



Debates of the Senate

Bill S-219 Second Reading

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Speech by: The Honourable Thanh Hai Ngo

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Speaker: The Honourable Noël A. Kinsella

THE SENATE

Wednesday, April 30, 2014

BLACK APRIL DAY BILL SECOND READING—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Thanh Hai Ngo moved second reading of Bill S-219, An Act respecting 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.

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

Bill S-219 will recognize April 30 as Black April Day. This commemoration day will 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.

. (1450)

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 30 deserves a day of commemoration. In truth, too little is known about the struggles and atrocities that followed the devastating Vietnam War. Even fewer are aware of 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 the two different political systems. The Cold War brought the Vietnam communists in the north against the Vietnam 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.

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 30, 1975, a dark day that shook the world and forced millions of Vietnamese to leave their war-torn homes in search of 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 operational role during the Vietnam War in order to support the aim of establishing peace and ending the war by assisting the enforcement of the Paris Accord of 1973. Canada also served on two international truth commissions and provided medical supplies and technical assistance.

From 1954 to 1973, Canada was a member of the International Control Commission that oversaw truce agreements in Vietnam and was limited to neutral nations. Canadian diplomats were further renowned for 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 on 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 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 30 is celebrated as a day of military victory over the Americans. However, April 30, 1975, marks a sad day for far many more people, especially for those from South Vietnam.

For Canadians of Vietnamese origin and the wide Vietnamese diaspora now living abroad, April 30 depicts a day when South Vietnam fell under the power of an authoritarian and oppressive communist regime that pays no heed to human rights. We remember April 30 as a black day, because it represents the sad day we lost our country, our families, our friends, our homes, our freedom, and our democratic rights. It commemorates a day of loss and grief.

After the Vietnam War, over 65,000 Vietnamese were executed and over 1 million were sent to prison and rehabilitation camps where it was estimated that around 165,000 died because of retribution from North Vietnamese communists.

The years after the fall of Saigon from 1975 to 1996 were known to be the largest mass migration in modern history with more than 1.5 million people leaving the war-torn country in search of freedom.

What was unique about the Vietnamese exodus was that unlike most other migrations that often are displaced through mountains, deserts and oceans, the only route of escape for Vietnamese fleeing the country was by navigating the sea. This is why this group of refugees has become known to the world as the "boat people." Many Vietnamese people had to sail in rickety broken boats from 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 being attacked by pirates, being murdered or sold into slavery and prostitution. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, over 250,000 perished in the seas looking for a brighter future and freedom.

Honourable senators, many Vietnamese Canadians' journeys and arrivals to Canada are not part of our national heritage. I

want to share with you a few stories of survival of the Vietnamese boat people on their journey to Canada.

One wrote:

On the eighth 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 I died at sea.

Another story:

It began 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 Terumbu 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:

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 move. Other bodies were weighing down on me. Then the air became so thick it was almost impossible to breath. 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 breath, and another one, and another one....

[Translation]

Honourable senators, these are but a few of the thousands of stories told by survivors. I could spend hours reading these stories about the Vietnam exodus, but I am sure that these few descriptions will give you an idea of what the Vietnamese boat people endured in their search for refuge and freedom.

[English]

What is even more unfortunate is that some countries turned the boat people away, even when a boat full of refugees managed to reach land. These refugees often had to travel even farther from their homeland and settle in Canada, France, Australia, the United States and United Kingdom. The United States accepted 800,000 refugees, Britain accepted 20,000 and France 96,000. Australia and Canada accepted 137,000 each. The Vietnamese diaspora across the globe now amounts to approximately 3.5 million.

. (1500)

Honourable senators, Bill S-219 is not only about commemorating the boat people who 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.

[Translation]

In light of the growing migration of Vietnamese refugees, the federal government created a private sponsorship program under which it would invite volunteer organizations, churches and groups of at least five adult citizens to welcome a family of refugees and provide them with support for one year. For each privately sponsored person, the government would sponsor another refugee.

