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## The Vietnamese Refugee Problem

PHILIP GEYELIN

WHEN President Johnson announced on August 30 that he was sending Dr. Howard A. Rusk of the New York University Medical Center to make a firsthand inspection of private agencies' relief efforts in Vietnam, the story was buried by black headlines from Saigon. That day, two more strikes by U.S. B-52 bombers at Vietcong strongholds in South Vietnam were announced and the word was passed by American military sources that saturation bombing attacks in the south were about to be stepped up to the rate of almost one a day.

There is a grim connection between these two developments. Each in its way bears on the growing problem of what to do about the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese civilians already uprooted by the fighting and the thousands more who may be added to refugee rolls if Hanoi and Washington intensify their test of wills. Taken together, they point up a dilemma that cuts across every aspect of the Vietnam conflict.

American policymakers are all too aware that the joint efforts of the United States and the South Vietnamese to turn the tide of battle in their favor, whether by B-52 bombings or by a stepped-up counteroffensive on the ground, are

bound to create more refugees. "There's no denying it," one high-ranking member of the U.S. aid mission told me in Saigon; "even when we only drop leaflets warning of a bombing raid, we add to the refugee flow."

As the war intensifies, the responsibility of the United States to see to it that these displaced civilians are cared for adequately is increased. But under the conventions that continue to guide the U.S.-South Vietnamese partnership in this strange war, the primary responsibility for the care of the refugees still lies with the government in Saigon. An emergency program of refugee relief, particularly in a few of the more serious trouble spots, may be in order, as some members of Congress are already arguing. But to do this under U.S. government auspices would risk undermining the authority of the Saigon régime.

The Johnson administration has settled on a compromise. The Americans will put more money, more material, and more manpower into helping the refugees, and a new unit will be created in the U.S. aid mission in Saigon to deal exclusively with refugees. All told, about forty officials will be diverted to refugee relief, either as counselors to the social welfare ministry in Saigon or

out in the field, helping untangle bureaucratic snarls, spurring recalcitrant local South Vietnamese authorities, and otherwise seeking to expedite relief programs. Where bottlenecks persist or in emergencies with which the South Vietnamese are unable to cope, private American relief agencies, and perhaps even foreign countries, will be called on, with the United States providing transportation and supplies as needed.

This is where Dr. Rusk enters the picture. He is to report to President Johnson on how the private groups can be mobilized more effectively, how their separate efforts can be co-ordinated, and how their assistance can be rapidly brought to bear in crisis areas. But, for reasons that become clear in the context of the refugee problem, the administration intends to cling as long as it can to the two principles that have guided it up to now. One is to avoid "Americanization" of the refugee-relief efforts. The other is to discourage as much as possible any relief program on a scale that might threaten, in the words of one policymaker, "to put a premium on being a refugee."

### The Flood

It is estimated that nearly 600,000 Vietnamese have been dislodged from their villages and hamlets—most of them in the past six months—and driven toward the bigger district towns and provincial capitals in search of shelter, dependable food supplies, or simply security from shot and shell and Vietcong terrorism. Of this number, some 200,000 have supposedly been "resettled" under government relief programs, though the latest reports from U.S. officials in Saigon suggest that many of them have merely crowded in with relatives. But the more fortunate of them have been relocated on new land under a program conducted by the Saigon government, with a good deal of material assistance from American foreign aid. The South Vietnamese government provides a modest stake, roughly equivalent to \$50, to finance a house; the American aid mission contributes cement and roofing materials.

But a village-by-village count taken by American officials in August confirms earlier estimates that

almost 400,000 refugees are huddled in temporary camps in schools, churches, and other makeshift havens; in the highland areas, many have simply squatted in open fields. For all of these there is also supposed to be assistance from Saigon, at levels U.S. experts there consider not only adequate but generous—on paper. The food allowance sounds small, working out to the equivalent of no more than fifty cents a day for food for an average family, but it has to be measured against an average annual per capita income of about \$100. In theory, government help includes free supplies of other basic necessities such as blankets, mosquito nets, and sleeping mats. Beyond this, there are extensive relief efforts by a host of private American volunteer groups.

