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## THE VIETNAM REFUGEE PROBLEM

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Some 3,500,000 people -- roughly 20% of the total population of South Vietnam -- have sought refuge from the war raging around them or from the harassments of the Communists during the past five years. Almost all of them have taken refuge in the South. Virtually no one has gone North. Many have been helped in re-establishing a new life in a new location. Many have returned home as soon as security conditions have permitted. One million still are refugees.

This paper examines the history of this problem and describes the efforts to cope with it.

Unlike post-World War II refugees who wandered from country to country over the face of Europe, Vietnam's displaced people usually move in large or small groups from a combat zone to a nearby area which offers them relative security. Both places are within their own country's borders.

To be torn from their ancestral homes, land and livelihood is a particularly wrenching experience for people in a traditional society like Vietnam's. It is compounded by the inherent boredom and lack of personal involvement in their refugee-camp existence. The poignancy of their plight is intensified by the proximity of refugee camps to their homes.

As inescapable by-products of war, refugees anywhere at any time in modern history have tested the talents of everyone who works to relieve their suffering. Failure to rehabilitate them leaves a lingering sore in the body politic and national conscience of any country which harbors them. Rehabilitation of refugees is a particularly challenging task in the midst of war, as in Vietnam today. Unfortunately it is impossible to resolve all of the many complexities of their problem before the fighting ends.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This is not the first time in history that refugee problems have plagued the Vietnamese people. Refugee migrations have occurred with more than accidental frequency throughout the course of Vietnamese history. In fact, the entire Vietnamese nation has been on the move for the past two thousand years. This may appear to contradict the traditional quasi-religious attachment that the average Vietnamese feels toward his rice fields and the tombs of his ancestors. Closer examination, however, reveals the rather remarkable ability of the Vietnamese people to adjust to large-scale displacements necessitated by warfare.

The first known migration in Vietnamese history took place within the 400 to 250 B. C. period when Viet tribes moved from China into what is now North Vietnam. Ensuing centuries witnessed progressive, often violent migrations southward that reached Vietnam's present southern boundary along the Gulf of Siam early in the 18th Century. Therefore, the massive population upheavals that have taken place during the past 15 years -- albeit sharply accented by violence and physical hardship for the individuals concerned -- are not entirely novel experiences for the Vietnamese people.

It also is a well-established historical fact that, although economic overtones were present, these migrations were motivated primarily by opposition to oppressive regimes. Certainly the masses of people who fled from the North Vietnamese countryside in 1954 and 1955 were politically motivated beyond doubt.

Refugees in Vietnam today frequently have been caught in the crossfire of fighting around them and fled from it rather than from systematic oppression. These displaced persons, although called "Refugees from Communism" by the Government of the Republic (GVN), ironically are more apolitical than were refugees during the 1950's. Today's so-called refugee in Vietnam is more aptly described as a "war evacuee" inasmuch as he has, in effect, fled from a combat zone in search of security. He has not crossed an international boundary.

### REFUGEES IN THE 1950'S

Nearly a million people were evacuated from North to South Vietnam, resettled and rejuvenated economically in three years' time -- from 1954 to 1957. This, no small accomplishment, is worth more than a passing note. It may be divided into three distinct phases characterized by: moving a large segment of the population, temporarily sheltering them, and, finally, permanently resettling them and integrating them into their new surroundings. These stages are self-explanatory and cover roughly the period from June 1, 1954 to December 31, 1957 when the GVN "Commissariat General aux Refugies" (COMIGAL) was disbanded. It should be noted that the resettlement/integration effort was extended beyond this cutoff date as part of overall economic development programs in Vietnam, but it was not an identifiably separate refugee program after 1957.

From the earliest moment of the Indochina war -- and particularly during the period from December 19, 1946 to July 21, 1954 -- large numbers of innocent civilians lost their homes and rice fields during military actions conducted by Communist or French Forces. The state of insecurity which prevailed in the countryside caused substantial numbers of refugees to move toward urban areas. Even before 1954, cities such as Saigon and Hanoi sustained five to eightfold population increases compared with pre-World War II figures.

The large-scale population movement, which began in May 1954, however, occurred after the battle of Dien Bien Phu, and made it obvious that the French security perimeter in North Vietnam would be confined to the Hanoi-Haiphong lifeline in the Red River Delta. Large Catholic areas in the hinterland were thus exposed to Communist occupation. Hundreds of thousands of Catholics trekked out to the new defense perimeter and the great exodus of 1954 began.

