

# Hopes Thin for the Millions Adrift Across Indochina

By HENRY KAMM APR 21 1971

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 20—Uprooted, sometimes by those who are called friends and sometimes by those called enemies, millions of living victims of the war are adrift in Indochina.

They wash up here or there, sometimes for a brief respite, often for a long stay without a future. Then they move on, mostly to another place where they do not want to stay.

In a region where 30 years of war have made a mockery of numbers, it is a fair estimate that of the 27 million people thought to live in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, at least a fourth have been uprooted at least once. About half of that number remain in places that they cannot consider home.

In all three countries tens of thousands are still being made homeless by a war from which the United States may be disengaging but to which the people of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos see no end.

The United States finances everything done on behalf of the uprooted in South Vietnam and Laos and will presumably do the same in Cambodia. A Senate subcommittee headed by Edward M. Kennedy has earned the respect of American officials for focusing attention

on how the United States exercises its responsibility for displaced persons. The subcommittee will hold hearings on the issue tomorrow and Thursday, and William E. Colby, who is in charge of the American side of the pacification effort in South Vietnam, will be the principal witness.

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“They are not fleeing the enemy and not fleeing the allies,” said Keo Viphakone, the overburdened man in charge of the insoluble refugee problem of Laos. “They are fleeing the soldiers.”

In tropical lands where food grows swiftly, the refugees often go hungry because they do not even stay long enough to raise their own or because they are crowded so densely into inhospitable places where not enough can be provided.

“We are preventing them from dying,” a missionary in Pnompenh said, summing up the extent of what is being done for the displaced persons of Cambodia. And—it is clear after seven weeks of travel through Indochina, visits to refugee sites and interviews with scores of displaced persons and officials charged with

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The New York Times/Nancy Moran

Laotians from island in Mekong on way to refugee camp

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their care—the missionary might have been talking of those in the two other countries as well.

In the general absence of security as long as the war continues, refugees can be resettled elsewhere or returned to their native regions only at the risk of a renewal of hostilities that will again cast them adrift.

The greatest number of refugees is in South Vietnam, where a conservative estimate is five million displaced persons in a population of 17 million. As early as 1954, when Vietnam was partitioned, nearly a million Vietnamese fled south rather than live under the Communists in the North.

Of the three million people thought to live in Laos, the number of those displaced at least once is put at 750,000.

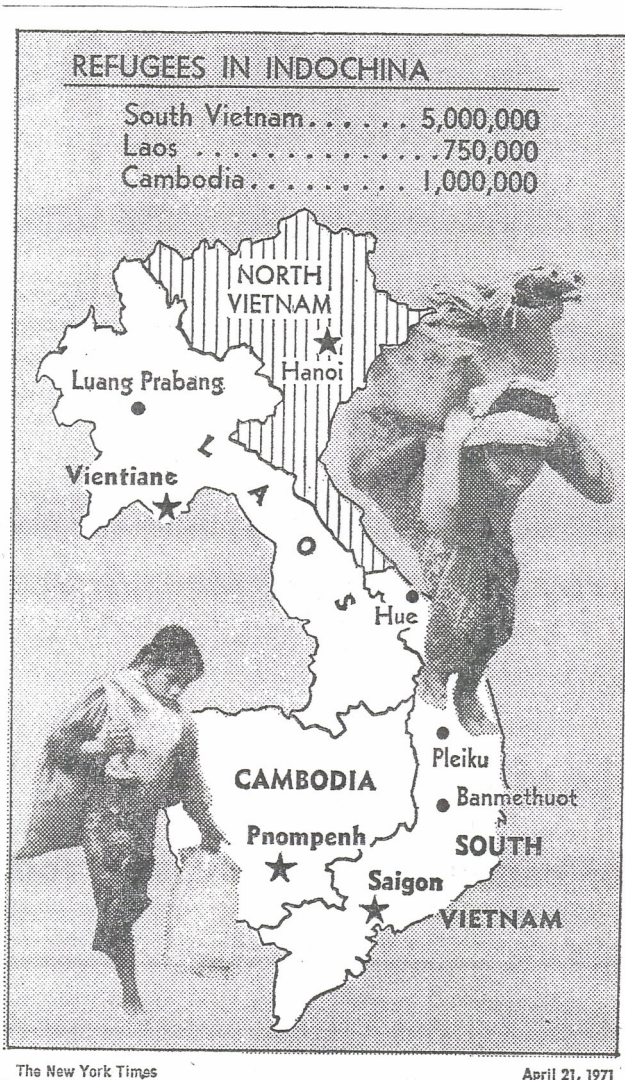
Cambodia, which lived in relative peace until last year, has not been at war long enough yet to compile even approximate statistics. But 200,000 ethnic Vietnamese have been evacuated to South Vietnam, the population of Pnompenh is thought to have risen from 600,000 to more than a million and there are refugees all over the countryside.

