

U.S. Aid Scandal -- Viet Refugees Who Don't Exist

Da Nang, South Vietnam

The U.S. is paying to feed tens of thousands of nonexistent refugees from Quang Tri province.

American and Vietnamese officials close to the problem agree that cheating and corruption at all levels of involvement — from refugees getting an extra pound or two of rice a day to high government officials in the upper reaches of a kickback pyramid — exceeds previous experience, however rich.

The Vietnamese officials are in the main unwilling or, in exceptional cases, unable to stop the cheating, and Americans feel powerless to act against it without at the same time endangering relief for the real refugees from Quang Tri, who may total well above 200,000.

PITFALL

In the opinion of qualified experts, the Quang Tri refugee problem, now nearly a year old but not publicly discussed, illustrates the costly pitfalls of American financial assistance.

When Quang Tri, the northernmost province of South Vietnam, was nearly overrun in the Communist offensive of last spring, its population has 317,000. Today, after large numbers remained behind under Communist control and many others were killed in the fighting and sustained bombing that followed the offensive, 327,000 people are listed as Quang Tri refugees and food for that many is issued at American expense.

Officials and others involved agree on the practices by which the relief rolls are swollen but differ on the degree.

ESTIMATES

A South Vietnamese official close to the problem before the offensive believes

that only half the refugees exist.

A foreigner with years of first-hand experience with the people of Quang Tri puts the number at 180,000 to 190,000, while American officials put it at 200,000 to 250,000. All this makes for a range of 75,000 to 160,000 phantom refugees.

Close to two billion piasters, or more than \$4 million, has been spent for the Quang Tri refugees since October 1, and spending since last May, when the refugees began to pour southward, is estimated at \$1 million a month.

REASONS

The American and south Vietnamese officials have been ready to accept refugee figures suspected of exaggeration because they lend credence to contentions that while the Communists can capture territory they cannot win control of the people.

The idea that almost all the people of the province escaped southward also overcame qualms about the heavy bombing and shelling of Quang Tri after its fall, since the areas under attack could be depicted as depopulated.

Provincial officials, at the Quang Tri headquarters that has been moved rearward to this city in Quang Nam province believe that many more people than the government acknowledges — and American advisers accept — remained behind.

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