

U.S. Considering

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Saigon

The United States is reported to be on the verge of initiating a massive airlift from Da Nang to remove tens of thousands of refugees pouring into South Vietnam's second largest city from the former capital of Hue and other northern provinces.

Shortly after Deputy Prime Minister Phan Quang Dan announced that South Vietnam's refugee population has reached 850,000, a U.S. Embassy official disclosed that Washington has been asked to transfer \$10 million in previously approved aid funds to finance relief for refugees.

Part of the diversion of funds is to be used to finance the airlift, the official said.

"Dr. Dan spoke of 850,000 refugees this morning and if you talked with him tonight, he would probably be speaking of one million," he added.

Involved is the problem of what to do with an estimated half a million refugees converging on Da Nang alone.

U.S. technicians were dispatched yesterday to survey the massive American-built runway at Cam Ranh Bay, which has fallen into disuse since the withdrawal of American forces. It was one of three locations cited as likely terminal points for airlift of refugees from Da Nang.

"The pressures are mounting quicker than we thought and we'd like to get it going as soon as possible," the official said.

Da Nang, a city with a normal population of 450,000, was reported overflowing with refugees pouring in by motor caravan and on foot from South Vietnam's five northern provinces. Although only one of the provinces — Quang Tri, which

Refugee Airlift

touches the 17th Parallel border of North Vietnam — has been abandoned by South Vietnam's armed forces, fears of imminent North Vietnamese invasion here are reported widespread throughout the region.

A large portion of Hue's 20,000 population has fled, and South Vietnamese troops pulled out of the city yesterday along the only escape route left open.

The outpouring of refugees appeared to represent a "ballot by agony" gesture

toward the Saigon government. Although Montagnard mountain tribesmen and militia units refused in substantial numbers to join the evacuation of the abandoned provinces of Kontum, Pleiku and Phu Bon in the Central Highlands, many Vietnamese residents of these provinces and the northern province of Quang Tri were fleeing their homes with government forces for the second or third time during the Vietnam war.

The reported impending American airlift of refugees

from Da Nang would bring what could run into tens of thousands of refugees to the three central coastal provinces of Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan.

Yesterday, Edward Daly, president of World Airways, one of the charter companies which is carrying out

the just resumed airlift to the besieged Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, flew one of his firm's Boeing 727 jets to Da Nang and brought back a planeload of refugees to Saigon.

The flight, one of three yesterday, was reported arranged with Air Vietnam. Details of who was footing the bill were not immediately available.

Three more World Airways refugee flights from Da Nang to Saigon are scheduled today and two more tomorrow.

Pan American World Airways has reportedly been sounded out by the Saigon government to provide a Boeing 747 jumbo jet to assist in the Da Nang refugee airlift. In a freight configuration such a plane could carry as many as 800 refugees at one time.

The Vietnamese Navy was reported to have sent two transport ships from Saigon to Da Nang to evacuate refugees by sea.

Dan said an interministerial committee was established four days ago to "cope with this new refugee situation of unprecedented dimension." He said South Vietnam's own sea transport vessels, capable of moving only about 50,000 refugees a month, would be insufficient to cope with the problem building up in Da Nang.

Overland evacuation is impossible because highways are not safe, he said.

(In Washington, Pentagon

spokesman Colonel Robert L. Burke indicated that Pentagon officials consider the evacuation of Vietnamese from such places as Da Nang Saigon a gray area in American policy.

("Under the law," he said, "There is no way U.S. military forces can be used in South Vietnam." But he answered, "I don't know," when asked if Vietnamese refugees and military personnel could lawfully be evacuated along with themselves the Committee for Jussonnell.)

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