No figures are available on displaced persons in the Communist-controlled regions of the three countries, where regular attacks from the air have turned many inhabitants into cave dwellers. The bulk of the bombing is conducted by the United States, but the South Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian Air Forces are no more sparing of the lives of their countrymen.

The air war, along with other weapons in the vast arsenal that the United States has brought to Indochina, is generally

accepted as a major cause of the mass displacements. That view is shared by most American refugee officials interviewed, but because of the touchiness of the subject most ask that their names be withheld.

There is another side to the problem. When the Communists enter a village and impress its men, even temporarily, to fight for them or to serve for a month or two carrying the goods of war on their backs, the village has the choice of doing their bidding—and becoming the target of American or South Vietnamese air strikes, artillery barrages or ground attacks—or facing Communist retaliation for refusal.



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In the "revolutionary warfare" the Communists practice, they also spread terror to demoralize civilian populations in contested areas; not only do they employ threats and propaganda but they also carry out mortar and rocket attacks on civilian targets.

Such tactics have often caused entire villages to move voluntarily to areas more firmly under Government control, particularly since they are assured of safety from the allied air attacks that are a constant threat in areas not clearly on the Government side.

The South Vietnamese Minister of Social Welfare, Dr. Tran Nguon Phieu, noted in an interview that the United States introduced saturation bombing and shelling to save human lives, expending ammunition rather than men. Dr. Phieu, a man of tact, did not add that the lives being saved were American, perhaps at the expense of those of Vietnamese.

"Our kind of war has destroyed all the accommodations that once existed," an American official said. "The scale and scope of our operations preclude any live-and-let-live. With our air power and our artillery we have made it a massive war all the time."

As American troops withdraw there is a decline in the amount of artillery being used, even though the air war continues without letup. In February, 1969, official figures show, 1,078 American guns fired 961,154 rounds. For last February

the figures show 560 guns and 316,275 shells.

At least until recently the Americans appeared to have abandoned the tactic of large military drives that were termed "refugee-generating"—that is, entailing forcible relocation of the civilian population of an area, often without warning and preparation.

But since last year the practice has been renewed by the South Vietnamese command. Some American civil officials accuse the United States of failure to exercise the responsibility that American power confers on it in Vietnam to halt the practice.

"The place is called Pleikotu, and there are more than 2,000," said the foreign volunteer nurse who has been driving there daily although the road is sometimes mined by the Vietcong. "They were brought there in Vietnamese helicopters on Dec. 16. Of the 300 who have died, I think about 80 per cent were children."

"But I found only two dead today, when usually there are five or six. They die of malnutrition because all they have to eat is rice, roots and leaves."

"They're not angry. They are so beaten down they don't have any reaction. They are all alone out there."

Pleikotu is 15 miles from Pleiku, a provincial capital, regional military headquarters and the seat of a major American civil and military establishment. In the warehouse of the provincial social-welfare authorities there are large quantities of dried fish and powdered milk.

The official United States attitude is that the Americans' role is strictly advisory. "All we can do is keep the province

chief's nose to the grindstone," a senior official in Pleiku said.

