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# \$232m agreed for Vietnamese influx

THE Government yesterday managed to push through a proposal to allocate \$232.3 million to cope with the continuing influx of Vietnamese boat people despite fierce objection from legislators.

The plan to provide accommodation for 11,800 more boat people was carried only with the support of 27 legislators at a Finance Committee session. Eleven legislators voted against the plan and three abstained.

However, those councillors who endorsed the request said they gave their approval only on the understanding that the Government takes active steps to put an end to Hongkong's plight.

Legislator Rita Fan Hsu Lai-tai said: "If the proposal is rejected, the new arrivals would have to be housed in existing holding centres, putting insurmountable pressure on security officials and neighbouring residents."

The plan includes allocating \$170 million to build the third and fourth phases of the White Head detention centre and \$28 million to convert the Lowu military camp to a temporary holding centre.

Another \$34.3 million will go towards the operation of the new accommodation.

Mrs Fan, who is also the deputy convenor of the Office of Members of the Executive and Legislative Coun-

Reports by ANDY HO, S.Y. WAI, JOHN TANG, DAPHNE CHENG and ESME LAU



Rita Fan

cils (Omelco) Security Panel, said the Government must review the port of first asylum policy should next month's international conference in Geneva fail to provide a solution.

In the meantime, she said Hongkong should make use of diplomatic channels to voice its strongest protest to Vietnam and to urge the United Kingdom to accept more refugees.

Her view was supported by many councillors who said Britain must continue to repay Hongkong, either partially or totally, for the cost of handling the boat people.

Members also urged the Government to further ex-

plore the possibility of chartering vessels to take back to Vietnamese waters those boat people screened as illegal immigrants.

Leading the opposition was legislator Martin Lee Chu-ming who said it was the British Government's responsibility to pay for the construction and management of the centres.

"It would be wrong for us to resolve the problem for Her Majesty's Government. We don't have the necessary information and we do not know what is the British bottom line in handling the matter.

"The British Government should reimburse every penny spent by Hongkong in this regard, through deducting it from next year's Defence Cost Agreement.

"We may break an agreement by doing this, but the UK deserves it because it has broken another agreement (with regard to its responsibility over the boat people).

"The money is with us. We just don't pay. Let them sue us," said Mr Lee.

Another legislator, Szeto Wah, said he would not support the plan unless Britain gave an undertaking that it would officially, strongly and publicly denounce the Vietnamese Government for allowing its people to flee the country.

Mr Michael Cheng Tak-kin argued that to build ad-

ditional facilities for the boat people would encourage more to come. He said the funds could be better used to take care of needy local people.

Others who voted against the request were Mr Tai Chin-wah, Mr Cheung Yan-lung, Mr Ronald Chow Mei-tak, Dr Leong Che-hung, Mrs Elsie (Elliott) Tu, Mr Paul Cheng Ming-fun, Mr Ronald Arculli and Mrs So Chau Yim-ping, who said Hongkong should not be given the task "to fill the unfathomable pit".

Those who abstained were Mr James Tien Pei-chun, Mrs Miriam Lau Kin-ye and the Secretary for Lands and Works Graham Barnes.

Defending the Government plan, Acting Chief Secretary Piers Jacobs said the existing spare capacity would be insufficient to cope with new arrivals in the summer, judging from past experience.

"The problem is, even if we don't provide accommodation, the boat people will still come," he said.

The Secretary for Security Geoffrey Barnes promised they would try to convince other countries to carry out mandatory repatriation of illegal immigrants at the Geneva conference.

"The consequence of screening is mandatory repatriation. We should be hammering home the message in Geneva, especially to those who don't want to hear it."