

Unaccompanied Children Pose a Refugee Problem

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CAMP PENDLETON, Calif., July 27—Officials dealing with the resettlement of 130,000 Vietnamese and Cambodians have discovered in refugee camps more than 300 children who arrived in this country unaccompanied by their parents.

Most of them are Vietnamese, according to those familiar with their cases. Some were apparently sent out with other relatives or friends when Saigon fell to the Communists at the end of April. Others are said to have been separated from their parents as they fled.

Unlike the 2,000 youngsters, most of whom were orphans, who were flown to the United States in Operation Babylift in early April, nearly all the unaccompanied children in the camps apparently have living parents who have not released them for adoption.

The disposition of these children, members of the President's Interagency Task Force on Indochina Refugees acknowledged last week, poses serious legal and moral problems that have yet to be resolved.

"They've only surfaced rea-

sonably late," said Elinor Green, the group's chief spokesman. "As we get more and more statistics on the camps, we find that some of these children don't belong to families."

She said the Government's policy as far as it had evolved was "to do as much research as possible as to where their families are" and then "to reunite them with their families."

"If they turn out to be children with parents in Vietnam," she added, "that presents a

Continued on Page 9, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 6

problem that has never been faced before that I know of. One can only assume that if their parents wanted them out they would be kept here."

She said that to the best of her knowledge neither the International Red Cross nor the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had been asked to approach the new Government in Saigon to see if it could be determined whether the children's parents wanted them back in South Vietnam.

However, an official at the High Commissioner's office in New York, who is working on the repatriation of about 2,400 refugees who have asked to return, said the United Nations was aware of the children and had asked the interagency group not to put any of them up for sponsorship until it could be learned if they had parents in Vietnam who wanted them back.

"Some of the children have already come to our representatives—one or two—and asked to go back," he said, "and then they have changed their minds. But how does an 11-year-old child make up his mind?"

He said he did not think the children should be placed in any permanent situation, except with close relatives, until some sort of inquiries could be made.

"Frankly, we don't have any

answers for the moment," he said. "It might be good not to do anything for the moment. We're not in a position yet to check on people in Vietnam. We don't have an office there yet."

The largest number of children who have been identified as "unaccompanied," about 170, are here at Camp Pendleton. Seventy-nine are at Indiantown Gap, Pa., 38 at Fort Chaffee, Ark., and 18 at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., the other posts

where refugees are being housed. Twenty-eight children are reported to be under the care of the local authorities on Guam.

Although different methods of caring for the children have been used at the various camps, most of the youngsters here are living with relatives or families they attached themselves to during the exodus. They are treated much like the more than 17,000 other people still living in tents and quonset huts on this Southern California Marine base.

However, 13 girls and 20 boys, mostly between the ages of 8 and 13, are being housed dormitory-fashion in an unmarked quadruple trailer guarded by a military police-

man and set some distance from the nearest tents.

They are children who have no one to care for them, and they are being watched over by Red Cross officials and counselors with the aid of bilingual Vietnamese couples from the camp.

Although photographs of the youngsters at play were permitted, no outsider is allowed to talk with the children or visit the dormitory. This policy led one person associated with the program to complain that officials appeared to be reluctant to have the children's personal histories explored.

However, Thomas C. Irvin, deputy senior civil coordinator for the interagency group here, insisted that the only intent

was to shield the youngsters from undue pressures after their traumatic experience.

Like other officials questioned, Mr. Irvin, who is in charge of the efforts here to resettle the children, conceded that there were no easy answers.

"We're still trying to formulate ideas about just how to handle this problem," he said, "because we obviously could not process the children out as unaccompanied. We're not talking, except in very rare cases, about an adoptable child. The facts are so difficult to establish you'd never get a court to agree that the child was adoptable."

However, Mr. Irvin indicated some doubt about the wisdom

of attempting to send the children back to Vietnam or even of making inquiries about their parents for fear of bringing retribution down on those who stayed behind.

"As you can imagine, it's a double-edged sword," he said. "To establish the whereabouts or even the existence of the parents can cause problems."

Moreover, he added that the interagency group had "had reports from children who came out with relatives that there were conscious decisions by the parents not to leave."

Mr. Irvin said that in most cases where children were with blood relatives they would be processed out as a family. In other instances, he said, efforts are being made to persuade unrelated families with whom

a child may be staying to keep the youngster when they leave the camp.

He noted that in many states it would be possible for such families to apply for foster homes status and receive financial assistance.

For those who cannot be placed with a Vietnamese family, he said, the interagency group is negotiating with San

Diego County on the possibility of finding foster homes for them.

"I guess there's one thing we need to keep in mind to keep this in perspective," he added as he pondered the alternatives. "There's no government guidebook on how to run a refugee processing center."