

Saigon's Cloud of

By Bernard Weinraub
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Saigon

This capital is on the brink of chaos. The streets are humid and eerily silent at night as soldiers cluster on street corners or sprawl on the pavement and sleep beneath tamarind trees.

By day, fear and rumor seep through this city of two million. The airport is packed. The foreigners are rapidly shipping home their ceramic elephants and furniture and stereo sets. Vietnamese men stand on street corners in small groups reading the afternoon newspapers, then quickly walk home.

"C'est fini, c'est fini," a Vietnamese Catholic priest repeated over and over at the airport.

A Vietnamese man, with tears in his eyes, said good-bye to an American and whispered hoarsely: "We will survive in Vietnam. Another million people may die perhaps, but we will survive and be proud."

There is a sense of doom in Saigon, a sense of engulfing darkness.

A Vietnamese woman burst into tears the other day in a restaurant. "What's going to happen to us?" she asked her companions. "Will they shoot us? Will they shoot my family? What's going to happen?"

In a small apartment near downtown Saigon, a 23-year-old widow of a soldier, with two small children, trembled the other morning and bit her lip. "Where is there to go after Saigon?" she asked. "What is there to do? Wait, wait, wait."

Doom Is

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Thickening

An American official, seated in his office at the embassy, shrugged and said, "I asked my wife to leave, I begged her to leave, and she said no, she wants to stay with me until the end. Our kids are in school in the States."

He smiled and said, "It's the end of the line, isn't it? It's going so fast I can't believe it."

President Nguyen Van

Thieu's abrupt decision to abandon most of the northern two-thirds of the nation and concentrate his defenses around Saigon and the Mekong delta has resulted in what even senior government officials term a debacle.

"It is not a question of the North Vietnamese on the offensive and making this a military conquest," said one European official, whose

embassy began burning old documents in recent days. "The North Vietnamese are taking the country by default. I'm sure they're as incredulous as everyone else. The army is mad with fear and panic. It's all collapsing before our eyes."

Amid the disintegration of the army and the loss of government control, nearly two million refugees have been fleeing the northern

provinces and the central highlands and streaming into Saigon. They are staying with families, and living in row after row of shacks sitting on stilts and built of straw and beer cans.

The panic in Hue and Da Nang, as government representatives fled, coupled with the collapse of discipline among government troops, has led to a ripple effect along the coast.

Cities deemed invulnerable two weeks ago, even last week, are lapsing into North Vietnamese hands: Qui Nhon, a key central coastal port, has been lost; Nha Trang, Cam Ranh bay and possibly even Phan Rang and Phan Thiet, the last of the coastal enclaves, are swollen with refugees and armed deserters. Those places are filled with chaos and panic.

People are fleeing to Saigon because this is the only place they have faith in, said one defense analyst. "But there's a tremendous danger of all of this gathering momentum right here, of it turning ugly and violent against foreigners, especially Americans, who are getting out. People are saying, 'You got us into this and now you're running out. And what in God's name is going

to happen to us?"

An American official, who has spent nearly a decade here, said, "My phone hasn't stopped ringing. People keep coming over to the house. They're desperate. These are people who have worked with us. They don't know what to do. A colonel and his family just came over. His wife was crying. They're going to Vung Tau (a coastal port) and try to get onto any boat that's leaving. They're that desperate. And this government has made no initiative to calm the people. The Communists are stepping right into the vacuum."

At Givral's, a coffee shop at the corner of Tu Do and Le Loi and a hangout for journalists, minor officials and soldiers and their girl friends, a veteran Vietnamese reporter said, "How could it happen so quickly? Hue, Da Nang, Nha Trang. Sometimes I think that when the Communists take over Saigon I'll go to the Saigon river and drown myself. We don't like the Communists, you know. But sometimes I think I'm too old to care. It's all gone."

Soldiers without limbs, and some in apparent shock, now beg defiantly in downtown Saigon and explode in Vietnamese curses when foreigners brush past. An American official getting a haircut the other day was the object of an angry verbal attack by several Vietnamese youths who spoke of U.S. "betrayal" of the Vietnamese people. Foreigners, walking outdoors past the 10 p.m. curfew, have been roughed up by the police and the army.

In the meantime, prices of rice, spices and vegetables have risen by 20 to 50 per cent in the last few weeks. Rumors of six, perhaps even eight, North Vietnamese divisions in the Saigon area have fueled the sense of alarm here.

There are rumors of looming Communist sapper attacks that would somehow break the crackling tensions

but touch off rioting, looting and attacks against foreigners seeking to flee.

There are rumors of coup plots against Thieu, although Vietnamese politicians and journalists angrily claim that the Vietnamese president remains in power largely because of the support of the American embassy and the Ford administration.

There are rumors of deals between Thieu and the Communists, rumors that are vehemently denied by government officials.

In the last few years American officials in Saigon have been forced to remain remote from the foreign press and publicly maintain a stanch pro-Thieu position, under Ambassador Graham Martin.

But as the situation here has rapidly deteriorated, middle-level American officials have become more and more outspoken about Martin and, perhaps more crucial, the lack of any preparation or even alarm about the nation's virtual collapse until recent days.

"Of course we're hostages to the situation," said one official. "If we panic and leave all at once then the Vietnamese will panic too. But it is inexcusable that this embassy has done so little about evacuation of dependents. There are still children here, can you imagine? And it's only because no one wants to panic the Vietnamese government and people."

"Damn it, it's the end of the line and the embassy is playing tiddlywinks."

Another official said he was "sickened" by a widely publicized newspaper photograph here of Thieu enjoying a laugh with Martin and General Frederick Weyand, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff.

"This country is going down the drain faster than anyone can believe. Thieu has done nothing to calm the people, his policy has been a disaster — the only historical parallel, I guess, is Dunkirk — and here is this photograph. What's going on?"