

Israel gives Vietnamese refuge

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Sixty-six Vietnamese refugees, turned away by Asian nations after they fled their Communist homeland in a leaking fishing boat, found asylum in Israel on Sunday and were promised jobs, housing and lessons in Hebrew.

"I hope you hear in my voice what I think of all of you. I am very touched by your kindness," said Dr. Tran Quang Hua, a former army surgeon who acted as group spokesman. His voice trembled with emotion.

Each refugee was given \$70, canned food and a packet of tea on arrival. The refugees, some Buddhists but most Roman Catholics, were taken to a hostel in Ofakim in the Negev Desert 75 miles south of Tel Aviv. They were greeted there by welcome signs and a youth band playing "Jerusalem the Golden."

Officials said that for the next few months most would stay in Ofakim, a development town of Yemenite and North African immigrants where they could find work in small industries.

The 34 men, 16 women and 16 children spent four days huddled

on a fishing boat, with supplies of food and water running out, when an Israeli freighter plucked them from the South China Sea two weeks ago.

An Israeli official said about half the refugees may be eligible for visas to the United States. Many said they planned to stay in Israel, where they can become citizens in five years under naturalization laws similar to those of the United States. Jews gain automatic citizenship on arrival.

"They will enjoy all hospitality," said Prime Minister Menahem Begin, whose first official act after being sworn in Tuesday was to grant asylum to the Vietnamese. He said their plight evoked memories of Jews fleeing Nazi Germany and being denied entry to Palestine.

Yehudit Huebner, an Interior Ministry official, said this was the first time Israel had received a party of non-Jewish refugees. Israel normally gives no aid to non-Jewish immigrants, but officials said the Vietnamese would receive the same aid offered to Jewish newcomers.

Though Huebner said Israel has never turned away displaced persons, it has consistently refused to allow Palestinian refugees to return to the homes they abandoned when the Jewish state was formed in 1948.

The refugee group was rejected by Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong before Israel offered them asylum, and they said at least five ships had passed them by in the sea without offering assistance.

Gaming official defends free passes for VIPs

Begin last week called it "a shameful evasion." Former Prime Minister Golda Meir asked, "Would one not rescue a stray dog or a wounded bird?"

The final leg of the journey, from Taiwan to West Germany to Israel, was arranged by the U.S. Embassy in Taiwan and was paid for by the Inter-Governmental Commission for European Migration.

The escape began with a 200-mile overland trip under forged travel papers from Saigon, now known as Ho Chi Minh City, to a secret boat launch site on the Vietnamese coast.

It was planned by Le Dinh Quy, a former major in the South Vietnamese army who spent eight years in a Laotian prison camp run by the North Vietnamese. He said the refugees traveled in small groups by cars and buses and abandoned their baggage during a five-hour hike through tropical forests to the seaside. The boat departed June 6.