

\$16m bill for illegal immigrants

By a Staff Reporter

THE cost of repatriating ex-China Vietnamese illegal immigrants was put at more than \$16 million yesterday as truckloads of them rolled across the Hong Kong border for the first time in six years.

In an exercise described as orderly and without incident, 109 ethnic Chinese Vietnamese illegals were forcibly repatriated in seven trucks.

They were handed over to Chinese officials across the border from Sha Tau Kok.

The illegals, all identified as coming from Guangdong farming communities, were among an influx of about 2,400 who fled to Hong Kong in boats from Beihai in Guangxi over the past two months.

Officers took just 15 minutes to repatriate the 42 men, 29 women and 38 children, completing an early-morning journey which began at Chi Ma Wan Detention Centre in Lantau Island.

The illegals were taken at 6 am in a troop carrier to Tuen Mun, then transferred to police trucks for the journey to Sha Tau Kok.

The Assistant Director of Immigration, Alex Yeung Chun-kwong, supervised the border operation and said the exercise went successfully and smoothly. There was no resistance, he said.

They were smiling on

the trucks – a good indication that they were quite content with the arrangements to go back to China," Mr Yeung said.

Reporters were not allowed to interview the illegals. Some of the immigrants chatted to police and waved as they were driven across the border.

Mr Yeung said he understood China had given assurances that the illegals would be returned to their communities and given accommodation and household registration.

"This has been confirmed by the Chinese border liaison officers," he said.

Yesterday's operation, involving about 50 police and 20 immigration officers, was the first in a series of land and sea repatriations to be carried out under an agreement reached between Hong Kong and Chinese officials at Guangzhou.

Mr Yeung said the bulk of repatriations would be carried out by sea, beginning perhaps as early as the middle of next month.

Five hundred Vietnamese illegals would be taken to Haikou in their home province of Hainan.

Each shipment would cost around \$4 million. Four shipments would be needed to ferry the 1,800 illegals who originated from outside Guangdong, from the provinces of Hainan (900), Guangxi (800), Yunnan (50) and Fujian (50).

The Government hoped to return all 2,300 remaining

illegals within two months, but it had yet to verify the identities and details of about 1,800 of them and to finalise the charter of a ship.

"It's our idea to send them back to the original farms where they come from and not to Beihai," Mr Yeung said.

"We hope we can achieve a rapid, orderly and continuous repatriation."

Hong Kong will bear the total cost for repatriation.

The next land repatriation would involve only 26 people and take place within the next fortnight. The cost of land repatriations was "insignificant" compared with sea repatriations.

"We need to charter a commercial vessel which is large enough to accommodate 500 ECVIs [Ex-China Vietnamese Illegals]," Mr Yeung said.

"We have to ensure the security arrangement is suitable for conveying such a large number of ECVIs, bearing in mind we need to accommodate the escort officers."

A Security Branch spokesman said the branch was happy with yesterday's repatriation and hoped it would serve as a deterrent.

The previous forcible repatriation of ethnic Chinese Vietnamese was in 1987 when more than 7,000 illegals were returned by land and sea to China. The repatriation programme followed a massive influx of more than 7,500 that summer.