam (Thailand), signed in 1833, contains provisions relating to piracy. Since the late 1800s, piracy has been recognized by the international community as a crime. In recent years, it has been formally outlawed under various conventions; the most recent one, the
UN Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982, states in Article 100 that "all nations shall cooperate to the fullest extent possible in the repression of piracy on the high seas. . . ."

In modern times as in the past, nations have concerned themselves primarily with piracy against commerce—the robbing and scuttling of oil tankers, for example. Such attacks persist in Southeast Asia: at a June 1983 convention of the International Maritime Organization, the waters off of Singapore were cited as one of two areas in the world most significantly affected by piracy against commercial shipping. But another form of piracy is also characteristic of the waters of the region—small-scale poaching wars among and between Thai and other nationals. It is into this context of personalized piracy that Vietnamese boat people have entered.

In the environs of Songkhla city in Southeast Thailand, the present-day pirates are generally fishermen or migrant farmers from northern Thailand who fish part-time. The massive Thai fishing fleet—40,000 to 50,000 small boats—allows anonymity to the pirates, and the hundreds of islands in the area provide hiding places.

Thailand has not been able to regulate its fishermen effectively, unlike Malaysia just to the south. There, authorities' longstanding fear of communist infiltrators and resultant commitment of money and resources have brought fishermen under a well-run registration program, and they have been banned from carrying weapons. In contrast, some Thai fishing vessels are better armed and equipped than the small patrol craft used by the Royal Thai Navy or marine police in their anti-piracy efforts.

Perhaps the most important factor that permits piracy to flourish is the social fabric of southern Thailand. The area is semi-independent of control from Bangkok, and uneasy relations between its large ethnic-Malay and Muslim minority population and the ethnic-Thai Buddhist majority, as well as other political, ethnic, and religious factors, make even the administration of usual government programs difficult. Lawlessness is chronic—stores are stocked with contraband, smuggling is commonplace, and country roads are the site of nighttime hold-ups by roaming gangs or dissident groups.

In this setting, piracy has a firm niche, and international laws against such activity seem almost irrelevant.

**Boat People As Victims**

Attacks on boat people occurred as early as the first boat escapes in 1975. Their frequency increased as the number of boats multiplied and word spread along the southern Thai coast of boat people coming, often with their remaining resources converted into gold or hard currency. In
1981, 77 percent of the boats which left Vietnam and eventually landed in Thailand were attacked. In 1982 and 1983, the percentages were 65 and 56, respectively. Though the trend is downward, the viciousness of attacks has not abated, and any level of such violence is unacceptable.

Motivated by the promise of booty or centuries-old racial antagonism between the Thai and the Vietnamese, the pirate attacks take a variety of savage forms.

Hundreds of victims have died, having been shot, knifed, beaten, or rammed; some have committed suicide under duress. If victims survive the first attack, a second is virtually certain: the average number of attacks per boat has almost consistently exceeded two since 1981 and has reached over three in some time periods. Children have told of being beaten or terrorized by pirates wielding hammers and knives. They have watched as their mothers were raped or abducted. Girls as young as six years of age have been sexually assaulted.

Clearly, young girls and women are victimized in disproportionate measure. Over a period of almost three years ending in November 1983, most of the nearly 500 persons reported as kidnapped were female. Of that number, fewer than half have been found: abductees are often simply thrown overboard. Some women are sold into prostitution by their captors.
### Pirate Attacks on Boat People Arriving in Thailand 1981-1983

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Persons Arrived</th>
<th>No. of Deaths from Attack**</th>
<th>No. of Abductees*** (No. Traced)</th>
<th>No. of Rape Victims***</th>
<th>No. of Persons Missing</th>
<th>No. of Boats Arrived</th>
<th>No. of Boats Attacked (Percent)</th>
<th>Average No. of Attacks Per Attacked Boat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>15,095</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>243 (78)</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>352 (77%)</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>5,913</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>157 (92)</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>443</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>141 (65%)</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983*</td>
<td>3,171</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>89 (35)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>77 (56%)</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Note: These statistics are based solely upon reports by boat people.