That attitude enrages others in CORDS, the mixed civilian-military Civil Operations and Rural Development Support organization, which is headed by Mr. Colby. In turn, the critics are termed bleeding hearts by those who accept the official line. The response to the criticism is that, however much one may sympathize with the tribesmen's plight, advisers should advise only and let the Vietnamese make the decisions.

Irving D. Hamberger, refugee adviser for the provinces of Darlac and Quangduc, accused Washington in an interview of so impressing the American advisers with the need for establishing good rapport with their Vietnamese counterparts that their advisers are encouraged to support actions that they believe to be immoral.

Mr. Hamberger, a taut and energetic former real-estate developer from Arizona, recalled with anger hearing a colleague say, "We must be pragmatic, not moral." Mr. Hamberger is planning to leave Government service next month because of his deep dissatisfaction with the American stand on refugees.

About 300 people, mainly children and women, camp alongside the military airstrip at Banmethuot waiting for a plane. They have waited for a month, and no one has told them that no one intends to send a plane.

They are mountain tribesmen from Cambodia who left their homes last May and June to cross into Quangduc at a time when South Vietnam offered more peace than Cambodia. There were about 8,000 of them, and the Government in Saigon allotted money to feed them.

Local indifference has kept all but a fraction of the money from being spent on feeding the refugees. Hungry and neglected, they stowed away on planes that had brought ammunition to a military base near their camp. They thought they might get to Pnompenh, but they landed at Banmethuot, where no one wanted them.

They camp at the side of the airstrip. Some live in a shack, others in big United States Air Force packing crates, others in



Photographs for The New York Times by NANCY MORAN  
Vietnamese youngsters outside the makeshift housing in a refugee camp near Danang

covered holes in the ground.

They have nothing to do but wait for a plane and hope for food. What food they get, mainly from American supplies, they divide among the families.

A sack of dried fish was divided first, little fish by little fish. Then the bigger fish were cut into small pieces that were added to each pile of little fish until the sack was empty. Each person accepted what he got without argument or complaint. They smiled.

"When is the plane coming, sir?" they asked in pidgin French.

The uprooting of Montagnards, as all the members of the many hill tribes of Indochina are called, has been a particular sore point in the record of forced relocations in Laos as well as South Vietnam. Even in times of peace the hill tribesmen have all the problems of ethnic minorities in countries governed by the people of the plain. The effect of war is the more traumatic.

The hill tribesmen have won the particular affection of Americans working with them in Laos and South Vietnam, not only for fighting well despite heavy losses in mercenary units organized by the United States but also for appearing more open and friendly than the more sophisticated Vietnamese.

Even Americans not passionately committed to the montagnard cause, as well as many Vietnamese, agree that the attitude of most Vietnamese officials toward the relocation of montagnards is indifference at best. Those more involved accuse the Vietnamese of chasing the tribesmen from their traditional lands to exploit them themselves.

"The Vietcong attack us, the Americans bomb us and the Vietnamese rob us," a montagnard nurse said as she rocked her infant son, whom she had tied to her body.

Over strong objection by CORDS, relocation of montagnard hamlets was resumed last summer under orders of Maj. Gen. Ngo Dzu, commander of Military Region II. Fifty-one thousand had been moved by last month, with 30,000 more due to be uprooted.

On American insistence that, with mounting Congressional interest in refugee questions, such moves might endanger American support of other programs, General Dzu suspended the relocations. "But the relocations will eventually be carried out," a senior American official said. "All we can do is try to see that they are done right."

Buon M'bre is a resettlement site for the people of six hamlets of the Rhade hill tribe near Banmethuot. Close to 900 people live in an agglomeration of temporary shelters in a cleared site off Highway 14. It has not been attacked by daylight.

The Vietcong visited their old hamlets about twice a month, lectured to the people and forced them several times to turn over a can of rice per family. Government troops also came now and then, accused them of dealing with the enemy and sometimes took away men for questioning.

Last September, just before the rice harvest, troops came to tell them they would be evacuated to more secure lands. They were lucky because there was enough transport to allow them to carry their possessions. They worried about their rice, but the soldiers assured them that security would be provided at harvest time so that they could go to reap it.

