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A hasty push to resettle last 7000 Viet refugees

By William Vance
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WASHINGTON — In the seven months since the fall of Saigon, the federal government and an army of volunteers have helped 121,513 refugees from Indochina gain a toehold in America.

Within the next month, they will try to do the same for 7,399 still quartered in the last remaining refugee camps at Fort Indian-town Gap, Pa., and Fort Chaffee, Ark. And that may be the toughest job of all.

The government's Interagency Task Force for Indochina, a division of the State Department, wants to get out of the refugee resettlement business by year's end.

It won't be easy. The last to go are generally the hardest to place because of exceptionally large families and, in many cases, the lowest or least desired skills.

At Fort Chaffee, for example, one "extended family," a loosely related group of 89 Vietnamese, wants to leave together and live together.

The adults in this cluster of eight separate families are all fishermen. A spokesman for one of the 10 volunteer agencies under contract with the State Department to help resettle refugees observed that "it's a little late to find places for groups like that."

But Julia V. Taft, the bubbly, energetic director of the Interagency Task Force, remains optimistic.

"We do have some extraordinarily large cluster families that want to go out together," she said. "But we have seen these groups throughout the program. It just takes a little longer to place them."

John McCarthy, a perpetual motion machine who runs the refugee resettlement operations of the U.S. Catholic conference through 169 diocesan centers, worries about rushing the program but thinks it can be done.

By most appraisals, the resettlement program has been a success.

Task force officials say the "breakdowns," the placements that fall through because of misunderstandings, language

problems, religious differences and the like, have affected only about 2 per cent of the refugees.

McCarthy and others working on resettlement insist that the fears preceding the influx of refugees — that they would consist mainly of drifters, prostitutes and gold hoarders — have not proven true.

In addition to finding U.S. sponsors, the task force and the volunteer agencies are continuing to work on third country resettlement of the Indochina refugees.

More than 6,500 already have relocated in other countries — most of them in France and Canada — and 1,546 recently sailed back to Vietnam on a repatriation ship from Guam.

Task force officials say they aren't discouraging repatriation but that only about 200 others actually have applied.

Most of the refugees have been settling in western and southern states, with the biggest concentrations in California (26,570), Texas (8,528) and Florida (5,217). Pennsylvania is the only northeastern state with a sizable refugee population (6,445), task force officials said.