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\$12.4m pledged by US to help with Viet costs

By SIMON MACKLIN

THE United States Government has pledged US\$1.6 million (HK\$12.48 million) from the President's own Emergency Refugee and Migration Fund, to help pay for the upkeep of Vietnamese boat people in Hongkong.

US Consul General Donald Anderson announced yesterday the money had been promised to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to help pay for work in Hongkong.

But it was not immediately clear when the cash would be available or if it would be put towards paying of the existing \$118 million debt owed by the UNHCR to the Hongkong Government or would be used to finance new projects.

A statement issued by Mr Anderson said the money was for the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan of Action to end the territory's problem with boat people.

"This special pledge represents a further demonstration of our commitment to assisting Hongkong in dealing with this burden," the statement said.

The special pledge of funds for Hongkong was made in a letter transmitted last week from the US Government to the UNHCR in Geneva.

Since the plan of action was agreed upon at the International Conference on Indochinese Refugees last June, the American administration has committed

US\$5.6 million (HK\$43.68 million) in support of its implementation.

The contributions have been in addition to the previous pledge of US\$17 million (HK\$132.6 million) for the general UNHCR program in Southeast Asia in the current financial year.

According to the statement during the present financial year the US has contributed more than US\$108 million (HK\$842.4 million) for UNHCR's world-wide refugee assistance activities.

This, however, would not even be sufficient to pay for the UNHCR's work in dealing with Vietnamese asylum seekers in Hongkong, let alone the whole region.

The UNHCR estimate the cost of keeping the boat people in Hongkong will be about \$165 million this year, of which it has said it will only be able to pay \$46.8 million.

A further 46 boat people arrived in the territory yesterday bringing the total number of boat people and Vietnamese refugees in Hongkong to 56,405.

Meanwhile visiting Vietnamese officials are expected to leave tomorrow after having interviewed 331 boat people who have asked to return home.

The Vietnamese officials, led by Mr Dang Van Anh, have been in Hongkong for almost two weeks interviewing the boat people who are expected to be repatriated in two batches over the next three weeks.