

## Review of Media Coverage on Refugee Crises: The Case of Vietnamese Boat People (VBP) in Bidong Island

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### Abstract

The Vietnam War was fought between the communist government of North Vietnam and the government of South Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh declared independence from France when the French surrendered and announced a cease-fire. When Vietnam was split at the 17th parallel, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the Republic of Vietnam were created (South Vietnam). Between the two limits, citizens were free to travel. Ngô nh Dim gave control to South Vietnam, whereas Ho Chi Minh gave power to North Vietnam. The Geneva Agreements were signed, and they declared that Vietnam would be unified through elections. However, Ngô nh Dim said that South Vietnam did not sign the accords and was not obliged by them. After failing to unite Vietnam through elections, North Vietnam decides to unite the country through force, igniting the Vietnam War. During the 1970s and 1980s, media coverage was minimal. Unlike now, when social media has become the most efficient means of disseminating information and informing global audiences about what is occurring in other nations. Media reporting ways easier and simplifies and has a significant impact on reporting process. The purpose of this study is to examine the scant information about Vietnamese Boat People given through the media throughout the conflict using newspaper reviews published between 1970 and 1985. The findings demonstrated the importance of the media's role in aiding and expediting conflict resolution.

**Keywords:** *Media, refugee, crises, Vietnamese Boat People (VBP), media framing*

### 1.0 Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of Southeast Asians came to the United States, altering American-Vietnamese relations and generating new communities of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and among Americans. The evacuation by water of hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians (mainly Vietnamese) caused a political and humanitarian firestorm for the international community, the United States, and Vietnam. In the first wave, 140,000 South Vietnamese escaped the communist takeover in 1975, mostly political leaders, army officers, and skilled professionals. Fewer than a thousand Vietnamese were able to flee the country. Those who survived pirate attacks, typhoons, and hunger sought sanctuary in refugee camps in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong.

For some, these countries became permanent homes, while others used them as stopovers on their route to obtain political asylum in other countries, notably the United States (US). Vietnamese immigration to the US became a major political issue during President Jimmy Carter's presidency. The

number of refugees escaping Vietnam by water grew from roughly 6,000 in 1976 to almost 20,000 the following year. Officials estimated that about a third of the total died at sea as a result of famine, drowning, or pirates, issues that worsened when several Asian nations began turning away these boat people.

By the late 1970s, the Vietnamese government had begun to implement communist reforms, including the seizure of enterprises and farms. Many ethnic Chinese business owners in southern Vietnam, who had resided there for decades, were targeted. The Chinese, or Hoa as they were known in Vietnam, were suspected of sympathising with China, benefiting from the Vietnamese people's poverty, and betraying Vietnam during the battle with the US. As a result, they were urged to leave the nation by the government. Adults might arrange their expulsion by paying a bribe and a departure fee. A Hoa man paid for himself and his big family's journey using a bag of gold bars received from the liquidation of his estate in at least one occasion. Between 1977 and 1979, other Vietnamese took advantage of the black-market activity in selling passage outside of the nation, which grew into a lucrative business in Vietnam.

As a result of the growing violence and political instability, a wave of gees and displaced persons flew out of the area during the closing stages of the Indochina War in 1975. During this period, not only are Americans receiving refugees, but Vietnamese refugees are also arriving on Singapore's beaches. Due to their perilous means of transportation, the Vietnamese boat people have received a lot of worldwide interest. Despite the dangers of drowning, hunger, and pirate attacks, they have managed to arrive in countries as far apart as Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Australia [1].

Malaysia is not a signatory to the United Nation Convention 1951 on Refugees [2]. Therefore, asylum seekers who find themselves in the country lead a precarious existence on the margins of society, at risk of arrest as illegal immigrants, since Malaysia makes no distinction between undocumented or illegal workers and refugees [3].

