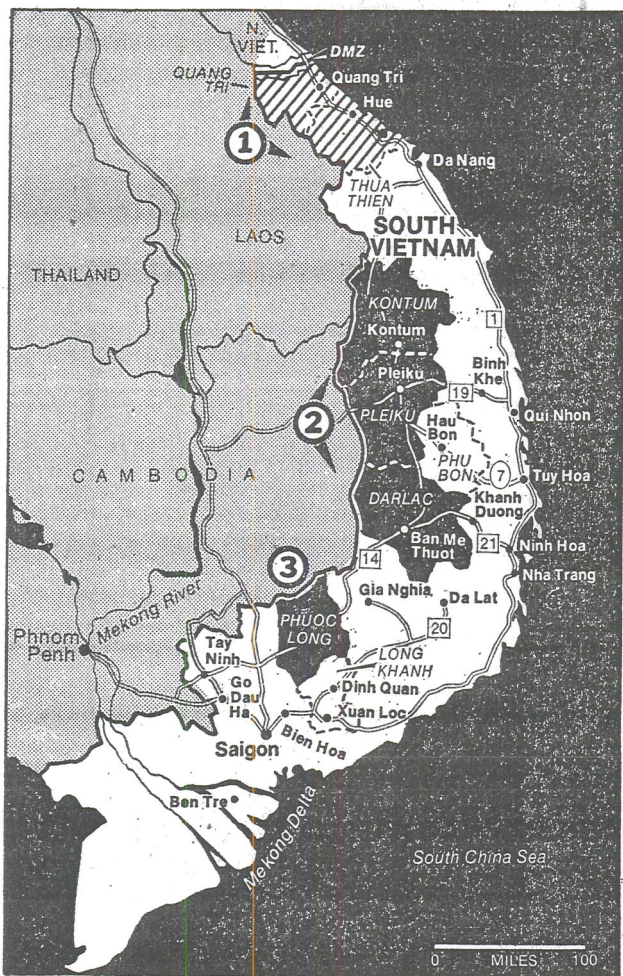


SOUTH VIETNAMESE FLIGHT FROM WAR ZONES SPREADS TO 2 NORTHERN PROVINCES



The New York Times/March 20, 1975

Flight from northernmost provinces (1) was spurred by reports that Saigon was abandoning them. Central area (2) was given up earlier this week, and Phuoc Long (3) was lost to the Communist forces in January.

MAR 20 1975 MASSIVE MOVE ON

Up to 500,000 May Be Heading for Lower Third of Country NYTimes

By MALCOLM W. BROWNE
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 19—The flight of refugees southward spread today to the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, adding tens of thousands of refugees to those who began evacuating the Central Highlands earlier this week.

By some estimates, as many as half a million people were now fleeing their homes in five provinces, an area representing almost two-thirds of the country.

The flight increased hourly as families fled cities as widely separated as the former imperial capital of Hue, at the northern end of the country, and Da Lat, a mountain resort only 140 miles northeast of Saigon.

Flight From 3 Provinces

Earlier this week the Government abandoned three Central Highlands provinces—Kontum, Pleiku and Darlac—and the stream of refugees and troops began.

Today the flight seemed to be spreading to the country's two northernmost provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien, and there was a report that residents of the capital of another Highlands province, Phu Bon, were joining the flight of refugees to the coast.

Government spokesmen repeatedly denied that Hue, Da Lat or any other part of the country was being abandoned to North Vietnamese forces. But the people, clearly under the impression that the Government might sacrifice the northern provinces to save the core of the nation, continued to move east and south.

[The Associated Press reported that Saigon officials, who were not identified, said that the Government was giving up Quang Tri province and was considering abandoning Thua Thien.]

Intelligence Data Lacking

As the exodus from the north continued, North Vietnamese and Government troops engaged in heavy fighting near Xuan Loc, a province capital less than 50 miles northeast of Saigon. [Page 18.] There were growing apprehensions among some Western military analysts that Communist forces were rapidly massing troops that could be used for an assault on Saigon itself.

Conceding that "the Vietnamese aren't telling us much anymore," these observers say the fear is heightened by the relative lack of enemy prisoners being taken these days and

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the consequent lack of intelligence as to where the Communist units are.

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Contrasted with the panic-stricken floods of refugees that were swept before the Communist advances in 1968 and 1972, the movement today was ap-

parently fairly orderly, for the most part. No major Communist attacks, no large-scale battles and no heavy aerial bombing are involved at present.

