

WXPost

APR 26 1975

Refugee Camp in Philippines:

By Terry Rambo

Special to The Washington Post

CLARK AIR BASE, Philippines, April 25—The rigid social class distinctions, so carefully observed in Vietnam, are beginning to break down among the thousands of Vietnamese refugees waiting here to be transported to Guam, and then the United States.

University professors, prostitutes, wealthy young draft evaders and upper class matrons live together in close quarters and find themselves interacting more than they ever would have in Vietnam.

Many of the upper and middle class refugees are particularly concerned about the presence of prostitutes and others whom they

consider undesirable elements. They fear that Americans will become hostile to all Vietnamese on the basis of the behavior of this minority.

Some of the refugees are better prepared for life in the United States than others. Professional people from the highly westernized Saigon upper and middle classes are likely to have the easiest time of it, at least initially.

Many of the professors, businessmen and university students have already been in Europe or the United States and are familiar with Western customs.

Some refugees have no one to support them at all. One of these is a bar girl whose former boyfriend put

her on a plane, saying: "I'll save you from the Communists, but once you're in the States, you're on your own."

Like many of the women refugees, the bar girl had only one marketable skill, which had supported her in the past, but which the U.S. immigration authorities view with disapproval.

One refugee hearing an American saying it looked like the United States was getting the best and the worst of Vietnamese society, responded bitterly, "Yes, but mainly the worst."

Such comments betray a certain elitism that is common among upper class Vietnamese, who sometimes forget that the heroine of the classic Vietnamese epic poem, Kim Van Kieu, was a

girl who became a prostitute to save her family.

One refugee journalist spoke with anger of seeing two expensively dressed businessmen filling a large bag with oranges that had been provided for the children.

"Now the Americans will think we are all thieves like those men," he said.

But all the refugees share a sense of relief at having escaped what many believe would have been certain death and apprehension about what their lives will be like in the United States.

One haughty upper class woman evacuee from central Vietnam was severely criticized by two lower class Saigon residents for refusing to speak to them.

WXPOST

APR 26 1975

'Best and Worst' of Vietnam

"Here we are all refugees," she was told.

An upper class onlooker added: "It doesn't matter now if one is the wife of a Cabinet minister or even a Cabinet minister himself. We are all the same now."

One of the luckier ones is a professor from Saigon University who had been offered a fellowship at an American university and was awaiting a visa when the evacuation started. Her English is fluent and she has many long-time American friends willing to help her.

Probably fewer than 100 refugees have such advantages.

Many middle class refugees, like journalists who had worked for American

media, have skills that would not be useful in the United States.

Several refugees who had worked for an American newspaper plan to use their severance pay to buy a farm.

"I am not afraid to work with my hands," said one. "If we have land we can use it as a base point from which to make our way into American society. If we are successful in getting jobs, good. If not, we can always fall back on farming to feed our families."

The main concern of these journalists, and other Vietnamese who have not been abroad before, is that they do not understand American customs well enough to get along. Some sought out an American friend and asked

him to set up a seminar to teach them and their families about American customs. They also wanted English lessons for their children.

Adjustment may be particularly difficult for Vietnamese women married to American men. Many of the husbands are unemployed former contractors whose job prospects in the United States are not bright.

There are indications that the social divisions and prejudices, already weakened by the experience of living in the refugee camp here, will be undermined further by life in exile.

One upper class woman who had recently visited Hawaii noted that she had pleasant conversations there with Vietnamese wives of

Americans whose existence she would not have acknowledged in Saigon.

Regardless of social class or profession, all the refugees appear to look forward to going to the United States. Camp authorities have received only one request for repatriation to Vietnam, and the woman who asked soon changed her mind when she was offered a chance to return.

A Vietnamese who made inquiries among the refugees about whether they would like to return to Saigon was laughed at by some and accused by others of being a Communist provocateur. A few said they would like to go back, but only to rescue members of their families and leave again.