In 1975, Malaysia undergoes first significant experience with mass refugees and asylum seekers occurred after the fall of Saigon. The Vietnamese boat people started to arrive in Malaysia. The first phase consisted of 47 refugees, after that they were arriving in larger numbers, and Malaysia became the temporary home to more than 250,000 refugees. According to researchers, under the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees of 1989, Malaysia became a first protection space for these boat people [3]. The boat man housed in camps and had to wait several years for a durable solution that usually meant resettlement in a third country.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 History of Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was a lengthy, expensive, and contentious struggle that pitted North Vietnam's communist government against South Vietnam and its main ally, the US. The ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union exacerbated the tension. The Vietnam War claimed the lives of nearly 3 million people, including over 58,000 Americans, with Vietnamese civilians accounting for more than half of those murdered. Even after President Richard Nixon ordered the departure of US soldiers in 1973, opposition to the war in the United States remained strong. Communist forces ended the war by seizing control of South Vietnam in 1975, and the country was unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the following year.

Both South and North Vietnam suffered greatly as a result of the conflict. The National Liberation Front (NLF) along with America's enormous military strength, almost guaranteed that the civilian population suffered horrific casualties. The Vietnam War's greatest immediate consequence was the enormous death toll. A total of 2 million Vietnamese civilians, 1.1 million North Vietnamese military, and 200,000 South Vietnamese troops were killed throughout the conflict. Between 1965 and 1973, America unleashed 8 million tonnes of bombs during the air war. The bombs used varied in kind, ranging from high explosives to napalm used in air raids on communities suspected of harbouring the NLF.

During the Vietnam War (1960 – 1971), herbicides were sprayed by U.S. military forces at a rate of an order of magnitude greater than amounts used for domestic weed. During the war, United States soldiers used mortars and grenades in an attempted to destroy rice paddies and rice stocks, but rice grains were very durable and not easily destroyed. Then the rubber or plastic bladders were dropped directly into rice paddies for ‘rice-killing operations’ . These rubber bladders exploding on impact and releasing toxic herbicides. Barrels of herbicides were also dropped into the water irrigating rice paddies, polluting rivers and poisoning the soil and people for many years’ control [4].

In 1969 alone, 1,034,300 hectares of forest was destroyed using Agent Orange. Between 1962 and 1969, 688,000 acres of agricultural land was sprayed that primarily on paddy fields that has led Vietnam the poorest country. Agent Orange were sprayed by United States forces for military purposes during the Vietnam War at a rate more than an order of magnitude greater than for similar domestic weed control [5]; [6]. According to previous research, impacting the health not only of the vulnerable civilians but also in long term the Agent Orange affecting health of the soldiers who were once on the Vietnam war. Studies coherently suggest that Vietnam veterans have higher frequency of vasculopathy, cancer and some other health issues in association with Agent Orange exposure [7]; [8]; [9].

While Agent Blue was used as a contact herbicide in South Vietnam for rapid defoliation, grassy plant control and rice destruction and works by rapidly defoliating wide variety of plant species of grasses and grains [4]. The term ‘Agent Blue’ was first applied to cacodylic acid in powder form that was mixed with water in the field. Cacodylic acid is a highly-soluble organic arsenic compound that readily breaks down in soil. According to spraying of Agent Blue during the war, on 100,000 hectares of mangrove forests and about 300,000 hectares of rice paddies just before rice harvest time resulted in the destruction of the standing crop and rendered the land contaminated with arsenic [10].

Looking back at prior comparable crises, such as in Afghanistan, millions of Afghan men, women, and children have been forced to abandon their homes and seek shelter in other regions of Afghanistan or outside the nation due to two decades of civil conflict and significant human rights violations. Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, people, particularly women and children, have been victims of the violent struggle [11]. They have suffered much as a result of the destructive effects of constant conflict. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed or maimed as a result of the indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian areas. Thousands of people have been unjustly detained, tortured, raped, "disappeared," or murdered as a result of their political affiliation, ethnic identity, gender, or in retaliatory assaults by numerous armed factions battling for territory control. Millions of Afghans have been uprooted and dispossessed as schools, hospitals, houses, and farmland have been torched and destroyed [12]. Many Afghans have abandoned their nation due to the pressures of war and violence in Afghanistan. The media portrays on both parties easily found in social media reporting on the situation, which some claimed that the accuracy of the data need to be further investigate, as too many versions of report fed to viewer.