* Through November 1983.

** Includes only piracy-related deaths, eg. shooting, knifing, beating, ramming, and suicide under duress. Accidental deaths or deaths due to sickness or starvation are not included.

*** Abductees are generally, but not always, also rape victims. Abduction and rape figures here are mutually exclusive. A person who is both an abductee and a rape victim is counted only as an abductee.

In 1982, almost 53 percent of the boats were subject to rape/abduction attacks. Between January and November 1983, abductions and rapes were occurring at almost the same rate as in the preceding year. The figures are thought to understate the extent of the crimes, as they are based solely on accounts of boat people known to UNHCR, and many are reluctant to report rapes to outsiders. The statistics also do not reflect that women are often assaulted repeatedly or that abductees are usually also rape victims.

Aside from the physiological problems caused by rape, the women experience long-lasting psychological and emotional problems. These include depression and anxiety over possible pregnancy, loss of esteem by family and friends, and what their experiences will mean for their chances of a happy marriage.
Few services are available to the women at Songkhla camp, the main camp for boat arrivals in southern Thailand. There is no counseling for rape victims, and abortions are not available. Even in the camp, women remain vulnerable: security is weak and allegedly has been violated.

The boat people put up little resistance to the attacks, although some survivors have said they tried to defend themselves. Nearly all travel unarmed, as it has been difficult to obtain unauthorized weapons in Vietnam since 1975, especially for those considered suspect by the government.

In any event, the boat people believe that weapons would probably be useless as a defense against pirates. Often, violent attacks occur after the voyagers have been at sea for many days and are exhausted from their exposure to the elements and their meager rations. Further, there is a widely held belief that resistance will mean death for children or for everyone aboard in retribution. Also, boat people know that pirates can communicate by radio with confederates and bring reinforcements.

**Piracy One of Several Dangers**

Piracy is but one of the dangers the boat people must consider as they plan their escapes. Typically unskilled at piloting, they must depart in secrecy, often poorly provisioned and lacking navigational aids. Boats fit for travel are harder than ever to come by in Vietnam, as the supply has been depleted by illicit escapes since the 1970s. Serious overcrowding of the small craft is common; boats seldom exceed 30 feet in length and were designed primarily for river travel, not for crossing the high seas.

Further, concerned over the loss of boats from their fishing fleets and of manpower for their army, Vietnamese officials are trying to discourage escapes by imposing jail terms or sentences to a re-education camp on those who try to exit surreptitiously. Boat people landing in Thailand estimate as many as 80 percent of those attempting escape are caught.

It may be that the hazards of the journey have affected recent levels of boat flows. The number of boat people arriving in asylum countries has declined over the last years; 33,000 landed between October 1982 and September 1983, compared to 49,000 for the same period a year earlier. But the decline may also be attributable to slightly improved conditions for some in Vietnam, harsher policies of Thailand and other nations towards asylum seekers, and the introduction of a program of legal emigration from Vietnam. There is no certainty that another mass exodus of boat people will not occur, although there is hope that as this Orderly Departure Program is expanded, illegal departures will decline still further.
It is certain that the threat of piracy alone is not enough to deter escape attempts. While word of the attacks consistently has reached Vietnam, either through Voice of America and Radio Australia broadcasts or letters from relatives, some victims simply do not believe what they hear or read. One young girl dismissed as "just talk" a report from a friend that she had been raped 70 times. She, herself, was subsequently abducted and held for 12 days, raped repeatedly, and dumped into the sea. Some victims thought they could avoid pirates: some who landed in Thailand told USCR that they had set their sights for Malaysia, currently the preferred landing point of boat people, in part because the waters are safer. However, their poor navigational abilities; the weather; or theft of their boat motors, leaving them adrift, kept them from succeeding.

Still other boat people hope to be rescued by one of the commercial ships that regularly travel the Gulf. Prior to 1983, 20 percent of all boat people reaching land had been rescued at sea by such ships. However, rescue at sea by commercial vessels accounted for only 10 percent of arrivals in countries of first asylum during the first ten months of 1983, although ship owners and maritime organizations insist that crews are instructed to rescue boat people.