The Geneva cease-fire agreement in July 1954 provided for free movement in both directions for 300 days. Many friendly countries and voluntary agencies made significant contributions towards evacuating people from North to South Vietnam. Some countries, including France, also assisted in transporting southern-based Vietnamese families to the North. Initially, the French Government undertook this effort alone but it soon became evident

that the number of people moving in both directions surpassed its capabilities. The U. S. and other friendly governments, plus a host of privately financed voluntary agencies, joined the effort in response to an appeal from President Diem. COMIGAL reports indicate that the U. S. financed over 90 per cent of the aid to refugees at this time. France was the next largest contributor, followed by Great Britain, Australia, West Germany, New Zealand, and the Netherlands. A partial list of voluntary organizations includes the National Catholic Welfare Council, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, CARE, the United Nations Childrens Fund, Operation Brotherhood (organized by the Junior Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines), the International Rescue Committee, Church World Service, and the Protestant Evangelical Church of Vietnam.

The exact number of this refugee movement is unknown because COMIGAL records were destroyed in a fire which burned down its headquarters in 1955. Nine hundred thousand is the generally accepted estimate. Farmers made up about 80 per cent of this total. The rest included fishermen, artisans, businessmen, and military personnel with their families.

When the refugees arrived in the South, they were sheltered in transient quarters in and around Saigon. Many of them remained in this status for some time while the GVN sought sites elsewhere for their permanent resettlement. It should be remembered that at this time the GVN was a nascent government without any substantial administrative strength. Moreover, it was faced with formidable, hostile elements in the countryside -- the armed Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen insurrectionary sects. It was only after the GVN subdued these dissidents that progress could be made in finding sites for resettling refugees permanently.

U. S. funds, in support of COMIGAL's program, were administered by the United States Operations Mission (USOM). COMIGAL's task, assisted and supplemented by the voluntary agencies already mentioned, was to feed and house the refugees and then find regions capable of accommodating and supporting them according to their preferences. To accomplish this, prospecting commissions made up of experts and refugee representatives were sent to the provinces to find resettlement sites with the necessary requirements: arable land for farmers; favorable coastal fishing grounds for fishermen; and sites near towns and cities for artisans to set up their shops. Once these locations were determined, the Planning Office proceeded to design projects according to guidelines established by the prospecting commissions. With COMIGAL's recommendations, the plans were sent to USOM or to the French Technical and Economic Cooperation Bureau for approval and allocation of funds.

Refugees were moved to resettlement centers as soon as project funds were transferred to the COMIGAL account and advance site preparations were completed. Centers varied in size to accommodate populations ranging from 200 to 600 families. Whenever it was possible, whole villages, which had migrated intact from North Vietnam, were resettled at the same site. Then they began clearing land, planting their crops, electing their officials and building their schools and dispensaries, and ultimately integrating their administration into the structure of local communities. Integration started in April, 1956 and was completed by mid-1957 when all refugee villages were absorbed into the local administrative structure.

A total of 319 resettlement villages were created in this manner -- 288 of them for farmers, 26 for fishermen, and five for artisans. Geographically 207 were located in southernmost Vietnam, 50 on the central coastal plains, and 62 in the central highlands.

Only about half of these million or so farmers, fishermen and artisans went to resettlement villages. The rest -- who were mostly merchants, military men and government employees -- resettled with their families in places of their own choosing in cities and in the countryside, with their own resources.

By 1958 refugees from the north by and large were assimilated into the social fabric of South Vietnam. Intensified fighting and the deterioration of security beginning in 1964, however, would see many of these people uprooted again.

### CURRENT REFUGEE PROBLEMS AND PROGRAMS

Origin and Organization -- Essentially, the current refugee problem dates from the fall of 1964, although some small refugee movements started earlier. (In fact, all those who became refugees after January 1, 1964 are officially recognized. But the scope of the challenge did not emerge until the latter part of the year.) Ironically the problem was initiated not by an act of war but by the most devastating flood in modern Vietnamese history, which inundated vast areas of the countryside in the northern coastal provinces and left about one hundred thousand people homeless in the fall of 1964. The South Vietnamese Government at that time, weakened by coups d'etat and politico-military disintegration, was unable to keep the ravaged areas from being occupied by the Viet Cong. Consequently these flood victims formed the nucleus of a hard-core refugee population which by early 1969 had peaked to a level of some 1.5 million people.

Early in 1965 a USAID special study group was appointed to recommend ways of coping with what threatened to become a runaway problem. As a result, a USAID Office of Refugee Coordination (ORC) was created in mid-1965, and it became the focal point for U.S. assistance to refugees. Efforts were made concurrently to encourage the GVN to reestablish a cabinet-level agency to coordinate all aspects of the refugee program. This was accomplished in March 1966 by the creation of a Special Commissariat for Refugees, (SCR), directly responsible to the Prime Minister, under the leadership of Dr. Nguyen Phuc Que.

The rest of 1966 was a particularly trying time for the SCR. Much of its initial effort was spent establishing itself organizationally. Its staff was, to a great extent, recruited on a volunteer basis from other GVN agencies and it did not, for the most part, represent an elite corps of Vietnamese administrators.

