Vietnamese and Cambodian Refugee Crisis

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Introduction and Causes of Crisis:

The Vietnamese and Cambodian refugee crisis spanned from 1969 to 1973. During the 1960's, America and Vietnam were participating in the Vietnam War, which, along with internal conflict, was responsible for the displacement of not only Vietnamese but also Cambodian people. Due to the violent conditions from the war, many Vietnamese fled the country. Many were referred to as “boat people” because they escaped by boat on a dangerous trip to refugee camps in neighboring countries like Thailand.

The Vietnam war also strongly had an effect on the lives of Cambodian citizens. Cambodia served as a transport route between North and South Vietnam. Cambodia remained neutral during the war; however, they were bombed heavily due to the presence of Vietcong Army bases. In 1975, a communist group called the Khmer Rouge that was led by Pol Pot took control of Cambodia and attempted to create an agrarian utopia. Cities were evacuated and destroyed. 1.5 million Cambodians (~20% of the country’s population) was murdered by the Khmer Rouge. In 1979, the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia, causing many to flee the country to refugee camps in Thailand. Over 100,000 refugees relocated in the United States.
1959: Vietnam War begins.

1965: The U.S. sends combat troops into South Vietnam.

1968: The North Vietnamese Army retreats into Laos and Cambodia.

1969: American B-52s launch secret bombing raids over Cambodia.

1970: Cambodia's pro-American General Lon Nol deposes Prince Sihanouk, who then aligns with the Communist Khmer Rouge. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces invade Cambodia.

1971: U.S. continues its air strikes in Laos and Cambodia.

1972: The Khmer Rouge's army grows to some 50,000 soldiers, many of whom joined to retaliate for the U.S. bombings.

1973: The Vietnamese and Americans sign the Paris Peace Agreement. The Vietnamese begin to withdraw their troops from Cambodia. The last remaining American troops withdraw from Vietnam. The U.S. stops its bombing campaign on Cambodia, in which nearly 540,000 tons of bombs were dropped.

1975: Fall of South Vietnam; reunification of North and South. The Khmer Rouge come to power in Cambodia. Approximately 34,000 Cambodians flee toward Thailand to escape the government-sponsored genocide, which results in the murder of nearly one quarter of the population.

1978: The Vietnamese invade Cambodia in response to border attacks, depose the Khmer Rouge and install a Vietnamese backed government. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians escape into Thailand. Cambodian refugees begin to arrive in the U.S.

1979: Refugee camps open in Thailand to house some 160,000 Cambodian refugees.

1988: The Vietnamese begin gradual troop withdrawal from Cambodia.

1991: A formal ceasefire is adopted. The United Nations begins repatriating over 350,000 refugees from the camps in Thailand.

Lived Experiences of Refugees:


https://www.ted.com/talks/sophal_ear_escaping_the_khmer_rouge

*The Life We Were Given*, Dana Sachs

*South Wind Changing*, Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh
US Government Response to the Refugee Crisis:

On April 28th, 1970 President Nixon approved the Cambodian incursion, against the requests of Secretary of State William Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. This announcement is shown in the picture to the left.

The United States caused much of the displacement of villagers, from 1969-1973, in eastern Cambodia by saturation bombing all across the countryside with no regard for who exactly they were bombing. This haphazard bombing technique required the people being displaced to either join the Khmer Rouge or flee with no plan of where they were going. In total the U.S. dropped less bombs in the Second World War than it did on Cambodia. President Nixon had to be forced into stopping the bombing of Cambodia, but that did not stop the continual channelling of millions of dollars to military aid for the Lon Nol government. On April 30th, 1975 all of the U.S. troops evacuated South Vietnam, after two weeks earlier emptying the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh.

There was much controversy over who actually received help when supplies were sent to refugee camps. In many instances the food that would get sent to the refugees would be taken by the guerilla armies that would set up camp inside the camp. The U.S. was the largest contributor to the relief operation, it’s embassy setting up the Kampuchean Emergency Group (KEG) to oversee activities at the border. To many aid workers, which consisted of military and political people, monitoring the border KEG was seen as an extension of the U.S. foreign policy agenda in Southeast Asia.