Wide Area May Be Yielded

The assumption by many was that Hue has—in fact if not by formal order—been abandoned, and that if any of the north is held, it will be only a narrow strip along the sea as far south as the latitude of Saigon.

In 1968, United States Marines led a bloody effort that retook Hue after it fell to the North Vietnamese and Vietcong during the Tet offensive. In 1970, mass graves of about 3,000 residents of Hue were uncovered, victims of a massacre during the one-month occupation by the Communist-led forces.

In the current exodus, refugees lucky enough to be near functioning airports and with enough money to buy black-market plane tickets at four times normal prices are flying to Saigon.

The national airline Air Vietnam, is operating eight flights a day from Da Lat instead of two, and these were augmented by military flights.

Refugees Move Again

A Government spokesman said that the people leaving Da Lat were refugees moving on from Ban Me Thuot, which fell last week.

Planes arriving at Saigon from Da Lat today were jammed with double their official capacities. One passenger was a young woman ticket agent who had decided against orders to abandon her job in the Air Vietnam office in Dalat.

The Government has not said Da Lat is to be evacuated, but when school closed yesterday and teachers advised students to leave, most people felt it was time to go. According to those arriving today, Da Lat was emptying rapidly.

A similar situation was reported in Hue, but most travelers were leaving by road. A stream of buses, taxis and other vehicles was said to be shutting people all day from Hue to the comparative safety of Da Nang, which presumably could be defended longer than Hue.

Troops Shifted South

A major reason for the exodus from Hue was the shift by the Government yesterday of the entire Vietnamese airborne division in the area, to supplement the defense of Saigon in the south.

The paratroopers had been rushed to the north in 1972 to help halt the North Vietnamese onslaught into Quang Tri Province, and had been stationed there ever since.

But another fear in the area was raised by the Government's apparent abandonment of huge areas elsewhere. Its voluntary surrender of the three central highlands provinces this week deeply shocked most Vietnamese.

Even in coastal towns that have been considered among the safest in South Vietnam, such as Nha Trang, nervous residents are packing and taking to the roads heading south.

The great column of people

moving away from Pleiku along Route 7 toward the coast was reported by one military source today to have swollen to nearly 400,000. The column, which began moving from the sacked, abandoned and partly destroyed province capital over the weekend, extended all the way to Tuy Hoa on the coast.

But the greatest concentration of refugees, many weak and exhausted, was reportedly still in the dense and dangerous jungle near the town of Hau Bon, the capital of Phu Bon Province.

The only journalist accompanying the exodus from the highlands, Nguyen Tu of the Saigon newspaper Chinh Luan, wrote today that as the flight gained momentum everything in its way was being abandoned, including all of Phu Bon Province. Hau Bon was looted and set afire yesterday as its residents joined the march to the coast, he said.

Government Criticized

In his commentary, which was startling to read in a press normally controlled by the government, Mr. Tu wrote:

"Our compatriots are running in panic without an explanation and without preparation either by the central or local governments.

"Do we really have a Government or don't we? Do we really have leadership or not? A ranger officer told me, 'I just can't face the people anymore.'

"An outspoken private said, 'We're running away without a fight. It's too humiliating. At least we should have had a fight first.'"

Mr. Tu quoted a Vietnamese helicopter pilot as having said: "This is all so sad. When we looked back at Pleiku there was nothing left but flames. I felt miserable. We're still fighting, we haven't been defeated, so why are we running?"

The South Vietnamese military spokesman said today that there were probably about 1,500 vehicles moving along with the column of refugees on Route 7.

Heavy fighting continued in a number of provinces fairly near Saigon, with much of the Communist effort apparently directed at closing roads.

Among the many actions was a rocket attack against Bien Hoa Airport 12 miles northeast of Saigon, killing four civilians and wounding 25.

Private U.S. Groups Widen Relief Efforts in Cambodia

Special to The New York Times

UNITED NATIONS, N. Y., March 19 — Private United States relief organizations, acting on requests from Washington last week, are beginning extended emergency food operations in Cambodia, according to their spokesmen here.

CARE, which has a staff of eight Americans in Phnom Penh, expects to reach 550,000 civilians, most of them refugees, daily. Catholic Relief Service has evacuated some nutrition experts, but its food-distribution team remains and expects to care for 400,000 daily. World Vision Relief, a Protestant group based in California, is also continuing aid.

The United Nations Children's Fund plans to extend its aid program and to feed children with supplies airlifted to Phnom Penh, an official said. He added that UNICEF "hoped that it will be able to continue to operate effectively regardless of future military developments."

UNICEF has been supplying medical equipment to ten centers in insurgent-held areas under an agreement made in Hanoi last year.