They did, but the Communists attacked the soldiers and both the soldiers and the villagers were afraid to stay. Most of the rice was lost.

The land provided for the villagers will be cleared soon and they will plant. But it is far from sufficient for the people of Buon M'bre and it is seven months until the next harvest.

The Government gave them small amounts of food in the early stages. To buy their rice now the whole village, men and women—a boy is a man at the age of 12—work as day laborers for the Vietnamese who own most of the land around the camp. They earn 200 piasters a day, or 70 cents, except the younger ones, who get 150 piasters.

They supplement their diets with roots and leaves, digging deep for roots they do not like. "Now we have dug up

all the roots," a man wearing red shorts and a blue shirt said. "Even those under the rocks."

To show the people of Buon M'bre that the Government cannot give them security, the village was severely attacked in December, and six soldiers and seven members of their families were killed. The Vietcong kidnapped three teen-age girls and beat up a number of men.

About 70 per cent of the hamlets in which the montagnards of Vietnam, estimated at close to a million, live have already been uprooted, according to Gerald C. Hickey, an American anthropologist who is regarded as the leading expert on the hill people of Indochina.



A father with his sick baby at medical station at Namnoa

"If these poorly implemented resettlements continue, there is a strong possibility that the montagnards will be left a poverty-stricken population living on the fringes of Vietnamese society," Dr. Hickey said in an interview.

His views are shared by most of the Americans concerned with civil affairs. The Minister of Social Welfare, Dr. Phieu, expressed sympathy with the montagnards but said that the generals did not often communicate their plans to him.

The Banxon area in the hill country north of the Laotian capital of Vientiane is the center of life for the Meo mountain tribesmen and other northern hill tribes. The United States feeds about 120,000 of them by airdrop, helicopter and plane delivery and by handing food over to those who come on foot into the valley.

The Communist soldiers of North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao left thinly defended Banxon alone until last March 6. Early that morning they broke in.

A woman sat keening softly in the wreckage of a shack near the airstrip. She pointed to a slim bundle at her feet. "Only one, only one," she said, and raised her hand with the dex finger pointing upward.

The bundle was her daughter, her only child, killed a few hours earlier by a grenade fragment. The Americans who work there called the child the watermelon girl, because of what she sold, smiling at them and joking. She was 12.

Nearby lay the body of the only enemy soldier killed in the attack. He was a Meo, some people said, but others thought that he was a Lao or Vietnamese. He seemed little older than the watermelon girl.

The mountain people of northern Laos have been on the move since the early nineteenth-sixties, retreating while fighting the North Vietnamese invaders. Most have had no time to stop and grow their rice in years, and they have depended on the United States for most of their necessities. In return, they have fought.

But there are few mountains left and life in the larger communities of the plain fills them with apprehension. American and Laotian friends of the tribesmen fear that the attacks on their civilian centers are a final warning that the depleted tribes must be led out of the enemy's way and given a better chance of survival.

The continuing forcible relocation of montagnards in Vietnam is only the most striking case of Saigon's turning its back on its stated policy of bringing security to the people rather than uprooting people to take them to security.

The policy was first proclaimed in the pacification plan for 1969, following years of what Dr. Phieu called "dumping people like baggage." It was observed until the middle of last year, when General Dzu resumed the relocation of montagnards.

This month similar operations were revived in Quangngai Province, a strongly contested area of Central Vietnam and the scene of much earlier dislocation of people. American pressure managed to hold up temporarily an operation that may remove about 12,000 people, but the operation has now received the required authorization, *ex post facto*, and is proceeding.

An operation undertaken earlier this month slightly south of Quangnai City has already removed 650 people from a Vietcong-controlled valley.

The operation was ordered by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, commander of the Second Division, and was strongly supported by his senior American adviser, Col. Stephen Day. But Maj. Ben G. Crosby 3d, who as district senior adviser is part of the civilian-military province advisory team, strongly voiced his team's objections in a conversation with the colonel.