Without the kind and attentive efforts of thousands of Canadians and without the leadership, support and cooperation of the federal, provincial and municipal governments, Canadian and international refugee agencies, non-governmental organizations and religious groups, the migration of such a large number of people in such urgent and dire circumstances would not have been possible.

[English]

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, suffering in refugee camps and enduring long boat trips to escape the place we could no longer call home. Like many others, I had to struggle and work hard to support myself and my family in the new environment.

In July 1979, the Canadian government, under then Prime Minister Joe Clark, made its historic announcement of a target figure of 50,000 Vietnamese refugees to be admitted to Canada by the end of the 1980s. But in February 1980, the government announced that this figure would be increased from 50,000 to 60,000.

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Canadians graciously opened their homes and hearts to over 60,000 Vietnamese refugees who desperately needed a place to rebuild their lives. Canadians from all walks of life responded without hesitation, and they became part of a vast international effort dedicated to finding a safe haven for these unfortunate people.

[Translation]

Of the 60,000 Vietnamese refugees welcomed to Canada between 1979 and 1980, roughly 26,000 were sponsored by the government and 34,000 were sponsored by private agencies.

[English]

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 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' 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.

Without Canada's generosity and humanity, I never could have achieved what I have today. I 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 well-being.

For 39 years, every year on April 30, Vietnamese who live in exile throughout the world gather to remember the loss of their country. For all Vietnamese-Canadians, April 30 marks a day of remembrance. We remember the acts of brutality and the inhumanity with which the communists treated their adversaries. While there are certainly no positive outcomes from the brutal Vietnam War, there is one good ending. 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 in the fabric of their new homelands. Since their establishment, they have made immense economic contributions to their adopted countries. Many of them are now lawyers, doctors, judges, directors, artists, journalists.

Canada is now home to more than 300,000 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 people lost their lives in an attempt to find a better future and the pursuit of freedom. These men, women and children fought for democracy, human rights, justice and freedom. For the younger Canadian generation who were born and raised in a free society, freedom is like air.

We hardly ever think about the importance and delicate nature of freedom because it is always here 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 but also commemorate the achievement 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 30 is now a day when the Vietnamese diaspora in Canada dedicates itself to restoring those fundamental values and to reminding us and raising awareness about the freedoms and liberties that define our society and this great institution. April 30 is also remembered as the day that commemorates the struggles, courage and heroism of those who fought for democracy, human rights and freedom. April 30 is a day when we thank Canada for saving our lives.

I would like to point out that without Canada's generosity and humanity, I and thousands of Vietnamese refugees could never have achieved what we have today.

We are now allowed to live in a wonderful 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 inspire 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 freedoms, fundamental human rights and the rule of law. This is why today brings the Vietnamese people together to remember the suffering, express gratitude and advocate on behalf of the Vietnamese who don't enjoy the basic human rights and religious freedoms 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 honour 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 fortieth anniversary of Black April Day.

[Translation]

Honourable senators, I want to thank you for your support in making April 30 "Black April Day."

(On motion of Senator Fraser, debate adjourned.)

BLACK APRIL DAY BILL

SECOND READING—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the motion of the Honourable Senator Ngo, seconded by the Honourable Senator Ogilvie, for the second reading of Bill S-219, An Act respecting 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.

Hon. Mobina S. B. Jaffer: Honourable senators, I rise to speak about Bill S-219, the Black April Day act. I would like to thank Senator Ngo for tabling this bill. I'm certain there are many in the Vietnamese community who would like to thank him, as well, so thank you, Senator Ngo.

For the Vietnamese communities around the world, Black April Day is one of the most significant days of their collective history. It recognizes the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, the takeover of South Vietnam by the North, and the beginning of the mass exodus of millions of Vietnamese people from their beloved homeland.

During this exodus, many Vietnamese were forced to leave their homeland, and by any means necessary. Sadly, this meant the use of overcrowded, poorly constructed boats.

