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In Vietnam

Returning Refugees' Uncertain Welcome

Asan, Guam

Tran Thanh Tong summed up simply his reasons for wanting to go back to Vietnam: "I think Vietnam is my fatherland and in Vietnam is my family." Tong, a former captain of the South Vietnamese Air Force, spoke in English with no bravado, no show of emotion, just a statement of fact. He seemed to reflect the feelings of many of the 1570 refugees waiting here to go home.

Those refugees, along with 100 more from camps on the United States mainland, are expected to leave for Vietnam in about two weeks aboard a 20,000-ton Vietnamese cargo ship that brought refugees out of Vietnam when the Communists were victorious in April.

They will be sailing into unknown waters because the new government in Saigon has not agreed to accept them.

Saturday, South Vietnam warned the United States against "arbitrarily" repatriating the refugees.

"The PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government) will study the repatriation applications carefully and will make appropriate decisions," officials said.

The refugees say they think they will be welcomed, but many have privately expressed anxiety. Others like them have reportedly disappeared into "re-education" programs in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese who want to go home seem to fall into two main categories — those who fled in the panic and confusion of the

last days of the war because they feared Communist reprisals and those who got caught up in the chaotic exodus by accident.

They say they want to go back because their spouses are there, because they have changed their minds about the fear of revenge or because Vietnam is home and they do not want to start over again in America or some other place.

Tong, who was a loadmaster of cargo planes, said that when he fled during a rocket attack on Tan Son Nhut Airbase, at Saigon, he thought the plane was going to another place in Vietnam, but it flew to U Tapao, an American base in Thailand.

Tong was among those who demanded to return to Vietnam, refusing to board an American plane when ordered out by the Thai government. He was drugged and brought here, which caused criticism in the United States Congress.

Huynu Thi Thao and her 8-year-old niece are among the 240 women and children here who left without intending to. In a conversation through an interpreter in the dark corridor of the old hospital ward in which the refugees are housed, she said she was in Vung Tau when a rocket attack started and fled in a sampan. It drifted out to sea and its passengers were picked up by the United States Seventh Fleet.

Asked how she would find her husband after her return, she replied anxiously: "I don't know. I will just have to see when I get there."

About 1150 of the men here were in the navy and air force, with a few more from the army.

Commander Tran Dinh Tru, who will be the captain of the repatriation ship, said he left because "there were so many problems, so much bad news." He went by ship to the American naval base at Subic Bay, in the Philippines, and then came here.

Tran Ngoc Thach, at age 37, a rising young colonel in the army, is the acknowledged leader of the refugees awaiting repatriation. His wife and three children have made their home in Saigon for ten years, he said.

"I want to go back to Vietnam because all the propaganda before said the Communists would make revenge on us, but now I see it is not true," he explained through an interpreter. "I have listened to the broadcasts and read the newspapers and found out that it is not true. I understand the government in Saigon is very generous and is ready to forgive everybody."

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