To a good many onlookers, including some in the U.S. Congress, the Vietnamese refugees are, like their Cuban and East German counterparts, simply voting against Communism with their feet. If that is true, then it would seem logical to encourage their rejection of life in Vietcong-threatened territory, and to give them the most generous care possible.

However, a recent tour of the highland provinces, where most of the refugees are coming from, and of the coastal regions, where most of them have congregated, suggests that both the cause of the trouble and the cure are considerably more complex. Indeed, the refugee problem touches almost every aspect of the struggle—political, economic, and social as well as military.

One of the main difficulties is that conditions vary so much from place to place that there can be no simple solution. In some areas, the refugees are reasonably comfortable, not only by comparison with their former living standards but with the lot of those among whom they have settled. Near Na Trang, for example, row housing constructed for the refugees is superior to that of many local inhabitants. This reinforces the argument of those who fear that the present U.S. policy will lure still greater floods of refugees into already overcrowded coastal centers and stir even deeper resentment among local residents.

But in another coastal province,

Quang Ngai, where refugees make up nearly half of the populace still under South Vietnamese government control, conditions are appalling by almost any standards, and the South Vietnamese government is plainly unable or unwilling to provide a remedy. As of mid-August, the U.S. embassy in Saigon held to the view that no over-all crisis existed, that "somehow the system had absorbed" the bulk of the refugees, and that there was "no evidence of starvation or epidemic."

THE erratic performance of the South Vietnamese government has not made matters any easier. Reports of corruption persist. But many Washington experts feel that the fear of being accused of corruption is a greater factor in the widespread failure to pay out relief money at the accepted rate. In any given government program, it is noted, spending by local officials usually runs about one-third of the total authorized; in the event that a new government should suddenly come in and start checking the books, provincial and district chiefs want to be able to produce the cash or ironclad vouchers. Moreover, Saigon itself is highly erratic about disbursing funds from month to month; some provincial authorities ration relief payments for fear that a sudden cutoff might provoke resentment or even uprisings by the refugees. In many cases, refugees may be receiving no more than half their allotment.

Resettlement and job-retraining programs also look better on paper. For one thing, most of the refugees appear to be women and children, or, as one official put it, "what's left after all the able-bodied people have either been drafted by the government or impressed by the Vietcong." Some, whose sons and husbands are serving with the enemy, are not welcome. Those able to work are largely unskilled peasants; land to start them up again in rice farming is often at a premium. But Saigon would much rather return them to the homes they fled from than to resettle them. The catch is that the very process of pacification means more of the hit-and-run warfare that induces the peasant bystander to pull up stakes.

and far more are fleeing their homes than returning to them.

If the hit-and-run tactics of both sides, together with the heavy Vietcong taxation and the stepped-up terror, are one inducement for the peasant to leave his village, another is a carefully calculated Communist campaign to spread economic chaos by cutting communication lines and shutting off shipments of food and other supplies. As the Vietcong overrun the smaller hamlets and villages, refugees crowd into district towns, depleting rice supplies and creating other acute shortages of necessities such as cooking oil and salt. And as these centers are threatened in turn, the flow is pushed on toward the provincial towns; with roads interdicted and monsoon rains hampering airlift efforts, the pressure pushes the refugee flow on down from such highland trouble spots as Pleiku, Kontum, Ban Me Thuot, and Da Lat to the already crowded northern and central coastal provinces, which have food shortages of their own.

#### Rice and Ruin

A measure of the problem thus created can be seen in the fact that eight of these provinces consume 640,000 tons of rice each year, while producing only 220,000 tons. Even in the best of times they must import heavily from the rice-rich Mekong Delta. This interprovince commerce, however, has been almost completely ruptured by the cutting of roads and railroad lines. Shipping cannot begin to take up the slack, and air transport is inadequate. Hoarding by greedy merchants hoping for a speculative killing, or by ricegrowers who do not wish to risk their produce on Vietcong-invested roads, aggravates the scarcity.

