

Neglected Refugee Camp in Vietnam Houses the Old, the Weak, the Poor

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NINH TINH, South Vietnam, Feb. 2—She is 70 years old and without relatives, and wherever she goes she carries a rusted Sir Walter Raleigh tobacco can to hold the rice she begs to stay alive.

Dang Thi Nhi is a leftover. She and scores of others—the old, the weak and the blind and the families whose villages remain battlefields—are what is left of the Ninhtinh refugee hamlet, a poor, sandy camp in Phnyen Province where 2,500 peasants have sought a haven from the war.

Ninhtinh is only a fifth of its former size. Six years ago the first peasants began their uncertain journey from their contested villages, walking winding roads to the provincial capital, Tuyhoa, the only area assuredly out of the war zone here in the low lands of Central Vietnam.

The Government settled the displaced peasants in small tin shacks at Ninhtinh on sand where nothing grew. They tried to raise onions and other vegetables but all failed because the land was too dry and too salty.

There were always few men at Ninhtinh. Many were fighting for the Vietcong and many others died in the war. The most fortunate women were hired as laborers at an American air base five miles to the south. Children gathered firewood, selling daily loads at the local market for the price of a small fish.

Those people who could do so tried to leave the impover-



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Dang Thi Nhi uses a tobacco can to hold rice she begs

ished camp. Some went to Tuyhoa in the late nineteen-sixties after they had seved enough to rent quarters and about half have moved back to their original villages in the past two years. But the poorest and weakest and oldest cannot do so.

Ineligible for Assistance

Mrs. Nhi, looking ahead with her nearly sightless eyes, balanced her crippled body with a 12-inch ruler she uses as a walking stick. Her weakened lips quivered as she spoke.

"I am very poor so I beg all day," she said. "Some families give me a few pinches of rice. Some give me one or two piasters. It is the first time I have ever had to beg."

She wiped tears from her infected eyes, using the back of a dirty, calloused hand and added: "I asked the office of refugees for help me but they said they had nothing to give."

The refugees at Ninhtinh have not been eligible for Government assistance since the mid-nineteen-sixties. According to Government regulations, refugees are "re-settled" after six months and cannot receive further help.

Mrs. Nhi had a daughter who supported her with money earned working for the Americans, but she was killed by a truck while at work a year ago.

An American adviser in Phuyen Province commented: "I guess you can say that the



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refugees at Ninhtinh have been forgotten. Other programs have had higher priorities. The camp is no longer given a lot of thought."

The refugees began to lose their American jobs nearly two years ago when the sprawling air base began to cut back. Today none of the peasants at Ninhtinh work for the Americans.

Nguyen Tan, who is 62, has long been considered by the refugees as their leader and spokesman though he was never elected.

"Our greatest need is rice," he said. "We do not have to eat meat or fish, but we have to have rice."

Nearly every adult in the camp begs for a living, he added.

A group of 10 old men and

women gathered eagerly near Mr. Tan's hut to hear him speak with a visitor. As they sat huddled on the hot sand, an 80-year-old man toppled over and began to moan. A blind woman squatted, moved toward him and massaged his chest. The pain passed and he sat in silence again, listening to the conversation.

"Can you find us some food or some money?" the camp leader asked. "We stopped eating meat, then fish and then vegetables. Now we eat only rice soup, salt and some green leaves."

"If someone does not help us, we are all going to die here," said a 77-year-old woman, Nguyen Thi Hui. "We are too weak to move now. To go back to our villages we must be strong. We are too old."

Eyes Badly Infected

Many of the old people at Ninhtinh have badly infected eyes because the coastal winds blow the sand into their faces. A lack of medical awareness and medical facilities has intensified the infections and many of them have gone blind.

Though the camp is only a mile or so north of the provincial capital, it remains insecure from sundown to sunrise. At times, Vietcong pass through at night, according to refugees.

But the war is not the most pressing problem in the camp. The lack of food is.

"I beg for food by myself during the day and I return to cook the rice grains people have given me in the evening," said Mrs. Nhi, holding her still-empty tobacco tin. "I am ashamed to be a beggar—I am too old."