

104 More APR 18 1975 Americans Evacuated

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Washington Post Foreign Service

CLARK AIR BASE, The Philippines, April 17 — Another 104 Americans and Vietnamese dependents arrived from Saigon today as part of a quiet, continuing exodus from America's longest war.

U.S. Air Force C-141 Starlifters brought three loads of people and materiel to this vast installation, the largest American overseas air base, where 26 months ago the last prisoners of war landed from North Vietnam to signal the emotional climax of direct U.S. combat involvement in the Indochina conflict.

Those who arrived today were mostly U.S. contract personnel who had labored in the cities and countryside of Vietnam on construction and maintenance jobs. Some had Vietnamese wives and children with them, and most said they had little or no notice of their hasty departure from Saigon.

A New Jersey man said that as recently as Monday his maintenance group was told it would remain in Vietnam indefinitely. But as the military situation continued to worsen, sudden orders sent him to Clark on the first leg of a long trip home.

Most of the Saigon expatriates arriving here were placed on other air force flights within a few hours to continue their trips to the United States.

Meanwhile, about 250 Vietnamese who arrived over the past week are being kept almost incommunicado in a three-story barracks as stateless persons—the first of perhaps hundreds of thousands of refugees whose future will pose knotty problems for the U.S. diplomatic service.

These Vietnamese managed to get out of Saigon on air force flights without passports or other formal travel documents. The Philippines has not agreed to receive them, but is closing official eyes to their presence for humanitarian reasons. American officials from President Ford down have said the United States will give fleeing Vietnamese a place to live—but so far no legal procedures have been worked out to make this promise a reality.

Some of this first group of stateless refugees are female servants, common-law wives and children of Americans in Saigon. A few have legal passports themselves but lack documentation for their accompanying children and relatives.

The air force is feeding and housing the refugees free of charge, and the State Department is interviewing them as the first steps toward establishing an American identity. Orders have come down to keep the refugees away from the press at all costs, and guards have been posted around their barracks. Their movements are limited.

The reason for the unusual procedures appears to be uncertainty in high levels of government about their status and fear of establishing precedents. It is also believed that officials fear news of the presence of the refugees may anger the Saigon government, and perhaps create a large demand from other Vietnamese for similar evacuation opportunities.

Air force officials have prepared to feed and house as many as 5,000 stateless refugees at one time, if the present trickle should become a flood.

The steady, low-key exodus from Saigon continues at this logistical base which long supported the bone and sinew of the Indochina war.