Fewer rescues may reflect the smaller number of escape boats, the decline in shipping in the area due to worldwide recession, or the fact that the smaller boats currently being used are harder to see in rough seas and seldom appear on merchant ship radar. Nonetheless, many boat people claim to have been ignored by passing ships, often more than once, despite attempts to attract their attention. Some authorities have charged that boat people are being passed by on the grounds that they are not technically "under distress" as defined by international law, and that ship captains simply do not wish to take the time or incur the expense of disembarking boat people.

Programs to Combat Piracy

Two formal programs have been undertaken to combat piracy against Vietnamese boat people. A bilateral American/Thai effort, backed by $2 million in U.S. funds, was in effect from February through September 1981. It equipped the Royal Thai Navy with two spotter aircraft, money for the construction of a patrol boat, and operating resources. As a new initiative, it led to some convictions of pirates, but attacks continued.

When the bilateral program expired, the U.S. and Thailand could not agree on a continuation of their initial effort. The major obstacle apparently
A Thai Navy pilot briefs USCR staff on the surveillance routes of aircraft used in anti-piracy patrols; the aircraft do not fly at night, are not equipped to land on water, and though air patrols are coordinated with sea surveillance, it can take hours for Thai Navy boats to reach the site of attacks.

was Thai insistence that $30 million in resources was needed in order to curb attacks.

Largely on the grounds that the piracy was occurring on the high seas and thus cause for world concern, UNHCR subsequently negotiated the start of an internationally funded anti-piracy program to be administered by the Thai government.

Began in July 1982, this broadened effort drew donations for one year’s operation from 12 countries: $2 million from the U.S.; and a total of $1.7 million from Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Holland, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Along with the new money, the Thai received more hardware. Three patrol craft, three support trawlers, and three decoy boats were made available to the Royal Thai Navy, which again undertook responsibility for surveillance. Funds were also set aside for the Harbor Department and marine police.

The navy’s assignment was a difficult one: it had 18,000 square miles of water to patrol—as far west as the continental shelf of Thailand, south to the Malaysian border, and north to a point midway between Thailand and Vietnam. With aircraft of limited capabilities, its efforts were constrained.
Rarely would actual attacks be seen from the air, as only about one-third of the patrol area would be covered in a day’s surveillance and many attacks occurred just at nightfall or dawn when air surveillance was not conducted. Even if an attack was sighted, there was little that could be done immediately, as the naval planes were not equipped to land on the water. Positive identification of suspects—a key element in bringing piracy suspects to trial—was also elusive, as pilots flew equipped only with a simple hand-held 35 mm. camera to photograph events.

The aircraft were intended to work in tandem with surveillance teams on the water. Three such teams consisted of a decoy boat, a fishing trawler, and a patrol craft. Normally one unit was placed in the general area of the air patrols, while the other two were left in port for overhaul or use in training exercises.

Like their counterparts in the air, the boats were of limited effectiveness. The patrols did not operate at night, and the craft were not capable of venturing out in rough weather. If notified of an attack by a spotter plane, a patrol boat might need several hours to reach the site of an attack, enough time for pirates to have their way and to escape.

Other problems hobbled legal aspects of anti-piracy efforts. For example, in August 1982, a group of fishermen boarded a decoy boat and were arrested. Though Thai officials suspected them of intending to rob the boat, the intruders could not be punished for that intention because Thailand does not have a conspiracy law. Ultimately, the men were released because they had not been observed to commit any act of piracy and officials did not consider it a sufficient deterrent to prosecute them for a lesser crime, such as trespassing. Further, few boat people themselves are inclined to press charges or provide crucial identification of suspects. Their reluctance derives from several factors: distrust of Thai authorities, fear of reprisal from pirates, UNHCR’s limited ability to ensure physical protection, and worry that involvement might interfere with their hopes of resettlement. Too, women victims and their families often tend to want to forget their trauma and fear being stigmatized by court proceedings.

