

Yearning to Breathe Free

Immigration wave approaching from SE Asia

by James H. Walsh

A century ago when Emma Lazarus wrote, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," she was prophetic. Today her words are strangely apt, as tens of millions of Southeast Asians recover from a poisonous haze produced this past fall by raging forest fires in Indonesia.

The haze drifted over Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, southern Thailand, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and northern Australia. Among those who inhaled the pungent, dirty air, tens of millions sought hospital treatment for infected eyes, asthma, and bronchitis. On Irian Jaya, (Indonesian New Guinea), 500 persons — mostly children and infants — died from famine and cholera aggravated by the smoky haze. Among haze-related deaths in Indonesia and Malaysia, several hundred were linked to poor visibility on roads and waterways. Haze was a factor in the September 1997 crash of a Garuda jetliner that killed all 234 persons aboard.

Among the half million acres of land that burned were brushlands, rain forests, and even peat and coal seams underground. Indonesia is one of many Third World countries that have accepted shipments of hazardous waste from developed countries. As forest fires blazed, Indonesian students protested that their country had become a dumping ground for the Netherlands, the former colonial ruler of the archipelago. Should a forest or peat fire spread to hazardous waste dumps, the toxicity would be magnified many times.

The fires, which have become an annual event, were spread in 1997 by a drought prolonged by the El

Niño weather pattern which delayed the monsoon. In addition to the human health risk, the fires threatened primary rain forests and rare species of wildlife. They also accompanied crop failures and water shortages. For Southeast Asia, the forest fires of 1997 were an environmental disaster. For the United States, they signal a new wave of immigrants, fleeing concentrated population, poverty, pollution, and impending national economic collapse.

Push and Pull

In past years, the lure that attracted immigrants to the United States and to a lesser degree to Canada and Mexico was money. Be it wages or welfare, the money, though not great in Western terms, was enormous by Third World standards. Immigrants arrived ready to work two or three jobs or to qualify for social benefits. The

poverty push and money pull is now joined by a pollution push at home and a clean-air pull in host countries. The new immigrants will come legally or illegally; their arrival is as inevitable as Pacific currents and as relentless.

Over the past 30 years, as the United States admitted record numbers of legal immigrants, many more entered illegally, slipping by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Southeast Asian emigrants, whose numbers have not been large in the past, will now be joining this unstoppable force of humanity.

The price of industrialization for them will be emigration in search of food, water, and clean air for their children. Global trade has exploited their natural resources, cheap labor, and lax environmental enforcement, but that exploitation may be coming home to roost for developed countries. The magnitude of the forest-fire haze crisis was unforeseen by Western analysts who promoted Southeast Asia as an industrial park for global trade.

The combined economic and environmental disasters experienced by members of the Association of

Depressed by economic and environmental disasters, Southeast Asia is about to send the United States a new wave of immigrants.

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Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will serve as a catalyst for emigration, with the majority coming from Indonesia — the world's fourth-largest nation. Burma, now Myanmar, is mired in poverty so that hundreds of thousands of its citizens are illegally in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Thus, Indonesia and Burma will

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be sending new immigrants to the West.

In recent years, Indonesians have pondered a jobs-or-trees quandary, which has shaped up as a lose-lose situation. Deforestation continues, as the most productive rain forests are scheduled for logging, but the promised jobs have not materialized. In response, Indonesians sought entry into neighboring countries, and now they will be looking further abroad. Young Indonesians can earn more for their growing families elsewhere, especially with the regional economy in a tailspin.

Transmigration

Migration is not a new experience in Indonesia. The government policy of transmigration — resettling the poor of densely populated Java on sparsely developed outer islands — began back when Indonesia was a Dutch colony famous for its Spice Islands. Today Java continues to hold half of Indonesia's 206 million people; but this island, once famous for its teak, is now largely deforested. Farming land is scarce, and water shortages recurrent. The government must do something to keep Java from becoming the “Haiti” of Asia.

Over the years, the transmigration program has moved 8 million people from Java and nearby crowded islands. Among the 13,000-plus islands that make up the Indonesian archipelago, Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Irian Jaya — large islands rich in natural resources — have been targets for resettlement. On these territories, transmigrants — the poor and unskilled of Java — have had to compete with tribal peoples for rain forest

cropland in a replay of cowboys and Indians in the United States.

