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Life in Saigon Seems Normal, but the Tide of Fear

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 7—At the First National City Bank in Saigon today, the doors were open, but customers could not cash personal checks or even Citibank travelers' checks.

The bank's three American officers, along with the American representatives of Saigon's other United States banks—the Chase Manhattan Bank and the Bank of America—left Saigon last Friday night on a specially chartered Pan American 707 jet bound for Hong Kong. Their wives and children had departed earlier in the week on regular commercial flights.

The bankers are only some of the many Americans now leaving Vietnam as rapidly as possible. A week ago, the United States Consulate General said there were 5,880 Americans in Vietnam. Today an embassy officer just shook his head and said he couldn't guess how many were left.

The Packing Goes On

In an effort to avoid panic among Vietnamese, the embassy officially insists that United States Government employees are not being evacuated.

But at the huge Defense Attaché's Office at Tan Son Nhut air base—once known as Pentagon East, Americans were shredding their files today and packing their belongings. Some of the more than 20 women killed Friday in the crash of an Air Force C-5A transport that was also carrying children were actually Defense Attaché's office employees being evacuated, it is now known. They got on the flight by acting as escorts for the 243 children.

As far as can be told,

many American officials and private companies are making no similar arrangements to evacuate their Vietnamese employees, some of whom fear reprisals from the Communists for their years of identification with the American cause here.

Sane for the abrupt departure of the Americans, Saigon, on the surface, wears an air of normality. The restaurants and movie theaters are crowded—the Eden Cinema is showing John Wayne in "McQ," a police story. Lithe Vietnamese girls in bright ao dais, the traditional tunic-dresses, stroll the downtown boulevards; beg-

gars, minus an arm or a leg, accost foreigners for money.

On the edge of town, at the sprawling Quang Trung army training center, youthful draftees sat in a dusty field today waiting their turn to be taught how to drive a jeep. Nearby, tailors were busy working on new olive-green fatigue uniforms for the recruits.

Remnants of 1973 Units

Perhaps because of three decades of relentless war, the Vietnamese have developed a special talent for accepting these irrational, the contradictory and the unlikely.

At Tan Son Nhut air base, housed in the same complex of decaying tin-roofed barracks and rusting barbed wire are South Vietnamese Air Force pilots; the remnants of the International Commission of Control and Supervision and the Vietnam delegation to the Joint Military Commission, both of which were set up by the Paris peace agreement of 1973, and the American Defense Attaché's Office.

Today, while South Vietnamese A-37's, light jet bombers, took off screaming from a nearby runway, a mandful of Hungarians lay around Tan Son Nhut's Olympic-sized



The New York Times/Nguyen Ngoc Luong
People in Saigon filling sandbags as they prepare for possible shelling against the city

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Surges Nearer the Surface Every Day

pool, oblivious to everything. They had very good tans.

Beneath the surface here, the seeds of fear have been planted by refugees arriving from the Central Highlands of such cities as Hue, Da Nang or Nha Trang, on the central coast, and the stories they tell of their flight.

Hundreds of refugees interviewed in various parts of the country in the last few weeks have said they were fleeing not so much because of any specific fear of the Communists as because of the general panic that spreads when most people start running. Little thought is given to livelihoods, homes and pasts being thrown away; the urge to run seizes almost everyone.

'More Afraid of Rangers'

"The people who escaped with us were more afraid of the rangers than they were of the Communists," a middle-aged man from Pleiku, in the highlands, told friends the other day, speaking of the elite South Vietnamese Government force.

Two rangers, he said, put their M-16 rifles against his stomach. One had stripped off his Rolex watch; the other took his wallet. "After that," he said, "I was so afraid of the rangers that I hid my clothes and went around in my underwear so they wouldn't have anything to steal." He had been the manager of an ice plant at home.

When the refugee column from Pleiku reached Tuy Hoa, near the coast, the rangers looted the town. "They just went into restaurants, ordered chicken, duck and beer — whatever they liked," the man from Pleiku went on. "When the time came to pay the bill they put a hand grenade on the

table and demanded the owner's money."

"But the North Vietnamese treated us well when they stopped us," said the refugee. They gave us lectures about how we should stop running away and supporting Thieu, but they didn't touch a hair."

Americans who live in the isolation of their own company, in high-walled houses with air conditioners and big chauffeur-driven cars, seldom catch glimpses of the Vietnamese reality around them. When these come, they can be startling.

It isn't every Sunday that

you are awakened at 7 A.M. by a breathless female voice on the telephone proposing marriage. "I must come to see you now—I want to marry you, please," the voice says. You have only seen the woman twice, and then briefly.

That is not an unusual experience in Saigon today. One American received four such proposals this week alone, including one from a respectable woman with two children whose husband is a police officer.

There is a catch, of course. You must help them get a visa to the United States, a passport and a plane ticket out of Vietnam, all as quickly as possible. They have heard the stories of their cousins or uncles who fled from Da Nang or Cam Ranh Bay and though most of them have never, to their knowledge, seen a Communist, they are terrified.

Grasping at a Loophole

South Vietnam's strict emigration law makes it harder for most Vietnamese to get out of their country than for an East European to leave his country, but there is one loophole. A Vietnamese woman married to or even just engaged to a foreigner is eligible for a passport. Thus, an American here is likely to have an endless stream of visitors in his office now.

"My family is missing," one such visitor said yesterday. "I have no money now. I am scared of the Communists. They will kill me for sure." There were tears in her eyes.

The emotion is clearly genuine; one's sympathy is aroused.

"Please marry me," the visitor said, fingering her long black hair nervously. "When we get to the States, we can get divorced."