Thai Administration Criticized

In the spring of 1983 as Thailand braced for a seasonal upsurge in boat arrivals, the internationally supported program was producing meager results. No suspected pirates had been arrested, let alone convicted, while two-thirds of the Vietnamese boats landing in Thailand were still being attacked.
The navy's efforts were flawed. The decoy boats, for example, were docked in plain view at the harbor in Songkhla and, when on patrol, were manned by young naval personnel who could hardly be mistaken for boat people. But critics conceded that patrolling the Gulf was not easy, and they largely wrote off obvious errors to inexperience. Instead, most of the criticism was directed toward the Thai's administration of the program.

The government had formed a high-level group, the Royal Thai Government Committee on the Suppression of Piracy, to coordinate Thai involvement. But it met only once during the first ten months of the internationally funded program. Meanwhile, Thailand's National Security Council (NSC) became the de facto coordinator and administrator. To the NSC fell such essential tasks as distributing program funds to various Thai agencies, monitoring their needs and progress, and providing UNHCR with reports about how the effort was proceeding.

No full-time personnel were assigned to deal with piracy issues for the NSC, and the group was ineffective in implementing initiatives. It failed, for example, to push the Harbor Department to set up a computerized registration of Thai fishing boats, for which it had been given $160,000 and technical assistance; in ten months, the department managed only to draw up a contract to design the project. NSC reports to UNHCR in Bangkok on anti-piracy efforts were late and superficial: in March 1983, UNHCR received a report that covered the period from October through December 1982; surveillance activities were described in four lines.

The poor administration of anti-piracy activities may simply have reflected bureaucratic problems endemic to the Thai government. Interagency efforts at national and local levels are difficult in most developing countries, and Thailand's NSC, in particular, lacked the wherewithal to coordinate the complex of tasks.

The Thai may also have been acting out their consistently held belief that the international community must take responsibility for fighting piracy. Thailand alone could not do so, some have suggested, especially when faced with such other pressing concerns as controlling drug smuggling, dealing with military insecurity on its eastern border, and fighting bandits and local insurgents in south Thailand.

From the Thai, who said throughout the program not to expect significant results, given what they had to work with, came one fairly simple answer—if efforts were to improve, still more and better materiel would be needed.

But perhaps the grimmest explanation for Thailand's lack of concerted effort is racial animosity. Burdened with thousands of Vietnamese refugees, as well as thousands more from Laos and Cambodia, and experiencing
incursions by Vietnamese at their eastern border, many Thai maintain an antagonistic attitude toward the Vietnamese which dates from hundreds of years ago. Many individual Thai fishermen help boat people in distress; nevertheless, piracy may be a perverse way of discouraging still more Vietnamese boat people from trying to reach Thai shores. Even if this is not so, it is the case that Thai officials repeatedly suggest that boat people exaggerate the severity of the piracy problem, despite detailed checks by UNHCR field staff of accounts of attacks.

On balance, some authorities attribute what decline in the rate of attacks has occurred largely to the proliferation of oil and gas drilling rigs in the Gulf (to which refugees often turn for assistance) rather than to the effects of the anti-piracy program.

**Efforts to Strengthen Programs**

Steps have been taken to strengthen anti-piracy efforts. Stressing that piracy is an international crime that affects not only refugees but also fishermen and all shipping in the Gulf of Thailand, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Poul Hartling urged the UN in early 1983 to consider piracy a matter of world concern. Subsequently, UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar contacted 17 countries—the 12 donors to the anti-piracy program, and Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—asking them for suggestions on how to address piracy as a regional problem. (The results of the secretary general’s initiative have not been publicly released.) Further, UNHCR distributed new guidelines for the disembarkation of refugees to call more attention to the issue of rescue at sea by commercial vessels.

The most significant move to improve anti-piracy efforts has been the investigation by a team of maritime experts. At the initiative of UNHCR, the three-member international team went to Thailand in June-July 1983 to review the internationally funded program. Its subsequent report contained, along with numerous other suggestions, several recommendations of a technical nature to increase the effectiveness of surveillance. It called for random as well as night patrols and, to foster better coordination, establishment of an anti-piracy task force composed of elements from a cross-section of Thai agencies with its own integrated headquarters at Songkhla.

