

Saigon Plans Vast Peasant Shift

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 10 — South Vietnamese and American officials here have disclosed plans for what is expected to be the largest planned movement of peasants in the history of Vietnam.

The Saigon Government, with full American support, hopes to resettle the refugees in more sparsely populated provinces. The peasants are to be moved to the two southernmost military regions, called III Corps and IV Corps.

Estimates of the total number to be involved in the movement vary. American sources cite figures ranging from 200,000 to more than a million, depending on security and the willingness of the peasants. South Vietnamese officials, however, confirm that the movement could involve between two million and three million peasants throughout two military regions during the next three years.

It is an attempt by the South Vietnamese to solve chronic refugee problems in the northernmost military zone, called I Corps, where nearly a million peasants, by official estimate,

have been removed from villages during the last four years to urban centers.

Some American officials here have expressed fear that the movement will create more physical and psychological stress than the peasants, already bewildered by the war, can handle. They add that the movement will add greatly to postwar social reconstruction problems.

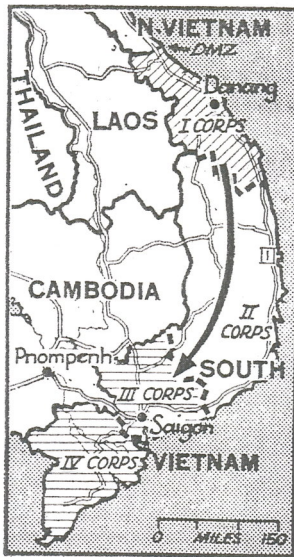
South Vietnamese officials feel the vast movement will be acceptable to the refugees who have already broken ties with their ancestral plots, so important as centers of Vietnamese religious worship.

Some Vietnamese, sharply critical of the movement, say that the plan is a political move by the Government against the Vietnamese of the northernmost provinces, who have consistently resisted control by the Saigon Government.

The area has been traditionally sympathetic to the Communists and remains the poorest economic region in South Vietnam. By moving the peasants, these critics say, the Government would attempt to disperse its opposition at the cost of still more suffering.

The project, already approved in principle by the highest South Vietnamese and American officials, is now in its final planning stages and will be announced soon by the Saigon Government. A new agency will be formed to handle the movement.

The project will be financed



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Continued on Page 6, Column 3

by the United States, according to Franklin Stewart, the director of the War Victims Program in Vietnam.

"We expect that this year's allotted refugee fund will be exhausted during the first two months of the program. Mr. Stewart said. "After that we hope to get additional money from the U.S. Government."

"The costs of the project after all would be too much for the South Vietnamese Government to handle at this time," he said.

The Minister of Social Welfare, Dr. Tran Nguon Phieu, said the plan had been considered for several years but had not been acted on because of the "political implications" of moving peasants out of the northern provinces during the initial period of the Paris peace talks.

"Only now do we feel that we can go ahead with the plan. Before this time political observers watching the peace talks in Paris would have seen the move as a preparation for handing over the area to the North Vietnamese," he said. "I expect the movement will begin this spring, when the monsoon season in central Vietnam ends and work becomes possible."

Difficulties for Saigon

Refugees in the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam have long been a source of frustration for officials here. Since 1965, the fighting there

has often been heaviest. Search-and-destroy operations have sent hundreds of thousands of refugees into relocation centers near urban areas, where the peasants have lived off an economy sustained by American troops. Security in rural areas and unexploded mines and bombs have often made village resettlement impossible.

Refugee officials here estimate that about a million Vietnamese continue to live in what is termed "nonviable" conditions in I Corps. Unofficial estimates run even higher.

"The success of the pilot project, the resettlement of the Cambodian refugees, has encouraged us to begin a land development project in general, the Minister of State, Dr. Phan Quang Dan said.

Dr. Dan headed a program that resettled more than 200,000 refugees from Cambodia. He is expected to head the new resettlement project.

Loss of Jobs Is Noted

"For years we have spent billions in the I Corps and have achieved nothing. Our idea now is to settle hard-core refugees on new land. It is just nonsense to dole out money to them without giving them solutions," Dr. Dan said.

"We are facing tremendous economic problems," he went on in accented but clear English. "The withdrawal of American troops is now beginning to be felt."

"Sixty thousand families have

already lost their jobs. There will be twice as many in '71 and after that many more," he said.

"But we have two tremendous assets," he continued, "rich land and a disciplined army. We can resettle soldiers and their families on land which together can add greatly to development of the country."

"At first the relocation project will be gradual," he said. "Village representatives will be brought down to look at the land. Then they will go back and tell the people what they have seen. I figure we can bring down 200,000 within the first six months. That would be a good beginning."

In response to a question as to whether some peasants would be forced to move, the minister said, "For those who say yes, we would bring them right away. The others will follow, I know. They are like sheep. We know from the Cambodian experience that the peasants will jump at the opportunity to have new land."

In the past, such big movements have been avoided by refugee officials here. Only one such movement has occurred during the course of the war. It involved 3,000 peasants who were settled in the Camranh Bay area.

Vietnamese peasants are known to have strong ties to the graves of their ancestors. Both Buddhist and Roman Catholic Vietnamese traditions encourage respect for ancestors.

Some American refugee ad-

visers are showing opposition, charging that the new movement would create even more rootless Vietnamese.

One American adviser, who asked not to be identified, said:

"I am afraid that if they try to settle refugees in our province the peasants will eventually move to Saigon to join the urban slums. I am opposed to the movement. I know other American advisers are opposed. In the long run, it will only add another tragedy to our already tragic involvement here."

Mr. Stewart, however, believes that the peasants will have a choice.

"Our first priority is to let Vietnamese settle in their own villages," he said. "If that is not possible, we want them to resettle them as near as possible to their lands. In all cases it will be our policy to have voluntary movement where we are dealing with permanent relocation of refugees."

"I know some people feel the Vietnamese peasants want to remain near their ancestral graves," Dr. Dan said. "But look back at Vietnamese history. Vietnamese have been moving south for centuries."

"This will be the largest organized movement of Vietnamese in all of Vietnamese history," he noted with pride.

"I feel that ancestral ties are important but are overstressed. A chance to farm land is more important to the peasant," he said.

Vietnamese have been mov-

ing south from the Tonkin region — now North Vietnam — since the eleventh century. The move has been gradual, with Vietnamese clashing for centuries with the Chams, an Indian civilization that occupied present day central Vietnam, and later with Cambodians in the nineteenth century.

The largest refugee movement

came in 1954, when 850,000 left North Vietnam to resettle in the south, where they awaited the unification of the country which was to follow elections in 1956.

Most North Vietnamese in the south continue to live in separate quarters and villages, apart from the South Vietnamese, still talking among themselves of returning to the north when peace comes.