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For Americans in Saigon, Problem Is Getting Out

By Philip A. McCombs
Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, April 13—An American embassy official sat among the packing crates in his house Sunday afternoon sipping a beer. "I'm getting ashamed to be an American," he said. "I don't think we're going to be able to get any Vietnamese out of here, and all those who sided with us are going to see that our promises are worth just what the North Vietnamese promises are worth—nothing."

With much bitterness and a certain sadness, the American and foreign communities are pulling out of this city. Their departures are creating a growing bitterness and fear among many of the Vietnamese who are being left behind.

According to reliable sources, the embassy in the next few days will begin shipping out regular embassy personnel, whittling down the size of its staff.

The embassy is being exceedingly low key about all this, since any major

or sudden move could trigger a panic among Vietnamese who might think they were being left behind.

The fact is that any rapid disintegration of public order would probably make an emergency evacuation, even of remaining Americans, exceedingly difficult if not impossible.

There has been talk here that the South Vietnamese air force has threatened to bomb Tansonnhut airport in order to halt any sudden evacuation.

It is thought here that an evacuation of Americans from this city would require 18 hours—if Tonsonnhut were open to fixed-wing aircraft and if the evacuation were totally unopposed by the military forces of either side or the local citizenry.

This time frame may be reduced if the number of Americans here falls significantly below the 6,000 who are now estimated to be in the city.

However, with the present tension in the city, it is almost inconceivable

See AMERICANS, A16, Col. 1

Americans' Efforts Turn to Getting Out

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ble that a large and sudden American evacuation would be unopposed or would not trigger a panic that would impede it.

If helicopters have to be used—as they were in Phnom Penh—then the whole problem becomes much more difficult. In Phnom Penh only about 300 persons were evacuated by helicopters, each one of which holds far fewer persons than a fixed-wing military plane.

Under these circumstances, President Ford's talk of America's moral obligation to "tens of thousands" of Vietnamese who may want to get out of South Vietnam seems to have an idealistic but impractical ring.

According to American embassy estimates, there were about 6,000 Americans in South Vietnam a few weeks ago. These included 1,335 U.S. government personnel, 2,265 contractors and their dependents invited by the U.S. government to work here, and 1,598 private American citizens.

Since then, according to reliable sources, the embassy has expedited the removal of roughly 2,000 of these, mostly among the contractors and their dependents. Actually, many of these dependents are Vietnamese rather than Americans, even though the embassy has included them on the list of Americans in Vietnam.

Most of the dependents of U.S. government personnel—the total number was only 366—have now been quietly shipped out of the country.

Other embassies here are also thinning down. The British are down to a skeleton staff and the Australians, among others, have shipped out all their dependents.

Many of the Americans are going out by normal commercial flights, but the embassy's defense attache office has set up a special headquarters in the modern movie theater at the old Military Assistance Command compound on Tansonnhut airbase for organizing U.S. military evacuation flights.

Despite shipping out about 2,000 Americans, the embassy unofficially estimates that there are still 6,000 Americans in Vietnam.

"About 2,000 that we never knew about have suddenly just showed up out of the woodwork," said an official. "They're mostly old boys who have been living here, many of them illegally and without proper paperwork, with their Vietnamese wives or girlfriends. Now that the heat's on, they're surfacing and asking how they can get out."

One result of all this is that the consular section of the embassy has been jammed. The line starts forming as

early as 6 a.m. on weekdays, and by opening time a few hours later the line often extends all the way down the long block in front of the modernistic embassy building.

The scene often becomes bizarre later in the morning as a silver Air America helicopter takes off from a pad atop the six-story building and then returns on repeated trips. People passing on their motorcycles are fascinated by the noisy chopper and look up as they drive by. No one announces its purpose.

Inside the embassy lobby, men carrying large plastic sacks hurry to waiting trucks, climb in front with the driver and drive off.

There have been reports that Americans in line in front of the embassy have been approached directly by Chinese businessmen and offered sums up to \$35,000 to marry their daughters and get them out of the country.

At the immigration counters at Tansonnhut airport on the outskirts of Saigon, an official calls out names, and one by one a variety of grizzled contractors, young and old, answer the roll. It is like the army, although the captain is much more polite than a drill sergeant.

One middle aged man with his shirt hanging out and a two-day growth of beard stands outside watching the planes take off and land.

"I've been out of work here for a couple of months and I'm just seeing a friend off," he said. "I don't know what I'll do. Hell, the North Vietnamese are going to need technicians. Maybe I can get a job when they come in."

Anti-Americanism here has so far been limited to some ugly looks from citizens and soldiers, casual comments here and there, and while this may have a strongly favorable political impact in the United States, it is regarded here as disgusting.

The United States has airlifted thousands of orphans out of here, and while this may have a strongly favorable political impact in the United States, it is widely regarded here as disgusting.

"Nice humanitarian gesture indeed," wrote an anonymous Vietnamese citizen in today's English-language Saigon Post newspaper. "But what about those millions of orphans to be whose parents are going to be executed by the Communists...?"

Vietnamese don't like the idea of their children being taken out of their country any more than anyone else would, and anyone here—from minister of state to taxicab driver—and will give same negative reaction.

The letter written quoted above also wrote: