

# Churches in Thailand struggle with the refugee problem

Christianity constitutes a minority religion in Thailand. Its position was set out in an interview by BISHOP GEORGE PHIMPISAN with Fr BRUCE DUNCAN.

**A** CONTINUING international effort is needed if refugees in Thailand are to be permanently resettled, according to a Thai Catholic bishop visiting Australia as a guest of the Bible Society.

Bishop George Phimpisan, a Redemptorist, has the north-east diocese of Thailand bordering on Laos, where 55,000 Lao refugees live in one camp.

This part of Thailand is very poor, and the diocese relies on international relief agencies to supply and support the refugees as they wait for resettlement. In one province, Bishop George said, almost all Catholic priests and sisters are working with the refugees.

A growing problem is that receiving countries are not willing to take sick or handicapped people, but are taking those with skills and those likely to resettle quickly. Bishop George said that they are caring for about 400 lepers and handicapped people.

Relations between the Christian



*On the move; Vietnamese refugees in Thailand.*

churches are very good in Thailand, according to the Bishop. In a population of fifty million, Christians are a tiny minority, numbering 250,000 Catholics and about 100,000 Protestants. They work together in development projects, and share media facilities. Bishop George himself helped translate the New Testament into Thai,

and this remains the only translation in Thai.

Christian relations with Thai society are cautious but relaxed. 'The Church is considered as a foreign institution, connected with French culture. Yet Thailand was never colonised and Thais take great pride in their freedom. There was strong feeling against foreign missionaries, a feeling which is fading since now most Church people are Thai', said the bishop.

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**'... Catholic clergy are revered for their celibacy. This is the one country in the world where if you took away celibacy, it would be a great set-back in the eyes of the people.'**

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'After the fall of Saigon, the foreign bishops resigned and Thai bishops took over most dioceses. Today about three-quarters of the more than 400 Catholic priests in Thailand are nationals, and the more than 1200 Catholic sisters are overwhelmingly Thai.

'There has also been steady growth in vocations, and we have now 250 major

seminarians, one for every thousand of Catholic population. Nearly 30 priests will be ordained this year so the future looks very good for us.

'The question the Buddhists always put to us is: "The Church has been here over 400 years. How come you still need foreign missionaries?" It's the same question we ask ourselves.'

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The Buddhist culture is a great help to Catholicism especially, according to the bishop. Buddhists have great respect for their monks and priests. And Catholic clergy too are revered for their celibacy.

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Dialogue with the Buddhists is difficult, the bishop said. The Buddhists tend to see our efforts at inculturation 'as a scheme to undermine Buddhist religion. Dialogue is

seen as such a scheme, so we are at a dead end in that direction.'

There are very few Buddhist converts to Christianity, which is more demanding than Buddhism. Buddhists believe in reincarnation and do not feel the sense of urgency of Christianity that this life is all we have.

'They can never understand why we are pushing so hard. This is the difference in mentality, and their attitude to us, seems very easy-going.'

The Church in Thailand is heavily involved in development work, but is unable to speak out on social issues. 'Buddhists think priests and religions should not get involved in any way with social issues. That becomes a stigma and is looked upon as completely out of line, even by the government. So we don't speak out on social issues, except for issues such as abortion, which is a rally point for 'Buddhists think priests and religious

'We can't say anything like the church does in the Philippines. It would be like a cry in the wilderness. So instead of saying anything, we just go and do it. Of course, we teach social issues in the schools and seminaries.'

Bishop George said that the Communist threat to Thailand had faded. After the student uprising some years ago, many of the students went to the jungle. But with the split between China and Vietnam, and the reality of living and fighting in the

jungle, their numbers have dropped from 15,000 to little over a thousand.

The promise of the government not to punish those who return has been honoured, and men are still coming in.

The bishop said that Thailand has not been a 'domino', according to the expectations of the 'domino theory' of Communist expansion. 'Thai society is completely different from Indo-China, where the Communists have been able to use anti-colonialist feeling as a tool.' This was not available to them in Thailand, said the bishop.

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'The Communists are trying to colonise us. That is all you have to say to the Thai people, and they will fight. So this is a very clever psychology. Thailand means the land of the free.'

Especially important is the role of the King of Thailand, who is very close to Thais, and embodies Thai national freedom and self-respect, since he kept Thailand independent of the colonialists. 'Anybody in Thailand right now would die for the King'. ■