



Raising Money for Refugees from Indochina

NO.6

1. Tackling Some Problems of World Misery



United Nations High Commission for
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Boat People: These were people who fled their home countries over the ocean in small boats or fishing craft that might sink at any moment. In 1975, three nations in the Indochina region (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) shifted their political systems to Socialism. Many residents who would not put up with this new system became political refugees and fled overland to Thailand or by sea in small boats. The refugees from Vietnam were called Boat People by the world media,

and information about their difficulties was widely spread through newspapers and on television. The pitiful situations of these refugees reached a peak in 1979. Within Sophia University, many voices were raised to ask: Isn't there something that we can do to help? On December 1st of that year, the movement called "Sophia University extending helping hands of love to Indochina refugees" was established and the entire Sophia University family started to tackle the refugee problem.

2. About the university-wide activities to help solve the Indochina refugee problem

On November 28, 1979, the Academic Senate decided, as a first step of activities on behalf of the Indochina refugees, that Sophia University would start a fund-raising campaign involving all members of the Sophia family. The kickoff event of the fundraising program was a lecture and exhibition of pictures held on December 5th, with the intention of calling attention to the sad living conditions of the refugees. Two days later, the administration started to ask for volunteers to participate in the fund-raising efforts. Within the



university, a variety of volunteer groups agreed with this plan and offered their services. As well, the Catholic students group at Gakushuin University expressed their agreement with the ideas of Sophia University, so the circle of cooperation began to extend beyond our borders.



This picture shows then-President Joseph Pittau SJ, participating in the collection of donations in front of Shinjuku Station.

Starting on December 10th, the administration set up collection boxes inside the campus, at the main gate and the north gate and elsewhere. This started the activities of soliciting donations. From December 17 until December 22, there was a program to collect funds on the streets near the East Entrance and the West Entrance of Shinjuku Station. As many as four hundred Sophia-related volunteers (counted on a day-by-day basis) participated in this collection drive, headed by then President Joseph (Giuseppe) Pittau, SJ. This activity at Shinjuku Station was picked up by the mass media and made known all over Japan, with the happy result that many contributions came to Sophia through banks and postal savings accounts from all around Japan. The target amount for the Sophia collection was

set at three million yen; by January 18th of 1980, the amount raised had reached eleven million, forty-six thousand, one hundred and sixteen yen.

President Pittau took seven million yen of the seven and a half million yen that had been raised by Christmas, and left on December 27th to present this money personally to the Catholic Bishops' Association of Thailand. The next day, Associate Professor (at that time) Kiyoshi Watabe of the Faculty of Humanities left for Thailand to assist President Pittau. This money collected by volunteers was given to the Catholic Emergency Refugee Assistance office and was used as seed money for building schools for refugees in the camps. During his time in Thailand, President Pittau was taken for visits to the refugee camps at Kaoidan and Sakeo. He realized that it would be quite valuable for the refugees to have face-to-face contacts with volunteers from Japan. So he checked on the feasibility of students or others from Japan coming to Thailand for volunteer work. The responsible persons decided that the refugee camp at Sakeo could welcome such volunteers. President Pittau explained the possibilities at a



press conference shortly after his return to Japan:

“I came to think that even Sophia students could do some useful work in the camps if they came as older brothers and sisters of the children in the camps. They could play together, help the children with their clothes, and work with washing or showering facilities. As the Sophia students are giving various kinds of help, they will certainly receive far more valuable things from the experience of living in an atmosphere of love and unselfish service.”.

3. The volunteers came to the camps not to give things, but share the lives of the refugees

The volunteers were going to be sent to the Children’s Center at the Sakeo refugee camp, which was administered by the Catholic Emergency Refugee Assistance Office. This center was accommodating about 1200 Cambodian children, both orphans whose parents had died or been executed and children who had become separated from their relatives. The condition placed on the acceptance of the first group of volunteers was that Sophia would continue to send groups of volunteers. The recruitment of volunteers started on the occasion of the press conference which President Pittau gave on the 11th of January, 1980, after his return from Thailand. The call for volunteers attracted much interest, with about 500 volunteers signing up almost immediately. The volunteers were divided into groups of about ten adults each. The first squad of volunteers left Japan on February 3rd. After that, a new squad was sent every two weeks. Each squad included not only current Sophia students, but also parents, faculty and staff members, and even students from other universities. By the time that the first squad of volunteers arrived in Cambodia, the number of children in the target camp had reduced by about 300. Because foster homes had been found for many of the children, the Children’s Center at the refugee camp was closed during the early days of April. For this reason, starting with the sixth squad of volunteers who departed from Japan on April 13th, the Sophia volunteers were shifted to a refugee transit center inside the city of Bangkok. This was a camp for the temporary living of refugees who had some possibilities of moving out of Thailand into some receiving country. The Sophia volunteers were teaching music and dancing and languages. They helped in the refugee camp and also in the slums of Bangkok and in orphanages. They started



working at a camp for Laotian refugees in Inkai.

Before his or her departure from Japan, each volunteer had the chance to study the Khmer language at an elementary level. In the places of working, the volunteers' activities included helping to educate the children, playing with the children, and helping them to take showers properly. From February to October a total of some 150 volunteers were sent from Japan to the refugee camps. The number of volunteers gradually decreased and the conditions and demands at the camps became increasingly more difficult to respond to, so the administrators in Japan decided to terminate the program with the dispatch and return of the seventeenth squad of volunteers.

Father Harumi Akabae, SJ, a vice-president of Sophia University during this period, summarized the volunteer program as follows: "What was more desirable for the volunteers than doing something practical for the refugees was seeing the actual wretched plight of the refugees with their own eyes. By living side-by-side, the

volunteers could have their hearts opened and could come to have a feeling of the joint responsibility of human beings for each other." For example, one of the student volunteers reflected as follows: "We learned things that we could never learn just by staying at our university. I was ashamed to find myself to be a person who could only think about things that were happening inside Japan. When I was living among the many blessings of Japan, I could never

Meguko: an association to help Asian children to become independent

understand why my life was filled with discontent and complaints."

Sophia University continues even today to have programs that give serious consideration to the Asian situations and programs that provide concrete assistance in improving the situations discovered in some parts of Asia. Among these Sophia educational programs, one must include the research activities of the Institute of Asian Cultures and the Institute for Social Justice (recently renamed the Institute for Global Concern). Student groups such as Meguko continue to provide assistance to less fortunate children in Asia.

