

WXPost

JUN 3 1975

Officials Report Progress in Refugee Work

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Officials responsible for the resettlement of thousands of Vietnamese refugees expressed cautious optimism yesterday that their problems are coming under control.

"We're still playing catch-up," said an official from one of the voluntary agencies charged with resettling more than 100,000 refugees now in camps and staging areas in the United States and in the Western Pacific. "Slowly but surely we're working things out."

At the same time, the inter-agency task force established by President Ford to coordinate policy concerning refugees said the problem of security clearances for the refugees, a major bottleneck, had been solved. Elinor Green, task force spokesman said that the clearances, which took up to three weeks and required checks by five government agencies, now take one week to process.

However, figures on clearances, compiled at the end of last week, demonstrate continuing problems. Of 18,000 refugees at Camp Pendleton, Calif.—one of four refugee camps on the U.S. mainland—about 10,800 had received security clearances and 2,986 had sponsors. Only 1,878 of the refugees with sponsors had received security clearances, indicating a lack of coordination among the agencies involved.

Miss Green acknowledged the problem yesterday but said that the Immigration and Naturalization Service has assured the task force that refugees with sponsors will be given priority for clearances.

About 102,000 refugees—including 55,000 in the western Pacific—remain to be resettled. Almost 26,000 refugees have left the camps for new

erably higher than the 300 to 500 refugees who were leaving 10 days ago.

Whether the increase is a temporary surge that resulted from solving the security-check problem could not be determined. One voluntary agency official said yesterday that most of the refugees resettled in the last week were persons who had prior contact with their sponsors.

Some voluntary agency officials who were critical of the way the task force approached the problems of resettlement now see some hopeful signs.

"I think the thing is going to work," said John McCarthy of the U.S. Catholic Conference Migration and Refugee Services. "It's getting going."

The conference, which traditionally has handled most refugee resettlements has 200 staff persons distributed among the four camps.

"No matter where a person wants to go I've got an office," McCarthy said, referring to the presence of a Catholic church in almost every community.

McCarthy, like other voluntary agency officials, discounted the task force's early projections that all refugees would be resettled within three months. According to McCarthy, complete resettlement would take at least six to eight months, "and it could possibly be a year."

Although more cautious about how quickly progress is being made, another voluntary agency official, who asked not to be identified, agreed with McCarthy that "progress is being made." This official, critical in the past of the task force's handling of resettlement problems, said, "It shouldn't be as it is, but letting bygones be bygones, I guess it's going about as well as could be expected."

A congressional source, familiar with the problems of resettling refugees, remained skeptical. "We have to let the dust settle," this source said. "On balance, I would say there hasn't been all that much movement."

homes, including 2,000 who went to other countries.

Statistics provided by the task force indicate that the pace of refugees leaving the camps appears to be picking up, but the meaning of the figures is unclear.

In the last week, refugees have been leaving the camps at the rate of 700 to almost 900 a day, below the target figure of 1,000 a day projected by the task force, but consid-