Meanwhile, with Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, the lack of media coverage of the issue resulted in the general public being unaware of the Vietnamese struggle, as reports were only available through newspapers, radio, and television at the time. Because Vietnam's neighbours refused to welcome them, the refugees were forced to flee by sea. Their dread of being persecuted at home outweighed their fears of shipwreck and piracy, as well as starvation and dehydration. Dam Thanh Tran only has a few photographs of his life in Vietnam since they couldn't bring much.

### **2.3 The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press**

The press has a great ability to focus attention, albeit not all media on all issues among all citizens. Frequently, press successful in telling us how to think about it [13]. The agenda- setting role of the press is the unpremeditated outcome of the necessity of the news media, with their limited capacity, to select a few topics for attention each day. Agenda also is strictly a descriptive term for a prioritized list of items, the major topics found in newspaper, television news programs, and other mass media message. The agenda setting influence of the media operates at two sequential levels in the communication process- attention and comprehension [14]; [15].

Agenda setting, was put forward by the journalist Walter Lippmann in his book public opinion in 1922 [16]. The agenda-setting process is composed of the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda, and the interrelationships among these three elements [17]. In any society the number of potential public issues almost always exceeds the capabilities of the government to process them [18].

Several studies related to news reporting and issues related to immigrants and refugees by scholars have been extensively done. Melek and Ulucay in their study suggest that positive media emphasis on the images of refugees had a positive impact on public opinion and caused an overall attitude change in the public [19]. Also, further investigation done to seek whether being exposed to positive news coverage about Syrian refugees would cause an attitude change in the public from negative to positive [19]. Despite, another study demonstrates a positive impact of general immigration news on anti-immigrant party support and not on the support for other parties [20]. Damstra's study was conducted in Netherland examine whether being linked to the immigration issue in the news is a prerequisite for the Freedom Party to benefit from immigration coverage, and to what extent this also applies to parties *not* owning the issue [20].

Song study analysed news reports from three major news organizations on the 2015 terrorist attack in Paris from the perspective of news agenda-setting and framing [16]. The study found different frames and differences in media coverage do not only exist in the three media coverage of the Paris terrorist attacks. Due to different regions, traditions, cultures and political positions, all media will use different frames to report different events, which is an inevitable situation. Three news agencies are China's Xinhua News Agency, American CNN and the pan-Arab Al-Jazeera.

These studies as well as some studies by other scholars [21]; [22]; [23]. It shows that news media are able to set the public agenda by making some issues more salient at the expense of other issues [24]. Media coverage of the refugee crisis is important because the media still are the main source of information concerning distant issues and as such it facilitates people's access to social reality [25].

## 2.4 Vietnamese Boat People on Media

**TABLE**

News reported by media through newspaper platform (1970 – 1991)

1

Code	Title	Publication	Published
N1.	Vietnam Refugees Faces and Increasing Savagery	New York Times	July 4, 1984
N2.	Chinese Refugees from Vietnam Thrives in Chinatown	New York Times	February 11, 1984,
N3.	1300 Refugees Land at Pusan amid Welcome	Korea Times	May 14, 1975.
N4.	200 Malaysia Vietnamese Dies off Malaysia Coast	New York Times	November 23, 1978,
N5.	Vietnam Refugees Say Malaysia Troops Sent Boat Back Out to Sea	New York Times	June 23, 1979
N6.	Malaysia to Put 70,000 Refugees Back Out to Sea	New York Times	June 16, 1979,
N8.	Malaysia Reels Under Refugee Tide	The Washington Post	December 11,1978
N9.	Kumpulan Terakhir 52 Pelarian Vietnam dipindahkan ke Sungai Besi	Bernamea	November 12, 1991
N11.	24 Cedera di rusuhan di kem pelarian Vietnam	Bernamea	September 27, 2021
N12.	Terpaksa berkeras dengan pelarian Vietnam	Berita harian	Jun 15, 2015



