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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE, AT THE INTERNATIONAL MEETING ON
HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND RELIEF TO THE KAMPUCHEAN
PEOPLE HELD IN GENEVA ON 26 MAY 1980

First of all let me express the appreciation of my delegation to the United Nations Secretary General for convening yet another conference on the Indochina refugees. The last time we met here, in July 1979, it was to discuss the problem of Vietnamese boat people. The consequence of that meeting was a dramatic fall in the flow of boat people - suggesting strongly that these things can be turned on and off at will.

To judge by recent reports the tap is being turned on again. This is one reason why I regret, but am not surprised over the absence of a Vietnamese delegation. When this conference was first mooted it was suggested that in order to prevail upon the Vietnamese to attend we should eschew dealing with the political and military causes that underlie the refugee problem. Though this undertaking was given the Vietnamese together with their friends have nevertheless elected not to attend. This being so there is less reason for us to pretend that things are not what we know they really are.

The Vietnamese rejected the holding of this conference on the ground that it would be politicised. I personally never believed for one moment that this was the real reason for Vietnamese opposition to this conference. Nevertheless the ASEAN countries gave the undertaking, in order to facilitate Vietnamese participation, that the conference would concern itself only with ways and means of feeding and looking after a people desparately in need of food.

Despite this assurance the Vietnamese are keeping away from this conference. Incredibly enough they are boycotting this conference because it has not been politicised. This new demand is contained in a letter recently circulated to the United Nations by the Permanent Representative of Vietnam explaining why it was not attending the conference. The

letter contends that the problem of "distributing aid to the Kampuchean people ... is primarily the responsibility of the People's Republic of Kampuchea." It further states that a "satisfactory and durable solution" can be reached "only through agreement between the parties directly concerned."

In other words a precondition for helping Kampuchean refugees is the acceptance of the Heng Samrin regime as the legitimate authority in Kampuchea.

If this is not a demand for the politicisation of this conference then I would like to know what it is. The price of a Vietnamese attendance is first our recognition of the Heng Samrin regime and second that we enhance its popularity and image of benevolence among the Kampuchean people by channelling international aid only through the Heng Samrin authorities.

In other words the Vietnamese have seen this conference as an occasion for political blackmail - to use the concern the world feels over the possible death of thousands of people as a bargaining lever to get recognition for a regime which the overwhelming majority of nations have so far refused to accept as legitimate.

To justify this clear lack of concern over the desperate condition of the Kampuchean people Vietnamese and Heng Samrin propaganda has in recent months maintained that all talk on the possible recurrence of famine in Kampuchea was imperialist exaggeration and that all was well.

If this is so then either the relief authorities who have been claiming otherwise are deliberately misleading us or the Vietnamese are prepared to play dice with Kampuchean lives to attain their overriding goal of getting recognition for the Heng Samrin regime and consequently the legitimising of Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea.

I believe the relief workers in the field. I am aware there have been criticisms of some aspects of their operations in Kampuchea and some of them may be valid. But when all is said and done I think they deserve our thanks for the magnificent work they have done under extremely chaotic and difficult conditions and in the face of obstruction by men less moved by human suffering and more by terrible visions. A million or more Kampucheans have every reason to thank the many official and unofficial aid agencies for having provided them with at least their daily bread.

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Even discussing the humanitarian aspects can be awkward for the Vietnamese and this may explain their absence. To do so is to tacitly admit that after nearly 18 months of "liberation" the number of peoples fleeing from it has tended to increase and that the fruits of such liberation are growing hunger for thousands. A liberation which requires international food aid to sustain it, especially in a country which was able to feed itself before such visitation, does not readily lend itself to convincing rhetoric.

That is why Vietnamese and Heng Samrin propaganda on the food and refugee questions swings from an outright denial that these problems exist to one of demanding that food assistance would be welcome provided the bounty seems to emanate from Hanoi and Phnom Penh.

