Chapter 5

‘Compassion Fatigue’\(^1\) in the Mid 1980s

During the 1980s, refugee flows from Indochina continued but resettlement numbers started to fall as developed states started to suffer from what ASEAN termed ‘compassion fatigue’.\(^2\) In addition, international assistance began to be redirected towards new refugee crises in Africa and Central Asia. This prompted Southeast Asian states to argue that they should not be required to assist populations who were not *bona fide* refugees and who were better described as ‘economic migrants’, ‘illegal migrants’, or ‘non-genuine’ refugees. Southeast Asian states called for asylum seekers to be individually assessed and if found not to meet the 1951 Convention definition, be forcibly returned to their country of origin. This about-turn in the perception of Indochinese asylum seekers caused uncertainty about how they were to be defined and treated. In this chapter, I illustrate how Southeast Asian states continually manipulated this uncertain situation.

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\(^1\) First used by ASEAN states to describe resettlement states reluctance to continually accept Indochinese as refugees. ASEAN, *Joint Statement by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers on Indochinese Refugees*, Singapore, 14 June 1987. http://www.aseansec.org/2484.html I am aware of the term ‘compassion fatigue’ being used by authors such as Susan Moeller, Luc Boltanski and Stanley Cohen who refer to the public having a dulled sensitivity towards crises that are reported by the media. However, as ASEAN states used the term ‘compassion fatigue’ in their responses during sessions of the Executive Committee Meetings of the High Commissioner and in ASEAN Joint Statements I have chosen to use their understanding of the term. Moeller, S. D. *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (London: Routledge, 1998); Boltanski, L. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Translated by Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Cohen, S. *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

In this chapter, I argue that by the mid 1980s Southeast Asian states became successful in claiming that Indochinese asylum seekers did not deserve *prima facie* refugee status. Acceptance of their argument by the international community further legitimised their refusal to accede to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. The ‘non-genuine’ refugee argument was first made in the late 1970s around the time that people began to pay traffickers to be taken out of Vietnam (see Chapter 3). However, the label commonly used then was ‘illegal migrants’. It was not until the mid 1980s that Southeast Asian states began to position the ‘non-genuine’ Indochinese refugee in contrast to the ‘genuine’ refugee contained in the 1951 Convention, that many Western states and even the UNHCR began to accept the idea that Indochinese asylum seekers should not receive *prima facie* refugee status.

This chapter is divided into five sections. First, I will look at Southeast Asian states demands for Western states to adhere to the promises of resettlement and assistance made at the 1979 Conference. The continuing arrival of Indochinese refugees meant that Southeast Asian states wanted to ensure that their plight was ever present in the mind of donor and resettlement states. One way in which they effectively maintained the international community’s attention was by questioning the refugee status of the boat people. The second part of the chapter looks at precisely how Southeast Asian states started to frame this argument. At this stage of the crisis, when the number of Indochinese seeking asylum begins to increase again, there was a curious lack of counter-argument by Western states and the UNHCR. In section three of the chapter, I show how this impacted on the Cambodian refugee population. The Cambodians were not protected by the UNHCR as refugees, unless they could gain access to a UNHCR camp on the Thai border, which was very difficult. Therefore, the majority remained on the border throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, being constantly displayed as evidence of Thailand’s generosity and as a reminder of the need for the international community to deal with the Indochinese refugee problem. The fourth section of the chapter looks at how, by the mid 1980s, relations between the UNHCR and Thailand became increasingly strained. Thailand was affronted by the UNHCR publicly discussing the difficulty it was having in preventing pirate attacks on boat people in the Thai Gulf. This led the UNHCR to attempt to appease Thailand in order to maintain a presence there and keep the general cooperation of the Southeast Asian states. However, this need to appease was taking its toll on the UNHCR and Western states both financially and politically. In the final section of this chapter I demonstrate how Southeast Asian states succeeded in convincing key international actors that the Indochinese should not be considered *prima facie* refugees. This occurred just as the numbers started to rise again and provided the catalyst for the 1989 Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) (discussed in the next chapter).