

South Vietnamese Want Prompt

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DA NANG (South Vietnam) — In Central Vietnam, where life is tough and so are the people, the Americans are more concerned about what will happen after they leave than are the Vietnamese. That probably is true of the whole country.

"Every Vietnamese knows you are leaving," said Nguyen Gia Hien, an influential Catholic politician and former senator, "and the sooner you get out the better. Please don't loiter. It doesn't do

anybody any good, you or us.

"Maybe by the end of 1971 is too soon," he added, "but six months one way or another isn't going to make any difference. Why are you so worried?"

"It's almost ego-deflating to see how well they get along without us," confessed an American official. "They sometimes act as if we were never here."

Vietnamese equanimity as they watch the Americans leave is in large part oriental fatalism. There is nothing they can do about it, so why worry. Besides, they have

seen other armies come and go.

Many are glad to see us go and don't hesitate to say so. For the average Vietnamese the war didn't really begin until the Americans came with their bombs, bulldozers and big guns. And just as the war began with the coming of the Americans, they hope it will go away as we leave.

Besides, one must reckon with the nature of the central Vietnamese. Proud, tough, conditioned by their meager environment, they have even less use for foreigners than the rest of their countrymen.

Not for nothing is central Vietnam, or Annam as it used to be called, known as Vietnam's "cradle of revolution."

Still another factor, although it is hard to define, is that many people seem to have more confidence in their government's ability to protect them. Flurries of alarm that the vengeful Viet Cong would descend upon them once the Americans departed subsided when weeks and months went by and nothing happened.

Perhaps there is no better place to measure the effects

Pullout of American Forces

of American withdrawal than central Vietnam, officially known as Military Region I (MRI), which embraces South Vietnam's five northernmost provinces.

No part of the country has been so bitterly contested, mainly because of its proximity to North Vietnam.

Hardly a building stands—unless recently constructed—that isn't marked by the war.

The landscape looks more like a moonscape. More Americans have died here than in any other place in Vietnam.

Two years ago, at the peak, there were 177,500 American troops in MRI. Today there are fewer than half that many — 83,000 to be exact — and that figure is diminishing — hopefully.

Yet the roof hasn't fallen in. True, the North Vietnamese are showing new signs of aggressiveness along the Demilitarized Zone that separates North and South. But that was to be expected.

Nothing is simple in South Vietnam and the situation in the five northern provinces is no exception. In the two most northern provinces the North

Vietnamese army is the visible threat. In the three southern provinces it is the less visible, often invisible, home-grown Viet Cong, larded with North Vietnamese because of heavy local casualties.

On the surface at least the American withdrawals have made little difference. South Vietnamese militia and regular army forces have taken up the slack as the Americans moved out. Yet appearances can be deceiving and nowhere more deceiving than in Vietnam.

"Withdrawal symptoms" have cropped up here and

there. Security has "eroded" in some places. Enemy-initiated military incidents are relatively few, but partisan attacks are up and the VC often operates more freely in broad daylight.

Some hamlets belong to the government by day, the VC by night, but it was always thus.

Some Americans detect a wait and see attitude among the people. "There are a lot fence-sitters out here," an American officer said, gesturing toward the rice paddies and the hills rising sharply in the background.