

PRESIDENT DAVID ROPNER

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GENERAL COUNCIL OF BRITISH SHIPPING

30-32 ST. MARY AXE

LONDON, EC3A 8ET

29th May, 1979

The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher, MP.,  
The Prime Minister,  
10, Downing Street,  
London, S.W.1.

*Jean Prime Minister,*

I am writing to you on behalf of the British shipping industry to express our deep concern over the problem of the Vietnamese refugees.

We are very grateful for the prompt decision of the Government over the weekend in the case of m.v. "SIBONGA". But there are already other British ships, as you will know, which have rescued Vietnamese refugees at sea and have them on board in circumstances of great difficulty.

I see from the statement issued from No. 10 today that the "SIBONGA" decision must be regarded as interim and that no general commitment has been made about similar action in future. This must be a matter of great concern to British shipowners. Masters of ships are under a legal obligation to render assistance to persons in danger at sea and British shipowners and their Masters would not, of course, wish to do otherwise. But the consequences for them, if once they have these refugees aboard and are unable to disembark them, are obviously most serious. First, there is the health risk and the maintenance of order. Then there is the commercial aspect. The ships in question will be unable to trade, contracts will be broken and the financial penalties to owners may amount to very large sums. Particularly in the present depressed state of the shipping industry, no owner can afford losses of the order involved.

I and my colleagues fully realise the extremely difficult decisions inherent in this whole problem for you. But I must bring to your attention the implications for the British shipping industry, and I do ask that decisions be taken which relieve the individual British shipowner and Master of the obligation to keep these refugees on board their ships for longer than is absolutely necessary.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Home Secretary, the Foreign & Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Trade.

Yours sincerely

David Ripper.

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