

Fact Sheet 11: The Vietnam War and its impact on Southeast Asia

On 2 July 1976 the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was declared. Hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese officials were imprisoned in re-education camps after the communist takeover. Tens of thousands died. Vietnam's economy slumped. An estimated two million civilians left the country. These refugees were often called 'boat people' because they fled in crowded, dangerously unfit boats. An unknown number perished at sea.

In 1977 New Zealand accepted 412 Vietnamese refugees. By the end of 1980 there were approximately 2000 Vietnamese refugees in New Zealand.

For more information on [Vietnamese in New Zealand](#) go to the New Zealand Peoples section of Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand.

The fighting in Vietnam had destabilised the wider region.

Neighbouring Cambodia was dragged into the conflict. It was bombed by the US air force in an attempt to stop North Vietnamese communists supplying their southern allies via the Ho Chi Minh Trail which ran through eastern Laos and Cambodia. Shortly before the fall of Saigon in 1975 the Cambodian communists, the Khmer Rouge, captured Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. This was a bitter blow to the Americans. Having tried to stop the spread of communism in the region, it had in fact seen its influence spread.

The fighting in Cambodia also created a refugee problem. Cambodia's population declined dramatically after 1975, as people fled the Khmer Rouge. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the communists eliminated the country's economic infrastructure and social institutions. They abolished money, schools and private property. They ordered the evacuation of the country's towns and cities, forcing more than 2.5 million civilians into provincial labour camps. Approximately 1.7 million Cambodians perished from starvation, exhaustion and malnutrition. Many were tortured or executed for being 'enemies of the state'.

After repeated border clashes in 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia (then called Democratic Kampuchea) and ousted the Khmer Rouge.

There was further fighting in 1979. China and Vietnam fought a brief border war. China had supported the Khmer Rouge. This brief border war is sometimes referred to as the Third Indochina War.

In 1975 about 16,000 Cambodians managed to cross the border into Thailand. By 1979 an estimated 270,000 Cambodians had reached Thai refugee camps. Even after the fall of Pol Pot's regime in 1979 hundreds of thousands continued to flee the country in search of sanctuary in Thailand. Between 1979 and 1992, New Zealand accommodated 4661 Cambodian refugees.

For more information on [Cambodians in New Zealand](#) go to the New Zealand Peoples section of Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring Laos, communist forces overthrew the royalist government in December 1975. The Pathet Lao established the Lao People's Democratic Republic.