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A 'Catch-22' situation over refugees

THE government is in a "Catch-22" situation regarding its policy on Vietnamese refugees.

Salvation Army Capt John McPherson, Director of Refugee Services, said that while the government was not happy with the closed camp system, it hesitated to suggest what else could be done.

In an article published in the digest of the Hongkong Council of Social Services, Capt McPherson wrote that an indefinite sentence in the closed camps created problems and caused depression among some of the more intelligent refugees.

The article noted that just over 4,000 refugees were now living in the closed camps at Chimawan and Heilingchau since the policy was implemented last July.

"The off-take from the closed camps is particularly slow because these new arrivals are the least likely to meet the ever more selective

criteria of the recipient nations," the article said.

The refugees, it said, had a right to basic standards of not only material living, but all the other qualities of life that go with human existence.

The council questioned the lack of a long-term policy towards refugees, and suggested that it was time to review the situation and to plan a better policy.

Capt McPherson noted that the slowdown in accepting Vietnamese refugees on the part of Western countries was partly due to the world recession and to soaring unemployment.

"People now realise that the actual horrors of war no longer exist in Vietnam, and that many new arrivals could now be classified as economic refugees," he said.

The Salvation Army's attempt to set up cottage industries for the refugees in the closed camps, has not been successful due to various obstacles.

"With the recession, many smaller factories which normally would pass out piecework no longer do so,"

Capt MacPherson said.

Other difficulties include the isolated location of Chimawan, limited space inside the camps and security specifications that no machinery or materials can be used if they can be converted into

weapons," he said.

He added that services offered refugees by the Salvation Army were limited by a lack of space, funds and staff.

"However, basic human rights and dignity are maintained at all times," he stressed.

The Salvation Army office is the only one that is actually located inside the camp, and acts as a resource centre for the refugees who may hesitate to approach the Correctional Services staff directly.

Also writing in the digest, Miss Belinda Hung, supervisor of Caritas's Resettlement Counselling Programme, noted that 95 per cent of newly arrived refugees were ethnic Vietnamese who spoke no other language.

"They cannot elaborate on their reasons for leaving Vietnam, thus making themselves ineligible for resettlement as refugees," Miss Hung said.

The article concluded that Hongkong, some day, will have to integrate the residue of Vietnamese refugees into its community and that many of them will be from the closed camps.

"It is in our own interest that they be prepared to live a useful, productive and peaceful life with us," the article said.