

Post 14/5 '79

Refugees a human tragedy – Waldheim

UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim yesterday visited Cambodian refugees in Aranyaprathet and described their fate as “a great human tragedy.”

He told reporters on his return to Bangkok that he would discuss the refugee problem with Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan today.



UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim jokes with a Cambodian child during a visit to a refugee camp in Aranyaprathet yesterday.

Dr Waldheim, on the last stage of a 10-nation Asian tour, said the basic problem was how to stop the influx. Tens of thousands of Cambodians have fled to Thailand recently in the wake of fresh fighting in the northwest of their country.

The Secretary-General said he had been told there were more than 100,000 potential refugees in the border areas.

"We must organise international help because this problem cannot be settled by Thailand alone. We must find them permanent asylum," he said.

He hoped Thailand would grant temporary asylum to Cambodians fleeing here pending resettlement efforts by the UN High Commission for Refugees and other organisations.

Dr Waldheim visited two camps in Aranyaprathet. One is for so-called old refugees — those who fled before last January when a new Vietnamese-backed administration ousted the pro-Peking Government of Prime Minister Pol Pot from Phnom Penh.

This camp houses over 7,300 refugees, many of whom have been in Thailand since 1975 when they fled the communist

takeover in Cambodia.

The second camp he visited houses about 4,000 new arrivals, many of whom have fled since the Vietnamese-led forces of the Phnom Penh Administration launched a drive last month to quell resistance by Khmer Rouge loyal to Pol Pot in the Northwest.

Dr Waldheim said the situation of the 4,000 in the second camp was "in suspension." He was told no decision had been made about their future and this was one of the issues he wished to discuss with Thai leaders today.

As he walked through

contd 14/5/75
Waldheim

the jam-packed camp, crowds of men, women and children applauded him.

In the established camp, Dr Waldheim listened to an appeal statement by camp leader Sarun Tith, 33, who said: "We would like to ask your excellency to appeal to all the countries of the world to open their doors to the Cambodian people, before they all die in Cambodia."

The refugee leader said

acceptance by the world's countries would encourage the Thai Government to take more refugees. He protested what he called the forcible expulsion of thousands of people into mountains along the border.

"There is little food, no medicine and many will die," he told the UN leader.

Dr Waldheim replied, "I am deeply touched and shocked by this horrible situation, and I wish to assure you we will make every effort to try to solve your problem."

He promised to bring the matter up last night at a dinner in his honour by Gen Kriangsak.

Because many refugees have said they wished to return to Cambodia to fight Vietnamese troops, it is not known how many Cambodians have been forced to return to their homelands.

About 150,000 Cambodians who crossed into Thailand in recent weeks, were forced or allowed back across the border into areas still under Khmer Rouge control.

Thai officials explained to Dr Waldheim 1,700 Cambodians recently expelled against their will were not legally classified as refugees.

Aranyaprathet District Officer Amorn Anantachai said they were illegal entrants, in violation of Thai law meant to preserve the nation's security.

Dr Waldheim was handed petitions by some refugees about family reunions and other matters. He accepted them on "a humanitarian basis."

Dr Waldheim, obviously moved by his experience, said he had visited a hospital in Aranyaprathet and saw some cases, including wounded children. He said they were being well cared for.

After his meeting with Prime Minister Kriangsak this morning, the UN Secretary-General and his wife are to fly to Hua Hin for an audience with Their Majesties the King and the Queen at Klai Kangwol summer palace.

He will hold a Press conference at the United Nations Building conference room later this evening before departing for Moscow.