The major said the principal reason for the operation was to "upgrade" the rating of Quangngai Province on the hamlet evaluation scale, an American computerized classification of all populated places in South Vietnam as to security. The ratings run from "A" to "E" in descending order of security and end with "V," a hamlet controlled by the enemy. Major Crosby discomfited the

colonel by declaring that he thought the principal motive for the removal of the people from their homes and fields was to eliminate the V hamlets of the Songve Valley.

The area will be under Communist control, the major said, and the people will be away from their fields with not enough forces in the region after the operation has been completed to guarantee their security.

"I don't like this kind of operation," Major Crosby said. "It's like punching a pillow."

"When we force them to leave the insecure areas we can control them better," said Vu Duc Chinh, a lieutenant colonel in charge of pacification and civil affairs of Military Region I in Danang, speaking of forced relocations.

"I have never yet seen a relocation that improves security in any significant way," said an American refugee official with long experience in the region about which Colonel Chinh was talking.

"The rural population remains basically uncommitted. Their primary concern is their status quo. If they have land and draw from it their subsistence, and if they can look from one growing season to the next and see survival, they do not want to move."

Among American refugee and pacification officials, from the top of the pyramid in Saigon to those at the district level, the conviction is nearly universal that the hamlet ratings are the chief villain in the return of the "refugee-generating" operations.

A high rating on the scale, designed as a "management tool" to help officials in judging the security situations, has become the goal.

Pressure for upgrading ratings, whether they reflect actual gains in security or not, originates in Washington, ranking officials said. It is then passed on by the United States mission here, anxious to show success, to the Saigon authorities, who are eager to please Washington, particularly if it can be done by bookkeeping devices.

The pressure was heightened, reliable American sources said, when President Nguyen Van Thieu quietly passed the word throughout his administration last spring that by the spring of this year he wanted all D and E hamlets brought to higher ratings.

The withdrawal of American troops, which spreads troops and security more thin, is believed to be another factor in Saigon's renewal of efforts to concentrate the population.

Nguyen Thieu, deputy hamlet chief of Culac, said he did not know that his native area was known as the Street Without Joy. It was named by the French soldiers of the first war of Indochina, who found that the region of sand dunes north of Hue was more suited to the Communists than to their own forces.

He said he was glad to be back, now that security had improved. This is home, said Dang Cuoc, a 67-year-old shopkeeper.

And Col. Ngo Van Loi, province chief of Quangngai, who came from Hanoi when the Communists took over, said, "All Vietnamese want to go home eventually.

"You too, colonel?"

"Yes," he said, after a moment. "Me too."

The people of Culac returned to their village in July, 1969. After having been made refugees by the fighting in March 1967.

The Government's Return to the Village Program has helped 900,000 South Vietnamese to rebuild their lives in or near the places from which they were driven. It is the fundamental aim of most Vietnamese who have not made a new life in a city, for their ties to the native soil are strong and durable.

The return is voluntary and is usually decided on by the village elders after inspection of the site and assurances of reasonable security.

Those who resettle are entitled to a food allowance of 3,600 piasters (\$13) a person and 10 sheets of tin roofing and a 7,500-piaster (\$27) construction allowance a family. Since most are not familiar with their entitlements, it is believed that many have gotten less than their due.

Even critics of the Vietnamese and American attitudes toward refugees agree that Return to Village has worked well and is consistent with the desires of the people. They hope that the increase in secure areas that has made possible the growth of the program is due more to a real increase in Government strength than to a tactical decision by the Communists to maintain a lull in fighting until the Americans withdraw.

There are more houses in Culac now than before the people were driven out, the shopkeeper on the Street Without Joy said, but the village was nicer then.

"There were green fences," he related, "and good gardens, trees and flowers. Perhaps years and years later people will make Culac nice again."

"I do not know when," the shopkeeper continued. "Even the Government does not know."

"Peace depends on the Governments of Saigon and America," the deputy hamlet chief said. "About the Government in Hanoi we do not know at all."