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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
AT UNITED NATIONS MEETING ON REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, GENEVA, 20 JULY 1979

First of all, let me express the appreciation of my delegation to you Mr Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Refugees for initiating this Conference for Refugees thereby highlighting for the third time to the world the problem of refugees from Indochina. However, at the outset, let me say that the way this Conference has been structured it is unlikely, in my delegation's view, to be any more successful than the two earlier conferences on the subject, late last year and early this year. Like this conference, the two preceding meetings focussed only on the humanitarian aspects of this great human tragedy to the exclusion of the causes behind it. The two conferences, far from abating the flow of refugees only accelerated it.

So, once again we are being asked to produce Hamlet without the ghost. Out of deference to the organisers of this Conference I will try to abide by the rules of this game. May be I am wrong. May be Hamlet can be presented without the ghost. My delegation does not think so, but it will not obstruct this experiment and will even try to be helpful.

All I can hope for Mr Secretary-General, should this approach fail for the third time, is that the world community summons up enough courage the next time to produce Hamlet with the ghost. However, since I cannot introduce the ghost into this chamber, I have left outside in the form of a booklet dealing with other aspects of this problem which, in my humble view, are

pertinent to its solution. It includes extracts from statements and conclusions arrived at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting held in Bali a few weeks ago.

I have, however, one request to make of this conference. Since we have not been asked to lay blame on the country where the refugees originate, may I ask that even more consideration be shown to countries which have been forced to take and then push away these refugees. Since someone must be responsible for this tragedy may I suggest, that for the purposes of this conference we all agree to point the accusing finger at God. I know he will understand and forgive, for this is not the first time that the old gentleman has been forced to take on his shoulders the sins of his wayward children.

Since we have been asked to keep our speeches short, may I summarise the general approach, by ASEAN countries, towards a possible solution. There may be differences in respect of details and emphasis but there is none in respect of the basic approach. My ASEAN colleagues and others will elaborate on the Bali consensus in their own

way.

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But I would like to utter a word of caution about the precedent that is being set at this conference, and especially the way we are discussing this problem. As I understand it, the universal declaration of human rights declares that every country is responsible for ensuring that its citizens enjoy human rights. That it is the responsibility of a country to look after its citizens. But we are now extending this definition somewhat. It being that if a country cannot discharge its responsibility

towards its citizens then the world community should take over this responsibility. Now, if this precedent is set here then the refugee question can at a certain point become the responsibility not of the country where the refugees originate, but of others who are expected to take it over. There are many more millions of refugees outside of Southeast Asia. If this be the case they will insist that the same consideration and solution proposed here, be extended to their refugees to be settled elsewhere - as a matter of right. Can we make a distinction between the two? There are many in Africa, perhaps 3 million - are we going to make a distinction if they seek to be so treated?

Should we go along with this distinction? Supposing a country says "yes, we also insist that our citizens be so settled", or if any country wants to get rid of its population or sections of its population, are we going to accept this precedent that once a country disavows responsibility then we should take over the responsibility? That is why I think there is only one solution to this problem of refugees, which can be decided here. It is not all that difficult. Hence, we appeal to our neighbours in Vietnam that they provide us with a solution before we leave Geneva.

A major and decisive contribution towards the solution of this problem, is the immediate halting of the flow of refugees from Vietnam and also from Laos and Kampuchea. If they (Vietnam) can give consideration to this request, and tell us that there will be no more flow of refugees, then we come to a practical solution. For then, the next element of the refugee problem to be solved is how to resettle about 400,000 in ASEAN

countries. If the tap is turned off, then I think it is within the means of the international community to resettle this 400,000 who are stranded in other parts of Southeast Asia.

Can this be done? I think it can be. I heard only yesterday from delegations from Hong Kong and from Southeast Asia that the flow of refugees has dramatically dropped in the few days, before this conference. It has dropped, in fact it is almost zero. If this is so, then it only shows that it can be done. That is one element of the problem. And if that problem is solved, the problem is completely solved. We can go home happy. But if that is not solved, if the tap is not turned off, it is insoluble.

The second important element is the removal of nearly 400,000 refugees in ASEAN whose continued presence not only imposes dangerous political, economic and social strains but contains within it potential for racial conflicts which could tear our societies in Southeast Asia apart. So I was glad to hear the head of the delegation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam giving consideration to the problem of relieving the ASEAN countries of this intolerable burden. That is a step forward. That is a reassuring step forward. The consciousness now is that, for whatever reason, an intolerable burden has been imposed on ASEAN countries and that they (Vietnam) are ready to help solve it.

So towards this, I suggest that the Vietnamese delegation agrees to stop the flow and to give priority to the repatriation of the 400,000 refugees in ASEAN countries in the matter of resettlement. The 600,000

in Vietnam, if I read the Memorandum of Understanding between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the UNHCR correctly, can be processed in Vietnam itself. But halt this operation until the 400,000 in Southeast Asia have been disposed of.

But at the same time, as my colleagues have said, should there be stray refugees, then the principal of first asylum should be tied up with final asylum. It is not just first asylum. First asylum with final asylum, such that the figures involved in the first asylum should be matched or equated with the figures for final asylum. If that is not done, then the ASEAN countries unwittingly may be left holding the refugee baby.

Nobody has said here but I appreciate that many countries, especially about six, have done more than their share of taking in refugees. They have doubled it. But even if they quadrupled or quintupled it, I do not see the expected flow, which runs into millions, being absorbed by the rest of the world community. Unless they can say "We are giving a blank cheque," and they will absorb as many refugees who seek first asylum in ASEAN countries. Nobody has given that guarantee. People talked about doubling or quadrupling. Unless they can say that they will absorb all the refugees who seek first asylum, I think ASEAN countries may be quite reluctant to accept this principle of first asylum.

These then Mr Secretary-General are some of the reflections I have been able to put forward within the context of discussing a human problem.