The single most formidable task during this period was to establish operational services in each of the provinces. It was compounded by the absence of a sense of urgency in dealing with the refugee problem and a low priority approach to it, especially in the provinces.

Both the GVN and the U. S. Government were well aware of the outset that the best solution was to help refugees to return to their original homes. Accordingly, the GVN established benefits (primarily for food and shelter) for what it considered to be a temporary period in the refugee's life. The hope was that 30 days--in any event, not more than 60 days--was sufficient time for a refugee to return to his ancestral home and reestablish himself there with his family. Although sound in theory, this optimistic time estimate proved to be sadly out of line with reality. For whatever reason refugees decide to leave their homes, they are extremely reluctant to return until they are convinced that security has been firmly reestablished in their regions. Many, therefore, have chosen to resettle temporarily with government assistance in new locations awaiting the restoration of security in their homelands.

Other problems developed as the intensified military operations of 1965, 1966, and 1967 confronted under-manned and ill-equipped provincial staffs with a flood of newly generated refugees. During this period, hundreds of thousands streamed into the towns and cities, many of which were isolated and difficult to supply. These refugees were also initially viewed with suspicion as they had largely emerged from areas of VC influence. This, plus the press of more urgent tasks, resulted at the beginning in a low priority for assistance to them.

However, as awareness of the size and scope of Vietnam's refugee problem grew, several organizational changes were made within both the U. S. and GVN governments which strengthened the allied refugee program considerably. In 1967 the U. S. ORC was moved from AID, first to the civilian Office of Civil Operations (OCO) and later to the office of MACCORDS, Military Assistance Command for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support. The only other organizational change since then was made early in 1968 when the Refugee Directorate assimilated USAID's Social Welfare Division.

The GVN also made two significant changes: First, in November 1967 the Special Commissariat for Refugees was amalgamated with the Ministry of Social Welfare, which remained under the capable direction of Dr. Nguyen Phuc Que; and, secondly, in April 1968, the MSWR joined forces with the Ministry of Health which thereby became the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and Relief (MHSWR), under the dynamic Health Minister, Dr. Tran Lu Y.

What is a refugee? According to the official Vietnamese definition a refugee is anyone who is compelled to leave his place of abode to escape from Communist terrorists, flee from artillery or bombardment, or evacuate combat zones.

This definition does not completely cover all traumatized elements of the population who have been dislocated and handicapped temporarily or permanently in one way or another by the war. War widows, orphans and amputees are among such victims and they must, in a very real sense, be considered among this war's refugees. The GVN operates a wide range of social welfare programs, supported by the U. S. and other governments and by many private, voluntary agencies.

The war in Vietnam, by virtue of its permeative, "frontless" nature, has created a refugee problem that exists in virtually every province of the country. Wherever the war is intense, so is the refugee situation, and im-

PLICIT in this fact is the solution to the refugee problem itself. Wherever the level of combat has subsided and GVN or Allied Forces have restored territorial security, refugees are returning home. Territorial security is the inescapable sine qua non for refugees. This basically affects the ultimate solution of the problems and this is why it cannot be fully accomplished until the shooting stops.

### WHAT IS THE U. S. DOING FOR VIETNAMESE REFUGEES?

In June 1969, what is called the active caseload of refugees totalled 1,197,143 people, compared with 1.5 million early this year. Among them are some 435,000 people living as temporary refugees in camps, about 590,000 who are living outside of camps often with friends or relatives, and some 171,000 who are in the process of being resettled.

As stated before, it is estimated that as many as 3.5 million people (over 20 per cent of South Vietnam's population) have been refugees at one time or another since 1964. (This figure does not include people only temporarily displaced by acts of war. Excluded, for example, are the almost 1,000,000 persons whose houses were destroyed during the enemy's Tet and post-Tet offensives of 1968.) The 3.5 million people represent the total number of refugees eligible for GVN assistance in returning to their home villages. It also includes a substantial number of people who have migrated to cities, who will never return to an agrarian life.

The nature and size of refugee allowances have changed considerably over the years in response to refugee needs and rising costs. (A chart enumerating current refugee allowances is attached as Annex B.) Basically, the refugee is entitled to temporary food and shelter during the initial period of his dislocation, to resettlement benefits at a new location and/or "return-to-village" assistance. Apart from payments to individuals, the program also includes public health, primary and vocational education, and self-help economic development activities.

The United States finances the major portion of the refugee program, and maintains a 95-man advisory group to assist and advise the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and Relief (MHSWR). The U. S. provides Vietnamese piasters as a direct subsidy to the MHSWR program budget and U. S. dollars and piasters for purchases of refugee commodities which are consigned to the MHSWR. Financial and logistical support is also given to voluntary agencies participating in refugee and relief programs. U. S. financial support from all sources in 1968 approached the equivalent of 60 million dollars.

