

Report from Rome by Maria Cristina Fiocchi

A way out of the Vietnam tragedy

Catholic priests provide a firsthand report on conditions in Vietnam, and a proposal for how Western governments can help.

Last June, at an international conference in Geneva, the U.N. High Commission on Refugees decided to limit the grants of "refugee" status it gave fleeing Vietnamese—and to send back home the "illegal immigrants" who don't meet the guidelines. On Dec. 15, Hong Kong authorities, on orders of the British government, started to forcibly deport Vietnamese refugees.

At a recent memorial for 117 Vietnamese martyrs canonized in 1989 by the Pope, a young Vietnamese priest told us, "Those who propose sending the Vietnamese refugees back home do it in the name of a false charity, which amounts to a death sentence, because no one can guarantee what will happen to these refugees. Even though the situation in the refugee camps is very difficult, don't forget that these people risked their lives to flee Vietnam."

He added, "The collapse of communist imperialism offers a way out. Vietnam suffers from great isolation. The country's economy is on the floor. With all the changes going on in the East bloc, those countries are surely not going to throw money in the name of 'communist brotherhood.' So the international community should tell the Vietnam government: 'We're available to help you, give you economic aid, but you have to start down the road to democratic reforms and declare free elections.'"

He appealed to Western governments "to help the refugees and accept them in the Free World, until the Vietnamese government offers real guarantees. The only guarantee is a change

in the political system."

In June, more than 200,000 students in Vietnam took to the streets in their country's capital to protest miserable living conditions. At the time we interviewed Father Gildo Domini, who visited the south of Vietnam after having been expelled 14 months earlier, in April 1989.

"My first impression," the Jesuit father remarked, "is that the *doi moi* (change) in Vietnam is real. But this renewal is barely under way, and therefore it is very fragile and superficial, while the main problems remain unresolved."

"The economy is falling into disastrous conditions. There is much poverty, which creates discontent and mistrust toward the ruling authorities, who after 14 years of government have shown themselves to be incompetent, greedy, and corrupt. Certain data show this clearly: The *doi moi* was begun only in trade and tourism activities, which led of course to immediate cash flows into the state coffers, while sectors like government investment are in a state of fearful neglect. Out of a population of 65 million, there are only 110,000 university students. The teachers are badly paid. They get the equivalent of \$8 a month and are forced to seek outside work to live.

"Also, in the area of private initiative, the government is pursuing a mistaken and contradictory policy. For the past year private initiative has been allowed, but such high taxes are imposed on it that many small factories and stores which had just begun activity have been forced to close their doors. The north-south division of the

country remains a reality. The North is poor, and the Communist leadership is highly fanatical and ideological. The South is more developed; Saigon alone produces 40% of Vietnam's GNP.

"In the political realm a certain 'democratization' has begun. Freedom of movement is allowed and a new election law is under study, but the violations of human rights are still very numerous. Many political prisoners are still held in reeducation camps. There is no free press. There is systematic discrimination against believers and non-Communist citizens.

"The Catholic Church's situation is very delicate. While certain freedoms are conceded—four seminaries have opened, many new churches have been built, and in Saigon catechism is being taught—there is no law to safeguard the rights of believers and freedom of action for the Church as such in regard to sacraments, liturgy, and pastoral work.

"The choice and the number of seminarians is government-controlled. The existence of Catholic organizations is banned. Printing of religious materials is forbidden in many cases. Priests are not allowed to exercise their ministry. The ruling authorities try to divide the bishops by making ties of benign tolerance with some dioceses and bishops, and harshly persecuting others.

"The Vietnamese students' call for democracy must be given greater support especially in the light of the tragic turn of events in China. It is our conviction that such desires will not go unheeded because, as the statesman Thomas Paine wrote on the eve of the American War of Independence, against British colonialism: 'Tyranny, like hell, is not easy to overcome; yet it is consoling to know that the harder the struggle is, the more glorious is the victory.'"