The first unpalatable fact we must face up to is that we can expect little or no cooperation either from the Vietnamese or their friends on coping with the problem of starvation in Kampuchea. In their scheme of things and as authors of this tragedy a few thousand more Kampuchean deaths are neither here nor there. For one thing an economically ruined Vietnam must give priority to sustaining and feeding some 200,000 occupation troops in Kampuchea, in addition to the reported 1,000,000 it is keeping in readiness to ward off what the Vietnamese claim is the Chinese menace. In the circumstances it would be to strain credulity to believe that such food as is available, whether indigenously produced or given as aid by allies or acquired by way of gifts from the international community, would be diverted to sustain Kampuchean civilians. So when the Vietnamese insist that international aid should be disbursed through the Phnom Penh authorities they are not being just legalistic.

We should nevertheless exert what pressure we still can on the Vietnamese (because if the Vietnamese agree the Heng Samrin regime too will agree) to allow relief agencies to monitor the distribution of such aid to Kampuchean civilians in areas under their control. I personally doubt whether much cooperation can be expected from the Vietnamese who not so long ago had no compunction about pushing thousands of their nationals into open sea on political and racial grounds. Therefore the possible death of thousands of Kampuchean are likely to move them even less. Nevertheless, this should not be made an excuse for not trying to save as many Kampuchean as we possibly can in those parts within Vietnamese control.

What is going to happen should conditions become really desperate within Kampuchea is more of what has already been happening the past year or so - an exodus of Kampucheans towards the Thai border. As of today there are over 170,000 Kampucheans in holding centres in Thailand. A further 200,000 are encamped along the Kampuchean-Thai border. Add to this the estimated 600,000 to 700,000 floating refugees who are in close proximity to the border.

These statistics make a mockery of the claim by the Vietnamese and the Phnom Penh authorities that all is well insofar as food is concerned within Kampuchea. It possibly is only because nearly a million people are being cared for by international aid. As of 30 April ICRC/UNICEF sea shipment and relief flights had delivered directly to Kampuchea some 75,000 metric tons of rice and 11,500 metric tons of other foodstuffs. For the same period some 76,000 tons of rice and over 14,000 tons of other foodstuffs were disbursed along the border and in Thai holding centres. Because of this massive international aid nearly a million or more Kampucheans are at least alive.

If there should be serious food shortages within Kampuchea and possibly Vietnam, their people will, as they have done the past year, trek hundreds of miles to reach the Thai border because they know that that is where they can get the food they desperately need.

We may or may not be able to bring help to all the people within Kampuchea in view of the clearly uncooperative and cavalier attitude of the Vietnamese and Phnom Penh authorities appear to take towards this problem. But we can save the many hundreds of thousands of Indochinese refugees who can make it to the Thai-Kampuchean border.

That is why the Singapore Government fully supports the Thai proposal for the establishment of safe encampments along the Thai border. First such camps already exist unofficially and cater for the desperate needs of between 700,000 and one million people. From here Kampucheans take food into the interior to thousands more. As of today over one-third of all foodstuffs enters Kampuchea by way of this human land bridge. We know that by and large all this foodstuff goes to civilians. This is a life-line established spontaneously by the Kampuchean people. It exists. It has saved thousands of lives and can save thousands more.

Once news of such camps spread this is where the exodus will converge should the worst happen in Kampuchea. Therefore all aid, as cannot be fairly and properly distributed from Phnom Penh, can be disbursed through the western border.

I am well aware that the Vietnamese and their friends will object because their objective is winning a war - not saving Kampuchean lives. I see no reason why the world community should flinch before Vietnamese blandishments which require that we watch passively the death of thousands of Kampucheans by withholding aid to hundreds of thousands of Kampucheans and even Vietnamese who brave long treks to the Thai border because those who claim authority over them cannot provide them with the most elementary of human rights - the right to eat.

