

Quiet Battle Is Under Way in Vietnam For Areas That Neither Side Controls

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 18—A silent battle is under way in South Vietnam for the control of areas in which neither the Government nor the Communists can claim to exercise full authority. The weapon are people.

Informed American sources report that the Government is preparing to move large numbers of refugees driven from their homes in last year's Communist offensive back to regions over which Government control is incomplete.

Simultaneously, the sources said, the Vietcong are creating administrative structures in villages in the same regions, in an effort to claim them as their own if the cease-fire operation and supervision commissions get sufficiently organized to inspect local situations in the areas for which they are responsible.

Frequent Incursions

The areas involved are mainly in the northern half of the country. So far, plans have been approved by the Saigon Government and American refugee officials to move 70,000 refugees from the provinces of Quang Tri, Thua Thien and Quang Ngai back to areas from which they fled in the fighting last spring.

These areas have been recaptured by the Government but, being almost deserted by their former populations, are subject to frequent Vietcong incursions.

The 70,000 people — 44,000 from Thua Thien, 16,000 from Quang Tri and 10,000 from Quang Ngai—are to begin moving before the end of this



The New York Times/Feb. 19, 1973
Saigon Government plans to return refugees to 3 provinces whose names are printed in boxes.

month. These are mainly people who have remained under Government control throughout the war and are believed by the Government to prefer to remain that way.

Within two months, the Government plans to extend the refugee return to a larger category of people now in camps. Involved in this extension would be refugees from regions in the north that have been contested by the Government and the Communists.

It is in these areas particularly that the vietcong have been reported implanting their

own leaders and flags, and where the greatest difficulties are expected.

Of the 630,000 people in refugee camps, more than half are considered to be in the first two categories. At least 25,000 people fall into a third classification. They come from areas traditionally friendly to the Communists and will not be allowed to return to them. Most are from Binh Dinh province and fled the fighting there last year. They stayed in camps, according to American sources, because there the Government feeds them.

Before the cease-fire went into effect it had been expected that the refugees from Binh Dinh might try to "explode" out of the camps and head for home. This, it was feared, would provoke violent Government countermeasures. But these refugees have not tried to head home, presumably because of the continuing insecurity in the countryside.

Threats of Violence

Nevertheless, the possibility of violent outbreak continues. The American sources believe the Government is determined to maintain strict control over populations whose loyalty it suspects.

As the American presence and direct role diminishes, American officials feel increasingly powerless to influence Government decisions, either against the movement of refugees into contested areas to which they might not want to go or against the forcible retention of others in camps.

REMEMBER THE NEEDIEST!