

Vietnamese find a home country

4 arriving here among 160 coming to Canada after being stranded abroad

Catherine Rolfsen, Vancouver Sun

Published: Saturday, March 08, 2008

Four Vietnamese stranded in the Philippines for decades were to begin a new life in Canada Friday night after Ottawa granted them entry on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

The two couples are among 160 people who have been allowed to enter the country after years of lobbying by the Vietnamese-Canadian community. Many were so-called "boat people" who fled from Vietnam in 1975 after the fall of Saigon.

"It's a happy day," said Hung Tong, vice-president of external affairs of the Vietnamese Canadian Community in Greater Vancouver and himself a boat person who arrived in Canada 25 years ago. "These people have no home," he said. "They wanted to have freedom."

Many of the Vietnamese who entered the Philippines illegally to escape Communism were labelled stateless and denied the right to work, own property, go to public school or get government health care.

Vancouver's Hoa Nghiem Buddhist Temple is sponsoring the two couples scheduled to arrive Friday night -- Bai Thi Ly and Van Be Nguyen, and Thi Be Em Huynh and Dat Huynh. Temple volunteer Stella Nhung Davis said they have already been offered jobs.

"They're grateful to Canada," she said. "They're going to go and work and they're looking forward to their new life in Canada."

Davis said the two couples have grown children who have immigrated to the U.S.

The arrival of the Vietnamese from the Philippines is the result of a six-year campaign -- dubbed "Freedom at Last" -- by the Vietnamese Canadian Federation and refugee advocates.

Last May, the federal government agreed to bring the 160 to Canada on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, said Ben Letts, a spokesman for Citizen and Immigration Canada. One family has already arrived in Calgary, he said.

Vietnamese organizations have raised more than \$500,000 to help settle the new immigrants, and community groups across the country have sponsored families, meaning they've committed to find them housing and jobs, and arrange schooling for their children.

Davis called their arrival "a historic moment" for Vietnamese-Canadians.

Davis recently travelled to the Philippines to see first-hand the plight of the Vietnamese living there.

"Most of them are street vendors trying to make a living. They cannot get protection from the police, or if they're getting robbed they cannot go to the police," she said. "All they dream of is to be able to get resettled to another country and be able to travel and be able to do all the things that citizens are allowed to."

Davis said community groups are offering to sponsor nearly 200 more Vietnamese from the Philippines in order to keep families together.

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