

# Big Pacific Mess Of U.S. Supplies

## Hong Kong

The sudden evacuation of Saigon and the collapse of the South Vietnamese government left the United States with a nightmarish tangle of shipping and supplies scattered across the Pacific and now piling up in Asian ports.

Getting the initial pileup straightened out will take months, and the legal complexities of who owns what and who pays for what may take years to settle.

Nobody has any accurate dollar estimate — in part because a lot of files remain in Saigon — but it certainly runs to many millions. The overall American aid program was running at more than \$300 million annually when the collapse came. And at any given moment much of that was tied up in goods already at sea or so far along that they could not easily be turned back.

"It is really a nightmare," said Cliff Frink, former senior official of the Agency for International Development mission in Saigon. He came out on evacuation day and is now in charge of finding out where everything is and putting the whole mess into some kind of situation that can at least be recognized if not immediately solved.

His job was complicated by the fact that orders flatly stopping all government-financed cargo to Saigon were not issued until the last possible moment. And even those orders, for instance, could not halt cargo that was inextricably mixed with other goods headed for Asia from American ports.

The U.S. Embassy in Saigon at that time was still fighting for more congressional aid, not to stop the

things already on the way.

Now, weeks after South Vietnam collapsed, cargoes are still turning up.

These cargoes are being taken off at Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. There are AID officers in all ports working under Frank's direction to untangle the situation.

In all these congested ports, extra warehouse space must be found. In Hong Kong AID has asked for bids for space for up to 10,000 tons of cargo. In the other ports it will need as much if not more.

It is estimated that up to 30,000 tons of rice, corn and wheat are involved.

The goods run from office machines to tractors to tires and drugs. There are chemicals for plastics and forklift trucks. One hundred fifty big drums of mixed vitamins are in one shipment.

Much of the cargo will eventually end up in other American-financed AID projects, after Frink and his colleagues "do an awful lot of grubby work in warehouses."

This is partly because bills of lading are frequently imprecise. A big cargo might simply be listed as "textiles." The organization originally due to receive the cargo knew what that was, but now someone must go

through that cargo and get more specific information.

Some of the goods will probably be auctioned off eventually, but that also presents problems. Trade and merchandising conditions must be taken into account before goods are put shipping and storage.

"The really big problem will be disposal," Frank said. "We will probably

have most of the stuff fairly well sorted out in a few months." The legal problems are more complex. Some lawsuits are already brewing.

Before the United States notified shippers that it was, in effect, taking over the Saigon-bound cargoes, the responsibility for them was in the hands of more or less normal commercial channels. When the order was given at the same time Saigon was being evacuated, the goods became government property. There are certain to be conflicts over shipping and storage.

As might be expected in a situation involving South Vietnam, some fast and loose hanky-panky is almost a certainty.

Some South Vietnamese businessmen are known to have left Saigon with original bills of lading in their pockets. Some were surely obtained legally. Some were probably obtained from the South Vietnamese government authorities by bribery or by other means.

The problem is that an original bill of lading, in a legal sense, is a negotiable document. It represents ownership of something of specified value that has been paid for by a bank letter of credit or by similar means. Sorting out that kind of situation will keep some maritime legal authorities occupied for some time.

The problem is not solely confined to the American government either. Many private companies in South Vietnam, with branches overseas, and cargoes they are probably seeking. In addition, welfare institutions were involved. The Catholic Welfare Service is known to have 23 containers of goods somewhere on the high seas.