

Helping the Vietnamese: Time for Action

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Apr. 6—As World War II ended, millions of civilian lives were saved by emergency relief measures. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration provided medicine, food and shelter without boundaries of place or politics, caring among others for eight million displaced persons. Many countries contributed. But the crucial factor was the extraordinary generosity of the United States, which supplied more than half of UNRRA's resources.

The American instinct for generosity is making itself felt again now, in response to the human tragedy in Vietnam. The reactions of ordinary people, the telephone calls flooding relief agencies, the offers to adopt Vietnamese children—all these show an overwhelming desire to help the innocent victims of the war.

But the good will has not, so far, produced much actual help for the people who need it. In Vietnam, American ships have picked up a few refugees—and taken them to other places of doubtful safety. In this country, the impression is of chaos: officials have given no clear view of what our policy is or how the public can help.

The problem is to join the mood here, the deep and genuine desire to help, with the need on the ground. The need is urgent. Millions of Vietnamese are separated from their homes, often from their families, living without adequate food or shelter or safe water. Help is required now.

President Ford has spoken more than once of sending humanitarian aid.

Now the time has come for deeds. There are steps that he and the country can take, at once, to relieve the misery of the Vietnamese.

• The President should appoint a single person to coordinate all American relief efforts, and to carry on the necessary relationships with the United Nations and other countries. The appointee should be someone known and respected abroad and capable of attracting bipartisan support at home.

A single responsible head has always been essential to the success of large relief efforts. The American examples include Herbert Hoover after World War I and Herbert Lehman as chief of UNRRA after World War II. The United Nations has just chosen someone to coordinate all of its emergency Vietnam relief operations: Sir Robert Jackson, the eminent Australian who was deputy chief of UNRRA and has handled many international assignments since then.

• Some Americans apparently believe that we can end the nightmare of the Vietnamese, and save our own consciences, by flying people out of Vietnam. That is illusion, and we shall have to get over it if we are going to deal with the problem in its true scale.

There is an obligation to those high Vietnamese officials most closely associated with the United States over the years, and to children fathered by Americans. But even the flight of children that have taken place, for all the goodwill of the Americans involved, are a dubious symbol. A bitter South Vietnamese Army lieutenant said in

Salgon the other day: "It is nice to see you Americans taking home souvenirs of our country as you leave—china elephants and orphans."

In any event, the real problem will remain after whatever air evacuations take place: the millions of Vietnamese who are not going to leave. A few dramatized flights cannot dispose of the concern for them.

• We must be prepared to aid the helpless wherever they are. Whether a child gets American medicine or powdered milk should not depend on where her family was when the Saigon army collapsed. There are an estimated one million refugees on the other side of the line now, and there may be many more in time. Their survival should not rest on our politics or pride.

The French Government has already decided to send emergency aid to both sides in South Vietnam. The French consul remained in Da Nang when it fell, and he is arranging to fly supplies to the airport there or in Hue.

American voluntary agencies have said they are ready to reopen their offices in the areas abandoned by Saigon if arrangements can be made with the Provisional Revolutionary Government. The P.R.G. has indicated that it is ready to accept aid personnel from the United Nations Children's Fund and possibly other international bodies. It is through these agencies that relief will have to go to the other side, with all appropriate safeguards.

President Ford has a tremendous opportunity at this moment—a chance to begin repairing this country's wounds in the act of helping to heal Vietnam's. But he can do so only if he focuses

his thoughts and ours on the humanitarian cause, eschewing any further attempts to assign blame to Congress or to find "promises" of military aid to Saigon where officials, sworn to Congress there were none.

Americans are ready to unite on something in Vietnam at last. Their hearts are open. Congress will surely approve any sympathetic relief program. It is up to the President to put politics aside and lead us in meeting our responsibility to the people of South Vietnam.