



What can Europe learn from the Indochina refugee crisis?

As Europe struggles with the largest migrant influx since WWII, DW speaks to Courtland Robinson about how the international community dealt with a similar crisis in Indochina, and the lessons to be drawn from the past.



Images of hundreds of thousands of desperate migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean remind some of similar scenes in Southeast Asia when in the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese "boat people," together with ethnic Cambodians and Laotians, among others, were washing ashore following the Communist takeovers in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

It is estimated that hundreds of thousands may have died while undertaking dangerous journeys as part of their attempts to flee and seek protection in other countries.

While over three million people fled to become refugees in other countries in the region or China, many were also resettled in third countries, mostly in Europe and North America.

In the current refugee crisis facing Europe, a deeply divided European Union recently agreed to relocate 120,000 asylum-seekers and ease the strain on Greece and Italy, despite four EU countries voting against the plan.

But the 120,000 people the 28-member bloc is seeking to share out are equivalent to just 20 days' worth of arrivals at the current rate, according to the UN refugee agency, UNHCR.

So what lessons can Europe draw from the past? DW spoke to Courtland Robinson, an associate professor at the Center for Refugee and Disaster Response at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

DW: What were the main reasons behind the Indochinese refugee crisis?

Courtland Robinson: The main reasons were the Communist takeovers in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in the wake of US and other foreign troop withdrawals in 1975, and the flight of large numbers of people who feared persecution at the hands of the new governments.

In 1979, flight from Cambodia increased substantially following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime and the installation of a Vietnamese-backed regime.

Why did neighboring countries initially fail to cope with the problem?

The numbers overwhelmed local capacity to cope. In addition, influx stoked local fears that refugees would bring conflict across the borders (this was particularly true in Thailand) and upset local ethnic and nationalist sensitivities.

How was the refugee crisis ultimately resolved?

The crisis was resolved through the sustained efforts by the international community to establish interlocking commitments, first in 1979, to sustain local asylum through large-scale international resettlement and then, in 1989, to sustain local asylum through a combination of resettlement of refugees and repatriation of those screened-out as non-refugees.

The key factors were the mobilization of the United Nations agencies (including UNHCR) and the leadership of a number of countries to provide significant and sustained financial support and large-scale resettlement commitments.

What parallels do you see between the Indochinese refugee crisis and the current one involving refugees from Middle East and Africa that's affecting Europe?

The numbers are massive, the local response is *ad hoc*, and the need is for a truly comprehensive, sustained plan of action to secure temporary asylum for all who seek it while providing more durable solutions for refugees and non-refugees.

I might say that another parallel is that these more comprehensive solutions might need to be initiated by one country demonstrating leadership. In the case of the Indochinese crisis, it was the United States. In the current crisis, it would be Germany.

What lessons could Europe draw from this and other major refugee crises?

The lessons are simply that there are historical examples and models of successful comprehensive responses to large-scale, regional refugee crises.

The priority should be providing temporary sanctuary for all who seek it, with provision of basic services (food, water, shelter, medical care) as well as provision of asylum screening to determine who is a refugee in need of specific protections and who is not a refugee but would deserve other humane solutions.

What do you think will Europe ultimately need to do to cope with the migrant influx?

I think Europe needs to set aside the Dublin Regulation, at least temporarily, and harmonize its policies to offer immediate sanctuary and humanitarian aid to all arrivals, while also providing for status determination and asylum for those qualified.

Europe should also contribute more to the UN efforts to help refugees in the Middle East whose living conditions in countries like Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan are deteriorating.

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