Source:
http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/situation-in-cambodia-worsens
Public Reaction/Discrimination:

In the United States both the Vietnamese and Cambodian populations were basically non-existent until the Vietnam War and the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia caused the mass migration of over 800,000 refugees to the US alone. Both groups definitely had very similar experiences when it came to fleeing their home countries in response to violent conflict, but their were definitely some differences in the ways the two groups assimilated and were regarded in society and the media.

Cambodians:

Although Cambodians faced discrimination within the United States, immigration allowed them to have much greater freedom to practice their own culture and keep alive the spirit of tradition from their collapsing homeland. Many Cambodians had trouble with maintaining their identity, especially children who were forced to come to school and felt like “Americanizing” was the best solution to fitting in. Some of the stereotypes that surrounded these newfound immigrants was that they were inherently lazy and passive, yet this was just due to their culture that avoids confrontation. Many Cambodians avoided getting involved in US politics and focused their efforts on rebuilding their homeland by sending volunteers whenever possible.

Vietnamese:

Vietnamese refugees also found themselves faced with discrimination upon arrival in the US. Because of how publicly America was against the Vietnam War, these refugees had a much harder time trying to remain casual members of society. The public was much more aware of the Vietnamese presence in the state because they were from “enemy territory”. Lots of movies, books, and other social media outlets stereotyped the Vietnamese refugees coming in, so they were more stigmatized than the Cambodians. Most of the U.S. population had no idea that we were bombing Cambodia as well. Like the Cambodians many Vietnamese were not involved with U.S. politics but for other reasons. The Cambodians were focusing on rebuilding their country while the Vietnamese refugees and US citizens were still hesitant to work together because of the war.
As you can see from this New York Times Article titled: Communist Takeover Saigon: US Rescue Fleet is Picking Up Vietnamese Who Fled in Boats, that the US government probably did not speak for the will of their people when they helped these Vietnam and Cambodian refugees who were trying to escape from war and communism. This is a newspaper article from 1975, and in this time their was really no enforced political distinction between refugees and immigrants. Most of the articles from this time kept referring to these people as immigrants, indicating that they had a choice in the matter. They were recognized by the UNHCR as refugees but people did not really care to learn the backstory of the people they saw as “foreign” or the “enemy”. Even today many people globally do not what the difference between an immigrant and a refugee is nor care to acknowledge how important it is to know the status of an individual. Although it appears the government was more amicable to these refugees, with initiatives to take these people in, their was still certainly still discrimination. The government forced these new refugees to scatter throughout the country in order to prevent enclaves and communities from forming with the idea that a small number of widely dispersed immigrants would not really affect the country negatively.

Although the United States for generations has been considered the melting pot of the global community, a place where everyone has equal chance to succeed, every group of immigrants whether they are financial migrants or cultural/war refugees no matter how big or small has faced some level of discrimination. All these groups, some more than other have been able to assimilate over multiple generation to become the diverse country we are today. The Vietnam and Cambodian refugees that came here didn’t experience anything much different than any other group that is the “first” of their kind to come to the United States for whatever reason.
Three Different Waves of the Refugee Crisis:

**First Wave: ('75-'76, government sending people in Vietnam to reeducation camps)**

Before 1975, few Vietnamese scattered away from their homeland. However, since 1975, over a million people have fled Southeast Asia in three major waves.

The first wave sprang out in 1975 in the closing days of the Vietnam War. By then, Communist troops had defeated the South Vietnamese and taken control in South Vietnam. In face of the fall of South Vietnam and the start of reeducation camps, most refugees were well-educated, high-skilled Vietnamese who had opposed the communists, worked for the South Vietnamese government or maintained close ties to Americans. Among them, 125,000 people resettled in the United States. They were first airlifted by the United States Government to bases in Philippines, Wake Island and Guam, and later transferred to refugee centers in California, Arkansas, Florida, and Pennsylvania for up to six months of education and cultural training to facilitate their assimilation into their new society.

