

for I.S.
Wethers

J. K. M. P.

2 Oct. 1979

Anger over refugee report

Government and camp officials yesterday hit back at accusations that Hongkong's 65,000 Vietnamese were being made to suffer as a deliberate ploy to dissuade more from coming here.

The report in Sunday's London Observer claimed that the Government is implementing a policy of "intentional neglect."

The paper described conditions in some camps like "those on board an 18th century slave ship."

And it said of the 107 refugees who have died in the past two months "many were infants who, according to letters smuggled out of camps, would have lived if given timely and appropriate medical treatment."

The criticism sparked off a mixture of anger and laughter in refugee circles last night.

"There is definitely no Government policy on this," the acting Secretary for Security, Mr Morris Morgan, said.

"If we were going to do it, we would have done it many months ago."

"We try to be pragmatic about the problem. Our responsibility is to house the refugees and no one would pretend they are living in satisfactory conditions."

"I think it would be wise to compare our conditions with those in the rest of Southeast Asia."

"We have seen to it that no epidemics have broken out. We are constantly checking for them."

Mr Morgan rebuffed criticism in the report that there was a shortage of medical supplies for the refugees.

A Medical and Health Department spokesman said statistics showed that the death rate among the refugees was no worse than that among Hongkong's population.

He said up to September 15, 194 refugees had died in the Colony's camps.

This gave a crude death rate of 2.8 per thousand for the first nine months of the year.

In comparison the crude death rate among the Hongkong population last year was five per thousand — for the whole 12 months.

At mid-September, 4,697 refugees had been treated in hospital (50 per cent of whom were children), for diseases such as dysentery, measles, spinal meningitis, typhoid and pneumonia.

The medical spokesman
(Cont'd on Page 28 Col 2)

Anger over refugee report

(Cont'd from Page 1)

said doctors had a supply of any drugs they needed to cope with outbreaks of illnesses.

However, some refugee parents provided a stumbling block by not allowing their children to be inoculated.

"This is despite our continual efforts to persuade them otherwise," said the spokesman.

Each refugee camp has a medical clinic staffed by at least one qualified doctor helped by staff from the voluntary agencies and by Vietnamese, most of whom claim to have been doctors in Vietnam.

The Observer report quoted Donald Dale, an Englishman working for the Hongkong Christian Service as saying: "There's a lack of access to treatment, with unskilled medics telling refugees it's not necessary and aspirin will do."

Mr Dale was unavailable for comment yesterday, but the manager of the service's Shamshuipo camp, Mr James Reid, retorted: "This is ridiculous. I don't know where these reports came from."

"I have heard no word

about such a policy and we certainly have no shortage of medical staff or supplies."

Other refugee workers, however, say life is not such a bed of roses, but staff are working as best they can under adverse conditions.

"The staff is never adequate," said one worker.

"We always need more people."

"But there is no deliberate move to neglect the refugees."

"No doubt the reports came from the refugees themselves."

"If you have 65,000 living here, there will always be a handful of rotten apples who are unhappy."

A senior official with the Red Cross, which runs the Kai Tak North camp, said:

"Conditions might seem bad if you are used to working in the plush Observer offices, but life is different out here."

"The Government has not said anything. We have the job to run a camp and we are doing it as well as we can under the circumstances."

● A total of 337 refugees left Hongkong during the weekend for resettlement overseas.