

## Viets' long road of misery

# Refugees flee the unknown

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**VUNG TAU, Viet Nam**—For days they came. Walking in the hot blistering Vietnamese sun, clinging to tiny fishing boats, packed like human freight aboard cargo ships, crammed into overloaded airplanes.)

It was a long road of misery for the more than two million South Vietnamese refugees who in the last two weeks fled the battles and the onrushing North Vietnamese troops pouring south thru the Northern and Central Highlands.

"I JUST KEPT thinking that I couldn't be caught by the North Vietnamese," said Nguyen Van Nhon, a carpenter from Viet Nam's ancient capital of Hue. "I knew they would kill me."

But would Nhon have really been killed if he had stayed behind in Hue when North Vietnamese forces moved in? Even tho there have been reports that the Viet Cong murdered several thousand people in Hue in 1968 there are very few people who actually saw these atrocities.

"I don't know now, maybe I would have been all right, but I just couldn't bring myself to take that chance," Nhon said.

SO, LIKE TWO million others, Nhon took one last look around his home, gathered his family and left.

And like his two million fellow refugees, Nhon became a political pawn, shoved back and forth on Viet Nam's rugged playing board by Saigon and Hanoi.

"You see," said Phan Quang Dan, South Viet Nam's deputy prime minister for welfare, at the height of the refugee panic, "these people are fleeing the North Vietnamese. They aren't running toward them, are they? That shows you how much the people fear and hate the Communists."

**MEANWHILE, OUT** at the Provisional Revolutionary Government's diplomatic mission at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport, Hanoi had its say.

"The poor refugees are being forced to flee, forced by the Thieu clique in Saigon," said Col. Vo Dong Giang, chief P.R.G. spokesman. "Do you think for one moment that we are driving these people away? What good is all that land we have liberated without people?"

And while the political rhetoric was flying back and forth, the refugees were caught in the middle, shelled by advancing North Vietnamese troops and robbed by retreating South Vietnamese troops.

**WHEN THEY** weren't running they were languishing in hastily set up refugee camps.

"I had to leave everything behind in Da Nang, my money, my home, my clothes, and now I'm beginning to think, my life," said Tran Tho Hien, who arrived in this port city almost 10 days ago.

Why did he run? Was he afraid of the North Vietnamese? The Viet Cong?

"THIS MAY SOUND strange to you," Hien, 43, said. "But I ran because everyone else was running. I don't think I have any reason to fear the

North Vietnamese—I've never worked for the Americans or fought against Hanoi's soldiers.

"But when it came down to staying and facing the unknown or running and facing the unknown, I felt like I had to run," he said.

Thousands of refugees were faced with the same choice and thousands ran simply because they saw someone else running.

The P.R.G. made one attempt to halt the mad rush of refugees from its advancing forces when it dropped leaflets warning the people its troops were coming, but not to panic.

"ONLY THOSE who have actively worked against the peoples revolution will be punished," the P.R.G. said.

"But what does that mean?" pleaded one refugee. "People just don't want to stay around and take the chance that they haven't offended Hanoi somehow. They prefer to run. At least while we are running, we are alive."

At least some are alive. The South Vietnamese government estimates that at least 3,000 men, women, and children died in the confused exodus.

While the Vietnamese refugee has been used as some kind of pawn in the game of life and death between Hanoi and Saigon, at least both sides agree on one thing: He is one of the long war's greatest tragedies. "These refugees are tragic, tragic figures," said South Viet Nam's Dan.

"ALL THOSE refugees are suffering tragically," said the P.R.G. spokesman, Col. Giang.

And if you don't believe either side, just ask any refugee.