At the time, approximately 840,000 Vietnamese who fled became known as "Vietnamese boat people" because of their use of those dangerous boats. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has reported that at least 215,000 people lost their lives at sea in the desperate attempt to flee Vietnam. Many died by drowning, illness and starvation. In other cases, boats were hijacked by pirates, their passengers kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Senator Ngo has stated several stories about the suffering of the Vietnamese boat people. I would like to tell you one that really struck me. It is the story of a girl named Thuy Trang Lai. She writes:

I was 11 years old when I fled my homeland in a frenetic whirlwind of madness, confusion, and fear. What I recall most vividly was a sudden devastating realisation that my mother wasn't coming with me.

She stayed to look after the rest of the family. She could afford only to send one of her children out of the country, and I was the eldest. But no one had told me any of this — I had no idea I was leaving. It wasn't until the moment when my seventeen-year-old cousin grabbed me by the hand and the two of us ran off that I had any inkling my life was about to change. It was a moment that has me in tears even to this day.

I have tried to block out the horrors of that boat trip during the first terrible seventy-two hours. The South China Sea is merciless at the best of times, and it was as though our boat would be swallowed at any moment. I clutched at my stomach to keep the vomit down. I held desperately onto my knees and shut my eyes tight to stop myself from thinking too much about my mother.

But there was one thing I couldn't block out. A dream, a particular dream. How I cried when I awoke from it! It was the hard damp timber I had been sleeping on that woke me. Then I would feel the tears pour from my eyes, down my cheeks and into the hands that desperately craved to reach out to my mother. In the dream I was drinking lemonade Mum would make at home and, as always, she was there beside me.

It felt so real, and it was so beautiful that it turned into a real nightmare when I woke. In that sad moment I remembered how her arms would reach out for me whenever I needed her, and I cried until I ached.

The boat cut a sad figure on the furious sea. The half-broken vessel carried the weight of hundreds of people and their heavy hearts. We had to sit on top of each other, and couldn't even see our own arms and legs. Babies who resembled rag dolls howled day and night as people twenty years older than I was cried for their mothers too.

I was constantly shivering from being drenched in seawater, but at least it washed other people's vomit off me.

As the days passed, the boat began to stink of desperation. All around me were the hungry bodies and haunted faces of people deteriorating before my eleven-year-old eyes. The cramped conditions make it hard for us to move even an inch, so we often sat in the same position for days on end. It was as if Death visited me more times than I could count on one shivering hand.

. (1450)

Honourable senators, to be a refugee is one of the most difficult trials a person can face. There is an overwhelming helplessness that you feel when you are in the hands of the good will of the international community. I thank Canada and the policies of Prime Minister Trudeau which allowed my family and me to find a home here in Canada in 1975.

It was around that time when Senator Ngo also arrived in Canada as a refugee.

Those of us who have been refugees share an unspoken bond. We are acutely aware of the varying levels of suffering that each refugee undergoes. Some of us, through sheer chance, were put in a position where a country welcomed us with open arms, such as Canada. We are the lucky ones. Others were forced to spend their time in refugee camps or roam from one country to the next hoping that they would be accepted or, at the very least, allowed to remain in humane conditions.

For those of us, like Senator Ngo and myself, who were fortunate enough to have a country such as Canada accept us, we know that it could have very well been us on that boat or in a refugee camp. We could still be in a refugee camp.

It is because of this understanding that Senator Ngo, you senators and I work hard to raise the awareness of the plight of refugees around the world.

Recognizing April 30 as Black April Day is a recognition of Canada's acceptance of 137,000 Vietnamese refugees between 1976 and 1991.

In particular, it is recognition of the Canadian families, religious groups, charitable groups and the non-governmental organizations that sponsored an estimated 34,000 Vietnamese refugees to come to Canada. It is also an acknowledgment of the suffering that many Vietnamese refugees, like the 11-year-old Thuy Trang Lai, underwent during their exodus or a boat ordeal.

Honourable senators, Bill S-219 is an important bill, not only for the Vietnamese community in Canada, but for anyone who has suffered the loss of one's beloved homeland and had to endure the status of refugee. It is for this reason that I would urge honourable senators to speak in favour of Bill S-219 and eventually vote for it.

(On motion of Senator Martin, debate adjourned.)