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Local march to show ^{3.}¹² anger at Viet policy

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UP to 5,000 people are expected to march through Yuen Long town today to protest the first asylum policy for Vietnamese boat people and show their anger over not being consulted on the decision to set up a detention centre in their district.

District board member, Mr Ngai Kam-chun, yesterday said they were marching because Hongkong had no moral responsibility for the boat people and could not accept arrivals forever.

So far this year more than 20,000 boat people have arrived - housed on ferries and on islands with no shelter while the government tries to find more permanent accommodation.

Yuen Long is the site of the latest detention camp as Sek Kong airfield is being converted to hold up to 7,000 boat people.

Members angrily walked out of a meeting on Thursday as they had not been properly consulted about the detention camp, despite threatening earlier to sabotage the camp.

Principal Assistant Secretary for Security, Mrs Carrie Yau Tsang Ka-lai, last week listened to their complaints and told them work would be halted temporarily. But this was vetoed by the Chief Secretary, Sir David Ford.

However, the government handed them a temporary victory on Friday by postponing the transfer of 670 boat people to Sek Kong. The move was set for yesterday but will now take place next week so residents can be briefed more thoroughly on camp security.

Members of other district boards sympathised with the Yuen Long people, and said that the government had paid little attention to the boards' concerns and they were often the last to be told of plans affecting their areas.

"The government has informed rather than consulted," outspoken Tuen Mun member, Mr Stephen Ng Ming-yum, said.

Dr Leonard Davis, a long-time observer of the refugee problem, said: "It would appear to me it reflects some anxiety on the part of the government that in real dialogue with the

district boards, they may not be able to marshal sufficient arguments to win over the district boards," he said.

"They go through the machinery of consultation but they already have a hard plan in mind."

There has not appeared to be much choice. As arrivals hit a 10-year high of more than 300 a day, the government has been scrambling to find accommodation. District board members agreed it was difficult to turn down requests.

"We had to accept. There are so many people coming daily. If we object, do we let them sleep on the street then?" Sha Tin district board chairman, Mr Ng Chan-lam, said, referring to Whitehead detention centre which is being built in his district to hold up to 28,000 boat people.

But Dr Davis pointed out that since the start beginning of the year the government had said it had "contingency plans" to cope with a heavy influx of boat people. However, it would have been politically inexpedient to reveal these early on, he said.