Figure 1: Sample of News Report –Malaysia Media

**TABLE 2**  
News reported by television media posted on YouTube platform

No	Title	Publication	Reporter
V1.	May 1979 Pulau Bidong Malaysia Vietnam refugees	ABC News, 1979	Jim Laurie
V2.	Pulau Bidong Kembali Bernyawa	TV9, 19 September 2021	Mohd Ishak Abdillah Ngah

Table 2 reported by two different timelines now and then of Bidong Island. In 1979, reporter name Jim Laurie, has covered on the arrival of Vietnamese refugee and placement in Bidong Island. The assistance, struggle and Malaysia plan in giving them protection while waiting for the arrangement to deport the refugees to countries that willing to accept them. In the video duration of 2: 14 minutes, footages of NGOs, refugees and the government of Malaysia participation in managing increased numbers of refugees. After deportation of the refugees, Bidong Island latest visual reported by TV 9 news reported in September 2021 highlighted the island hidden potential as part of the tourist spot.

**2.5 Media Role and Reporting on VBP**

Journalists act as an agent on media reporting and many of the reports prepares are usually have focused on humanistic reporting and on telling the stories of refugees, very few journalists are trained to cover this issue. Therefore, reporting made by media is crucial, especially relating to refugees as it has the potential in creating awareness and contribute to country policy decision making in solving the issue [26]; [27]. This is due to the involvement of policy awareness as well as to project the consequences of the report made. As eyes of the worlds are watching on these writing, onto to look up the issues, solution as well as recommendation and help from others. These were some of the conclusions reached by media experts gathered in Paris on March 18 to discuss Media and Migration as part of UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication's thematic debate (IPDC).

Through the debate conducted among topics discussed involved of the Syrian exodus and its impact on Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Europe have brought attention to the subject of populations on the move, but it is equally prevalent in other countries. But “words matter”, observed Melissa Fleming, spokesperson for the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees. According to Jacco van Sterkenburg, a Dutch academician, the media has often reduced migrants to an image where they are either a (male) menace or a collection of victims as a result of unprepared journalists [28]. These two techniques, he believes, have a lot in common. They both promote a “us and them” mentality that emphasises differences at the expense of covering common human issues among neighbours. These recent issues

relating to media role and reporting on refugees does implies to the refugees of Vietnamese early 1970 's to 1980's. Some of the media has replace the Vietnamese refugees to Vietnamese Boat People in every reporting to symbolise this group. These can be seen from the title of the newspaper headlines reported in Table 1.

### 3.0 Methodology

Qualitative method employs in the present study by reviewing news report, reported by the media. Study reviewed coverage on refugees or Vietnamese boat people from 1970 until 1991. Another study that uses the similar concept of broadcast news review in its reporting to seek news coverage in an issue [29]. The present news review has taken its place through the newspapers and previous television news posted on YouTube. Meanwhile, newspaper reports news reviewed in the present study are New York Times, Korea Times, and Express Newspapers. The roles of journalists and content report will be further analysed. This is to identify the portrayal of Vietnamese boat people by the media back then during the arrivals of these refugees. The review process has been conducted through online search on old newspaper archives and video footages reported by the media. The details of the review finding can be found further in the findings section below. Keywords search used such as Vietnamese refugees, Vietnamese Refugees and China, Vietnamese Refugees and Korea, Vietnamese Refugees and Malaysia followed by deportation. There were many reports reported on Vietnamese refugee within the time fame of 1978 to 1991. They were randomly select and reviewed. Findings of the reviewed news article further tabulated in the findings section

### 4.0 Findings

After the review process takes place through online. The old archive reports were later listed using keyword search in Figure 1 below. Figure 1 represents some of the sample used in the present study to see the portrayal of media reports relating to Vietnamese refugees worldwide, the scope is to seek further on differences of countries that hand in help such as provides shelter medical aids, foods etc.