The team also suggested that UNHCR assign full-time staff to the piracy issue and that the legal section of UNHCR have the capacity to computerize information gathered from survivors for distribution to various Thai forces.

Some of the team’s recommendations have been implemented. UNHCR, for example, assigned a full-time consultant to monitor the program for a six-
month period ending early in 1984. Donor nations are still studying the team report. For at least one nation—Holland—review of the report will influence whether it will contribute to the second year of the program which commenced in summer 1983.

The current year's effort is funded at a level of $2.6 million. Of this, the U.S., the largest contributor, will provide about $800,000.

Although funded at a level less than the first year, this year's program is expected to operate largely as before, essentially because much of the hardware has been purchased and new expenses are likely to be primarily operational.

The scale of the program appears to be satisfactory to donor countries, including the U.S. However, the program may eventually be altered. The U.S. Congress voted a total of $10 million in anti-piracy funds to cover fiscal years 1984 and 1985, and in turn, the State Department has established a group of experts to determine the most effective use of these funds. The report of the group is to be presented to UNHCR as a basis for discussion about the future of the internationally funded anti-piracy program and possible changes in its approach.

**Victims' Fate Uncertain**

As of November 1983, there were 138,000 Southeast Asians in refugee camps in Thailand. Of these, 10,000 were Vietnamese who had arrived by boat, as many as one-half of whom might have been attacked by pirates as they fled across the Gulf.

For all their misfortune, victims of pirates who reach Thailand or other asylum countries may not be assured of a satisfactory resolution of their plight. Asylum countries continue, albeit reluctantly, to provide temporary haven. But in Thailand, boat people are transferred from Songkhla camp to Sikhieu camp, one of the "humane deterrence" camps set up by the Thai to discourage refugee flows. Here, conditions are stark, and until early 1983, inhabitants were not allowed to be considered for resettlement out of Thailand. Although Thailand has permitted interviewing by resettlement countries' representatives in the last year, processing has been kept deliberately at a slow rate.

Further, boat people in Sikhieu and elsewhere may not necessarily be accepted as refugees for the purpose of resettlement in third countries. They may not be able to demonstrate to the satisfaction of immigration officials that they were targets of direct persecution in Vietnam on the basis of their racial, ethnic, religious, or political background. Rigorous application
Two of the three patrol craft provided to the Royal Thai Navy under the international anti-piracy program; the patrol boats do not stay out on the Gulf of Thailand overnight, nor are they used in rough weather.

of these criteria by potential resettlement countries, including the U.S., has led many claims to refugee status to be rejected, thus denying the potential for resettlement in a third country.

Even if refugee status is unchallenged, resettlement out of Thailand is not assured, as third countries have limited the number of refugees they will admit as compared to previous years.

The U.S., traditionally a leader in refugee admissions whose example is followed closely by other countries, admitted 39,000 Southeast Asian refugees in fiscal year 1983. This number represented less than one-third of the number admitted only two years earlier and was less than the ceiling of 64,000 allowable admissions from Southeast Asia established for FY 83. For FY 84, a still lower ceiling of 50,000 has been set by the U.S.; other nations have also limited the number of refugees they will accept.

In view of the lowered admissions levels and apparent decline in receptivity to refugees in traditional resettlement countries, Thailand may have
come to regard Western pressure for improved anti-piracy efforts as hollow. Without adequate resettlement offtake, Thailand, a nation of asylum for over 600,000 refugees since 1975, may lack incentive to ease boat people’s attempts to reach Thai shores.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The relationships between piracy issues and refugee issues are complex. The country which is to offer asylum to the boat people is also that from which most pirates come and that which is called upon to combat piracy. UNHCR, the international agency responsible for protecting refugees, has taken on the cause of combatting piracy, but is also urging other UN agencies and national bodies to take part. The U.S., which has resettled the largest number of Southeast Asian refugees and is the largest contributor to anti-piracy efforts, is restricting its admissions of Southeast Asians who have sought asylum in Thailand and elsewhere; at the same time it has been calling on Thailand to assure more adequate protection against pirate attacks for newly arriving boat people.

