

# Escape Plan for Saigon Officials

## Washington

The Ford administration is preparing to evacuate between 100,000 and 150,000 Vietnamese thought to be marked for reprisals by the North Vietnamese, but has not acted yet for fear of causing a wave of panic in Saigon.

"If we wait much longer it could be too late," said one U.S. official. "But if we move now it could kill any chance that the South Vietnamese army could hold off the North Vietnamese for a while longer."

Under the evacuation program, selected groups of South Vietnamese would board U.S. and other merchant ships for removal to the United States and other countries.

Persons believed by U.S. officials to be marked for reprisals by the conquering North Vietnamese would be the ones taken out. Officials in both Saigon and Washington fear the Hanoi government could execute thousands of so-called "enemies of the revolution."

Included in the evacuation would be Saigon government officials, military commanders, educators and soldiers who defected from North Vietnam to join the South Vietnamese army.

Unless the evacuation is started within the next few weeks, North Vietnamese forces might cut off any escape route to the sea, Pentagon officials believe.

If Saigon falls, U.S. officials say a new wave of refugees would probably cripple any organized evacuation effort.

U.S. officials said most may go to the Philippines initially and then travel to other nations that would open their doors.

Mr. Ford's decision on an evacuation, however, is being delayed by a report by Army Chief of Staff Frederick C. Weyand that the South Vietnamese army possibly could rally to the defense of Saigon and the Mekong delta, providing the needed boost to South Vietnamese confidence.

Despite Weyand's report, senior U.S. defense officials remain grim in their outlook. Some predict the Saigon government will fall by the end of the month, either because of North Vietnamese attacks or political turmoil.

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