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## \$115m boat people centre wins legislators' backing

By DAPHNE CHENG

LEGISLATORS yesterday voted 26-11 in favour of a Government plan to spend \$115 million to turn Tai A Chau into a detention centre for 10,000 Vietnamese boat people.

After a 70-minute heated debate, the majority of the councillors were convinced that Hongkong had no alternative but to go ahead with the project.

Britain will contribute an equal amount for the scheme, which involves the construction of a water supply, sewage treatment facilities and a berthing pier.

They also pointed to the need to improve security measures surrounding the island to reduce conflicts with the local community.

Only three of the 46 non-civil service legislators - Mr Szeto Wah, Mr David Li Kwok-po and Dr Henrietta Ip Man-hing - were absent from yesterday's Finance Committee sitting.

Among those who voted for the scheme was Mrs Fan Hsu Lai-tai, who appealed for unity among her colleagues to demonstrate to the international community the extent of the problem facing Hongkong.

But Mrs Fan added: "Even though I approve this item, it does not mean that I will support further requests."

The 11 councillors who argued against the proposal maintained that the boat people issue was an international problem and Hong-

kong should not bear the responsibility alone.

They were Mr Poon Chi-fai, Mr Hui Yin-fat, Mrs Elsie Tu, Mr James Tien Peichun, Mr Chan Ying-lun, Mrs Miriam Lau Kin-ye, Mr Tam Yiu-chung, Mr Ronald Chow Mei-tak, Mr David Cheung Chi-kong and Mr Michael Cheng Tak-kin and Mr Martin Lee Chum-king.

Four others abstained, while two were absent when the vote was taken.

Mr Lee said Britain alone should be responsible for the costs, as Hongkong had already contributed more than 10 times the sum of Britain towards the boat people.

"Britain should foot the whole bill. If Britain's contribution comes to more or less as ours, then we can go for 50-50," he said.

Mr Hui insisted the as-

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## \$115m approved for Tai A Chau camp

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sembly should block all requests of funds until a viable long-term solution was in sight.

He said the United States, which opposed mandatory repatriation, should pay the cost for the upkeep of the boat people.

Mr Hui also singled out the United Nations Higher Commissioner of Refugees for criticism, saying the agency had offered little help.

"The UNHCR is still owing us the great sum of money of over \$100 million. Can we ask the British Government for a loan and collect the money later from the UNHCR to repay Britain?" he suggested.

His colleague, Mr Chow, concurred: "Unless there is light at the end of the tunnel, this bottomless pit is not acceptable."

Mr Poon, on the other hand, was worried that improving the detention camps could reduce international assistance in solving the problem.

"We may instead attract more to come to Hongkong. Some Vietnamese are willing to go back now because of the camps' unsatisfactory conditions.

"These are bargaining chips for us to ask the international community for help," he said.

Mr Poon proposed that Hongkong's port of first asylum policy be scrapped.

However, the Government Refugee Co-ordinator, Mr Mike Hanson, stressed

the abolition of the policy would not only be inhumane but difficult to implement.

He said Hongkong should rely on the comprehensive plan of action agreed by the international community for an ultimate solution.

The Chief Secretary, Sir David Ford, said: "The abolition of the first asylum policy can never guarantee the success of solving the problem. No one can guarantee whether it works or not."

The Secretary for Security, Mr Alistair Asprey, explained that the Tai A Chau project was to ease overcrowding and allow for the closure of some existing camps.

Mr Asprey said that apart from a small number of private lots owned and controlled by a company, the land on Tai A Chau was crown property. Talks were under way to have the lots rented to Government.

In Washington yesterday a number of refugee agencies urged the American Government to accept the necessity of mandatory repatriation with proper safeguards to ensure the boat people were not ill treated.

The Acting Executive Director of Refugees International, Ms Nina Hale, warned a congressional hearing that Hongkong would proceed with forced repatriations without proper safeguards and a more flexible approach by the US on mandatory repatriations was needed.