

How It Is Now With the People

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By Frances FitzGerald

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—Not far from Quang Ngai City the Muc Tien refugee camp lies on a sandspit on a river. Some 20,000 people live in the congeries of tents and tin-roofed shacks, each tent sheltering ten or more families, and each family with only the space for a bed and a bundle of belongings.

In April the heat is intense, and the breezes that bring some relief sweep up sand and lodge it in cooking pots, clothing and childrens' runny noses. Still, even the heat of the dry season is preferable to the floods of the monsoon. Since last November the Americans at regional headquarters have been planning to improve camp conditions, but owing to the usual bureaucratic delays and the usual corruption, the camp has remained much as it was a year ago. The tents are crowded all day long. Bands of children run and shriek in the alleyways while the women and old people simply sit and stare out through the barbed wire. For there is nothing to do. Jobs are scarce, and there is no land to cultivate. People simply sit and wait for the occasional hand-out of rice, salt and cooking oil.

Left to themselves, they would leave the camp and walk the ten or fifteen kilometers to the site of their old villages. But the Saigon authorities will not let them since they come from an area not fully controlled by the Thieu Government. The police and village officials regard the people with some suspicion, believing them to be "dangerous elements" or "VC sympathizers." They may be right, for the camp, as it happens, contains the people of Son My village and the survivors of the My Lai massacre.



Jill Krentz

of My Lai

A month or so ago a team from Senator Kennedy's Judiciary Subcommittee on Refugees visited the Muc Tien camp on its mission to study the possibilities for American postwar relief and rehabilitation aid to Indochina. But, as the team members soon discovered, their mission was premature. For the war continues in Vietnam, just as it does in Cambodia and Laos, and there is still no question of "purely humanitarian" aid. As always, American aid to refugees in South Vietnam resides within the larger framework of American aid to the Thieu Government and aid to a counter-insurgency program in which military considerations take precedence over the needs of the civilians. Still, the Paris accords have brought about a new situation, and one that demands a reconsideration of American relief projects. In the context of a cease-fire that works to some degree, the question is whether American refugee aid does not actually work against the interests of the people of

Muc Tien and of the hundreds of other camps like it in South Vietnam.

According to official figures there are currently some 650,000 people in the South Vietnamese refugee camps. The professed aim of the Nixon Administration—in line with its work ethic—is to rid itself of these welfare cases and resettle all the refugees before the end of the year. But American officials say that the task cannot be completed since the Thieu regime (supported by the United States) will not, if it can help it, permit those refugees who come from P.R.G. (Provisional Revolutionary Government) or contested areas to return to their home villages. The U.S. and the Saigon regime have other plans for these people who make up a significant proportion of the camp population, but none of them seems likely to succeed. For those people who come from areas conceded to the P.R.G. (such as the northern third of Quang Tri Province), Saigon proposes to create new villages on undeveloped land that it can militarily control.

In the past, however, the Government has proved incapable of planning or implementing such projects to the satisfaction of even those few thousand people willing to abandon all hope of returning home. The resettlement of hundreds of thousands of probably reluctant people would offer problems

of a new order of magnitude. As for those refugees who, like the people of My Lai, come from contested areas, the Saigon Government plan is to assert military control over their villages, building new outposts or reinforcing old ones and obliging the people to build concentrated settlements—much like the old Strategic Hamlets—under the guns of the outposts. This second plan is just as dangerous as the first since "to increase security" usually means to violate the cease-fire-in-place and to invite retaliation by the P.R.G. And if history is any judge, any attack on a Government outpost would be repulsed by an air and artillery bombardment and result in new civilian casualties and new refugees.

The U.S. and the Thieu Government's plans are not very attractive to those people who come from P.R.G. or contested zones. The majority of refugees—and the category includes not only the hundreds of thousands in the camps, but the millions who have moved to the cities and the roadsides during the war—simply want to go home as soon as the fighting stops. The Thieu Government is doing all it can to prevent them. In many provinces officials have taken away these people's identity cards—forcing them to check in at the police station every few days—and threatened arrest or

violence against those who move from their war-time settlements.

Where refugees have disobeyed orders, the Government has carried out those threats. In many provinces it has made it a practice to bomb or shell all the newly-built houses in the P.R.G. areas. In areas undefended by the P.R.G. main forces, it has sent in ground troops to burn the new houses, strip the new fields and, perhaps incidentally, to loot the farmers' belongings. The police and the territorial forces that patrol the borders of Government zones have arrested farmers going to market and charged them with "supplying the VC." As was always the case during the war, these arrests are often followed by the confiscation of the farmer's belongings and sessions of interrogation and torture. These measures are not wholly effective—the P.R.G. zones do seem to have gained some population since the cease-fire—but they act as powerful deterrents to the majority, including many of those on the refugee rolls.

Thus, until the Saigon Government changes, or is forced to change, its policies, American aid to refugees in South Vietnam will only contribute to keeping the farmers estranged from their land, economically dependent on the United States and incapable of beginning the long task of reconstruction. Not only do these policies violate the whole intent of the Paris accords (specifically Article Eleven on freedom of movement and freedom of work) and make a mockery of stated U.S. war aims, but they threaten, even in the absence of a major renewal of the fighting, to create a permanent refugee population, similar to that of Palestine.

The mockery seems particularly cruel in the case of the Muc Tien camp. The people of My Lai and the surrounding villages have been uprooted five, six and seven times in the course of the past decade—and largely as a result of U.S. air and artillery fire. Now, after the peace agreement has been signed, they are being held virtually as political prisoners in a sandspit camp.

"Look," one of the old men said to me, "we don't want any more American aid. We have enough rice to survive. We just want them to let us go back to our village." The Thieu Government would like the American people to think otherwise. In an inept and revealing bit of public relations work the Thieu officials greeted the Kennedy delegation to the camp by putting up a sign in English that read, "The people of My Lai thank the Americans for all their help."

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