

\$10m aid scheme for Vietnam

By FIONA MACMAHON

THE Hongkong Government is looking at giving \$10 million in direct humanitarian aid to Vietnam for small infrastructure projects aimed at helping returning boat people to re-start their lives.

The Secretary for Security, Mr Alistair Asprey, yesterday confirmed that the Government was looking at the move to prevent more people from leaving Vietnam and to encourage the 50,660 still here to return home.

If the administration goes ahead with the idea, it will have to be endorsed by the Finance Committee.

There have been repeated calls in the past few months by politicians who have visited Vietnam for Hongkong to take such a step.

A spokesman for the Hongkong Concern group on Vietnamese Refugees and Boat people, Sha Tin district board member Mr Johnston Wong Hong-chung, said a locally based aid agency should be sponsored to provide support for the returnees.

Mr Wong said, while \$10 million might not go far here, it would go a long way in Vietnam and direct aid was better than giving hand-outs to returnees.

The move was also welcomed by Oxfam and Save the Children, and Legislative Councillors are expected to look at the issue sympathetically.

The European Community and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees provide aid for returning boat people and the com-



Alistair Asprey

munities from which they fled.

Hongkong's offer would be only a drop in the ocean compared to the US\$113 million (HK\$873.37 million) the EC has pledged.

The convenor of the Omelco Security Panel, Mrs Rita Fan Hsu Lai-tai, is on a fact-finding visit to Vietnam.

Mr Asprey said if Hongkong did fund a direct aid programme the money would go to the villages and communities from which a large proportion of those Vietnamese in the camps came from.

"So that achieves the objective of preventing more people leaving by making more jobs available in these communities and secondly by providing jobs for people returning."

Refugee Co-ordinator Mr Clinton Leeks said the move was being considered in the light of the "excellent co-operation" from Vietnam in the wake of the agreement last May allowing Hongkong to return all non-refugees.

He added that the administration believed

"some form of contribution would be an appropriate thing to do".

Mr Leeks said if Hongkong did go ahead with the idea, the Government would look at direct support for small-scale infrastructure projects and things that would help improve the economy.

He said it was hoped direct aid would send a signal to those still here that things were improving in Vietnam and it was time to go home.

He refuted any suggestion that the aid might be a pay off and argued that money was not part of the recent deal with Hanoi which saw Hongkong mandatorily repatriate a group of 38 last Friday.

"The Vietnamese face very real problems with re-integration but this is not linked with the latest agreement."

Mr Leeks said it was possible the Government would channel some funds through non-governmental agencies working in Vietnam if they were the most appropriate conduit.

Oxfam's director, Mr John Torgrimson, said Oxfam would have to look at any stipulations there might be if the Government went ahead with the proposal.

"Generally, we would be very interested in participating in the distribution of some of the aid," he said.

Save the Children's field director, Mr Phillip Barker, said if Hongkong supported an aid package for Vietnam it would be commendable, and Save the Children would be interested in discussing the project.