

# How the Viet Refugees Are Doing Today

By Frances Fitz Gerald  
New York Times

**I**N THE eight months since the evacuation from Saigon and Phnom Penh, about 130,000 Indochinese — the vast majority of them Vietnamese — have passed through the four refugee camps set up by the federal government and have moved on into the United States.

There are refugees living now in all of the 50 states and in every stratum of American society. But just who the refugees were, why they had come and what they hoped for in the United States were questions never fully asked nor answered.

United States Immigration lacked the records to make a thorough security check, and the statistics compiled by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Indochina Refugees, an *ad hoc* body coordinating "Operation New Life," were incomplete. What figures there were indicated that about half of the adults spoke some English, a quarter had university educations, a third were Catholics and the population as a whole was very young.

Of those who answered the task-force questionnaire, about a sixth were former U.S. government em-

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ployees (10,000 people), and there were as many enlisted men (7,000) as there were officers. The survey did not, of course, register the number of prostitutes, dope dealers or

generals, and it did not show that the population included almost all the inhabitants of one fishing village and a Saigon rock band.

And in a sense, perhaps, it did not matter: The refugees could not be sent back to Indochina, and except in the case of criminals convicted in the United States, the government had no alternative but to treat all of them equally.

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**G**ENERAL Ton That Dinh, a descendant of the old Vietnamese royal family, who is living now in Rockville, Md., considers himself lucky.

"Americans give you a chance to work," he said. "First I worked at The Wood Shop — a small shop in Georgetown — and did everything, including taking out the garbage . . . Then after that at the Hot Shoppe I cooked French fried potatoes; then I was out on the road with hat and vest signaling. Now Volkswagen

. . . . You don't believe me? Look, here are my receipts. Hot Shoppe, \$85, and they take out so much for taxes, and look, let me show you . . ." General Dinh ran into the bedroom and brought back a workman's blue suit with the inscription of his new employer, "Montgomery County Cars," sewn into the front pocket.

Now in his 50's General Dinh is as animated as ever and his job situation complicated as it always was. In the period 1963-66 Dinh had participated in at least eight coups supporting Catholics against Buddhists, then Buddhists against Catholics, Ngo Dinh Diem against General

Duong Van Minh, General Minh against General Nguyen Khanh, General Nguyen Cao Ky against General Nguyen Chanh Thi and then vice versa — on at least two occasions taking both sides of the question and ending up on the winning side. Under the Thieu regime he retired from the army to take up the more stable post of senator on the government ticket.

"People get depressed without money," he continued. "Now I have \$200. And I've already paid the rent for next month! I make \$2.73 an hour."

"Anyone can make money if they are willing to work," he said. "And the rules apply equally to everyone. Punch in! Punch out! Eat quick! Punch in! That's justice! That's liberty!" The American system had initially puzzled him, but clearly now he was getting the hang of it.

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**T**O THE U.S. Catholic Conference staff at Fort Chaffee, Ark., there were, by October, some familiar faces among the crowds of refugees. Dang Duc Cuong, for instance, came often to the office. A gentle, nervous little man in a suit and tie, he did not press himself forward, but hung around the corners as if hoping that by his physical presence he might somehow influence the strange "lottery," as the Vietnamese called it, whereby agency workers "matched" refugees with American voices on the telephone.

Formerly a lecturer in French and English at the University of Saigon, Cuong hoped to get a job as a teaching assistant while he worked for an American university degree.

If the refugees accepted an offer of sponsorship, they would go through immigration and get on a bus for Seattle, Chicago or Binghamton, N.Y., to deliver themselves over to strangers. Once outside the camp gates, the refugees could not get back in, for, legally speaking, the camp was not in America: it was nowhere.

"People live here," a Vietnamese professor said, "as they did, in Saigon in the worst days of the war: They live in dreams, in their own self-contained world." And there was no way out except thorough the gates. The one English-language and cultural-orientation program for

adults — established by a grant of more than \$1 million from the federal government — helped not at all, since its directors lacked even the most superficial knowledge of Vietnamese culture.