Government-sponsored clearing of the rain forest to build homes and schools for transmigrants has become an Indonesian bone of contention. Cropland-clearing by transmigrants ranks after commercial logging and tree plantations as a major cause of annual dry-season forest fires and haze.

Flaws are appearing in the transmigration policy, as transmigrants sneak back to their former urban homes or try to enter Malaysia, Singapore, or Australia to seek a better life. If the economy won't come to Mohammed, Mohammed will come to the economy.

“Intra-ASEAN” Migration

Malaysia and Singapore are host countries for large numbers of ASEAN immigrants, legal and illegal. Many who would fail to qualify for legal entry risk illegal entry in pursuit of economic improvement. The Malaysian government estimates that 600,000 Indonesians are currently in the country on legal work permits; those there illegally increase the total considerably. For instance, an estimated 280,000 Indonesians reside illegally in the state of Sabah (Malaysian Borneo) alone. As with illegal alien counts worldwide, estimates — the only gauge — are notoriously low. Intra-ASEAN patterns of illegal immigration create problems similar to those experienced by Western Europe and North America.

Malaysia and neighboring Singapore admit to having problems with illegal aliens — Filipino maids, Indonesian construction workers, Bangladeshi laborers, and Myanmar waitresses — who take low-paying jobs disdained by the host country's rising middle class.

Day in and day out, the Southeast Asian news media carry immigration stories, spotlighting a range of problems from the criminal activities of illegal aliens to sham Muslim marriages as a means of securing legal residency. Singapore nationals are of one voice in demanding control of immigration by their government; no unskilled workers need apply!

Government authorities attribute the rise in crime in Malaysia and Singapore to the rise in illegal aliens. Most undocumented aliens are unskilled workers who drain a country's social services and strain its criminal justice system. Depending on the country, varying degrees of medical, social, and welfare services are available to legal workers, foreign students, and even to undocumented aliens, and the costs to host countries are

rising. ASEAN host countries, along with Western Europe and North America, are seeing an increase of dark-skinned laborers who pack into small apartments; eke out a living at construction, lawn work, or housework; and send wages home to their families.

Although Malaysia and Singapore recruit foreign workers with academic degrees and technical skills, they are turning back the unskilled. Malaysia, in January 1998, announced the expulsion of 1 million legal foreign workers. Thailand projects that, within the next three years, it will send home 1.5 million foreign workers. In April of 1998, Thailand was systematically searched for foreign workers — Peoples Republic of China, India, Indonesia, and Myanmar nationals. These skilled and semi-skilled foreign workers, most of them Indonesians, are feeling the direct impact of Asia's financial depression.

Ethnic and religious unrest is also linked to immigration. In Muslim nations of the region, newspaper headlines tell of physical attacks on ethnic groups, especially ethnic Chinese. Most of these attacks have religious overtones, for the majority of Indonesians and Malaysians are Muslims who resent people of other religions coming to their countries.

Singapore, whose population is 72 percent ethnic Chinese, is the exception. The affluent city-state separated politically from Malaysia in 1965 because of its majority non-Muslim citizenry. As ethnic Chinese gained positions of power, they felt constrained by Malaysia's Muslim culture. Singaporeans also retained stronger ties to the English culture and economic and legal systems of their former colonial days than did the rest of Malaysia. Singapore tolerates no unrest among its diverse ethnic groups.

In the past, Indonesians made undocumented entry into sympathetic neighboring countries confident that, should they be caught, the host country would return them to their home country, which would accept them back. With water shortages in Java, however, the government has been slow in accepting returnable illegals.

As the population of Southeast Asia grows, at a rate exceeding that of China and India, intra-ASEAN migration will no longer suffice as a pressure valve, and immigrants will have to seek distant shores. The Muslim religion does not endorse abortion or family planning, and Southeast Asia's birth rate is twice that of Western

The Korean Connection

The United States maintains a large military presence in South Korea, and since the end of hostilities in 1953, many soldiers have fallen prey to the boredom of peacetime duty. Despite the best efforts of their officers and chaplains, some soldiers insist on marrying their Korean girlfriends or mama-sons. Unfortunately, many mama-sons or "mooses," in reality, are prostitutes, looking for a way to emigrate to the United States. They are supported in these efforts by their pimps, who have standing orders to provide fresh flesh for brothels in America. These pimps, working with gangsters in Hawaii and California — most of them in the United States illegally — form the Korean Connection which specializes in exploiting soldiers.

