

Vietnam Goes On Trial in Geneva Over Its Refugees

By HENRY KAMM

GENEVA — When Stalin, who is less unmentionable in Hanoi than in other capitals in the Soviet orbit, perceived a threat from one of the national minorities of the Soviet Union, or if a nationality incurred the willful dictator's displeasure, he had the entire national group uprooted and banished to the wide-open spaces of his realm in Central Asia, Siberia or the Soviet Far East.

These forcible population transfers, of Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans and a host of other ethnic groups, were accompanied by enormous suffering. People died in overcrowded freight cars, or died of hunger, heat or cold. They arrived in wildernesses; they were left there with no housing, minimal food, no medical care. The fittest survived.

Sixty-five nations met in Geneva last week to discuss the Vietnamese adaptation of this method of dealing with nationality problems: the expulsion of tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese. In the only speech to win applause from the floor, Vice President Mondale compared the conference to one held 40 years ago on the persecution of German Jews. Unlike that meeting, which Germany refused to attend, Vietnam sent a representative. With perfect sangfroid, Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien denied any official responsibility for the outflow and said Hanoi had more pity than scorn for those who left. His position was supported by the Soviet delegate, who blamed the exodus on China.

Secretary General Kurt Waldheim of the United Nations announced at the close of the meeting that Vietnam had promised to try to stop the outflow for an unspecified "reasonable period." Since the present monsoon has already reduced such prospects, Hanoi is on safe ground. The principal countries of first asylum — Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand — were pleased but refugee officials greeted the news without enthusiasm.

The crisis took root between the spring and summer of last year, when Vietnam's relations with China deteriorated markedly. The closer Hanoi drew to Moscow, the angrier China became. When Vietnam joined Moscow's economic bloc, China cut off its important economic aid. Border war between Vietnam and Cambodia heightened the tension.

By April of last year, the flow of ethnic Chinese from North Vietnam across the Chinese border had begun. Peking charged Hanoi with driving them out through racial discrimination and deprivation of jobs. Sensing possible propaganda content, observers reserved judgment on whether Hanoi was driving out the Chinese, who had never

been known to cause trouble for the Government, or whether Peking was fomenting the exodus to further its anti-Hanoi campaign. Somewhat later, the percentage of ethnic Chinese from the former South Vietnam began to rise markedly among the "boat people" arriving in Southeast Asia. Like the refugees from the north, they said they were offered a brutal choice: entrust their families' lives to the jungle with only minimal tools and an initial food supply, or emigrate.

For the northerners at least, emigration meant crossing a land border into a country ready to receive them. In the south, where most of the estimated 1.5 million ethnic Chinese in Vietnam lived, the choice was between the jungle and the open sea.

One important difference emerged. The forced migrants from the formerly capitalist south were made to pay agents of the Government for the right to choose expulsion onto the sea rather than into the jungle. As is the case throughout the rest of the Soviet bloc, the acquisition of convertible currencies, gold or jewels has become one of the principal political objectives of Vietnam.

The people being expelled include not only politically uncommitted citizens from the south who were prepared to accommodate to the Communist regime but also northerners who were longtime Communists, minor officials or soldiers and professionals trained in the Soviet Union in badly needed skills such as medicine. Whatever their politics or possible contribution to Vietnamese reconstruction, their Chinese origin barred them from participation.

Except for the immediate financial gain, observers see nothing but loss to Vietnam in the expulsion of a productive, energetic and not disloyal element of its population. Economic activity in which ethnic Chinese played an important role — rice distribution, the northern coal mines, the port of Haiphong — are reported to be operating at markedly lower efficiency. The consensus among observers is that Vietnam is acting irrationally, seeing a security risk in a largely unpolitical population because they belong ethnically to the nation that is Vietnam's principal enemy. Such was Stalin's wartime reaction to the Volga Germans.

In reaction to the exodus of ethnic Chinese and the continuing heavy clandestine flow of Vietnamese political refugees, China has joined the United States and the pro-Western world in loud protests. The United States and some Western countries are aware of the dilemma that lies in protesting against expulsions without also appearing to urge a police state to make sure that none of its citizens escape to freedom. Some Western nations that had modest aid programs have cut their assistance to Vietnam.

The United States, in frequent contact with Hanoi representatives despite the absence of formal ties, has raised the issue, to no avail, according to Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance. It has raised it with Vietnam's great friend, the Soviet Union, and found Moscow obdurately unconcerned. Professional observers in Asian and Western capitals doubt that anyone but the Soviet Union has enough leverage in Hanoi to bring about change in policy, but they believe that the Soviet interest in China's backyard lies in maintaining the highest possible level of instability. The outpouring of refugees contributes significantly to this objective.

Observers note also that practitioners of Stalinist policies, starting with Stalin himself, have shown a marked tendency for carrying out political goals, even when they were economically and socially harmful, with fanatical perseverance. In the most pessimistic view, the outflow of forlorn refugees will stop only when China, angered over the continuing Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, resorts to renewed war against Vietnam.