

Australians Shift, to Take Vietnamese

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From News Dispatches

After a storm of public protest, Australia has done a turnabout in its policy on Vietnamese refugees and plans to evacuate about 1,500 of the thousands of the South Vietnamese now stranded in an armada of ships and boats off Singapore.

Under plans being completed in Canberra, the refugees will be flown to Australia aboard Australian air force C-130s, probably beginning next week, special correspondent Christopher Sweeney reported from Sydney.

These evacuation plans are in marked contrast to the Australian government's earlier restrictive attitude toward refugees from South Vietnam.

The ruling Labor Party originally imposed strict limits on the number of people who could be admitted, rejecting nearly 90 per cent of the applications.

Nearly 400 refugees were expected from Saigon, but when the skeleton staff at the Australian embassy in Saigon finally flew out as the insurgents were about to enter the capital, large numbers were left behind. In the end, only 78 were evacuated.

This caused an uproar of bitter protest in Australia, with the government being criticized sharply in the press and by the public at large. Vietnamese students and immigrants went on a hunger strike outside Sydney's town hall and there were demonstrations in several cities.

Five of the 54 South Vietnamese refugee ships off Singapore left yesterday with their supplies of food, fuel and medicine replenished, the Singapore Defense Ministry said.

The ministry statement

did not say where the five vessels—carrying 850 refugees—were headed, but most of the refugees have said they want to go to Guam, to Subic Bay in the Philippines or to Australia.

Six more ships, carrying about 3,400 South Vietnamese, were expected to leave in the next 24 hours.

The ministry statement said that in the past few days the refugees had become "increasingly impatient" to leave, but that the government had agreed to a U.S. request to delay their departure for four or five days because "conditions in Guam and at Subic Bay were very difficult."

Another 6,600 refugees arrived yesterday on Guam,

where the refugee camps have almost reached an estimated maximum capacity of 50,000. An additional 20,000 persons are expected on the island Monday.

U.S. officials said about 2,000 refugees are being flown out of Guam to the United States daily, but not enough planes are available to ferry more, even though they have completed clearance procedures.

About 3,000 of yesterday's arrivals were immediately taken in buses to Anderson Air Force Base for a further journey to Wake Island, where refugee processing centers have also been set up.

The rest were given a quick medical check before going to the tent city established for them.

The new arrivals were obviously less affluent and less acquainted with Americans and the English language than the refugees who reached Guam earlier in the week. Many were fishermen from coastal areas.

In other developments related to the Vietnam evacuation effort yesterday:

- The last ship to leave Saigon reached Guam, with gaping holes in the side to attest to the fire the vessel took as it steamed down the Saigon River to the South China Sea. U.S. Navy spokesmen said two persons had died and 25 were wounded before the civilian freighter, carrying 600 Vietnamese, reached the open sea.

- The last group of Cambodian refugees brought out of Phnom Penh by the United States was flown out of Thailand to the U.S. mainland. At Subic Bay in the Philippines, three former Cambodian navy ships arrived unexpectedly carrying 750 refugees. The ships, which were on loan to the former Cambodian government, were repossessed by the United States.

- The new South Vietnamese government accused the United States of evacuating many South Vietnamese by force—sometimes with the use of chloroform—the Yugoslav news agency Tanjug reported from Hanoi. The Provisional Revolutionary Government demanded that all evacuated Vietnamese who wish to return to Vietnam be allowed to do so, Tanjug said.

- A group of 825 refugees evacuated from Vietnam by two Taiwan naval ships reached the southern seaport of Kaohsiung on Thursday, a Free China Relief Association spokesman said. Most of the 850 are of Chinese descent.

- Britain said it is prepared to admit "a number" of South Vietnamese refugees if they had ties with Britain. Several thousand Vietnamese refugees arrived recently in Hong Kong, a British colony.