

Indonesia concerned as Cambodians take to sea

Claire Bolderson reports on a sudden influx of Cambodian boat people and its regional implications

THERE is a new twist in the well-worn saga of the Indochinese refugees and nowhere is it being felt more than in Indonesia where the authorities find themselves reluctant hosts to a sudden influx of Cambodian boat people.

Throughout all the years of war in their country, Cambodian refugees have chosen to make their escape overland into Thailand. Now, however, they are beginning to follow the example set by their Vietnamese neighbours and are taking to the seas.

Since the beginning of the year more than 1,700 Cambodian boat people have washed up on Indonesian shores. They leave Cambodia from the southern port of Khompong Som with the intention, they say, of getting to Australia.

It is not a realistic goal. Given the more than 3,000 miles of rough seas and their small and ill-equipped boats, most of them never make it and end-up instead at Indonesia's refugee camp on the island of Galang, south of Sing-

apore. About 65 per cent of the Cambodians at Galang are young men who say they left their country because of their fear of being drafted into the army to fight Phnom Penh's war with the resistance.

They tell visiting journalists about what they believe is the continuing Vietnamese oppression of the Cambodian people and they talk about their fears that, one day, the Khmer Rouge will again take power.

Ironically, the pressure on Indonesia from Cambodian boat people comes just as the pressure on Hong Kong from Vietnamese boat people has started to ease dramatically. Arrivals in Hong Kong are 80 per cent down on last year. Only a few thousand have so far come to the colony – and contrary to last year's pattern they are mainly from South Vietnam – whereas 34,000 turned up during 1989.

The Cambodians, as a new phenomenon in the region, are not covered by the Comprehensive Plan of Action – the United Nations agreement under which boat people are

screened and divided into two categories; economic migrants and political refugees, of which only the latter are entitled to resettlement in another country.

But the Cambodian boat people, known simply at Galang as "displaced persons", insist that they are genuine refugees and they talk of being driven out of their country by what they describe in perfect English as "the prolonged war situation" there.

The Indonesians are not convinced. Mr Ali Alatas, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, and one of the leading figures in recent attempts to end the conflict in Cambodia, says he believes the Cambodian's motivation for setting sail is purely economic.

The belief is apparently shared by Mr Thorvald Stoltenberg, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), who said during a recent visit to Jakarta that he thought the Cambodians were simply seeking a better standard of living abroad.

Mr Stoltenberg also said that

the UNHCR would like to see more money spent on development projects in both Vietnam and Cambodia to tackle the root problems of poverty and so discourage people from leaving.

Despite their misgivings the Indonesians have given an assurance that they will continue to take in all boat people, both Cambodian and Vietnamese, who are in difficulty and have nowhere else to go.

But they have also said that if the Cambodians want to go on to Australia and are capable of doing so, they won't be stopped. As Mr Alatas recently said: "How can we say please come to Galang, please stay it's better here?"

That attitude has done much to stir the often troubled waters of Jakarta's relations with Canberra. In the past six months, two boat loads of Cambodians have managed to limp through the Indonesian archipelago and reach north-western Australia.

Reports that they were helped on their way by the

Indonesian Navy, which is said to have sold the boat people food and fuel and in one case, to have towed them back out to sea, have sparked a flurry of diplomatic activity between Jakarta and Canberra.

Australia has made it clear that it has no intention of becoming a country of first asylum – a role played up until now by members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations and Hong Kong. Instead, it wants to go on selecting boat people for resettlement from among those screened as refugees in the region's existing camps.

Urgent efforts have therefore been made, through both the Australian embassy in Jakarta and a visit to Indonesia by Dr Neil Blewett, the Australian Minister for Trade Negotiations, to try to persuade the Indonesian authorities not to allow Cambodians to continue to Australia.

But the Indonesians see things differently. Their camp at Galang which was built to hold 5,000 people, now holds more than 17,000. Last month

alone, there were 3,000 new arrivals and with poor sanitation and little available fresh water on the island, Galang is chronically overcrowded.

Most of the boat people there are Vietnamese whose numbers at Galang have been steadily rising because of increasing departures from southern Vietnam and the adoption in Malaysia of a policy of "push-offs" – giving boat people food and water and pushing them back out to sea.

The Indonesian government has made it clear that it will not do the same. It has also said it wants a screening system similar to the one which covers the Vietnamese to be introduced for Cambodians.

Indonesian officials have in addition stated that agreement must be reached urgently on what to do with all those classed as economic migrants and they have made it clear that, particularly with the new tide of Cambodians taking to boats, they feel the international community should now do more to help Indonesia shoulder the burden.