The Close Relationship of Social Welfare to Refugee Care--Because of the human misery war inevitably inflicts on civilian populations, social welfare in Vietnam today is primarily concerned with caring for the urgent needs of refugees. Social welfare is a relatively new function of the South Vietnamese Government. The first Ministry of Social Welfare was established in 1964. It was combined with the Special Commissariat for Refugees in November 1967, and the present Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and Relief (MHSWR) evolved from this GVN awareness of the close, interdependent relationship between refugee assistance and social welfare services. The U. S. Mission also com-

bined these two closely related functions by moving USAID's Social Welfare Division into the Refugee Directorate. The Refugee Directorate is contributing advisory support to MHSWR's effort to establish an effective national program of social and rehabilitation services. It also is assisting the GVN in its efforts to reestablish refugees and war victims in the economic, political and social life of the nation. These are the two major objectives of social welfare in Vietnam today.

The vast majority of Vietnam's social-welfare institutions operate under private auspices, mostly religious, although the Government provides them some subsidy and is moving in the direction of setting standards for them. Since 1968 the Government also has developed a limited number of its own services such as day-care centers for children, student dormitories and rice-kitchens for the poor, community centers, schools for over-age children, orphanages, and disaster-relief services for flood and fire victims.

Combining refugee and social-welfare programs insures more effective coordination and concentration on the most immediate problems of relief and resettlement. This does not mean that long-range social-welfare goals have been abandoned. It simply means that the impetus for Vietnam's developing social services stems from the urgent need for social services for refugees and related groups of people affected by the war.

The Role of Voluntary Agencies--In recent years private voluntary agencies have made increasingly significant contributions to refugee relief throughout the world. Because of the priority needs of refugees in Vietnam, a Voluntary Agency Division is included in the Refugee Directorate to help coordinate the efforts of all groups and to provide a focal point for their relations with the U. S. Mission.

There are 31 agencies from 26 countries currently operating in Vietnam. According to GVN requirements, they all are legally recognized and registered in their home countries; they all must also have signed agreements with a GVN Ministry and maintain a permanent resident staff in Vietnam.

The activities of these agencies are, of course, not limited to refugee or social-welfare projects. Several concentrate on the problem of public health. However, these registered agencies are all in Vietnam for the purpose of helping to meet emergency needs and they are guided by GVN priority requests. Twenty-one of the 31 registered agencies are devoting their full time to refugee-assistance programs. Five more agencies have part-time refugee programs. Voluntary agency contributions and expenditures in Vietnam total over 20 million dollars annually. Approximately 12 million dollars of this total is channeled into refugee assistance. The U. S. and GVN provide additional support by contracting with voluntary agencies which are directly engaged in refugee relief and related social services. The dollar value of this assistance for FY 1969 is 3, 825, 000.

At the present time, these registered agencies have over 500 U. S. and other foreign employees working with a full-time Vietnamese staff of approximately 2, 000. Foreign voluntary agencies also cooperate with numerous local agencies and in so doing have engendered a voluntary-agency spirit in Vietnam which promises to be a continuing asset to this country.

A Council of Foreign Voluntary Agencies coordinates all the activities in the country, with the full cooperation of the MHSWR. Eventually this Council will also include local Vietnamese organizations.

Voluntary agencies have access to highly competent personnel and the U.S. Mission has found contractual arrangements with them extremely advantageous in meeting special problems and needs of the refugee program. U.S. also encourages and supports voluntary agencies which contribute to programs but which are not under contract.

The over-riding goal of U.S. programs in Vietnam is to develop the capabilities of the Vietnamese people to solve their own problems. Voluntary agencies are contributing to this goal by training thousands of Vietnamese in various skills.

The expectation is that voluntary agencies will maintain, and in many cases, increase their support to dislocated elements of the population in the postwar recovery period. The MHSWR has declared its intention to seek even greater voluntary agency assistance, especially after the fighting ends and rural security permits expanded efforts throughout the country.

Conclusion--I believe there are several solid reasons for being optimistic about the future of this program. New refugee influxes in 1969 are down to a fraction of those in previous years. Security throughout the countryside has been constantly expanding since late 1968, providing unprecedented opportunities for refugees to return to their villages. By mid-year 340,000 had returned or been resettled in new locations, and the trend suggests an even larger number will be processed between July and December. This is not to say that pressing needs still do not exist. They do, and they are substantial; but the difficulties are being identified and, one by one, resolved. A new spirit of interministerial cooperation is greatly enhancing this progress. Assuming security will continue to improve, I believe substantial progress can be predicted for the future, recognizing that the full resolution of this issue will have to await the end of the fighting.