No one was to blame, of course, certainly no one in Fort Chaffee. The policy guidelines for "Operation New Life" had been drawn up in Washington not long after the evacuation.

Speed was important, officials said, because camp life was undesirable, and the Indochinese

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could not be condemned to a "ghetto" or "reservation" existence. The problem was that in a time of economic recession and general disgust with the war, the American public was not proving very eager to take up the burden.

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**B**UT EVEN so, the schedule has been met; the last refugee camp is closing, although the results of "Operation New Life" are as yet unknown. It is too early to draw conclusions and too difficult to generalize about a process that has sprayed the Vietnamese into every corner of American society.

In St. Paul, Minn., an air force major and his family live in the comfortable, ranch-style house of a corporate lawyer; a colonel works as a grocery clerk in Illinois; two prostitutes and a draft-dodger have considerably complicated the life of a Lutheran pastor, who had expected something else of refugees from Communism; 22 physicians work in Nebraska; the employees of the Saigon branch of the Chase Manhattan Bank now work at another branch in New York, and the butler at the house of a Washington columnist turns out to have been a press censor in Saigon.

In American economic terms most refugees have not done well. A survey by the Inter-Agency Task Force completed in October showed that while 68 per cent of the men had



Los Angeles Times photo

**A Vietnamese refugee family on the porch of their small house in Alexandria, Va.**

found jobs, 42 per cent of the families earn less than \$2500 a year and three-quarters earn less than \$5000. Based on the responses of 1570 families just a few months out of camp, the figures may not reflect a permanent reality. But finding employment has not been easy for the refugees, and most have had to start with menial jobs paying no more than the minimum wage. Many sponsors have been helping the refugees over the initial, difficult period, but there have been a good number of cases where sponsors have exploited the Vietnamese as coolie labor or simply left them to fend for themselves.

In the Sacramento Valley in California, for instance, 138 refugees, promised well-paying jobs on farms, worked for \$7 a day for a few weeks picking tomatoes; when the harvest was over, their sponsor told them there was no more work and abandoned them.

The situation is particularly bad in California, where nearly a quarter of the refugees population had settled. In October, 58 per cent were on welfare, and state officials expected the proportion to go as high as two-thirds to three-quarters. In California, the refugee program may become a political issue.

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**I**T WAS in order to avoid such problems that the task force decided to urge the voluntary agencies to disperse the Vietnamese

as widely as possible throughout the country. The decision was a controversial one, and the success of the policy remains questionable.

Loneliness, is, after all, often worse than poverty — and it had been a major cause of the so-called “breakdowns.” Where the Vietnamese have had any choice, they have tended to cluster together. Washington, D.C., now has 8000 Vietnamese inhabitants, including most of the high-ranking officers and civil servants who came as a result of their historical association with the U.S.

According to the Task Force survey, 50 per cent of the refugees want to leave where they are now settled. Where they will go will probably depend on information from other Vietnamese, for already networks are beginning to spring up through newsletters and social organizations. The problem, of course, is that the only compatriots rich enough to help are precisely those whom most Vietnamese consider responsible for losing the war and forcing them to come to the United States. (That the worst and most corrupt of the former officials have the best life in the United States is an irony that has not escaped the honest officers.)

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SOME AMERICAN officials and voluntary-agency people now believe that if relations between the United States and Vietnam were to open up, 20 to 25 per cent of the 130,000 refugees would go back to their country.

Fifteen hundred people have already returned to Saigon on a ship from Guam without authorization from their government. A few hundred more have signed up with the U.N. High Commission on Refugees to go back as soon as their government makes the arrangements to receive them.

Those who will stay here — who see no place for themselves in the new South Vietnam — have by and large made no long-range plans. For some it is too soon. Others think it is too late for themselves to start a new life and see what they do as being only a contribution to the lives of their children. They push their children to do well in school and applaud when they succeed, but it is painful for them to see the young ones already beginning to talk like American kids and forget their native language.

One former officer now living in St. Paul has begun to write down Vietnamese folk tales and fairy stories for his children before he forgets them. Such labors are painful. In most Vietnamese households, the talk is still of the past, and the outward turning to American society an act of will.