They set girls up near military bases in Korea and given them one assignment — get a GI on the hook. Treat him super-special, bathe him, cook for him, serve his every wish — drugs or alcohol or sex. The girls do whatever it takes to wed the unwary. Thousands of GIs have brought home Korean wives, or so they thought; and many of these war brides have waited less than a month before filing for divorce. In the United States as lawful permanent residents (LPRs), they then are free to relocate in California or Hawaii where jobs await them with the same criminals who set them up in Korea.

By the 1970s Korean marriage fraud had grown to such proportions that the Department of Justice inspector general initiated an investigation. The immigration papers of most of the Korean brides were processed in the Honolulu INS office, which was known to approve foreign-spouse paperwork, no matter how outrageously improper the circumstances. After a ten-year investigation the inspector general determined that the INS supervisor approving the applications was acting in a questionable manner. As it turned out, he was married to a Korean woman, with whom he operated the largest brothel in Hawaii, solely with Korean prostitutes — all former wives of GIs.

— From an unpublished manuscript by James H. Walsh, former Associate General Counsel with the INS

nations. It is time for Western nations to prepare for a new wave of immigrants from Southeast Asia. As the economic downturn in the region and uncertain bailout prospects accelerate emigration to Western Europe and the Americas, many Indonesians will make their exodus in the hands of alien smugglers.

Coming to America

Word of the United States' inability to control its borders has spread to remote island villages in Southeast Asia. Word also has spread of immigrants who enter on legal visas and then overstay their visas, and many are catching on to this method of entry. Like their counterparts from India, Pakistan, Somalia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Eastern Europe, those Southeast Asians who go the visa overstay route tend to be more educated or criminally connected.

Immigration to North America is much more expensive, difficult, and dangerous than immigration to an ASEAN host country, but many Indonesians believe it is Allah's will. Despite the historical tie between Indonesia and the Netherlands, that country actively dissuades Indonesian immigrants.

As Indonesians hear reports of large Muslim communities in major U.S. cities, the attraction of co-religionists becomes an added inducement. They also hear that the United States allows unrestricted religious expression — even expression that some would say borders on terrorism.

Because the trip from Indonesia to the United States is a long one, many emigrants will depend on alien smuggling gangs. Technologically first-rate, well-informed, corporately organized, and militarily effective, alien smuggling rings are utterly ruthless. They have an entrepreneurial creativity unburdened by bureaucratic delays and back-pedaling. Politically savvy, they make large contributions to sympathetic politicians and enlist humanitarian special-interest groups to lobby legislators and the news media to promote immigrant rights. In turn, alien smugglers have no oversight or legislation to impede them, and they benefit from the support of many U.S. farmers and manufacturers, whether overt or covert. As one alien smuggler said, "Money talks — everything else

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walks."

As the economic downturn in Southeast Asia drives up migration, Chinese alien smuggling gangs have found a new market, adding Thais, Laotians, Cambodians, and Indonesians to their clientele. True to their trade, smugglers use illegal immigrants for drug smuggling, prostitution, indentured servitude, or criminal hooliganism. One way or another, the smugglers extract their pound of flesh.

Should immigrants be short on cash, that is easily remedied. Smugglers sell penniless immigrants to U.S., Mexican, or Central American labor exploiters who rent them out to industries as light machine operators, manual laborers, seamstresses, waitresses, or prostitutes. As one exploiter said, "We're just labor jobbers, middlemen helping both sides."

Alien smugglers do not always deliver illegals to the agreed destination. Instead of Los Angeles, an immigrant may end up in a Nicaraguan sweatshop making athletic wear for a Sandanista patron who is now a local product assembler, a pseudo-capitalist.

Multinational companies, especially in the clothing and toy industries, use Third World workers as cheap, reliable, and productive assemblers. After World War II, they used Japanese workers, then Taiwanese, Korean, Mexican, and now Southeast Asian. Central America has witnessed its own productive workers and their families migrate to the United States. Amnesty and family unification programs passed by the U.S. Congress have created a void in cheap labor sources in the Western Hemisphere. An exodus from Southeast Asia of low-paid workers heading for the United States, Mexico, or Central America will be welcomed by manufacturers and their investors.

