

U.S. Navy Evacuating Refugees

Saigon

A U.S. Navy task force ordered to Indochina waters by President Ford six days ago began evacuating Vietnamese refugees from the Phan Rang area 160 miles northeast of Saigon late yesterday afternoon, the U.S. Embassy announced today.

It was the first use of uniformed American military forces in the evacuation. Four other American ships that have been loading refugees off the northern and central coasts for more than a week are chartered by the U.S. government.

Two of the four ships in the task force took part in the first evacuation, the Embassy said. They were the amphibious cargo ship Durham and the landing platform dock Dubuque, with 700 U.S. Marines aboard to keep order among the refugees.

By dusk yesterday, the Durham had loaded more than 1,400 people and the Dubuque had taken another 80 aboard.

Meanwhile, in the growing crisis in the capital, the South Vietnamese government said early today that it had smashed a plot by "short-sighted elements" to overthrow President Nguyen Van Thieu.

The government report

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said that a number of military officers had been arrested.

As the government reported the coup attempt, President Ford's envoy to South Vietnam left for Washington, pledging more U.S. aid.

"The North Vietnamese army . . . can be defeated," said General Frederick Weyand, U.S. Army chief of staff. Mr. Ford sent Weyand to South Vietnam to assess the military situation.

Weyand said the South Vietnamese army withdrawal that resulted in the loss of 60 per cent of South Vietnam to the Communists was "a sound strategic action."

Weyand, in a departure statement to newsmen at tightly guarded Tan Son Nhut air base, said he was leaving "with great affection and respect for the people of South Vietnam and I assure them that I will do all in my power to be of assistance to them."

In announcing the coup attempt, a South Vietnamese government spokesman said:

"A number of short-sighted elements have exploited the feeling of unease among the people to stage demonstrations, bringing more trouble to the rear in support for a military takeover plot. These elements have been arrested by security forces. Further investigation is under way."

Government sources said one of the men arrested was a trusted Thieu aide, Nguyen Van Ngan, who was fired by Thieu last year as a suspected Viet Cong agent, only to be cleared and taken on again at the presidential palace.

Ngan, whose official duty is to coordinate matters between Thieu and the South Congress, has long been known as the so-called bagman for alleged payoffs for congressional votes.

Rumors of an impending coup against Thieu have swept Saigon for more than two weeks in light of the defeat of half the South Vietnamese armed forces.

Most of the nation's generals are known to blame Thieu for the setbacks because he ordered the first

government retreats from the central highlands.

A week ago, his security forces conducted raids during the Saigon curfew and arrested dozens of politicians and other civilian opposition forces, also on charges of hatching a coup d'etat plot.

A few hours earlier, Saigon's Roman Catholic archbishop, Nguyen Van Binh, appealed for a change of

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leadership and senior Communist diplomats said that Viet Cong is ready to stop fighting and start negotiations if Thieu were ousted.

Police opened fire over the heads of the demonstrators at several churches as the new, earlier 9 p.m. curfew approached. No injuries were reported.

In the war, fighting slackened yesterday with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong apparently consolidating the vast territorial gains of their offensive in which they have swept down the coast against virtually no resistance.

South Vietnamese troops with orders to shoot to kill, turned back tens of thousands of refugees trying to enter Saigon after days and weeks on the road fleeing from Communist-held provinces to the north.

A.P. & U.P.

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