

Why Viet Refugees Fled in Panic

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Washington Post

Saigon

Why did they run?

Almost like the spread of some dread disease, a great panic has overtaken Vietnam. Starting first in the north, it sent hundreds of people fleeing from their homes, leaving everything behind. As it spread south, it infected thousands more

with an all but irresistible urge to run.

Why? Was it fear of the advancing North Vietnamese — a hatred of communism? It is hard to imagine that staying behind could be worse than dying of hunger, thirst and exposure in the jungles and in packed evacuation boats, or surviving to sleep in the streets and in wretched camps where refugees are prisoners of their

poverty and misery. Yet so many ran.

There can be little doubt that many fear the Communists. But many more seem to fear the unknown rather than a system of government, and by far the most common comment, heard during several days of interviewing refugees was, "We left because everyone else was leaving."

Thus it would appear that people's motives for leaving their homes are too complex to ascribe what is happening simply to anti-communism or people "voting with their feet."

President Ford said recently that "The will of the South Vietnamese people to fight for their freedom is best evidenced by the fact

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that they are fleeing from the North Vietnamese."

The opposite appears to be true. All over the northern part of the country the will to fight vanished when panic struck, and some of the South Vietnamese army's best units dissolved without firing a shot at the North Vietnamese. When discipline was gone some soldiers vented their rage and frustration by looting and killing people, and many refugees speak with contempt and hatred about the venality and corruption of the Saigon government.

Many central Vietnamese detest the Saigon government, but ran because of their fear of the North Vietnamese and the uncertainty of the future and simply because everyone else was running.

There are, to be sure, educated people among the refugees who dislike the regimentation and lack of intellectual freedom that the Communists demand. Others, especially Catholics, chose to leave Hanoi in 1954 when the country was partitioned and are now moving again.

Two women who fled from Nha Trang, for example, said they had come from North Vietnam on a U.S. Navy ship 21 years ago and had come farther south again last week on another U.S. Navy ship. They said

they would willingly move again because they thought they could not stand the Communists' intolerance for religion.

There are other refugees who feel that their class background is not sufficiently proletarian for the Communists, and it was noticeable that urban people appeared to outnumber country peasants in the refugee camps and makeshift settlements.

An 18-year-old student with a soft face and long mandarin fingernails, named Vo Minh Triem, said he came south because he was afraid the North Vietnamese would put him in the army.

Yet there were others among the refugees who

could not possibly be considered members of an exploiting class. An old fisherman with gnarled hands and a classic Ho Chi Minh beard, for example, spoke of his life of poverty in Qui Nhon. Capitalism had not been kind to him. Bribes had to be paid for nearly everything, and inflation had forced him to sell his boat so that he had to work for others. Yet he came south, he said, because he had heard that the Communists were cruel to people.

Some people from Hue mentioned that the Communists had murdered many persons when they captured the city in 1968, and they

said that those killed had not been important officials but unimportant people such as the postman and government clerks.

Many refugees are the wives and relatives of soldiers and other government officials, and many in this group said they felt that their association with the government might count against them in the eyes of the North Vietnamese.

Those who had worked for the Americans were even more worried. Hoang Dong, for example, had worked for the American firm of Pacific Architects and Engineers as a baker in Nha Trang. He was clearly worried about the American connection. He also said that he hadn't been paid and that if he stayed to wait for the Communists in Nha Trang he would never be paid.

But it was most unusual for people to speak in terms of hatred for communism or of any political motivation other than a vague fear of the Viet Cong.

Most of the people I talked to gave the same response as Nguyen Thi Thanh, a 45-year-old widow who fled south with nine children. One child was separated from them on the way and is now lost.

"I don't know exactly why I left," she said. "I was just afraid like all the other people. We heard rumors that the government was planning to evacuate the city, and when everybody started to leave I left with them. No exact reason."