At that time, even though only 36 percent of Americans in a national poll favored Vietnamese immigration, the U.S. President Gerald Ford signed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act of 1975, which granted the refugees special status to enter the country and established a domestic resettlement program. However, the refugees were deliberately dispersed across the country so as to prevent “ghettoism” in few geographic areas. Despite this conscious immigration policy, most of these first-wave migrants eventually moved to California and Texas. Places like Orange County, CA, was soon to become “Little Saigon” populated by them and joined by the second-wave and third-wave Vietnamese refugee groups.

Sources:
http://crfимmigrationed.org/index.php/lessons-for-teachers/147-hi8

**Second Wave: ('76-'77, ethnic Chinese in Vietnam being allowed to register for the draft)**

Between 1978 and the mid-1980s, almost two million Vietnamese, predominantly Vietnam’s Chinese minority, were pressured to leave Vietnam in mass exodus. On the one hand, due to the long distrust of the native Vietnamese, these people were threatened with military conscription, forced unemployment or being sent to rural “new economic zones” as laborers. On the other hand, as China attacked Vietnam over a border dispute in 1979, Chinese families were further expelled by the Vietnamese government. Although many of them had lived in
Vietnam for generations, they had no choice but to either leave their country with an “exit permit” of $3,000 or flee illegally. Because they all fled Vietnam by boat, they were soon to be known as the “boat people.”

Once at sea, the boat people spent months drifting before landing in “nations of first asylum,” including Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Hong Kong. Due to food and water shortage, diseases, boat sinkage, robberies, rapes and murders on boat, around 200,000 boat people had been dead before landing by the summer of 1979. Meanwhile, receiving from 2,000 to 50,000 refugees per month, the overwhelmed “nations of first asylum” resorted to expel the Vietnamese immigrants.

Some other Southeast Asian refugees found links to transit to America. During this period, about 500 refugees swarmed into the United States everyday. They were demanded of a U.S. sponsor, who was normally played out by relatives, private individuals, churches and service organizations. These sponsors volunteered to provide housing, food, clothing, transportation until the refugees were able to become economically independent. After a period of adjustment, due to language barriers, most of the refugees ended up in low-paying jobs and close-knit Vietnamese communities.

Sources:
http://crfimmigrationed.org/index.php/lessons-for-teachers/147-hi8

Third Wave: (The exodus of Cambodian refugees from Cambodia to the US resulted in a lot of drug trafficking/gang violence in the US during the 70s and 80s) Due to conflict in Vietnam, American and South Vietnamese invaded Cambodia. Then a leftist group named Khmer Rouge came into power and attempted to strip the Cambodians of their old traditions by removing everything considered “old” (the elderly and family life) in order to create an industrialized state. The result was a state consisting of forced labor camps, poor living conditions, starvation, and bombing which killed an unknown number of Cambodians. Cambodians fled to the United States because the U.S. has programs which offered refugees American sponsors and programs to learn English and American culture. Also, in America Cambodians could freely preserve their traditions and were not physically affected by the war. Most fled to California where they lived in poor urban communities where they developed gangs since they felt detached from the white upper class Americans much like other minorities are the time. Gaining employment in America was difficult for Cambodian immigrants because most of them worked as farmers. Many Cambodians settled for low paying service and manual labor jobs. Not having a formal education as well as the language and cultural barrier hindered Cambodians from any upward mobility in the job market. Overall, Cambodians experienced difficulty assimilating in America due to cultural differences and health problems from the trauma they endured in Cambodia.
Source: http://www.energyofanation.org/waves_of_cambodian_immigration.html
http://cdn1.pri.org/sites/default/files/story/images/AP7501091230.jpg
The role of NGOs:

What is an NGO?

A Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) is a non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group that is organized on a local, national, or international level. However, NGOs usually operate on the international level. These organizations do not have a formal definition, because they can perform a multitude of services and functions. This can include aiding the spread of information to the public to encourage political involvement, advocating for certain policies and listening to citizens’ concerns, usually with the goal of bringing them to the government’s attention. NGOs can be organized around specific issues, or more general, overarching societal problems.

