

Saigon Is Said to Abandon Big Refugee Resettlement

Special to The New York Times
MAR 12 1971

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 11—The Saigon Government's plan to move refugees from the northern part of South Vietnam to the southern part has been quietly set aside in favor of resettling them within their native provinces, American officials said today.

The change follows a Vietnamese-American survey completed in central Vietnam last month in which it was found that the overwhelming majority of the refugees were opposed to moving to other regions and wanted to return to their native villages.

The survey, made in the wake of a controversy aroused by the disclosure last January of

the plan to move the peasants, estimated by American experts to number in the hundreds of thousands, has led South Vietnamese officials to re-emphasize what is known as the "return to the village" program. However, it appears that only minor progress has been made.

Refugee officials now say that all relocations involving movement from one region to another will be strictly voluntary, though plans to move some refugees in Military Region I, the northernmost in South Vietnam, to the provinces of Binhtuy and Longkhanh, in Military Region III, northeast of Saigon, are still being considered.

The figures cited, from 10,000 to 20,000 refugees, are well below the original estimates of those involved.

According to some American sources, high Vietnamese province officials in Binhtuy and Longkhanh were not enthusiastic about receiving people from farther north.

The sources added that American officials were embarrassed by the January disclosure. "From that point on the whole idea has been played down," one source added.

United States Embassy officials have maintained that the

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MARCH 12, 1971

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report was premature and that no detailed plans had been drawn up. The movement of refugees to have begun this spring, was still in the early stages of discussion at the time of the report, it was said.

Norman Firnstahl, deputy director of the refugee program, a branch of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, the American Civil military advisory program, known as CORDS, said the survey last month "clearly established the 'return to the village' program as our highest priority."

"The survey gave us the most thorough understanding of the conditions within the refugee camps of central Vietnam yet," added, using the customary term for the northern region of South Vietnam.

What Do the Refugees Want?

An American official dealing with refugees said that the change in resettlement represented a victory for lower-echelon officials who argued against the plan.

"Most significantly," another official said, "finally someone has asked the refugees just what they actually desire."

The American refugee office generally coordinates its efforts with the South Vietnamese Ministry for Refugees and Social Welfare, headed by Dr. Tran Nguon Phieu.

Another program, run by the

Vietnamese Government and aimed at developing new hamlets in the southern regions, will receive any refugees who want to move from military Region I. Headed by a Minister of State Dr. Phan Quang Dan, and known as the Land Development and Hamlet Building Program, it is to establish new areas for development where displaced persons can be resettled.

"So far, Dr. Dan has not been given the mandate to go ahead," an American official said. "It is difficult to say how many refugees will eventually be involved."

Severe and Complex

The refugee situation in the northern most provinces of South Vietnam is considered by American and Vietnamese officials to be the most severe and complex.

The northern region has suffered the heaviest toll in the war. Vietnamese living there in what are officially considered to be unviable conditions approach a million. Vietnamese observers say unofficially that the figure runs even higher.

Many of those displaced are living in an artificially stimulated economy stemming from concentrations of American troops in that area, so that those in refugee camps and urban slums are finding their source of income vanishing with the American withdrawal. Yet security considerations often prevent many of them from returning to their villages.

Adding to the complexity, villages in areas now secure have been leveled and fields where rice used to grow are riddled with unexploded bombs and mines.

The northern provinces have always been the poorest region. Many there have supported the Vietcong against the South Vietnamese Government.