

# VIETNAM

## I. Why the Refugees?



*"The fact that almost the entire population tried to get away from the Communists is an extraordinary indication of their belief in freedom, of the fact that they don't want to live under a Communist regime."—Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, April 2, 1975.*

As a result of the latest setbacks for the Thieu regime, large numbers of civilians have abandoned their homes in different parts of South Vietnam. Such movements are usually described by the United States and Saigon governments as refugees "voting with their feet" because of their abhorrence of living under Communist control.

Additional requests for U.S. aid to Saigon are often justified by citing these refugee movements as illustrations of the South Vietnamese peoples' "resistance to Communist aggression." Statements by both President

Ford and Vice President Rockefeller leave little doubt that the current flow of refugees in South Vietnam will again be used to argue for more aid to Thieu. U.S. Ambassador to Saigon Graham Martin, quoted in a letter written by Thieu's Deputy Prime Minister, makes explicit the hope that "the millions of refugees abandoning Communist-controlled zones will help create a shift in American public opinion in favor of the Republic of Vietnam."

Based on my own personal experiences of working with refugees in South Vietnam, I discovered this notion of a political motivation for the movement of refugees to be pure propaganda. In fact, after extensive contact with many hundreds of refugees over a period of close to two years I met few who had left their homes out of fear or dislike of the Communists.

There are a number of causes for the sudden flow of refugees we are now witnessing in Vietnam, including

panic, anarchic conditions in cities abandoned by Saigon officials, and fear of being left behind. However, a major reason is fear of the fighting, desire to find relative safety within the Saigon-controlled enclaves. Refugees are afraid that once Saigon forces are gone, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) takes over, the PRG-controlled areas will be subjected to massive bombing attacks and artillery fire.

Indeed, recent events show these fears to be fully justified. In their latest attempt to recapture the coastal city of Nha Trang, on April 6, Saigon forces paved the way by dropping 15,000 pound "daisy cutter" bombs which exploded directly on the city (*Chicago Tribune*, 4/7/75). Missionaries and other relief workers in South Vietnam report that two thirds of Ban Me Thuot, the capital city of Darlac province in the Central Highlands, has been destroyed, at least half of it by Saigon bombing. And Kontum and

by Edward Block

Pleiku have been declared free-fire zones according to Saigon government sources (*Boston Globe*, 3/24/75).

[RAIN OF DEATH]

Neither the PRG nor the North Vietnamese Army have ever had a policy of bombing and burning population centers in Vietnam. To the contrary, it is primarily the impact of large-scale air bombardment of populated areas by the U.S. and Saigon air forces which has caused the huge displacements we have witnessed over the past ten years. And when U.S.-Saigon troops have been forced into retreat, this strategy has been supplemented by carpet bombing and indiscriminate shelling of populated cities and villages taken over by the PRG. The continuous Saigon air raids over the PRG city of Loc Ninh in Binh Long province is but one recent example of this strategy—there are many other instances which could also be cited.

Much of the city of Hue was destroyed in Tet 1968 during the U.S.-Saigon counterattack to recapture areas they had lost in the initial fighting. Thousands of civilians who had stayed in their homes after the U.S.-Saigon forces withdrew were subsequently killed or injured as American fighter planes dropped tons of bombs on the city. Certainly, the people of Hue could not have forgotten this tragic experience as they watched the Saigon soldiers suddenly disappear this March.

In 1972, Quang Tri was completely destroyed by U.S. B-52 bombers and Saigon artillery fire, killing more than 25,000 people whose only crime had been to remain in the city when it was taken over by the PRG. Those who were able to escape were not "fleeing from Communist aggression," as pictured by the Administration, but from the rain of death and destruction that was poured on them by the U.S.-Saigon military forces.

In Binh Dinh province, there were less than 10,000 refugees (many of them ARVN deserters and their dependents) who fled their homes during the "Easter offensive" of March-April 1972. It was only after Saigon's counterattack to retake captured districts that the in-camp refugee popu-

lation swelled to over 120,000 people. These refugees had remained in their homes and villages until U.S. and Saigon air forces combined to annihilate every population center under PRG control in Binh Dinh. At that time, those people who were still alive had no real choice other than to go to Saigon-controlled areas, where they could find safety from the bombing.

Even the State Department's own research documents expose their line on refugees as a deliberate misrepresentation of the facts. Numerous studies carried out under the sponsorship of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon indicate that the great majority of refugees had fled from the dangers of war, not out of fear of the Communists. This was confirmed once again in a *New York Times* survey of hundreds of refugees who recently fled to Da Nang from Quang Tri, Hue, and other northern areas. According to this survey, "refugees appeared to be fleeing in panic rather than for political reasons . . . . Not one [refugee] said it was because he or she feared or hated the Communists." (*New York Times*, 3/26/75).

Related to this simple panic is the fact that retreating Saigon forces carried out a "scorched earth policy" destroying food supplies and fresh water facilities. The Saigon government can rely on continuing food stocks from the U.S. aid program, and many refugees feel they must move into the Saigon enclave if they are to receive any food. They also know the PRG forces are unlikely to be carrying enough food and water to provide for those civilians who remain behind.

[AID WITH STRINGS]

Humanitarian aid offered by Americans to assist the refugees in South Vietnam has been pouring in to federal and private relief organizations from around the world. There is some question at this point, however, as to how such aid will be distributed and who will actually be receiving it.

