Unit 12.4 The Indo-Chinese refugees

**Inquiry Question:** What was the impact of the war on Australia and its neighbouring countries?

**Communist victory**

When the communist forces finally won the war in 1975 and took over South Vietnam, uniting north and south into one country, there were a lot of people in the south who were facing very difficult times. The removal of all foreign troops over the previous three years had led to a drop in revenue in South Vietnam. American and Australian military personnel had spent many millions of dollars in South Vietnam, thereby boosting their economy.

But more than this was the effect that the communist takeover would have on the South Vietnamese, many of whom had been working for the old government or for foreign interests. Obviously, these people would not be popular with the new government and there were a lot of reprimands carried out. Anyone who had been a member of the South Vietnamese military or the public service, or had worked for the American or Australian governments or military, was subject to disadvantages. At best, these people suffered a loss of income and status in the Vietnamese society and, at worst, years of imprisonment. People such as school teachers were often sent to "re-education camps" where they were forcibly and often violently taught about the errors of their past life.

Many of these people and their children were never allowed to hold positions of importance in Vietnam again. Officers in the army or school teachers were sent back to their villages to work on farms or were restricted to low-status jobs such as cleaning cyclos, pedal-powered rickshaws. Many small merchants, traders, shopkeepers and business people could no longer operate. Vietnam was cut off from trade with many Western countries, under a communist government these people were unable to trade freely. The effect was that many people wanted to leave Vietnam and Laos; which had also become a communist state at that time.

**Cambodia**

Cambodia was a special case. The Khmer Rouge seized power at the end of 1975 and introduced a new regime, an extreme form of "back-to-basics" rural communism. They purged the cities of their inhabitants and sent them into the country to poorly run communal farms. The country was reduced to absolute poverty and destitution. The Khmer Rouge trusted nobody, especially people who had been educated in the old Cambodia. They changed the name of the country to Kampuchea and literally started the clock from day one, calling 1976 "Year Zero." Like Hitler's Third Reich, which was intended to last 1000 years, the new regime planned to forge a brave new future starting at Year Zero. Instead, they brought death and suffering to millions of Cambodians. The regime lasted four years until Vietnam finally invaded the country in 1979 and removed the Khmer Rouge.

One result of this four years was the death of over two million people. From starvation, disease, and persecution, the "killing fields" of Cambodia became infamous as one of the worst experiences in modern times, rivalling Hitler's holocaust for horror and suffering. Many Cambodians risked death and terrible punishment trying to escape this regime, fleeing to refugee camps across the border in Thailand.

**Refugee camps and boat people**

The people who left Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos escaped as refugees. Many paid huge amounts of money to get into small, rickety boats that secretly left the coast and sailed south, to Thailand and Malaysia, or east to Hong Kong. Some of the boats made it as far as Indonesia and even the north coast of Australia. Sadly, many boats did not make their destinations, sinking in the tropical storms or being waylaid by pirates. Many people—the number of which will never be known—suffered terrible fates at the hands of these pirates, with thousands of instances of bodies being thrown overboard, boats sunk and women abducted, raped and murdered.

If the refugees did make it to the camps, they faced months, even years, of sitting in the camps waiting to be processed, hoping that countries such as the United States, Australia, France or Canada would accept them. Some were not accepted and were forcibly repatriated to their old country after years in the camps. Some came to Australia to start a new life, facing the problems that new immigrants face, beginning at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and trying to forge a new life. But, like refugees in past generations, they faced not only the problems of new immigrants, but also the memories of years of war and political suppression they had suffered in Indo-China. Many also had to deal with the memories of the terrible sea journey from Indo-China and the loss of family they had left behind. It would be years before they would see these families again. Some never would.

**Settling into Australia**

The Indo-Chinese people who came to Australia faced many problems:

- **Economic problems.** Like all immigrant groups, the Indo-Chinese who arrived here came with very little. They could only get unskilled jobs and they had no housing. There was also little infrastructure to support them because, especially during the years immediately after the Vietnam War, they had no Indo-Chinese community to help them. Like all immigrant groups, they worked hard and slowly made a place for themselves in Australia's economy.

- **Social problems.** Once again, like immigrant groups before them, the Indo-Chinese people had to work through social problems. Not the least of these is a racial discrimination. Given white Australia's long history of racial discrimination against Asians, dating back to the gold rush days of the 1850s, it was difficult for any Asian group to be accepted by many European Australians. They have often been cast in terms of racial stereotypes. Just as Italian immigrants faced in the 1950s and Lebanese in the 1980s, the Indo-Chinese learnt that members of immigrant groups are often characterised as all being the same, in looks, customs, names or criminal activities. The Indo-Chinese have suffered from this, but as with all immigrant groups before them, these stereotypes have been breaking down with time and education. The Indo-Chinese gathered together in certain areas, mainly in the capital cities. This practice has caused resentment among some non-Asian groups. Many Indo-Chinese immigrants are Buddhists and this religious difference has also caused problems for some Christian Australians.

- **Political problems.** In many cases Indo-Chinese refugees have left their country of birth for political reasons. If they supported the wrong side before the war ended and they suffered reprimals as a result, it is likely that they will be following fairly conservative political views in Australian terms. Many Indo-Chinese immigrants are strongly anti-communist.