



The Honourable Thanh Hai Ngo, Senator

Second Reading of BILL S-219

An Act recognizing April 30th as a national day of commemoration of the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada after the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War

Wednesday, April 30th, 2014

Check against release

Honourable Senators, I rise today with immense privilege and honour, to summon your support on Bill S-219, An Act recognizing April 30th as a national day of commemoration of the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada after the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War.

Bill S-219 would recognize April 30th as Black April Day. This commemoration day, would bring the attention of all Canadians to the events, and suffering that followed the Fall of Saigon after the Vietnam War in 1975.

It would also shed light on the fundamental role that Canadians played in rescuing and welcoming thousands of Vietnamese refugees.

Many might wonder about the significance of the end of the Vietnam War and the impact it had on Canadian history. Some might also ask why April 30th deserves a day of commemoration. In truth, too little is known about the struggles and the atrocities that followed the devastating Vietnamese war. And even fewer are aware about Canada's humanitarian role in the aftermath of the war.

Unlike the cold war and both world wars taught in schools across the country, Canada's implication with the Vietnam War and its boat people are often overlooked and forgotten.

The Vietnam War was very much driven by opposing ideologies between two very different political systems. The Cold War brought the Vietnamese Communist North against the Vietnamese Democratic South in an 18 year long war.

The Republic of South Vietnam courageously fought to defend freedom and democracy for over two decades in order to prevent the spread of communism. This prolonged struggle between the North and the South of Vietnam was an attempt from the communist North to invade the democratic south in order to bring South-Vietnam under its rule.



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The North communist forces broke the Paris Peace Accord by invading South Vietnam, and by establishing a ruthless totalitarian regime throughout the country after the fall of Saigon on April 30th 1975. A dark day that shook the world, and forced millions of Vietnamese to leave their war-torn home in search for safety and freedom.

Even if Canada was not directly implicated in the war, it showed its involvement in other ways...

Although the Canadian Forces were not directly involved in the combat or in the conflict, they undertook a supervisory operation role during the Vietnam War in order to support the aim of establishing peace and ending the war by assisting in the enforcement of the Paris Accord of 1973.

Canada also served on two international truce commissions and provided medical supplies and technical assistance.

From 1954 to 1973, Canada was a member of the International Control Commission, which oversaw truce agreements in Vietnam and was limited to neutral nations.

Canadian diplomats were further renowned by their involvement in negotiations between Washington and Hanoi. It was always maintained and agreed that Ottawa was an impartial actor and acted as an objective and respected peacekeeper while it administered humanitarian aid to the victims and refugees of the war.

After long battles and endless losses for both sides of the war, the Fall of Saigon took place with the capture of the capital of South Vietnam by the People's Army of North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front on April 30, 1975.

This dark day, marked the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the formal reunification of North Vietnam and South Vietnam into a communist state ruled by a one party regime.

For the current Vietnamese Socialist Republic, April 30th is celebrated as a day of military victory over the Americans... However, April 30th 1975 marks a sad day for far more many, especially for those from South-Vietnam.

For Canadians of Vietnamese origins and for the wide Vietnamese Diaspora now living abroad, April 30th depicts a day when South Vietnam fell under the power of an authoritarian and oppressive communist regime that pays no heed to basic human rights.

We remember, April 30th as Black April Day because it represents the sad day we lost our country, our family, our friends, our homes, our freedom and our democratic rights! It commemorates a day of loss and grief.



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After the Vietnam War, over 65 thousand South-Vietnamese were executed and over 1 million were sent to prison and re-education camps where it was estimated that around 165 thousand died because of retribution from North Vietnamese communists.

The years after the Fall of Saigon from 1975 to 1996 was known to be the largest mass migration known in modern history with more than 1.5 million people leaving their war torn country, in search for freedom.

What was unique about the Vietnamese exodus was that unlike most other forced migrations that are often displaced through mountains, deserts and oceans, the only route for escape for Vietnamese fleeing their country was by navigating through sea. This is why this group of refugees has become known to the world as the “boat people”.

Many Vietnamese people had to set sail in rickety broken boats for the South China Sea, where they faced constant, unimaginable peril. They had to navigate not only through deadly storms but also through diseases and starvation. The primary cause of death of the boat people was drowning and attacks by pirates and murdered or sold into slavery and prostitution. According to the United Nation High Commission for refugees, over 250 thousand perished in the seas looking for a brighter future and freedom.

