

## Boat people condemn loss of monument

By Peter Wilmoth

June 26, 2005



The destroyed monument to former Vietnamese refugees at Galang on Batam Island, Indonesia.

Leaders of the Vietnamese community in Melbourne have expressed anger and disbelief that a monument erected in March on an Indonesian island once home to hundreds of Vietnamese refugees has been removed at the request of the Vietnamese Government. Another monument, erected on the Malaysian island of Bidong, is under threat after a similar request to local authorities.

The monuments were erected as a symbol of the refugees' gratitude to their rescuers in the two countries. The Vietnamese community in Melbourne said the monument on Bidong "honours the humanity and the compassion of the Malaysian people towards their fellow human beings in time of need".

The monuments were erected at the site of the former Galang refugee camp on the Indonesian island of Batam, near Singapore, and at Bidong, off the Malaysian mainland, after a visit in March by 142 former Vietnamese refugees to pay tribute to the thousands who died trying to escape the Communists in the 1970s and '80s.

The visit was part of the 30th anniversary of the fall of Saigon when tens of thousands of Vietnamese escaped the new regime in boats. In its first year as a refugee camp Bidong received more than 52,000 refugees from 453 boats. They lived in squalid conditions in one tiny corner of the island.

The return to the camps by the former refugees was an emotional journey. Every former refugee had an extraordinary story to tell, often of terror on the seas in dangerously overcrowded boats, of murderous pirates who raped women and girls and of people at sea dying of hunger, thirst or by drowning.

The president of the Archive of Vietnamese Boat People, Dong Tran, called on Australians to join the group's condemnation of the Vietnamese Government's "callous acts of cruelty towards the deceased refugees. We call on the Malaysian Government not to give in to the demands of the Vietnamese communists to destroy the monument, which the Malaysian people should be proud of."

Mr Tran said the monuments "preserved the physical remnants of a major tragedy in human history.

The fact that the Vietnamese Communists go out of their way to put pressure on the Malaysian Government to erase history . . . is damning evidence of their inhumane nature."

*The Jakarta Post* said last week the monument was dismantled at the request of Vietnam on the grounds it was offensive. "The Vietnamese Government took the view that the wording on the plaque denigrated the dignity of Vietnam," the report said.

The engraving on the Bidong monument reads: "In commemoration of the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people who perished on the way to freedom (1975-1996). Though they died of hunger or thirst, of being raped, of exhaustion or of any other cause, we pray that they may now enjoy lasting peace. Their sacrifices will not be forgotten."

The president of the Victorian chapter of the Vietnamese Community in Australia, Hung Chau, has written to Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono requesting that plans for another monument on Galang proceed.

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