

# Saigon's Transfer of Refugees Is Protested

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 23—The Saigon Government has moved several thousand people in the Central Highlands, against their will in many cases and despite strong protests from American officials.

About half of the 7,500 people, mainly hill tribesmen, were shifted from refugee camps in Pleiku Province to larger camp in neighboring Kontum province where there has been an outbreak of typhoid. The water is contaminated and in extremely short supply and there are neither ten's nor houses to shelter all.

The remaining refugees were taken back to their original villages in an area west of Kontum city where there was heavy fighting only a few weeks ago and which many of the people and American officials alike fear is still unsafe.

## For Political Reasons

All of the people fled Kontum last spring when the Communists were taking vast chunks of territory and it appeared that the province's capital itself would fall.

American officials say that the refugees were moved for political reasons. Lieut. Col Buu Hap, the province chief of Kontum and the man who directed the move, said in an interview yesterday that he wanted the people back in their home province to facili-

tate hamlet and village elections, which he said would be held some time in April.

Another reason was so the people could begin cultivating their rice fields before the end of the planting season late next month, the colonel said.

He acknowledged, however, that for a great many people crowded into the former American Army base known as "Mary Lou," there was no land to work.

President Nguyen Van Thieu has held a series of recent meetings with province chiefs to urge them to get those dislocated by the war back to their home provinces.

The Americans say that they have protested, in vain, to the highest Government officials dealing with refugee affairs. Since virtually every facet of Government operations is financed directly or indirectly by the United States, an American official was asked how he and his colleagues could have failed to sway the Kontum province chief.

"If a province chief is convinced that he is doing what the President wants him to do," was the reply, "no adviser is going to be able to convince him that he should not do it."

Another American official said that not only local elections but the sovereignty of the entire province was involved. The Communists control almost all the land but a circle about 10 to 15 miles wide that encompasses Kontum city and a narrow corridor to the south

along national Route 14.

The American said there had been reports that the Communists were repopulating northwestern Kontum and he speculated that the Government might be trying to offset this by resettling the refugees.

With the latest arrivals, there are nearly 17,000 living in Mary Lou, a fenced-in section of dusty, barren rolling plains that lie just south of Kontum city. Many of the first to arrive at Mary Lou last October are still living in tattered army tents. There are also rows of wooden one-room houses with tin roofs. There had been about 24 people to a house; now there are 40 in some.

Dr. Patricia M. Smith, who operates a free private hospital in Kontum, says that she saw the first case of typhoid in the camp in early February and that since then 40 people have been stricken. There was one fatality in late February, at least a week before the province chief began moving new refugees into the camp.

## Medical Team Due In

American officials say they only became aware of the typhoid late this week and that a medical team has been ordered to Mary Lou and should begin general inoculations this weekend.

The camp has 20 wells, but, near the end of the dry season, there is little water in the wells and it is unfit to drink, American and Vietnamese officials say.

Nguyen Nga, a 50-year-old teacher among the latest arrivals yesterday from Pleiku, said he preferred the other camp because the facilities were better.

"They explained that Pleiku is a different province and you are people of Kontum, so you have to come back to your province," he said. "We wanted to stay but we thought it was impossible so we didn't say anything."

An old woman nearby entered the conversation. "We have lost everything and we just follow the Government," she said. "They tell us to come back and we just come back."

A few hundred hill tribesmen, unable to find shelter at Mary Lou, jammed into a sawmill near the main gate. Yesterday afternoon half a dozen of them crouched despondently on their haunches in a circle around a nearly empty bottle of rice whisky.

"I think everybody wanted to stay in Pleiku—people are scared here because the enemy is close," said Patrick Kreng, who learned while fighting with the American Special Forces and was later baptized and given a Christian name by Catholic missionaries.

He translated for a 52-year-old man who passed him the whisky bottle.

"The district chief said we must come back," the older man said in his staccato hill dialect. He did not ask anybody. He said the people must come back."