Honourable Senators, many Vietnamese-Canadian’s journey and arrival to Canada is now part of our national heritage. I want to share with you a few stories of survivors of the Vietnamese Boat People on their journey to Canada.

One wrote: “On the eight day, my three-year-old daughter died, on the ninth day my eight year old son died, and on the tenth my wife’s smallest niece died... We were on the sea without food or water for about 13 days. Then I wrote a letter, put it in a bottle, and threw it overboard, hoping someone would find it and let my family know that I had died at sea”.

Another story mentions: “It began early one morning, when we set out to sea, heading into the unknown. As a fourteen year-old boy, there I was with my sixteen-year-old brother and 150 other people on a small wooden boat designed to carry a third of that number when we arrived at one of Malaysia’s Terumba islands. The journey had taken four days and three nights, during which time we experienced two major storms and an angry sea that threatened to swallow us all. We witnessed many painful things during that trip, one of the most affecting being that an infant was crushed on and died, and his body was thrown overboard.”

Another boat people anecdote depicts:

“The lid was closed, and we were told to be quiet because the police would be inspecting the boat before it could leave to go out fishing. I did not expect to be put in a very small secret compartment of the boat underneath an icebox. It was dark and hot in there and I had no room to



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move. Other bodies were weighing down on me. Then the air became so thick it was almost impossible to breathe. Children started to cry, and their parents tried frantically to cover their mouths. I wanted to cry out also because I was so hot, so uncomfortable and so desperate for air. And I began to seriously fear for myself and my brother. Then it occurred to me that breath is life, and without it there would be no freedom. I told myself to hold on for one more breath, and another one, and another one...”

Honourable colleagues, these are only but few stories out of thousands of survivors of the boat people saga. I could go on for hours and read you more personal stories from the Vietnamese exodus, but I trust these few will give you a small taste of the suffering the Vietnamese Boat People had to endure as they were seeking refuge and freedom.

Honorables sénateur, ce ne sont que quelques témoignages parmi des milliers de récits de survivants. Je pourrais passer des heures à vous lire ces récits de l'exode vietnamien, mais je suis sûr que ces quelques descriptions vous donneront une idée des souffrances des boat people vietnamiens dans leur recherche d'asile et de liberté.

What is even more unfortunate is that some countries turned the Boat People away, even when boat full of refugees managed to reach land. So, these refugees often had to travel even further away from their homeland and settle in Canada, France, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. The United States accepted 823 thousand refugees; Britain accepted 19 thousand; France accepted 96 thousand; Australia and Canada accepted 137, thousand each.

The Vietnamese diaspora across the globe now amounts to approximately 3.5 million!

Ce qui est plus malheureux encore, c'est que certains pays ont refusé d'accueillir ces réfugiés même quand ces derniers avaient réussi à toucher terre. C'est ainsi qu'ils ont souvent été contraints de s'éloigner plus encore de leur patrie, trouvant refuge au Canada, en France, en Australie, aux États-Unis et au Royaume-Uni. Les États-Unis ont accepté 823 milles réfugiés, la Grande-Bretagne en a accepté 19 milles, la France 96 milles, l'Australie et le Canada en a accepté 137 milles chacun.

La diaspora vietnamienne compte actuellement environ 3,5 millions de personnes dans le monde!

Honourable Senators, Bill S-219 is not only about commemorating the people that lost their lives during the exodus, it is also a commemoration of how Canada welcomed these refugees with open arms. Canada's role has often been forgotten with the passing years.



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Honorables sénateurs, le projet de loi S-219 ne vise pas seulement à rappeler le souvenir des gens qui ont disparu durant l'exode, mais aussi à commémorer l'accueil chaleureux que les Canadiens ont réservé aux réfugiés vietnamiens. Le rôle du Canada après la guerre du Vietnam a progressivement été oublié.

Following the growing migration of Vietnamese refugees, the federal government developed a private sponsorship program, whereby it would seek assistance of voluntary organizations, churches and groups of at least five adult citizens who could sponsor and provide for a refugee family into their charge for a year. For each person thus sponsored, the government accepted another refugee under its own care.

Compte tenu de la migration croissante de réfugiés vietnamiens, le gouvernement fédéral a créé un programme de parrainage privé aux termes duquel il inviterait des organisations bénévoles, des églises et des groupes d'au moins cinq citoyens adultes à accueillir une famille de réfugiés et de la prendre à charge pendant un an. Pour chaque personne ainsi parrainée, le gouvernement acceptait un autre réfugié à sa charge.