**TABLE 2**

Keywords used in Media Report Findings

Code	Title	Publication	Keywords	Level and language
N1.	Vietnam Refugees Faces and Increasing Savagery	New York Times	Vietnamese Refugees and Savagary	International/ English
N2.	Chinese Refugees from Vietnam Thrives in Chinatown	New York Times	Vietnamese Refugees land in Chinatown	International/ English
N3.	1300 Refugees Land at Pusan amid Welcome	Korea Times	Vietnamese Refugees in Korea	International/ English
N4.	200 Malaysia Vietnamese Dies off Malaysia Coast	New York Times	Vietnamese Refugees and Malaysia	International/ English
N5.	Vietnam Refugees Say Malaysia Troops Sent Boat Back Out to Sea	New York Times	Vietnamese Refugees and Malaysia Refusal	International/ English
N6.	Malaysia to Put 70,000 Refugees Back Out to Sea	New York Times	Vietnamese Refugees and Malaysia Refusal	International/ English
N8.	Malaysia Reels Under Refugee Tide	The Washington Post	Vietnamese Refugees and Malaysia	International/ English
N9.	Kumpulan Terakhir 52 Pelarian Vietnam dipindahkan ke Sungai Besi	Bernamea	Vietnam Refugees deportation	International/ Bahasa Malaysia
N10.	24 Cedera di rusuhan di kem pelarian Vietnam	Bernamea	Vietnam Refugees deportation	International/ Bahasa Malaysia
N11.	Terpaksa berkeras dengan pelarian Vietnam	Berita Harian	Vietnam Refugees deportation	International/ Bahasa Malaysia

Findings from media reported has been summarise in this section, highlighting the four sample of international media and local media results reported at the time. The selection of random media reviewed and findings from the review has been summarise in this section as follows:-

*New York Times (N8)*

New York times reported on the compilation of survivors' accounts to the United Nations agency since 1982 puts the number of people killed by pirates at about 1,800. The reports highlighted more than 2,300 women have been raped; almost all rape victims were assaulted repeatedly, usually by all or many of the fishing boat's crew members. In addition, 850 women who were abducted remain missing. The media also highlighted the action as 'Violence for No Reason'. New York Times journalists also exposed the conversations and interviews with refugee officials, diplomats, officials of humanitarian organizations and voluntary refugee workers in Thailand, Europe, and the United States. It is relating to the consensus on emerged rape and violence rather than robbery as the principal objects in the report. Prices of boat fishing increased at the time where demand is high during the war to be used to escape from their land. Furthermore, due to desperation, some of the boat used are not fit for high seas.

*Washington Post (N8)*

Since 1975, 840,000 Vietnamese asylum-seekers have arrived in the countries of Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. Over 755,000 departed for resettlement in the West. Over 81,000 have returned safely to Viet Nam. The Washington Post article reports how the then Home Minister, Muhammad Ghazali Shafie stressed that the Malaysian government at that time was in a stressful situation in managing the Vietnamese boat people [30].

"We are bombarded by this influx of people," said Home Minister Muhammad Ghazail Shafle. "We in Malaysia have had this problem since the fall of Saigon [in 1975] but the dimensions have changed." - Washington Post article-

Apart from that, the writer also gives a background on how these Vietnamese boat people arrived in Malaysia and why they ran away and left on their own. news content tries to provide perspective from the government in managing and resolving issues related to the Vietnam boat people.

The United States has these fixed criteria and the immigration people come and pick up the ones they want," he said in an interview. "It seems they are taking only the better educated ones. What will happen to the residue? There will be 40,000 of them left because no one wants them.

