

The 'Wasted' People

By HERBERT MITGANG

WASHINGTON — Because of the ground invasions into populous areas of Cambodia and Laos and the poundings from the air that have reached a tempo of a thousand sorties a day, a new vale of tears is flowing across Southeast Asia.

Senator Kennedy's Subcommittee on Refugees estimates that the conduct of the war in the last two years has resulted in an additional half-million civilian casualties and generated three million refugees. Supporting evidence for these figures can be found in audits by the General Accounting Office and certain secret field reports from several sources in Washington.

The precise numbers of these "wasted" people (to borrow a grisly word from the Mylai trial) can never be known. Their welfare and whereabouts are not of prime concern in the Vietnamization program; nor do the three nations living under American bombers keep track of families attempting to flee the main business of war. But even if these numbers are arbitrarily cut in half, the displaced persons still exceed by far the million Palestinians who have been stumbling-blocks to peace in another sensitive area of the world for two decades.

American casualty figures are imbedded in mind: 45,000 dead, 300,000 wounded. But foreign nonmilitary losses are overlooked and buried officially. The Senate Subcommittee on Refugees says that there have been one million civilian casualties and five million refugees in South Vietnam; tens of thousands of civilian casualties and nearly one million refugees in Laos; tens of thousands of civilian casualties and more than one and a

Millions of Refugees Have Been Generated By the War's Fury

half-million refugees in Cambodia.

In Washington, officials have attempted to show that the refugee problem in South Vietnam is nearly solved. But unfavorable documents from the battle areas not shared with the American public about bombed-out civilians indicate otherwise. Villages are uprooted so that "unrestricted military strike operations" can be carried out by American bombers. People themselves are in a sense military objectives: the phrase actually is "to deny population resources to the enemy."

Semantic games have been played to make hundreds of thousands of refugees disappear so that budgets could be cut for their health and rehabilitation. Some have stopped being refugees and emerged as "war victims." No longer are they "resettled"; instead they are "resettled in place." When this phrase was disputed by the subcommittee counsel as a misnomer describing the actual conditions under which refugees lived, "resettled in place" became "resettled in place, with deficiencies."

One phrase that is no longer heard around Washington is "voting with their feet." That referred to the scores of thousands of refugees who had fled from the North Vietnamese and Vietcong supposedly to reach the democratic havens of the Saigon Government. But after the war was extended into Cambodia and Laos, refugees

"voted" to go anywhere, including some Communist-held areas, to escape United States B-52's, fragmentation bombs, gunships and napalm. Looking skyward, they have become human shuttlecocks.

Ironically, while the General Accounting Office confirms Senate Subcommittee staff reports findings that "official statistics on refugees and civilian war casualties have been misleading and grossly understated," their treatment has been placed in "the lowest category" of American A.I.D. health concerns. The new budget of the one Government agency directly concerned with public health and social welfare of the war's victims faces severe cuts.

In his office a few days ago, Senator Kennedy described the refugees, civilian casualties and destroyed homes as "a regional crisis of millions of people." He urged that such centers as those of the World Rehabilitation Fund in Saigon, Danang and elsewhere to rebuild limbs and lives be multiplied. South Vietnam's civilian population of fourteen million has only 400 of its own nonmilitary doctors. Senator Kennedy envisions an international war relief under United Nations auspices.

Long after the B-52 vapor trails have disappeared in the deceptive skies and defoliation of the countryside has ended, millions of civilian casualties and refugees will remain as testimony to the human destruction caused by the great engines of war. Right now, however, these wasted people are (to borrow another Mylai phrase) "no big deal." *

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