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Press Release

**Vietnamese Canadian community mourns Flora MacDonald's passing**

"It is with deepest sorrow that we learned of Ms. Flora MacDonald's passing on Sunday, July 26. During her tenure as Secretary of State for External Affairs, she did so much to rescue tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees who were stranded in Southeast Asia in the late 70's and early 80's", said Dong Tran, Secretary General of the Vietnamese Canadian Federation, himself one of the former Vietnamese boat people currently living in Canada.

Following the invasion of South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese Communists on April 30, 1975, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese -- members of the armed forces and government officials or supporters of the Republic of Vietnam, religious leaders, intellectuals -- were put in hard-labour concentration camps (officially called *Re-Education Camps*) where thousands would eventually die due to executions, diseases or malnutrition. Many others were exiled to the so-called *New Economic Zones* in remote regions of Vietnam. In addition, ethnic Chinese Vietnamese were forced to relocate or expelled from the country due to the political conflict between China and Vietnam in 1979. Under these circumstances, a million and a half people rushed to flee the country, mostly in small, leaky boats over the perilous Eastern Sea ("Bien Dong" in Vietnamese, aka South China Sea). Hundreds of thousands of these refugees perished at sea by drowning or starvation, or were raped or killed by pirates.

In response to the plight of the refugees, in 1979 Mayor Marion Dewar of the City of Ottawa spearheaded Project 4000 to campaign for the admission of up to 4,000 Indochinese refugees (mostly Vietnamese, but also including Cambodians and Laotians who fled the newly established Communist regimes in their countries) to the City of Ottawa through the Private Sponsorship Program of the federal government. Similar community initiatives were undertaken elsewhere in Canada, most notably Operation Lifeline spearheaded by Professor Howard Adelman in Toronto.

Responding to this overwhelming grassroots movement, the federal government under Prime Minister Joe Clark, at the urging of Ms. MacDonald and Employment and Immigration Minister Ron Atkey, announced on July 18, 1979 that the quota for Indochinese refugees would be increased from 8,000 to 50,000. This quota was later revised to 60,000 and, by the end of 1980, 64,000 Vietnamese refugees were admitted for resettlement in Canada. At the refugee conference convened by the United Nations in Geneva on July 20, 1979 Ms. MacDonald strongly denounced the Vietnamese Communist government's violations of human rights which, she said, were the main cause of the outflow of refugees from the country.

In 1986, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees presented the Nansen Refugee Award to the People of Canada in recognition of "their essential and constant contribution to the cause of refugees within their country and around the world". It was the first and only time that this honour was given to the people of an entire nation.

In the book *Gift of Freedom* written by Brian Buckley and published by the Vietnamese Canadian Federation in 2008 (General Store Publishing House, ISBN 978-1-897113-91-2), she has this to say about her contribution:

"Nothing in my long career gives me deeper satisfaction than the role I was privileged to play in our response to the Southeast Asian refugee crisis. That the story of Project 4000 - an encounter of courage and compassion - is now being told adds greatly to that satisfaction".

We are all forever grateful for her compassion and generosity.

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