Involved as these relationships are, certain facts are clear. First, although the public may be less aware than in 1979 when boat flows from Vietnam were at their peak, escapes by boat from that country continue. Second, violent attacks by pirates on boat people continue at an alarmingly high level, despite bilaterally and internationally supported programs to combat them. Judged by the results of these efforts, UN, US, and Thai officials have not demonstrated the political will to eliminate this tragedy. Third, resources exist to deal with the problem—if the current internationally funded program is not adequate, the mechanics and resources to control the problem can be found elsewhere, in particular because the governments involved are in sympathy ideologically.

The U.S. Committee for Refugees believes the pirate attacks in the Gulf of Thailand can be eradicated if individuals, governments, and national and international officials and agencies choose to act. This will to act and concomitant political commitment do not yet exist. Without both, no substantial reduction in pirate attacks on boat people can be expected. Based on the facts and analysis presented in this report, USCR offers the following recommendations to guide future action.

1) The American public must make known its concern and horror over pirate attacks.

Among Western nations, the U.S. can exert the strongest leverage in non-communist Southeast Asia. But, for its political leaders to do so, they must
be made aware of the concern Americans feel about the savagery imposed on vulnerable boat people. Churches, community groups, and others must inform their congregations, members, and constituents and encourage them to urge political leaders to come to grips with the piracy issue. Without this, it is unlikely much will change.

2) The U.S. must provide leadership and interim operational support to anti-piracy efforts, in addition to its financial contribution.

Although the U.S. has been the major financial contributor to anti-piracy efforts and some U.S. officials understand and have worked to resolve the piracy issue, senior level commitment on the part of the U.S. government is lacking. It is an undeniable fact that the U.S. government could resolve this problem if it chooses to do so. That it has not taken the necessary steps implies effective anti-piracy efforts are a comparatively low priority. The hierarchy of priorities must be restructured. This will undoubtedly require the active participation of the White House.

Further, use of U.S. naval capacity on the sea or in the air to minimize the violence until a satisfactory international approach is devised should be genuinely considered.

3) UNHCR and other UN and international agencies must be bolder in their anti-piracy efforts.

UNHCR has encouraged initiatives to combat the violence perpetrated by pirates, and it continues to highlight the problem in numerous reports. But it has had limited impact thus far. Lacking its own navy or direct authority to take the steps necessary to resolve the problem, UNHCR must continue and strengthen its efforts to precipitate an effective international response, regardless of political risks.

Further, the UN secretary general must respond to this issue of compelling humanitarian concern in a clear and forceful fashion and provide the leadership necessary to UN bodies, national governments, and other international agencies.

4) Thailand, however burdened, must do more.

Thailand does have pressing concerns, and combatting piracy on the high seas must be a responsibility of the entire international community. Nevertheless, in this instance, the pirates involved are overwhelmingly Thai, and many of the attacks take place in Thai waters. Further, the world image of Thailand is at stake.

It is incumbent upon the Thai, therefore, to implement creative techniques; rigorously institute a comprehensive boat registration program;
pursue improved investigative methods and efforts to trace kidnap victims, including those channeled into prostitution; and establish needed administrative structures. Most observers conclude it is these land-based improvements that are the key to making the program effective. All of these initiatives can be achieved if the Royal Thai Government gives the antipiracy effort the priority it deserves.

In 1979, the exodus of Vietnamese boat people was an event. Nightly newscasts dramatically showed rickety boats washing up on the shores of Thailand, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian shores. The compassion of the world flowed like a river. As 1984 begins, the aura of the event has dissipated, but the reality of escapes and vicious attacks on vulnerable boat people continues.

It is not acceptable in humanitarian and moral terms for our governments and our institutions to respond inadequately to such atrocities. To permit that to occur would be dereliction on the part of us all.

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