



Southeast Asia Resource Action Center

For Immediate Release

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“Refugees Celebrate 25-Year Milestone”

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Washington, DC – March 17, 2005 marks the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the signing of the Refugee Act of 1980 – a key event in the history of America as a beacon of freedom and an economic powerhouse.

Since the Refugee Act was signed, the United States has welcomed over two and a quarter million refugees to its shores. Refugees flee their homelands with only the clothes on their backs because of “persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution.” Since 1980 refugees have included Southeast Asians who fought alongside American forces in the Vietnam War, dissidents from the former Soviet Union, Cubans and Haitians arriving in Florida on rafts, Africans fleeing dictators, and many others.

The Refugee Act of 1980 provided for the establishment of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and state agencies for the promotion of self-sufficiency among refugees. Thanks to their work, and to hundreds of community organizations around the country, refugees have consistently reached self-sufficiency at a more rapid pace than have other immigrants to the U.S.

Dr. Nguyen Van Hanh, ORR’s current Director who was appointed by President George W. Bush, is a former refugee from Vietnam, and one of a large and growing number of prominent Americans who arrived in this country as refugees from Southeast Asia. Mee Moua, a State Senator from Minnesota, is a member of the Hmong ethnic group from Laos. Bestselling author, activist, and lecturer Loung Ung is Cambodian-American. Lao-American businessman Puongpun Sananikone, based in Hawaii, serves on the East West Center Association Executive Board and the Board of the Asian and Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund.

According to Bouy Te, a resettled refugee from Cambodia, “The 1980 Refugee Act was a key turning point in helping America to live up to its potential as a world leader in caring for the world’s most vulnerable people – people who literally have no place to go, no place to live.” Mr. Te is the Chair of the Board of Directors of the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), the nation’s pre-eminent community-building and advocacy organization mainly managed by resettled refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Information about Southeast Asian Americans can be found on SEARAC’s website at www.searac.org.

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