

Vietnam Embassy Shuts Down

Ambassador Gives Keys to State Dept., Drives Away

By Ron Shaffer

Washington Post Staff Writer

The Embassy of Vietnam was closed here unceremoniously at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday when former Ambassador Tran Kim Phuong handed the key to the building to State Department officials, got into a car with some staff members and drove away.

No crowd gathered. "Obviously everyone was very distressed," said Robert Richmond, one of the three State Department officials there. "But the turnover was handled very correctly, with dignity."

The transfer brought an end to the 20-year existence of the embassy, the scene of festive New Year parties, of communication and negotiations between officials in Saigon and Washington, and in its last days, the scene of confusion and tears as Vietnamese employees watched their government die.

"The funeral is all over now," the embassy's former political officer, Phuong Dung, said yesterday. "Now we all have to look for jobs."

The future of the former embassy, as well as the 40 Vietnamese employees who worked there, is uncertain.

State Department officials locked the gate to the building when they left Wednesday night, and that department is acting as temporary caretaker.

The government of South Vietnam had owned the building, and the new government in Saigon has requested the Algerian government to act as the protective power of the embassy and other Vietnamese assets. No decision has been made on whether the Algerians will be allowed to do this, a State Department spokesman said yesterday.

State and Treasury Department officials also have taken caretaker control of all other assets of the former

South Vietnamese government, in the United States, including bank accounts and foreign currency reserves in the tens of millions of dollars. These assets were frozen by the U.S. when Saigon fell April 30.

Total Vietnamese foreign currency reserves—money the former government owned and held outside Vietnam—was put at \$126 million yesterday by a State Department official. Most of that money is in the United States, he said. "It will take some time to sort it all out, and there's not exactly any pressing need to do it," he said. The eventual disposition of this money is not clear, he said.

The Indochina Resource Center, an organization here that was opposed to the former government of Nguyen Van Thieu, has alleged recently that the embassy employees stripped the chancery of paintings, furnishings and anything else of value before they left.

Several embassy employees contacted yesterday denied this. "Everything that belonged to the (former) government was left in the building; we wanted to leave with dignity," said the political officer, Miss Dung.

Property that belonged to the government included the ornate drawing room, the hand-painted furniture, lacquer tables and cabinets, plush rugs and paintings of Vietnam scenes, including some inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

The 40 Vietnamese embassy employees worked through Wednesday, cleaning out documents and papers and trying to answer questions from their countrymen about relatives and refugees and life for Vietnamese here.

They were paid last week for their work in May from a fund the former ambassador had set up for that pur-

pose before the country fell, embassy employees said.

Yesterday afternoon, Phuong summoned his staff into the drawing room for a farewell. "He thanked us for our cooperation in difficult times," said Nguyen The Loc, an information officer at the embassy. "It was a very short speech. Many of us were in tears."

The Vietnamese embassy employees will be allowed to remain here, a State Department official said.

Embassy employees yesterday said they are going to be moving to smaller apartments to save money, are cutting back to the most basic and cheapest food, and are applying for jobs at laundries, supermarkets, restaurants and gas stations. "We are looking for any kind of work," said Bui Ngoc Khanh, former consul of the embassy. "We need jobs badly."

Khanh, who lives in a three-bedroom Falls Church apartment with his wife and five children, said he had worked 12 hours a day, six days a week at the embassy for two years, handling visas and passports.

Yesterday, Khanh said, he awoke at 2 a.m. and could not go back to sleep. "I was thinking about my family, my job, my country, my relatives (who did not get out of Vietnam), my apartment, my future, everything," Khanh said.

While an embassy employee, Khanh said he made \$1,000 a month and was able to save a little money but he expects that to run out in a few months.

If he cannot find a job by then, Khanh said, his three teen-age daughters who now attend Falls Church High School will have to quit school and go to work. He said he is afraid to leave his \$270-a-month apartment for cheaper accommodations for fear other landlords would not accept an unemployed man.



By Joe Heiberger—The Washington Post

Quickly-drawn sign tells the story at the South Vietnam Embassy, 2251 R St. N.W.