Without the warm and caring efforts of thousands of Canadians and under the leadership, support and co-operation of federal, provincial and municipal governments, as well as Canadians and international refugee agencies, non-governmental organizations and religious groups, the movement of such large numbers of people under such urgent and difficult circumstances would not have been possible.

Sans les efforts chaleureux et attentifs de milliers de Canadiens et sans le leadership, l'appui et la collaboration du gouvernement fédéral, des gouvernements provinciaux et municipaux, d'organismes canadiens et internationaux pour les réfugiés, d'organisations non gouvernementales et de groupes religieux, la migration de gens en si grand nombre dans des circonstances aussi urgentes et difficiles n'aurait pas été possible.

I first arrived in Canada with other Vietnamese refugees. In a moment of great need, this country welcomed us after we lived through a devastating war, suffered in refugee camps and endured long boat trips to escape a place we could no longer call home. Like many others, I had to struggle and work hard to establish myself and my family in a new environment.

Je suis arrivé au Canada avec d'autres réfugiés vietnamiens. Nous étions dans le besoin, et nous avons été accueillis par ce pays après avoir connu une terrible guerre, souffert dans des camps de réfugiés et navigué longtemps pour fuir un endroit que nous ne pouvions plus appeler notre patrie. Comme beaucoup d'autres, j'ai dû lutter et travailler fort pour gagner ma vie et celle de ma famille dans un nouvel environnement.



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In July 1979 the Canadian Government, under then Prime Minister Joe Clark, made its historic announcement of a target figure of 50 thousand Vietnamese refugees to be admitted to Canada by the end of 1980.

And in February 1980, the government announced that the admittance figure would be increased from 50 thousand to 60 thousand.

En juillet 1979, le gouvernement du Canada, alors dirigé par le premier ministre Joe Clark, a fait une annonce historique : 50 mille réfugiés vietnamiens seraient accueillis au Canada d'ici la fin de l'année 1980.

Et, en février 1980, il a annoncé que ce chiffre passerait à 60 mille.

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Canadians graciously opened their homes and hearts to over 60 thousand Vietnamese refugees who desperately needed a place to rebuild their lives.

Canadians from all walks of life responded without hesitation, as they became part of a vast international effort dedicated to finding a safe haven for these unfortunate people.

Après la chute de Saigon en 1975, des Canadiens ont ouvert leurs foyers et leurs cœurs à plus de 60 mille réfugiés vietnamiens qui avaient désespérément besoin d'un endroit pour reconstruire leurs vies.

Des Canadiens de tous horizons ont répondu à l'appel sans hésiter pour participer à un immense effort international visant à trouver des lieux d'asile pour ces les réfugiés.

Of the total of 60 thousand Vietnamese refugees admitted to Canada, between 1979 and 1980, roughly 26 thousand were government assisted, while some 34 thousand were destined to private sponsors and relatives.

During the following decade from 1982 to 1991 over 79 695 more entered the country.

Sur les 60 mille réfugiés vietnamiens accueillis au Canada entre 1979 et 1980, environ 26 000 ont été parrainés par le gouvernement, tandis que 34 000 l'ont été par des organismes privés et des particuliers et par des membres de leur parenté.

Au cours de la décennie suivante (de 1982 à 1991), plus de 79 695 autres sont entrés au Canada.



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In 1986, the people of Canada were awarded the Nansen Medal by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in “recognition of their major and sustained contribution to the cause of refugees”.

The UNHCR’s Nansen Medal was awarded to the people of Canada for their extraordinary efforts on behalf of the Vietnamese refugees. This was the only time a country has ever been awarded this Nansen award.

En 1986, le haut-commissaire des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés a décerné la distinction Nansen au peuple canadien « pour sa contribution importante et soutenue à la cause des réfugiés ».

Cette distinction a été accordée par le HCNUR aux Canadiens pour leurs efforts extraordinaires à l’égard des réfugiés d’Indochine. C’est la seule fois qu’un pays entier ait reçu cette distinction.

Without Canada’s generosity and humanity, I never could achieve what I have today: I am able to proudly rise as a Senator and defend freedom, human rights and democracy without fearing for my life. Today, I can look at my family and know that I have been able to provide for them and ensure their wellbeing.

