

Failure to meet deadline to clear Viet camps puts extra burden on Hong Kong

\$1b headache for taxpayers

By Lou Palpal-latoc and Renato Reyes

TAXPAYERS will be forced to cough up \$1 billion a year to house and care for boat people because of the government's failure to meet the 1995 deadline in clearing all its camps.

So far, taxpayers have forked out a massive \$6.64 billion over the past 15 years to provide food, clothing and security to the 183,990 boat people who have arrived since 1979.

There remain 22,400 detainees in four camps.

As reported by *The Hong-kong Standard*, first asylum countries have agreed to meet

the December 1995 deadline in clearing all the camps in Asia.

However, the Hong Kong government has repeatedly admitted it cannot meet the 1995 deadline because of the decline in voluntary repatriation since February last year.

Only 5,600 boat people volunteered to return home last year, less than half the 12,300-plus volunteers in 1992 and 12,400 in 1993.

Due to the delay in closing the camps in the territory, Hong Kong taxpayers have to bear the burden of financing the boat people.

And to make matters worse,

taxpayers will have to find an extra \$100 million, making a total of \$1 billion, from 1996 when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stops funding services here after closing all camps in the region.

The government earlier estimated a \$900 million fund for the boat people for the 1995-96 financial year.

The additional \$100 million a year, now being shouldered by the UNHCR, would be spent to provide social, educational and medical services for about 22,000 boat people expected to remain in the camps beyond this year.

The figure is based on the UNHCR 1994 budget which showed it had spent \$120 million for such services.

A spokeswoman for the UNHCR office in Geneva confirmed that the agency would leave by the end of the year, the deadline set for all countries of first asylum to clear the camps of refugees.

"The UNHCR is not a travelling agent that can just take people back any time," a UNHCR spokesman said.

"We are encouraging the countries of first asylum to take advantage of the services provided by the UNHCR until the end of the year."

Hong Kong spends \$45,000 a year on each Vietnamese migrant.

The total amount of \$990 million covers meals, security and camp maintenance.

Refugee Co-ordinator Brian Bresnihan declined to comment on UNHCR's withdrawal, saying the issue would still be discussed in the forthcoming meeting of the Steering Committee of the International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees set for next week in Kuala Lumpur.

The cost of repatriating boat people will also increase because of the termination of the

UNHCR's voluntary repatriation program.

The UNHCR spent \$12.7 million last year on 38 chartered and commercial flights to repatriate 5,600 volunteers.

Assuming that most of the remaining boat people refuse to volunteer before the end of the year, the government may have to spend about \$176 million to be able to repatriate all the 22,400 boat people left.

The UNHCR's withdrawal plan will be spelt out in the draft statement to be discussed by the Steering Committee meeting in Malaysia.

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Taxpayers slapped with \$1b headache

After the expiration of the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) in December this year, the UNHCR said it would neither provide services in the camps nor monitor the repatriation of boat people who refused to go back to their homeland.

The UNHCR's hardline policy on the withdrawal of services was prompted by the refusal of donor countries to contribute more funds to the CPA.

From 1979 up to the present, the UNHCR has spent \$1.25 billion in providing services in Hong Kong camps, about \$1 billion in the form of debts to the local government.

The spokeswoman also confirmed refugees who could not be accepted for resettlement by June this year would be sent back to Vietnam.

"I don't find anything wrong in sending back the refugees because the economy of Vietnam has already improved," she said.

Refugee Concern lawyer Pam Baker expressed concern that social services might be

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affected in the camps with the UNHCR withdrawal.

She also feared that the maltreatment of boat people would worsen without the UNHCR monitoring the repatriation program.

Mary Yuen, executive secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Diocese, said: "Members of the steering committee must be joking if they force the Hong Kong government to meet the year-end deadline."

Jennifer Chow, chairman of the Joint Monitoring for the Repatriation of Vietnamese Boat People, opposed any move to spend taxpayers' money to provide services to the Vietnamese migrants.

"This is not the responsibility of the Hong Kong taxpayers, but UNHCR," she said.

"I am astonished to hear that the UNHCR is going to pull out of Hong Kong," Ms Chow added, citing past assurances by the agency that it would continue to offer services to Vietnamese migrants.