Public Health Concerns

The health of the coming wave of immigrants cannot be ignored. In recent years, open-border advocates have downplayed immigrant health, but this strategy will no longer be possible. Reports are surfacing of contagious strains of diseases such as malaria, cholera, and tuberculosis. Occasionally, the U.S. news media mentions increased TB cases in public schools with large immigrant populations, and medical journals increasingly

report on the spread of more virulent and aggressive strains of these diseases and on the emergence of new antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Reports from throughout Southeast Asia refer to a new form of malaria called the “killer” or falciparum strain.

Air travel facilitates disease transmission, especially when immigrants enter the United States on false and fraudulent documentation attesting to health exams that never were made. Frequently, illegal immigrants have a disease that would not permit their legitimate entry on a work or student visa.

Each flu season attests to the potential for outbreaks of new viruses from foreign lands. New and resistant strains of HIV viruses are crossing U.S. borders, and Southeast Asia is an incubation area for this and other sexually transmitted diseases. The brothels of Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, though targeted by public health officials, continue to infect hundreds of thousands of men and women, among them, those with plans of immigrating to the western hemisphere.

United Nations health officials recently admitted “grossly underestimating” infection rates of the HIV virus that causes AIDS. Health officials must now reexamine projected numbers of AIDS deaths. U.N. officials attribute the faulty estimates to a lack of accurate reporting by member nations. In the United States, politically correct manipulations of AIDS numbers are thus being outed. World Health Organization estimates for new cases of AIDS in Southeast Asia in 1997 were 1.3 million, but in light of the U.N. announcement, this guesstimate will prove to be low.

A researcher at the U.S. National Institutes of Health opined that new diseases — ones not seen before in the United States — are reaching unacceptable levels. The public may ignore the problem, until there is an epidemic, but, by then, it will be too late. Legal immigrants usually have medical examinations, and, at least in the past, the U.S. government enforced entry restrictions for the ill, but illegal immigrants enter unscreened for communicable diseases. Alien smugglers are not in the business of asking for health records.

Open-Door Asylum and Amnesty

Each succeeding wave of illegal aliens entering the United States quickly learns the rules. Depending on country of birth, they claim asylum, but usually only upon apprehension. Although it is difficult to make a case for political persecution in a U.S. ally like Indonesia, claims

of religious and ethnic persecution are gaining in popularity. Human rights organizations mobilize to plead for relaxation of U.S. immigration laws and regulations, based on heart-wrenching stories, stories that often do not bear scrutiny.

Muslim women of all countries can now claim fear of genital mutilation, even though the practice is rare outside the African culture. INS approval of such claims has opened a new asylum door. The claim of forced prostitution is another sure winner, even when, like most asylum claims, the truth is hard to ascertain. A Mexican man, who claimed persecution in Mexico because of his homo-sexuality, was granted asylum over vehement denials of any such prejudice by the Mexican

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government. What matters is the ability of the applicant to tug on the heartstrings of Americans. The more outrageous the story, the surer the immigrant can be of asylum. Alien smugglers instruct their clients in asylum strategy as part of their transportation fee.

The coming wave of Southeast Asian immigrants to the United States is inevitable. Special-interest advocates and alien smugglers, learning from past mistakes, study the U.S. psyche and political makeup of both parties — the fervor of the Democrats and the acquiescence of the Republicans. They depend on the INS being a day late and a dollar short, and they count on Congress and the President being several days late, with foreign dollars stuffed in their campaign coffers.

In 1997, the Republican-controlled Congress succumbed to special-interest groups and revoked get-tough provisions of the 1996 immigration law. By Congressional order, thousands of illegal aliens with criminal records remain in the United States, while the government processes their applications for legal permanent residency.

The U.S. Congress has pressed the INS into an unofficial open-door amnesty program for illegal aliens — one that is well known within the illegal alien community. There is a risk that immigrants will be indebted to open-border advocates with a political agenda, an agenda that may be contrary to U.S. foreign policy. When the United States weakens its laws to accept all comers, it accepts the risk that hidden among Indonesian immigrants fleeing pollution in their homeland are those who come to bring America down through criminal activities or terrorism.

Even though environmental degradation is not mentioned in the United Nations definition of refugees, it need not be a legal impediment for the coming Indonesians. If immigrants from every other country can now enter the United States with impunity, why should environmental refugees from Indonesia be excluded?

Bring on your huddled masses yearning to breathe free; only the few are refused. Welcome to the United States. No questions asked — except perhaps “Would you like to register to vote?”