

NYTimes Like an Ordinary Refugee, Ky Settles Into Tent Camp

By JON NORDHEIMER MAY 7 1975

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CAMP PENDLETON, Calif., May 6—In a dusty field in California, far from the palaces of power and gardens of Saigon, Nguyen Cao Ky settled today in the refugee camp that has become his temporary home.

Gone was the retinue of aides de camp and silk-suited businessmen. Absent, too, were the polished helmet liners and dashing uniforms of the South Vietnamese military he once headed as Premier and later as Vice President.

Nguyen Cao Ky, refugee, huddled in cold misery the first night in Camp Pendleton and warmed his hands over a trash fire burning in a blackened corrugated barrel. A lavender scarf was barely visible beneath the zippered collar of an olive drab Marine Corps field jacket.

"I have just spent the longest 30 days of my life," Mr. Ky said as the morning sun stirred the camp to activity.

It was good theater, according to some of the Vietnamese refugees who observed Mr. Ky's first hours here, however, they were not entirely convinced when he said he was without significant funds or influence or that he looked forward to life in America as a cab driver or farmer.

Wonder About Motive

The Ky-watchers were puzzled in trying to interpret the motives behind the general's decision to move through the camp like an ordinary refugee instead of seeking special attention, like that offered his wife and children when they arrived in Northern California last week aboard an evacuation flight.

On the one hand, they said, he might be giving a much-needed morale boost to the 12,000 Vietnamese here caught between despair and uncertainty.

On the other hand, some skeptics scoffed that it could

be a ploy to convince antiwar Americans that he sought no special privilege and had not shared in the booty of a corrupt regime that had brought military disgrace and defeat on his country.

Regardless, the man who strolled along the dirt and gravel paths of Camp 8 of the refugee quarters this morning had obviously completed a long and historic journey from that day in 1964 when he led the first air strike against North Vietnam, a prelude to the massive American involvement in Southeast Asia.

No Reception

If the surroundings were humble, as well as some of his words, Mr. Ky had not been entirely stripped of the swagger that had so colored his career.

Out of power since President Nguyen Van Thieu dropped him as Vice President in 1971, Mr. Ky had wanted his lieutenants here to organize a reception for him, according to a refugee source. The invitation, however, was declined by the refugee infrastructure that has been organized by the Americans to give the Vietnamese some voice in camp affairs.

The 43-year-old Mr. Ky, with a trace of gray in his mustache, visited other tents in Camp 8 this morning, talking with refugees and listening to the laments of dispossessed countrymen.

"They need someone they can trust, someone to give them guidance," he told newsmen who walked with him. "There is no reason they should be hostile to me. I have done nothing wrong in the past few years."

Asks For Help

At one point an old Vietnamese woman with a nut-brown beseched his aid in finding her two soldier sons. She picked through a brown plastic wallet to produce a worn photograph of them, standing bare-chested and grinning in some forgotten battlefield.

"Do you know where my sons are?" she inquired in Vietnamese.

"Don't worry, Mr. Kay said, 'there are still more ships and planes coming in. You will find them somehow.'"

"I want to go back to Vietnam to look for my sons," she wailed, her face tightened by grief. He patted her gently on the shoulder and moved on to another tent.

At one point a group of young men, mostly former soldiers, gathered around him in the field, and Mr. Ky told them in Vietnamese that they had to set a brave example for the other refugees.

"Remember to keep up your dignity and try to be self-reliant as soon as possible," he said. "You men who are heads of families go tell the other members of your family to keep up dignity. Although we lost the war we would rather die than live in humiliation. If we accept humiliation, then we'd better go back to Vietnam and let the Communists behead us."

"Tell your children and your grandchildren that we became exiles because of Nguyen Van Thieu. Remember that name. He is a traitor. He is a country-selling man. He is the most despicable man in the world."