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# Cost of housing Viet refugees expected to soar

A STAGGERING sum of \$270 million has been spent on accommodating and feeding Vietnamese refugees here since 1979. And the figure is expected to rise substantially with the introduction of closed camps for recent arrivals, whereby refugees are no longer allowed to work outside.

This has been revealed in a paper prepared by the Security Branch. To make matters worse, it has been found that more than half of the present 12,600 refugees awaiting resettlement face an uncertain future for they have been rejected by at least one country.

According to the authorities, about 70 per cent of the refugees have been stranded here for two years or more while Hongkong continues to have the highest population of boat

people in the region. Of the \$270 million spent, the government alone footed \$102 million, major voluntary agencies \$45 million, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \$120 million.

A government spokesman said the figure would have been much higher if several factors were also taken into account, such as the diversion of staff and resources from other purposes, the use of valuable land and hidden costs.

It's estimated that the detention of refugees in closed camps will cost taxpayers about \$100 million during the first two years.

At present, there are more than 3,500 refugees detained in these camps.

A recent review shows that most

by  
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of last year's arrivals came by boat from north and central Vietnam while others were taken to Hongkong after being rescued at sea by ocean going vessels.

A total of 7,502 refugees arrived by boat last year and 433 were picked up and taken here by seven ships.

It was found that 98 per cent of the arrivals are ethnic Vietnamese. This contrasts sharply with the 27 per cent in 1979 when a majority of the refugees fled their country for political reasons.

Despite the incessant inflow of refugees, the rate of resettlement last

year was the lowest in recent years as only 9,247 were accepted by other countries. This compared with 37,468 in 1980 and 17,818 in 1981.

And, the situation this year could be worse with no prospect of an increase in intakes.

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An official said so far, only about three per cent of the 12,631 refugees here have been assured of acceptance by other countries. About 60 per cent of them are classified as difficult to resettle while the fate of the rest would depend on results of submissions to various countries and steps taken by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Compared with other countries in

the region, it is apparent that Hongkong is the favourite place of shelter for refugees.

Hongkong saw a drop of 41 per cent in arrivals during the first 11 months of last year compared with the corresponding period in 1981.

But, the rate of resettlement of refugees from Hongkong has fallen much behind that of other countries, such as Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

"As a result, Hongkong continues to have the highest boat refugee population in the region, constituting about 30 per cent of the regional total," the spokesman said.

"And, it is becoming increasingly difficult to predict the rate of resettlement."

"There are only four major ongoing resettlement programmes -

launched by the United States, Canada, Australia and France. But, with stricter criteria imposed, it is not possible to predict how many refugees will qualify for these programmes," he said.

For the future, officials have predicted that there will be 1,480 arrivals during the first quarter of this year against some 750 departures.

This means that there will be about 13,400 refugees awaiting resettlement by the end of March.

Secretary for Security, David Jeaffreson, told the Legislative Council recently that the government was seriously considering repatriating all boat people.

The government is believed to have contacted Vietnam indirectly over the move in order to lighten the burden on Hongkong.