This article reports: *"They will take away the cream and leave us the crumbs."* Specifically, Ghazali wants the United States or a combination of countries to designate a Pacific Island, preferably Guam, as a staging and processing point for resettling all the refugees. Those countries would fix a limit -- two or three years -- within which every refugee would be guaranteed a new home.

*"It must be a firm commitment that there will be no residue" left in Malaysia, he insists.*

*Bernama (N9)*

Bernama's report informed about the closure of settlements in Bidong Island and the Vietnamese boat people were transferred to refugee camps in Sungai Besi while waiting to be sent to other countries [31]. In another Bernama report on January 18, 1996, police fired several shots when a group of Vietnamese drifters staged their worst riot by setting fire to two blocks of their homes at the Sungai Besi transit camp resulting in 24 people reportedly injured. Bernama's agency report is seen more as reporting what happened without publishing any views. Bernama's reporting is more objective by reporting incidents or progress that occur on issues or related to Vietnam boat people.

*Ketua Polis Kuala Lumpur Datuk Ismail Che Rus memberitahu pemberita dalam kem itu petang ini, mereka yang cedera termasuk tujuh anggota polis yang*

*bertugas mengawal keadaan tetapi mendapat tentangan hebat daripada rakyat Vietnam itu yang bersenjatakan bom api (molotov cocktail) dan batu. Rusuhan itu bermula pada pukul 6 pagi sejurus selepas satu pasukan Polis Simpanan Persekutuan (FRU) tiba di kem itu untuk membuat pemeriksaan biasa.*

News reporting that began in 1978 to the 1990s, that is until the closure of Bidong island and the presence of Vietnamese boat people in Malaysia, the local media is seen more to report incidents, governance issues and handling in settlements in Bidong, Sungai Besi refugee camp. The researcher's observation found that the news published by the local media after 2000, led to the experience of former Vitenam boat people and peacocks involved with their settlement either in Pualu Bidong and Sungai Besi refugee camps such as officers, locals or the authorities who had managing these refugees.

#### *Berita Harian (N10)*

This article has a somewhat different news angle from the reports while these refugees were in settlement. news is more in the form of writing plans, special reports and giving views. This report can be seen on a news report by Berita Harian [32] and a special report by Return to Hell Island by The Star newspaper [33]. Explore reporting in more depth without neglecting objectivity in reporting.

### 5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the media has illustrated the condition of Vietnamese refugees' condition before they get into safety. It includes the challenges in facing high seas, as many has escaped their country through seas. The portrayal of suffer face by the refugee such as risking their life to escape, loosing family members, wealth and many more has been put up in the international coverage. This has helped to be an eye opener to public in accepting and considering the refugee to have a temporary shelter the least. Desperation shows among the refugees has create an attention worldwide through the media reports. Meanwhile, some of other international report has reported on the tense situation for some country such as Malaysia in managing the refugee that arrived with high number of people near Terengganu Sea.

This highlights also helped world to realise the actual situation and hand in their helped. In the case of Malaysia, more than 250,000 arrived, with the assistance of UNCHR, Malaysia has successfully managed and use its resources to place a temporary relief to Vietnamese refugees. While waiting to deport the refugee to other country, many of country has set policy in accepting the refugee. In one of the interviews made by Washington Post, country such as united states has started to select the application by selecting educated Vietnamese and left the balance about 40,000 of them still has no place to deport. Malaysia government has firmly stressed on all refugee need to go back to Vietnam or transferred to other country. Due to this, Bernama's report informed about the closure of settlements in Bidong Island and the Vietnamese refugees were transferred to refugee camps in Sungai Besi while waiting to be sent to other countries [31]. This report has consistently reported by local and international media on the deportation of the. The deportation has cause riots among the refugee as the balance of the refugee that fails to get placement at other country has to go back to Vietnam. Riots portrays in the report is to show the objection or refusal to go back to their motherland, but instead pledging for a placement in other country to reside.

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