

325 Refugees at Camp Pendleton Await Day When They Can Return to Vietnam

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CAMP PENDLETON, Calif., June 29—Mostly they sit and talk quietly among themselves or lie on the campers' cots in the crowded tents and Quonset huts, staring into nowhere, dreaming private dreams of the homes they left behind.

They are among the 325 or so South Vietnamese refugees in this country who have decided since their escape at the end of April that more than anything else they want to go home. About 1,700 others of the more than 130,000 who fled as Saigon was taken over by the Communists have expressed a desire to return, but they are still being housed at Pacific bases, such as those on Guam and Wake.

To expedite their departure when arrangements have been completed between the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the new Government in Saigon, 238 were flown here this week from refugee camps at Fort Chaffee, Ark., Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., and Indiantown Gap, Pa., to join those at Camp Pendleton awaiting repatriation.

But the monotonous hours in the camp pass slowly for those who want to return, most of them men who originally fled leaving their families behind because they feared they

would be executed by the Communists.

Getting Impatient

"They are getting impatient," said Mohamad Gharib, the soft-spoken Iranian who is the High Commissioner's liaison officer here. "That's only human. They have expressed a wish to return and now they want to get it done."

Mr. Gharib said that repatriation "will be begun shortly." However, a spokesman for the High Commissioner's office at the United Nations in New York, who asked not to be named, would say only, "We hope to start within the next few weeks."

"There are a lot of practical problems," he added. "I think it's better to be impatient and have things go right when they start to move than to rush into it."

Since the High Commissioner's office announced late last month that the new Government in Saigon had asked it to render "all necessary assistance" in returning those who wanted to go back, arrangements have been made for all those seeking repatriation to be interviewed and to fill out questionnaires. These documents will be forwarded along with photographs to the United Nations Organization's office in Geneva and then to the South Vietnamese regime.

To Furnish Transport

When approval is received,



The New York Times/David Strick
Mohamad Gharib, liaison officer for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees at Camp Pendleton, Calif.

the U.N. will provide transportation back to Vietnam for the refugees.

Mr. Gharib, who has processed about 90 persons here seeking repatriation, said he had found that "there's mostly men who left their families behind."

"There are some women with children who have a reverse situation," he added. "They left their husbands behind. Among the 90 I have processed there are at least eight women and some 10 children."

Explaining their motivation in wanted to return, he went on:

"The two main themes that are expressed are the wish to return to rejoin their families and the wish to return to participate in the reconstruction of their homeland."

Along with the refugees, Mr. Gharib estimated that about 150 students and South Vietnamese military personnel were stranded in this country when the war ended and have asked to go home. They will also be processed here for return.

Meanwhile, as Mr. Gharib acknowledged, many of those awaiting repatriation are growing impatient.

Elected Leader

Among them is Le Minh Tan, a 44-year-old former fire inspector in Saigon who was elected leader of the 164 hopeful repatriates flown here last Sunday, from Fort Chaffee, where they staged a demonstration earlier in an attempt to speed up their return.

"We wait a long, long time

already, almost two months," said Mr. Tan, a stocky man wearing silver-rimmed sunglasses in the dimly lighted Quonset hut. "We realize the American people have charity in them and rescue us from Vietnam, but we don't need help any more, only transportation from the United States."

Mr. Tan, who left a wife and six children in Saigon, said that he was so desperate to get back to them that "sometimes I want to run and take a walk back to Vietnam."

"I am not a troublemaker," he added, "but we want to go back as soon as possible. If for any reason they try to keep us in the United States, we might have a demonstration after this month."

Mr. Tan said he had fled because the old Government had said anyone who had worked with the Americans would be killed, but later he had found that "the P.R.G. didn't kill anybody."

To Rebuild Country

"There is no reason to stay in the United States now that the war is over," he said. "We are Vietnamese people. We must go back to rebuild our country."

In the same hut, Le Van Liem, 33, a former sergeant in the special branch of the Sagon police whose wife is expecting their fourth child in three months, said through an interpreter that he had left because the old regime had told him the Communists would kill all policemen. Now he added, he is no longer afraid to return.

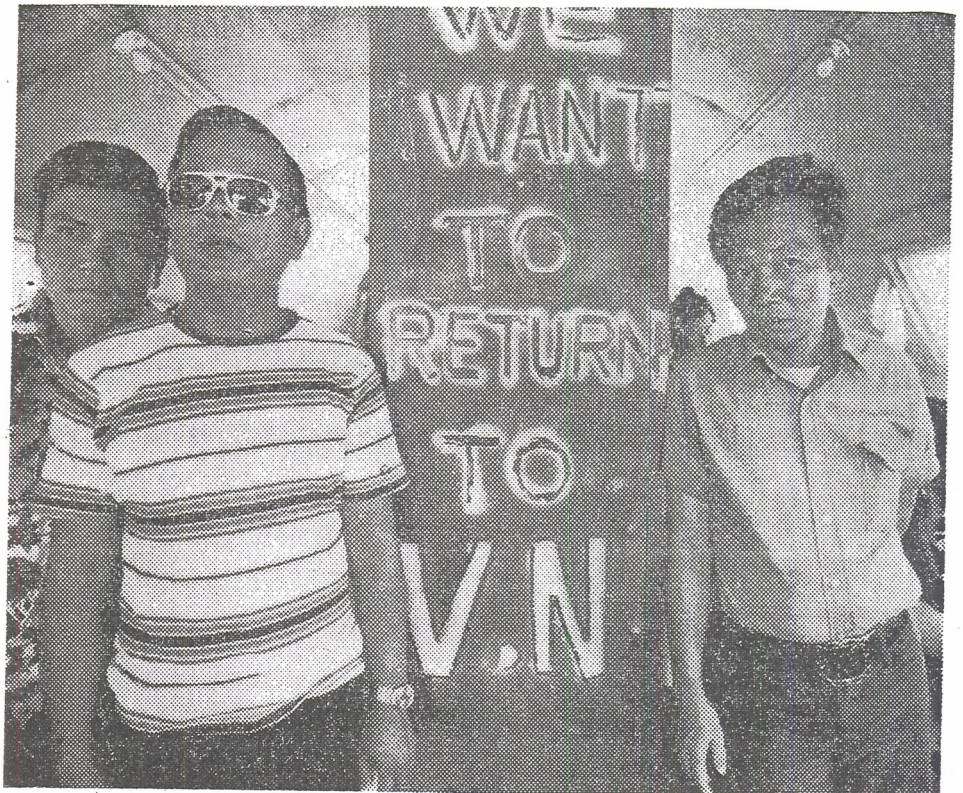
And le Van Duc, 31, another former policeman who is single but still wants to go back explained through an interpreter:

"Vietnam is my country, where I was born. I'm not afraid to go back. Even if I get killed, I'll die in Vietnam with my people."

Those seeking repatriation have not been segregated from the other refugees and in another part of the camp eight of the 16 men housed in one tent have opted to return while the rest intend to stay in this country.

Tran Van Ngoc, 27, a former navy storekeeper who speaks excellent English, said that there was no friction between those who intended to go back and those who wanted to remain here:

"Some people want to go back because they have families," Mr. Ngoc, who is single, said with a shrug. "Others want to stay here because they don't like the Communists."



Le Minh Tan, center, was elected leader of the 164 hopeful repatriates flown to Camp Pendleton, Calif., from Fort Chaffee, Ark., early last week. He said, "I'm not a troublemaker, but we want to go back as soon as possible." Others are not identified.