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~~\$1bn Viet~~ bill labelled a betrayal

Staff reporters and Reuter

Legislators reacted angrily yesterday to Britain's refusal to foot the \$1bn bill Hong Kong has incurred in maintaining Vietnamese boat people.

The Democratic Party member Zachary Wong said it would amount to a "betrayal" if Hong Kong had to shoulder the entire debt, for which Britain was responsible.

A last-ditch appeal for contributions from the international community to enable the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to repay the debt failed at the annual steering committee meeting for Indo-Chinese refugees in Geneva, Switzerland, on Thursday.

Britain, which is responsible for Hong Kong's role as a point of asylum for Vietnamese boat people, has refused to clear the debt if it remains unpaid by the 1997 transfer of sovereignty.

Melville Guest, Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Southeast Asian Department head, insisted "the matter is a responsibility for the UNHCR".

Wong said Hong Kong had "done its job" on the Vietnamese issue, at great financial and social cost.

"It's unfair, with Hong Kong doing all its work while the international community shuns its responsibilities," he said.

Wong said Britain should press the UN to repay the money, and if this failed, repay the debt itself.

The legislator James To agreed, saying the issue was Britain's responsibility.

Shortly after the Geneva

meeting, hundreds of Vietnamese in the Philippines threatened to commit suicide if they were repatriated.

Carrying machetes, knives, shaving blades and containers filled with petrol, the Vietnamese screamed "no transfer" at soldiers and policemen who tried to take them away.

Three men slashed their wrists with knives while an elderly woman stabbed herself in the stomach.

The 272 asylum-seekers at a camp in Morong Town in Bataan province, west of Manila, were to be transferred to another camp prior to repatriation. They later agreed to leave peacefully.

Hong Kong's Vietnamese detention camps remained subdued yesterday despite Geneva's confirmation that mass repatriations would soon begin, and despite earlier warnings of a likely deterioration in conditions.

A spokesman for the Correctional Services Department said officers were on the lookout for disturbances but there had been "nothing unusual".

"It's still quiet and peaceful," he said. "No one knows what their reaction will be, but so far we have seen no drastic action . . . nothing at all."

Pam Baker, the head of Hong Kong's Refugee Concern, said Hong Kong inmates had already resigned themselves to the decision.

"I don't think the words in Geneva made a whole lot of difference," she said.

Baker said she doubted there would be unrest such as occurred in the Philippines following the Geneva talks.