I am all for paying regard to the sensitivities of the Vietnamese but not to the extent of denying to a people the food we can provide simply because it will make the Vietnamese angry. Not to recognise the encampments that already exist is to facilitate the possible choking of the only life line the hungry people of Kampuchea now have. Once this is closed all aid must be channelled through the Heng Samrin authorities. This may explain the opposition to the idea of safe areas.

There is yet another reason for supporting the concept of safe encampments. It is an obligation - a debt of honour - we all owe to Thailand. The Thais, as they were initially inclined to do, could have shut their gates to the land refugees. But because of international pressure, on humanitarian grounds, they have opened the doors so that succour and aid could be brought to the Kampuchean refugees. In addition to the 156,000 in holding centres in Thailand, the Thais have taken in some 130,000 displaced persons from earlier waves of Indochinese refugees. The price of this hospitality has been the displacement of some 200,000 Thais from their lands.

So if the world community wearies of the aid and assistance, it has so far generously given to cope with the Kampuchean refugee problem, then it would be a breach of faith to leave the Thais holding the baby, especially if their hospitality should result in their having to cope alone with a fresh and massive exodus of people from Indochina. To be quite frank there is a lurking fear that the humanitarian impulse generated largely by the plight of the boat people who waylaid passing ships in the South China Seas appears to be subsiding. This may be because the land

people who trek it to the Thai border do not clutter up the sea-lanes and request sanctuary in developed countries. There is nothing comparable to the graphic television pictures of boats sinking in the China Seas to stir the hearts and conscience of millions of television viewers. The exodus of refugees to the borders of Thailand is routine news. There is no pressure to Western countries to resettle the land refugees.

So one of the reasons we are meeting at Geneva is that funds to cope with the problem are increasingly difficult to raise and hospitable Thailand might be left holding the baby. If the generosity and concern manifested in the past should evaporate and the refugee burden transferred to the shoulders of Thailand then it is only fair to point out the consequences. The political and economic dislocation that must follow, first in Thailand and then throughout the region would cost the non-Communist developed world many times more than what it would cost them to finance relief operations in Kampuchea.

The safe encampment is the most practical, efficient and economic way of realising the humanitarian objective this conference has set out for itself. This can be done better with Vietnamese cooperation. The camps should be free of politics and more important of contending armies.

The world community should proceed with the refinement and extension of safe encampments which are already there. The worst the Vietnamese can do is to launch a military operation against defenceless and hungry people—an action which even the Vietnamese might hesitate to do.

As I remarked the Kampuchean problem will persist so long as the political and military factors responsible for it remain unresolved. The Vietnamese themselves see the pacification of Kampuchea lasting some five to 10 years at least. So to spare ourselves the effort and expense of periodic meetings, the Kampuchean refugee problem should be classified as endemic and financial and other arrangements should be made on that basis.

If this is so just feeding and generally looking after hundreds of thousands of people in camps and havens is a negative approach. It becomes an aimless life of just eating, sleeping and procreating. It is to damage all that is human in a people and sooner or later these camps would become the breeding ground of frustration, bitterness and explosive perversions.

The safe areas should become a vehicle for the regeneration of the Kampuchean people who have suffered so much. They should be welded into a community equipped to play a useful role in the reconstruction of their brutally ravaged country when peace and freedom is regained. They should not, as some of them are now do, become thugs, smugglers and spivs ready to feed on the misery of their fellow countrymen. Properly approached these camps can become a self-sustaining community. There should be schools and hospitals and the more promising among them should be sent abroad to be trained as doctors, lawyers, administrators, economists, engineers, teachers and so on. These camps can nurture a pool of Kampuchean skills and talents can one day be put to good use in their country.

In addition food and rice seeds can be sent to the rest of Kampuchea through those encampments.

It may well be that the safe area concept may not get Vietnamese approval. We have bent over backwards to please the Vietnamese despite constant rebuffs. I am all for bending over backwards within reason but not to the extent where people could legitimately question whether we have spines at all.

May be for a change we should bend on the side of the Kampuchean people and the Thais who, at our instigation, did not close their doors to people who need help.