Thus the refugee problem becomes more than a question of handing out a dole; its key, as of now, is the supply and price of rice, which is something the United States can and is doing something about, without injuring the image of the Saigon government as a solicitous and busy benefactor of its people. All told, the U.S. aid mission has committed some 152,500 tons of surplus American rice to Vietnam for this year. Arrangements have even been made for the emergency

purchase of as much as 50,000 tons of rice available in Thailand, with a special 2,500 tons to be directly airlifted by American cargo planes to isolated highland population centers. This shipment, at the rate of three planes a day, will provide continuing supplies on a regular schedule, and the hope is that it will allay anxieties in remote upland areas and contribute toward diminishing the refugee flow. With these arrangements, administration officials believe that the refugee problem is, as one of them put it, "just barely manageable as of now."

But in places like Pleiku and Da Nang, the price of rice has already leaped thirty per cent or more at times, especially when reserves are low. In the northern Buddhist stronghold of Hué, prices of rice and most other necessities are reckoned to be roughly half again as much as in Saigon. The refugee food allotment, however, is calculated on the basis of "reasonable" rice prices; should they soar out of sight, everybody would suffer. In the words of Richard Evans, until recently the top refugee man in the Saigon aid mission, "Everybody becomes a refugee." A veteran of seventeen years in Far East refugee work, Evans can readily envisage a march on Saigon by millions of refugees if rice isn't available at a reasonable price.

This menace may never materialize, and the hope is that somehow it could be met by more stringent government price controls, still larger shipments of American surpluses, or some form of direct distribution. But it is one way the refugee problem could deal a shattering psychological as well as economic blow to Saigon's cause. It is also a reason why the United States has directed its efforts toward making the refugee concentrations as impermanent as possible.

An effort has been made to start refugees back to their home grounds just as soon as they seem safe and food supplies are adequate. Whenever possible, refugees are kept in village groupings, where they are encouraged to elect a village chief and handle their affairs within their original political framework.

Other reasons argue for a prompt

reversal of the refugee tide. For one thing, the refugee migration threatens to solidify a split between Vietcong and anti-Vietcong areas, hardening the division of the country and playing into the hands of the Communists in any future negotiations; to the extent that the refugees are moved by hatred for the Vietcong, their departure may simplify Vietcong consolidation of its territorial gains.

#### The Trojan Horse

But a more ominous reason for urgent efforts to stem if not reverse the flood is the suspicion, which cannot be flatly confirmed, that Vietcong agitators and sympathizers have been carefully planted among the refugees to undermine areas thought to be safely beyond Vietcong influence. The likelihood of enemy infiltration has caused many provincial and district officials to isolate the refugees, or at the very least to discourage their assimilation into communities already encircled and besieged by the Vietcong.

Thus the refugee problem has presented an almost unsolvable quandary for Washington policymakers. They are adamant in their insistence that as much of the U.S. rescue effort in Vietnam as possible be channeled through the Saigon government, for all its inefficiency; a job poorly done by Saigon, it has been long argued, is still preferable to a job done well by Washington. Now, however, with the dispatch to Saigon of a new foreign-aid chief, Charles Mann, this doctrine will be applied with more flexibility. Mann was an influential member of the U.S. economic-aid mission that conducted the remarkably successful Vietnamese refugee program in 1954 and 1955, when over a million Vietnamese flocked down from the North to escape Communist rule after the Geneva settlement. Mann will not only reorganize the refugee effort but is also prepared to prod Saigon bureaucrats and provincial chiefs. A compromise will be struck between the alternatives of doing everything under Saigon's auspices and plunging in with a wholly American relief plan that would undercut the South Vietnamese government in the eyes of its own people.