

# Return trip to reality

Vietnamese asylum seekers will be at the centre of diplomatic wrangles in the coming months, says Scott McKenzie

**C**OMBAT choppers swept in from the sea blasting out the strains of Wagner hoping to terrify "Charlie" into submission - it was a scene made famous in the Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now*.

Hong Kong's own version of that scene was played out this week as gung-ho government security forces pulled out of the High Island Vietnamese detention centre.

It wasn't quite Wagner, but a loud, definitely martial piece of victory music played over the speakers of the departing convoy of Police Tactical Unit vehicles on Tuesday amid cheers from the helmeted occupants.

Maybe it was their intention to signal a government victory or, more likely, it was their way of thumbing a collective nose at "Charlie".

For Asia's finest the smell of victory was oh so sweet. At least it was better than the smell of the tear gas used so liberally in the violent raid in April at the Whitehead camp.

Tuesday was a day when things went more right than wrong for the Government - they removed a group of deportation candidates from a roof using a somewhat more ingenious method than had been tried before. In essence, it allowed them to kick-start the troubled Vietnamese deportation scheme which had been on hold since March.

Known officially as the Orderly Repatriation Programme (ORP), the Government is "allowed" to send back a limited number of Vietnamese based on approvals from Hanoi.

In the big picture, the 60 or so people sent back every six weeks under the ORP in the past is hardly going to make a dent in the total of 24,000 remaining in the territory, if the ORP resumes in earnest as the Government has promised.

And there's the rub. Hong Kong has a problem it hopes will just fade away, but the Vietnamese issue has returned to the international stage and threatens to mire the territory in a battle of wits, diplomats, lawyers and asylum seekers.

As the deadline of the end of next year for clearing the camps looms, the pressure of how to take such a large number of people - 50,000 if you include the rest of Asia - out of detention centres and put them on aircraft bound for Vietnam is reaching boiling point.

Top officials of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are worried. They now preside over what is effectively a huge group of illegal immigrants at a time when their services could be best deployed elsewhere.

At the same time, they can't just abandon a programme that has run since 1975 - the world, otherwise known as UN donor countries, would not allow it.

But the worm is starting to turn. The all-powerful policy makers in Washington have changed tack and decided what their latest line will be, having made policy on the run since 1989 when they tried to convince the world that no Vietnamese should be forcibly repatriated.

With the US as the most influential signatory to the 1989-established Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) governing the repatriation and resettlement of the Vietnamese boat people, the policy turnaround will be officially announced in the coming months.

It will without doubt send a clear signal to those in the camps that their dreams of a home in California are just that - dreams. Many of them have clung to the hope that even though they have been denied refugee status something, anything will miraculously happen to spirit them out of the camps and into a resettlement country.

Of course this will not happen and instead they must face the reality of life in Vietnam and all that goes with returning to a country they fled in search of a new life.

Sure it is not going to be a bed of roses, but it is all they will get and for the sake of the children they are going to have to make the most of it.

The hard part from Hong Kong's

point of view will be making it happen. The number of people volunteering for repatriation has dropped to insignificant levels and this must be overcome.

If people won't volunteer, they must be deported and as was witnessed at High Island this week, there is a huge element of opposition to being removed. The Vietnamese have dug in their heels.

The UNHCR is already assessing how long it can justify being what is effectively the High Commissioner for Illegal Immigrants. The Government is also exploring ways of asking Vietnam to take back its people en masse.

In a visit to Hanoi this month, British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd sweetened the pot by announcing a £30 million (HK\$360 million) aid package for Vietnam.

He proffered the incentive as he discussed the issue of repatriating the territory's boat people. It was not exactly subtle but this hardly matters in the context of a problem that costs Hong Kong \$1 billion a year.

Presuming an agreement is reached with Vietnam and people have to be sent back in large groups, the task for Government security forces is not going to be an easy one.

A two-day operation this week involved a massive allocation of manpower and resources to remove a

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handful of people for deportation on Thursday and Friday - it cost millions. It also cost dozens of Vietnamese physically as their attempts to resist Correctional Services Department and police officers were put down with fists, feet and truncheons.

If the rest of the Vietnamese population resists, Hong Kong television viewers will see repeat after repeat of this week's operation. Sure, the police cheered at the end of the day but if they have to put their lives on the line every week, the cheering will turn to jeering.

In praising the work of security forces at High Island, Deputy Secretary for Security Ken Woodhouse acknowledged that the same thing would happen again if people did not volunteer for repatriation.

He places the onus of that need on the international community which has deemed the Vietnamese must return to Vietnam.

He also acknowledged that there was a hard way and an easy way. The easy way is obviously volunteering, the hard way is even more obviously to run the gauntlet of men in riot gear sent in to extract them for deportation.

What Hong Kong really needs and what the international community wants is for the CPA steering committee to reconvene sooner rather than later to decide once and for all how to rejuvenate the CPA. In the words of one UNHCR official "the CPA has stalled."

That meeting would also be asked to decide on a time-frame for the UNHCR to withdraw from the region's camps.

UNHCR chief of mission in Hong Kong Jahanshah Assadi has fallen short of calling for a withdrawal in Hong Kong, but he does say that with the imminent completion of the screening process, a primary obligation of the UNHCR would have been fulfilled.

Even agency workers who have traditionally fought against forced repatriation have changed their stance.

Most non-Government Agencies (NGOs) now say that Vietnam is the only option open to the boat people. Of course they have concerns about unemployment, harassment by authorities and difficult conditions, but on balance prefer it to life in the camps.

For most people, Vietnam is also far preferable to the China option. When Chinese authorities move into Hong Kong in 1997 they have categorically said they do not expect to find any Vietnamese left in detention centres.

Exactly what they would do if their wishes were not honoured has not been made clear, but the imagination tends to run wild.

In effect 1997 is the real deadline even if December next year is the one everyone says they are working to. Hong Kong can easily say then that they wanted to forcibly repatriate thousands of people but Vietnam wouldn't let them.

Conversely, if Vietnam does give the nod to large scale deportations and heavy-handed raids become necessary to remove people, Hong Kong can argue that it has no other option than to follow the directives of the international community.

There is also the problem of about 300 people in Hong Kong's camps who are not ethnic Vietnamese or have other traits which make them unacceptable to Vietnam.

A group of ethnic-Chinese Cambodians were mysteriously given refugee status after lawyers began

mounting a habeas corpus action to challenge the legality of their detention in the territory.

The Government and the UNHCR deny that the granting of refugee status after years of sitting in detention had anything to do with the impending legal action.

The spectre of court action over the remaining questionable groups of Taiwanese, ethnic Chinese and New Caledonians could see further detainees being given a refugee card.

There are enough problems on the horizon for Hong Kong without more court action.

And, if the number of deportation flight passengers continues at this week's rate of 33 people per plane, there would have to be a whopping 700-plus flights to clear the backlog - at \$1.35 million per flight. Something for the taxpayer to think about?