It should be kept in mind that most refugees who fled their homes in the Central Highlands and the northern five provinces are now living in areas

governed by the PRG. There are approximately 1.2 million refugees in the northern provinces, 400,000 in the central provinces, and only 100,000 in and around Saigon, according to NBC News. If relief assistance is given proportionate to these figures, the refugees in PRG zones should receive 94 percent of all funds and other resources sent to Vietnam for humanitarian aid.

The PRG has already requested international relief assistance to care for the civilian population now under their control. And several relief organizations, including the United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF), the Mennonites, and the American Friends Service Committee have already offered to help needy Vietnamese living under both the PRG and Saigon governments.

Although such organizations can make a significant contribution toward alleviating the present refugee turmoil, their capabilities are relatively limited. Until now, the largest single source of funds and resources directed to refugee assistance in South Vietnam has been the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which is the economic and technical assistance arm of the State Department. And, as long as the Saigon regime remains intact, it is unlikely the State Department will consent to provide relief assistance for refugees living under the PRG.

In fact, the Administration's current "humanitarian aid" program is closely tied to the political string of supporting Saigon's war effort. For example, in this year's USAID request for \$135 million in "humanitarian aid," almost 90 percent of the funds were programed to support paramilitary refugee resettlement operations—that is, to put refugees in contested or PRG-controlled zones in order to legitimize Saigon control over new territory.

Furthermore, at least until the Paris Agreements were signed in January 1973, the U.S. refugee assistance program in South Vietnam was implemented in conjunction with "Operation Phoenix," the CIA-sponsored counterinsurgency effort to eliminate suspected PRG cadre by assassination

and terror. Refugee camps, for example, were prime areas of activity for Saigon agents on the lookout for "Communist sympathizers" and the like. In refugee resettlement areas, children between the ages of 6 and 14 were often recruited by Saigon police to serve as informants. After January 1973, funding for Operation Phoenix was reportedly cut off. Nevertheless, current news accounts of Saigon troops and police carrying out "discriminate elimination" of suspected enemy agents aboard U.S.-operated refugee evacuation ships (*Chicago Tribune*, 4/7/75) reflect the continuing close connection between so-called refugee relief and Saigon's counterinsurgency campaign.

In the past, the U.S. Congress has been an unwitting tool in this counterinsurgency effort by agreeing to Administration requests for large amounts of "humanitarian aid" directed to the Thieu regime. If members of Congress are truly sincere about providing

humanitarian (rather than paramilitary) aid to South Vietnam, they should insist the Administration make funds available to *all* refugees, including the great majority now living in PRG zones.

Congress should also require that U.S. funds for humanitarian aid to South Vietnam be distributed through agencies other than USAID, which exists primarily to service the Thieu regime and its corrupt officials. During the past two years, as a result of findings and recommendations made by Senator Kennedy's Subcommittee on Refugees, the Senate has urged in its foreign aid appropriation bills that the Administration open up new, more effective, and less politically-oriented channels for providing economic and humanitarian assistance to South Vietnam. However, due to its own political bias, the State Department has strongly resisted such efforts, and Ambassador Martin even went so far as to urge reduced U.S. aid for the In-

ternational Red Cross because of its relief operations in North Vietnam.

To overcome this roadblock, a few congressmen, including Senators Kennedy and Humphrey, have recently proposed legislation that would require any additional U.S. humanitarian aid appropriations to Indochina to be channelled through various multi-national agencies such as the International Red Cross, United Nations relief agencies and private international relief organizations. Only with measures such as this can we insure against the continued political manipulation of refugees in South Vietnam, as well as prevent Saigon officials from adding more money to their already bulging Swiss bank accounts.

---

*Edward Block served two years as refugee relief and rehabilitation officer in South Vietnam for the United States Agency for International Development, 1972-73.*

---

## II. The Myth of the Hue Massacre

*"Look, if you think any American official is going to tell the truth, then you're stupid. Did you hear that?—stupid."*—Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Saigon, July 1965.

With the Saigon government's abandonment of Hue, and with refugees once more in flight, it was inevitable that the media would revive the memory of the "Hue massacre" of 1968. During March and early April 1975, wire services reported almost daily that "the bodies of more than 3,000 Hue residents were found in mass graves outside the city, executed by their Communist-led cap-

tors" (March 25). Don Oberdorfer of the *Washington Post*, in his "farewell" to Hue, recalled that "some 2,800 people were executed in Hue during the Tet offensive. Similar statements were made by the *New York Times*, CBS News and other media.

The "Hue massacre" is now mentioned in a virtually reflex action whenever people refer to Hue—understandably so, given the number of times the story has been repeated since 1968. But this reflex represents a triumph of propaganda over journalistic professionalism. For, like so much else which concerns the history of the Vietnam War, this widely accepted "fact" is a myth, originated by officials of the Saigon and U.S. governments, using

phony documentation and plain lies.

The myth of the Communist massacre at Hue has never been seriously questioned or investigated by the press. Why this has been so, and the process by which the myth has been institutionalized, is as important as the falsity of the myth itself.

[THE MYTH]

The essential point of the myth<sup>1</sup> is that during their month-long occupation of Hue during the Tet Offensive of 1968, NLF and North Vietnamese forces deliberately, according to an advance plan and "blacklist," rounded up and murdered thousands of civilians, either because they

by Edward Herman and D. Gareth Porter