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The Director

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Resettlement Program

Before leaving Saigon in November 1954, after three months TDY, I strongly recommended that if the Mission expected to achieve not only reasonable success in the resettlement program, but effective use of US funds, two-fold action was imperative:

1. Take a strong stand with the Vietnamese Government and stop making compromises.
2. Develop a program of resettlement in the real sense of the word.

My recommendations went unheeded and experience has unfortunately shown that a large part of US aid to the refugees was used without plans, without control and without an objective beyond the immediate need for a subsistence program.

I am saying this as an introduction to recent developments which are probably the result, in part, of this past experience.

You know that since my arrival almost five months ago I have made strenuous efforts, with your help, to give the resettlement program a new direction. This direction requires, above all, the cooperation of our technical divisions and thus, a common understanding in our official family as to what we want to do and what we can expect, not only of the Vietnamese Government, but also of the refugees themselves.

Unfortunately, after a short period of optimism and prospects for progress and swift decisions, after a few happy instances of common enthusiasm, the newly-acquired understanding and cooperation began to deteriorate and soon I saw myself standing alone, fighting against unwarranted caution, unconstructive criticism and unreasonable demands for perfection in the elaboration of a program, to a point where it was insinuated that I proposed unwise spending of U.S. funds. The original purpose of coordinating the program with technical divisions and of obtaining technical advice for the benefit of the program turned into a scrutiny of my own intentions, an evaluation of the merits of the refugee program, and a measuring of the refugees' worthiness in relationship to our freely-offered assistance.

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I am aware that the expressions of criticism and reservations are well intended, but I am afraid that they tend to make us lose the vision which we need in order to see the opportunities which are offered to us.

During the Displaced Persons Program, under which 350,000 displaced persons immigrated to the United States, the expression "to take a calculated risk" became famous; it was used in connection with security matters and the desirability of issuing visas to certain persons who had a nominal connection with Nazi or other fascist organizations. Decisions involving this kind of calculated risk are far more serious than when they involve only budgetary matters. Yet the Displaced Persons Commission courageously took calculated risks which later turned out to be wise decisions.

Today we have reached a point in the resettlement program where a decision involving a risk will not pass scrutiny. We must not help the refugees build a school unless we know that they will be able to support it from their own resources; we must not provide medical facilities unless we know that the refugees will meet our standards in their operation. A community hall is not productive, therefore we will not finance its construction. We are trying to draw a straight line, inflexible and with the cold accuracy of modern bookkeeping. The human effort, the human sacrifices and aspirations of the refugees are beyond the straight line.

I am afraid that the refugees are being victimized for the past performance of the Commissariat General and our own Mission. However, I must say in their defense that they did not ask for the type of assistance which they were so generously promised and later given.

The refugees needed money to keep them from starving; but they also needed guidance and a sense of purpose beyond their immediate needs. This guidance they did not receive and in spite of it, their achievements are remarkable, due only to their initiative and determination to start a new existence. Because of staggering odds, they are today far from standing on their own feet.

The skills and social aspirations of the refugees are a great opportunity for South Vietnam and in relation to U.S. objectives they could be of immense value to us. Because of the spiritual leadership among the refugees, and because they are hard-working people if given a chance, they may well eventually influence their new neighbors -- and what now seems an unjust preferential treatment of the refugees will bear fruits for a larger segment of the population.

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But this is not the only reason why we must be tolerant and broadminded: These people, by giving up their homes and existence have made a tremendous sacrifice -- far beyond what most of us can visualize. We cannot expect of them the same effort to recreate non-productive facilities as we do under normal circumstances. The fact that they cannot now support a school is a poor reason for not helping them to build it and to run it. Even if, in our eyes, a community hall is not important in the immediate future, its existence for them as well as for us has values which cannot be measured in dollars.

We cannot expect the refugees to earn a living and at the same time spend their energy for what they would like to have. I think just now when we are trying to stress the economic development of the villages is the time when we should give them the greatest possible assistance for the social improvement of their villages.

At the recent meeting when we discussed the resettlement program, the meeting over which you presided, I agreed with the decisions which were taken. Reflecting on my statement to that effect during the past few days, I have come to the conclusion that I did so only because there is so little time left. It was a mistake; I cannot agree to a program which is guided by undue caution and lack of vision on the part of those who are called to participate in its formulation and execution.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to change the thinking and the minds of people. Nevertheless, I must ask you to use your influence and authority in order to rescue the resettlement program from stagnation. Unless a broader view can be achieved, and a more flexible attitude be attained within the Mission, we will have failed in the sense that we will not have taken advantage of the opportunities in our hands.

From recent visits to a large number of refugee villages, I can state that the degree of achievement in what we call "resettlement" varies over a large scale; in some villages very little has been achieved both in the economic and social field; in others a point of almost complete self-sufficiency has been attained by the refugees.

The few subprojects developed so far reflect this variation in achievement and indicate the urgent need for flexibility on our part. The officials who are preparing the subprojects spend, in most instances, ten days to two weeks in the resettlement villages and develop the projects in conjunction with the refugees themselves. These officials are reasonable in their estimates of the requirements and conservative in the preparation of the budgets.

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I therefore strongly recommend:

1. That those who are asked to evaluate and concur in resettlement projects restrict their comments to those chapters of the project with which they are concerned from a purely technical point of view.
2. That in their evaluation they maintain the greatest degree of flexibility both from a budgetary as well as a technical point of view.
3. As a final recommendation, I suggest that Mrs. Bradbury (presently in the Program and Requirements Division) be assigned to the Division of Resettlement and Rehabilitation.

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