NGO involvement began in the time period of 1979 to 1982. This was after the Pol Pot regime had collapsed in 1979, so several NGOs started to provide help by forming emergency programs. Only a few Japanese NGOs began operating on the Thai-Cambodia border, while most of the other NGOs (both Japanese and other international NGOs) formed in Cambodia. In 1982, international aid spiked when the UN recognized the emergency situation in Cambodia. At this time, there were only 15 recorded NGOs working in Cambodia. The meeting between Prince Norodom Sihanouk and the Prime Minister, Hun Sen, in France in 1987 spurred international NGOs to increase aid more than ever before. The influx of aid and NGOs to Cambodia occurred in 1987 and 1988, but the final withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in 1989 was another turning point in many people’s decision to become involved in the crisis. By the early 1990s, the highest number of NGOs became involved, aiding Cambodia in any way possible.

NGOs had many key roles in the Vietnamese and Cambodian Refugee Crisis. Here, I will give a list of the major contributions to the crisis, supported by an example. There were countless NGOs involved in this crisis, some of which include CARE, CRS, IRC, The Norwegian Redd Barna, Oxfam, and others.

NGOs played a substantial role in enhancing the moral of refugees, especially those in refugee camps. By the start of 1980, over 100,000 Cambodians were held in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp. This was the main holding centre at that time. Many of these refugees were minors, unaccompanied by any family members or guardians. 37 NGOs worked in Khao-I-Dang, reflecting the global spread of NGO activity which was occurring at that time. One main role of NGOs in this camp studied unaccompanied minors who found refuge there. Though these children were alone, The Norwegian Redd Barna, along with others, found evidence that parents of many of the minors in the camp were alive. Redd Barna investigated over 2,000 files, and found that over half of the unaccompanied children were forced to be separated from their parents by circumstance, not by death, as many had assumed. This instilled hope in the camp that eventual reunification was a possibility. This work is just one example of the role of NGOs in
helping to enhance the moral of refugees, specifically the fragile youth stranded without their family’s support.

Another role of NGOs in the crisis was their work to encourage donations of governmental aid to places in need. One great example of this was the humanitarian aid that Oxfam, along with a consortium of several other NGOs, persuaded the Heng Samrin government to deliver to refugee camps in Cambodia. This type of aid was important, because although it ranged from aid in food to various types of care, the objective of humanitarian aid was to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain human dignity. Additionally, by negotiating to channel the aid through the Phnom Penh government, Oxfam was able to avoid the Thai-Cambodian border, increasing the amount of aid the camps could receive. In addition to this aid, Oxfam and other NGOs continued to plead for more aid, and to increase the relief operation in Cambodia.

Another extremely important role of NGOs was to help Cambodia build back its country from the crisis. In the early 1990s, Japanese NGOs played a major role in Cambodia’s reconstruction efforts by offering several forms of assistance. Japan supplied Cambodia with guidance for the government among other high-level initiatives. Other Japanese aid included assistance in education, vocational training, along with relief and refugee assistance. This was critical in encouraging the refugees to rebuild their lives in their native country. Additionally, the financial assistance provided by Japanese NGOs were very important in rebuilding Cambodia’s infrastructure.
This image depicts a typical food ration that was given to Cambodian refugees every week. The weekly ration includes rice, beans and dried fish. These refugees who received this food were located on the Thai-Cambodian border. This picture was taken in July of 1983.


Source:
Japan's Changing Role in Humanitarian Crises by Yukiko Nishikawa
https://books.google.com/books?id=T4cqBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA90&lpg=PA90&dq=the+role+of+NGOs+and+Charities+in+Vietnamese+and+Cambodian+Refugee+Crisis&source=bl&ots=UwJm1FKb4q&sig=olTpgc_9z7Hb4NcdrfWWIL367CU&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj8mbXH1aXLaUE2SYKHWYZABsQ6AEIwMDAD#v=onepage&q=the%20role%20of%20NGOs%20and%20Charities%20in%20Vietnamese%20and%20Cambodian%20Refugee%20Crisis&f=false
Vassar's Reaction to the Refugee Crisis:

While searching for words such as “refugee” and “cambodia” and “Indochinese” in the Vassar Newspaper Archive put together by the Vassar Library, I came across many articles. Many were specifically about the war in Vietnam and student and faculty protests. It seemed like many class notes contained these words but unfortunately, the full text of those class notes in the Alumnae/i Quarterly are not available online. I did find a few articles written in *The Spectator* by two students, Jad Davenport and Don Mathis, who visited refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border and wrote about their experiences. Two of these articles are shown below. One article, by Beth L. Lueck ’76 in *The Alumnae/i Quarterly*, describes her experience as an intern for a newspaper in Lancaster, PA involving interactions with Vietnamese refugees at a refugee camp there. It was published in September 1975 and is titled “on the annville beat.” Nevertheless, the most interesting article I found was a letter to the editor in the June 1977 *Vassar Quarterly*. This letter to the editor, titled “A Refugee Replies,” was written in response to an article about women in the vietnam war published in the previous issue. The full text is below.

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In this article from the August 1987 Spectator, Jad Davenport ‘90, describes the experiences of refugees, aid workers, and himself at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center in Morong-Bataan.
In this article from the April 1988 issue of Vassar's *The Spectator*, a student, Don Mathis, describes his visit to the Indochinese refugee camp with the author of the previous article, on the Thai-Cambodian border as part of an independent study project.
The Spectator Goes to Southeast Asia: Amongst Booby Traps,

CHRISTMAS TRUNK, THIS YEAR, Southeast Asia. The war in Cambodia had lasted for some time, and the situation had become critical. The Cambodian government had decided to evacuate its citizens from the war zone. The Spectator was one of the few Western newspapers to cover the evacuation, and the experience was described as harrowing.

Well, we took off from Saigon at 12:30 a.m. and began flying. The plane was loaded with equipment and personnel. The conditions were not ideal, but we had to depart immediately.

As we flew over the war zone, the landscape was quite different from what we had seen in Saigon. The fields were now empty, and the streets were deserted. The town was quiet, and there was a sense of tension in the air. The buildings were now occupied by the Viet Cong, and we were on our way to the evacuation site.

When we arrived, we were greeted by a relief worker. She explained that the situation was critical, and we had to hurry. The evacuation was in progress, and there was no time to waste. We were taken to a refugee camp, where we met with the survivors of the evacuation.

The conditions were not ideal, but we were able to help some of the people. We distributed food and water, and we provided medical assistance. The people were grateful, and we were able to make a difference.

Our stay lasted for two days, and we were able to report on the situation. We witnessed the courage and resilience of the people, and we were inspired by their spirit. It was a harrowing experience, but it was also a rewarding one.

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An article in the Miscellany News from 10 May 1967 titled “Opposition to Escalate In Viet Nam Summer” describes a summer program where “Workers will identify and bring together those persons in the
community who are disaffected from the war; they will undertake a program of education including readings, seminars, films and speakers, to increase public knowledge about the war and to develop individual ability to speak in opposition to it." It talks about how this program is already present at many other organizations and institutions in America.


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From the December 13, 1967 issue of The Miscellany News.

Along with this seminar, an article from the April 27, 1966 Miscellany News titled “Faculty to Decide On Topics For Viet Teach-in Participation” by CHARLOTTE KIRK, describes a “teach-in” where a series of professors and outside speakers come and speak as part of a panel about the conflict in Vietnam from a variety of angles.
Additional Sources:

This is an amazing source that clearly lays out the US reaction and involvement in the Vietnam along with the anti-war movement. It does not talk too much about the refugee crisis in particular but does give some great background information concerning the more general US response to the war. It includes many links and bibliography.

Cambodia:

This source is focused on the “Food, Politics and Humanitarian Response” aspects of the Cambodian crisis. It gives a brief background of the conflict in Cambodia and then dives into the “Politics of Humanitarian Relief,” the “border” refugee camps, and the Thai response to the crisis of refugees.

This article gives a brief background to the Cambodian conflict that led to the refugee crisis and describes how the press reported on the crisis.