**"Do Not Forget Us!" Bayard Rustin, May 1, 1978, *WORLDVIEW* Magazine**

This article was part of a set of three pieces called "America's Obligation to Indochinese Refugees." It includes a statement given to Vice President Mondale by the International Rescue Committee delegation that Bayard Rustin took part in...

A new "invisible man" has been born within our midst—the Southeast Asian refugee. Shunted from country to country, over 150,000 of these "invisible people" cling to a precarious existence in scores of refugee camps that dot non-Communist Asia. They have a simple and solitary message for the international community: "Do not forget us!"

Some well-meaning people have said to me: "The black community suffers from record high unemployment. Why should blacks be concerned about Southeast Asian refugees? They'll only take jobs and housing that black people desperately need." Such an attitude is understandable, but allow me to describe the enormity and urgency of the refugee problem.

Some months ago, while serving on a delegation organized by the International Rescue Committee (an organization that has provided much assistance to refugees from Nazi Germany and to the victims of apartheid and repression in Africa), I had an opportunity to speak with many refugees currently living in Thailand. They all told me the same stories; they all had the same fears. If they return home, they said, the Communist regimes will almost certainly kill them. Many complained about the lack of food in the Thai camps, yet they fear their own governments more than they fear starvation.

Of the refugee groups I encountered, the Cambodians were the most determined to resist returning to their now desolate homeland. When the brutal Khmer Rouge forces seized control of their country over two years ago, more than fifteen thousand people fled to Thailand, frequently with only the clothing on their backs.

At present thousands of Cambodians are crowded into four camps in eastern Thailand. Most of these destitute people have lived in these poorly equipped camps for two years or more. Resettlement programs have advanced at a snail's pace; few foreign countries have any interest in "undesirable" and semiliterate Cambodians. Moreover, recent border clashes between Thai and Khmer Rouge troops have made the Cambodian refugees suspect in the eyes of the Thai Government.

Cambodia's neighbor to the east, Vietnam, has produced thousands of its own refugees, many of whom have taken to the high seas in dangerous little boats. These courageous "boat people" have suffered heavy losses in their quest for freedom. According to several reliable sources, as many as half of these people perish at sea (about the same mortality rate suffered by black slaves crossing the Atlantic from Africa), either through starvation, drowning, or exposure. Merchant ships that pass these imperiled human beings rarely, if ever, offer assistance. And the Thai Government has become increasingly reluctant to grant them landing rights on Thai shores.

Vietnamese "boat people" who somehow survive the rigorous sea journey presently live in two temporary camps near the coastline. Since 1976 the number of refugees in these camps has risen to over 2,000. Another inland camp serves 1,500 Vietnamese who escaped through Laos.

I talked to several Vietnamese, and they all described the "New Vietnam" as a harsh and oppressive society. Common people, they told me, have been uprooted and forced to relocate in areas far from friends and family. Others have been sent to the so-called New Economic Zones. And still others have been compelled to change occupations. Trade unions, religious groups (both Buddhist and Christian), and student organizations—all of which once flourished in South Vietnam—have all but disappeared.

Two ethnic groups from Laos—the Lao and Hmong peoples—have even more refugees in Thailand than the Vietnamese and Cambodians combined. At present over 72,000 Laotian refugees live in nine densely populated camps in the northern sections of Thailand. The refugee community includes urban and rural people, as well as a contingent of former military and government officials.

Conditions in Thailand's refugee camps, at least the ones I visited, are far from uniform. Certain camps have better facilities than others, but none of them deserves to be called a "home." Given its limited resources, the Thai Government has, I believe, made an honest effort to provide decent facilities. Yet most refugees lack toilets, adequate food and clothing, and even personal privacy. All of these amenities, which most of us consider indispensable, have become highly prized luxuries. Indeed, life itself has become a costly luxury for these people.

It would be easy and politically expedient conveniently to forget these beleaguered people. We could, I suppose, soothe our collective conscience by sending a few dollars to the camps. But in seeking "a painless solution" blacks would ignore a basic lesson of the civil rights movement: the black struggle for freedom is intimately linked with the universal struggle for freedom, whether it be in South Africa, the Soviet Union, or Indochina.

How can we help these people? They do not want handouts or a "free ride." Instead, they want a fair opportunity to rebuild their shattered lives and earn a decent living. And there is only one way we can help—we must open the doors of America. Black people must recognize these people for what they are: brothers and sisters, not enemies and competitors.