Sans la générosité et l’humanité des Canadiens, je n’aurais jamais pu avoir ce que j’ai aujourd’hui, c’est-à-dire vivre dans un magnifique pays où je peux bénéficier de la liberté et de la démocratie et les défendre sans craindre pour ma vie.

For now 39 years, every year, on April 30, Vietnamese who have lived in exile throughout the world gather to remember a Day of Loss of their Country.

Depuis 39 ans, chaque année, le 30 avril, les Vietnamiens qui vivent en exil dans le monde entier se réunissent pour se rappeler le jour où ils ont perdu leur pays.

For all Vietnamese-Canadians, April 30th marks a day of remembrance. We remember the acts of brutality and the inhumanity in which the communists treated their adversaries. While there are certainly no positive outcomes from the brutal Vietnam War, there is one good ending.

Pour tous les Canadiens d’origine vietnamienne, le 30 avril est le jour où ils se souviennent de la brutalité et de l’inhumanité avec lesquelles les communistes traitaient leurs adversaires et où ils se rappellent ce qui leur est arrivé et est arrivé à leurs familles. Cette guerre brutale n’a certainement eu aucun effet positif, mais quelque chose de bon en est sorti tout de même.



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The Vietnamese boat people who escaped from Vietnam during and after the conflict have had a huge positive impact on the countries in which they settled. Vietnamese immigrants and refugees integrated quickly and extremely well into the fabric of their new homelands.

Since their establishments, they have made immense economic contributions to their adopted countries. Many of them are now lawyers, doctors, judges, movies directors, artists and journalists...

Canada is now home to more than 300 thousand Vietnamese-Canadians, with now three proud generations who celebrate an important heritage in a great nation.

Since coming to Canada, the Vietnamese communities have constantly shown that they are hard-working Canadians, capable of becoming an integral part of Canadian society...

Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese boat people lost their lives at Eastern Sea in an attempt to find a better future and in pursuit of freedom.

These men, women, and children fought for democracy, human rights, justice and freedom. For the younger Canadian generation who are born and raised in a free society, freedom is like air. We hardly ever think about the importance and the delicate nature of freedom because it is always there for us. But to the 90 million Vietnamese living in a Communist country, full of oppression and prohibition, Freedom Does Not Exist.

Bill S-219 will not only remember the atrocities that followed the Fall of Saigon, it will also commemorate the achievements of Vietnamese-Canadians concurrently to highlight a new chapter in Canada.

While remembering the past, we are able to focus on the present and future as well. Canada is a wonderful country because we recognize that each generation has a responsibility to make the future better for the next generation, and every one of us has an individual responsibility to do our share.

April 30th is now a day when the Vietnamese Diaspora in Canada dedicate itself to restoring those fundamental values and to remind and raise awareness on the freedoms and liberties that define our society and this great institution.

April 30th is also remembered as a day that commemorates the struggles, the courage and the heroism of those who fought for democracy, human rights and freedom.

April 30th is a day when we thank Canada for saving our lives.



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In closing, I would like to point out that without the Canada's generosity and humanity, myself, nor thousands of Vietnamese refugees, could ever achieve what we have today.

We now are allowed to live in a beautiful country where we can enjoy freedom and democracy as proud Canadians.

It is the openness of the people, the opportunities, and the democratic values, that inspired us to make our home here in Canada.

These are the same values we wish to promote for the millions of Vietnamese, whose basic human rights are close to non-existent.

To this day, the human rights situation in Vietnam has deteriorated significantly. This year alone marked an intensifying crackdown on religious freedom, fundamental human rights, and the rule of law.

The Communist Party of Vietnam continues its one-party reign since 1975, and maintains its political monopoly by limiting freedom of speech, by restricting the freedom of association, by harassing the religious freedoms of minorities, and by keeping the judiciary on a tight corrupted leash.

This is why this day brings the Vietnamese people together to remember the suffering, express gratitude and advocate on behalf on those in Vietnam who don't enjoy the basic human rights, religious freedom we enjoy here in Canada.

I urge both sides of the Senate, as well as our colleagues in the other chamber to regard this Bill as an integral part of Canadian heritage and as a testimony to human rights, freedom and democracy.

Honourable Senators, it is my great honor to be speaking a second time about this Bill on the exact day the Bill seeks to recognize. It is my hope, that next year we will be able to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Black April Day.

Honorable sénateur, je vous remercie de votre appui et de faire du 30 avril le « jour de l'avril noir ».

I thank you all for supporting this Bill, in making April 30th of each year, as Black April Day!