

Refugee Camp Winds Up

Ft. Chaffee Having Few Problems with Resettlement

By Austin Scott

Washington Post Staff Writer
FT. CHAFFEE, Ark.—

The number of Vietnamese refugees awaiting resettlement here dropped below 18,000 last week for the first time in months. And while autumn is not yet in the air, officials are already looking toward the end of the year, when they expect to be able to shut down the camp.

At one point during the summer, Ft. Chaffee became Arkansas' ninth largest city with 25,000 refugees crowded six or more to a room in endless rows of white, two-story Army barracks.

Civilian and military staff members say they expect the refugee population to decline steadily from now on. They do not think there will be a large group of difficult-to-place Vietnamese left over at the end as some have feared.

"The voluntary resettlement agencies have said publicly the Vietnamese represent the easiest group to resettle that they've encountered in the past 30 years," said Donald MacDonald, civilian director of the camp.

"We are going to wind up in the end with a few terminal cancer patients, perhaps some old persons without family, and some emotionally and mentally retarded kids . . ." MacDonald said.

"We'll put the cancer patients in public health hospitals. We'll have to find a decent place for them to die."

The refugees, only halfway through the biggest transition in their lives, do not fully share that sense of winding down. The Army began measuring them for winter clothes this week, and the voluntary agencies say many dread the coming cold, because they have no concept of central heating

or having to always bundle up when going out.

Alike say they have learned a lot in the four months since Chaffee opened. Some 47,200 of the 130,000 Indochinese refugees in the United States have been processed at Chaffee.

One change based on experience is that the voluntary agencies are de-emphasizing individual sponsors, and stepping up their search for group sponsors—churches, schools, civic groups, industries, even towns.

"Of our breakdowns—and we've had very few—nearly all have been individual

sponsors," said Mark Ice, head of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, which emphasized groups from the beginning. "You have more people, a broader financial base. You don't tend to run into the problems of a personality clash . . . They get a very good feeling that there are a lot of people concerned about them."

One of the things the refugees have changed is their initial random distribution among the 47 rows of 235 white wooden buildings with two bathrooms apiece—downstairs for women, upstairs for men.

Vietnamese-speaking staff members say they have sorted themselves out into little hamlets based on the well-defined social class system in their homeland. The peasant classes, mainly fishermen and farmers, have their own living areas, and the fishermen in particular stick so close together that some are now insisting they want to leave the camp as a group.

There are also clusters of single Army officers, mar-

ried Army officers, middle-class families, and the children of the well-to-do.

"The behavior of the lower classes is sometimes not bearable," explained Tran Minh Tan, 37, who worked for the largest bank in Saigon. "At least the upper classes keep themselves clean. The educated do not want to lose their self-respect. The uneducated have nothing to lose."

The latest available figures from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare indicate that as of early August, there was no significant bunching up of hard-to-place refugees, although that could still occur.

Of 33,000 refugees surveyed, for example, 2.13 per cent had no formal education, but they are not disproportionately represented among those still awaiting sponsorship. The survey showed that they made up 1 per cent of those already released, and 2.81 per cent of those remaining in camp.

The same general trend has held true for large families.

The most glaring exceptions have been the two largest peasant classes, farmers and fishermen. While the farmers and fishermen represent only 1.6 largest peasant classed, population, so few have been sponsored that the camp officially lists the percentage released as zero.

The U.S. Catholic Conference, which has placed more refugees than any of the other seven voluntary agencies, has begun to concentrate on fishermen and some of the other hard-to-place categories like single men, trying to move them out in groups.

Conference director David A. Herrmann said he has been "drumming up business" among Catholic parishes on the Gulf Coast, and hopes to place 500 fishing

families up and down the Texas coast alone. "We're not having any breakowns in the parish sponsorship" he said.

The Catholic conference put 101 refugees representing "10 or 11 fishing families" into the Port Isabel, Tex. area eight weeks ago, and had to move 30 to other locations in mid-August because of a series of misunderstandings between the sponsoring Isabel Se Food Co. and the refugees, Herrmann said.

"One man of the group spoke English," he said. "The company asked for deep-sea fishermen who could stay out on the boats for days. The refugees were used to going out in the morning and coming back in at night. They got seasick on the big boat."

Also, he said, refugees were unhappy because the normal pay for each job was split among the three or so Vietnamese trainees assigned to each task.

Both the company and the remaining fishermen have made compromises, Herrmann said, and things now appear to be working out well.

"We're pushing fishermen, farmers and singles," Herrmann said. "We're looking to the rice fields in Texas, too."

Henry Webb, a State Department employee who helps coordinate sponsors, said, "The fishermen are fighting to stay in as few groups as possible."

Webb is also working with colleges that are taking groups of students. Adams State College in Alamosa, Colo., has taken 50, he said, guaranteeing room and board, books and supplies and spending money. Southeastern State College in Durant, Okla., took more than 200. All the colleges, he said, plan for the refugees to go to school year-round, including the summers.

English-speaking Vietnamese say there is still a lot of apprehension at the camp about how difficult life will be on the outside, but the overwhelming desire is to get out quickly.

"When waiting for too long a time they get bored, and that's the problem we

have, boredom," said Tran Minh Tan. "And they get somewhat disillusioned with no chance to see the real world outside the camp."

They have been in the camp long enough to get letters from friends and family on the outside, however, and the camp staff says those letters, full of comments about how well they are being treated, are lowering the apprehension.

The cramped conditions at the camp have also contributed to easing the concerns of people like Huyen Thi Vu, 27, who is leaving in a week to join her father and a sister in Wisconsin. She doesn't know anything about Wisconsin, she said, but she's looking forward to the move.

She has been living with one of her sisters, her sister's two children and husband and a relative of the husband in one partitioned cubicle.

Like all other cubicles, it has a cloth curtain for a door, six cots, two portable wardrobes, and two windows, with just enough room left over for people to walk.

The sister's youngest child, 6 weeks old, was born in Arkansas, and bears a name bridging the two cultures: David Vu Thai Pho.

All told, there have been more than 200 births at Ft. Chaffee, as well as an estimated 300 to 400 marriages, and eight deaths, mostly newborn babies or elderly cancer patients.

Some of the 28 mess halls are decorated with patriotic slogans and red, white and blue curtains, as are the three PXs where the refugees who have money can buy food, cigarettes and play pinball or pool.

Jukeboxes in the PXs blare out loud American rock music while single young men gather to smoke and talk.

All of the camp staff say crime has been extraordinarily low, and statistics bear this out: seven misdemeanor convictions out of 22 complaints in June, 60 complaints in July, 13 complaints in August, and one felony conviction in the entire four months—attempted rape of a 14-year-old retarded girl.

The refugee population ranges from infants to one 93-year-old woman. But regardless of age, life away from nearly everything one is familiar with can be extremely difficult.

Vu Thi Tue, a 31-year-old is familiar with can be ex-Buddhist who fled from North Vietnam to the south in 1954, learned recently from a friend in Paris that her father, who was not able to get out of Vietnam, died in May. He was in his 70s. Asked if she could describe the impact that news made on her in her new situation, she shook her head and said, "I don't want to talk about it."