

CIA's hired killers among Viet refugees

By Robert Hollis

Up to 5,000 of the 110,000 Vietnamese refugees now coming to the United States may have been Central Intelligence Agency-paid agents of the counter-terror Operation Phoenix.

"My guess — and it's only a guess — is about 5,000 (Phoenix) operatives," said

an official of the U.S. Agency for International Development, who asked anonymity in exchange for his information.

"But don't worry," he said. "Most of these guys were heads of the program. Not very many were the triggermen and torturers."

But he conceded: "Some

of the guys who did the shooting are undoubtedly mixed in with the other refugees."

To date, U.S. officials both here and in Washington, D.C. have been reluctant to discuss any details of the numbers or names of former Phoenix agents included in the massive, last minute evacuation from Saigon.

But last week, former Ambassador L. Dean Brown, the State Department's director of the Operation New Life airlift, said that 50,000 places on U.S. ships and aircraft would be reserved for Vietnamese in the "high risk" categories.

When pressed by reporters, he admitted such "high risk" Vietnamese would include persons who worked for the Phoenix program.

Mort Smith, a State Department spokesman, told the Examiner Friday he had "no idea" how many former Phoenix operatives were evacuated in the final days before the fall of Saigon.

Smith said other high risk refugees included school teachers, bureaucrats and ranking officers in the South Vietnamese armed forces.

Will former paid assassins in the Phoenix program be living among Americans?

"If it is one of our paid assassins, they don't have to worry," he said.

Other former CIA and State Department officials who worked in the Phoenix

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program believed very few of the actual "triggermen and torturers" got out of Indochina.

"The actual torturers were pretty low level people," said John Marks, once an official with the State De-

partment's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. "The people who were saved were the bosses of the torturers."

Robert F. Gould, a former State Department foreign service officer who was the architect of the Vietnamese laws used creating Phoenix, was equally skeptical about

the mass airlift of Vietnamese counter-terror agents.

"A lot of the people they're bring out are probably the top officials in the program, the secretaries and others who didn't have anything to do with the killings and torture," he said.

"I'm sure they (Americans in the Saigon embassy) had very specific computer lists of the people they wanted to get out," said Gould, now an assistant Ohio attorney general.

"Those people were mostly the elite and I cannot equate them with war criminals."

Gould said the only war criminals coming out of Sai-

gon were the commanding officers of South Vietnam's concentration camps, including the infamous Con Son Island prison where many persons captured under the Phoenix program were sent.

The AID official, however, said he was told by Saigon embassy personnel that many "specialized assassins for Phoenix were spirited out of the country in the last couple of weeks."

After all, he said, "the Viet Cong were on the assassins' hit list for so long that these guys were all identified by the VC and ended up the VC's hit list."

State Department spokesman Smith noted that with about 110,000 refugees only now being taken to temporary camps in the Philippines, on Guam and Wake islands that it will be weeks before Washington officials learn who escaped the Communists.

He added that no decision has been reached on whether any former Phoenix agents will be identified.

Said Gould: "My guess is that there's absolutely no way you're going to find out anything from the government."

In any case, said Gould, Americans cannot condemn former Phoenix agents, regardless of their actions.

"The real criminals are the Americans," he said. "We were the ones who set up the Phoenix program. We are not the ones to point the finger."