

Terror-Stricken Viet Refugees' Bloody Exodus

By Bernard Weinraub
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Tuy Hoa, South Vietnam

Hundreds of refugees—bloody, terrified and weeping — arrived in this coastal city yesterday and told of North Vietnamese rocket and artillery attacks against the exodus from the Central Highlands.

Young women, their faces smeared with blood, carried wounded and dying infants off evacuation helicopters.

Old men and women, many of them with bandaged wounds, trembled and wailed.

Wounded South Vietnamese helicopter gunners sat beside a landing pad and waited for ambulances. Some of them were barefoot with ripped, blood-soaked uniforms. Many of them cried.

Scenes of agony and heart-break unfolded as groups of refugees moved into Tuy Hoa, a frightened, tense city in Phu Yen province that will serve as the gateway for tens of thousands fleeing the Central Highlands following the government's decision to evacuate northern areas of South Vietnam. Estimates of the number of people on the move range up to half a million.

Conversations with refugees, villagers, soldiers and officials of Phu Yen province made it plain that the North Vietnamese fired rockets and artillery shells at the fleeing families, that the Communists were

seeking to thwart the exodus of the peasants and that the withdrawal from the cities and villages was violent and panicky.

Eyewitnesses told of hundreds of bodies along Highway 7, the escape route that winds southeast from Pleiku, in the heart of the highlands, to Tuy Hoa, a distance of about 135 miles.

A woman from Pleiku named Ly Thi Oanh, gripping a child with leg wounds, said in Vietnamese:

"We were on a truck. They came from the jungle and told everyone to stop moving. We were on a slope. We kept moving. They just began firing on all of us."

Although thousands of villagers were expected to ar-

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rive yesterday in Tuy Hoa, a flat, pleasant city 235 miles northeast of Saigon, only a few hundred trickled in. Their flight has been blocked by heavy fighting along the route, especially at Cheo Reo — also known as Hau Bon — the capital of the adjoining province, Phu Bon.

The North Vietnamese are dug into the jungles around Cheo Reo, according to officers here, and knocked out at least seven tanks that were leading the mass exo-

dus from the highlands.

Dozens of South Vietnamese helicopter gunships moved into the area, against heavy fire.

"The Communists are doing everything possible to prevent this withdrawal," said a senior official here.

There are believed to be at least 5000 vehicles — buses, cars, trucks and armored personnel carriers — along route 7, and tens of thousands of people walking.

There were rumors that 1000 to 2000 Montagnard tribesmen, with the govern-

ment's regional forces, had deserted with their weapons and turned rebellious, attacking the caravan from the rear, setting homes on fire, looting and massacring.

The mood of Tuy Hoa, awaiting the refugee influx, uncertain of its own plight, was emotional and tense.

"You Americans, are you going to leave us like dogs?" said a middle-aged man who said that his wife and children were in Pleiku.

"Will I see them again," he said, tears welling in his eyes. "Will I ever see my children?"



AP Wirephoto

A woman refugee broke into tears as she reached Tuy Hoa with her child

TERROR-STRICKEN REFUGEES