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They voted
with their feet

A statement by
John McNoughton
U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense
September 17, 1965

They voted with their feet

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The U.S. Senate's subcommittee on refugees heard testimony September 17 that since late 1964, more than 600,000 Vietnamese refugees have fled from insecure areas and from Viet Cong terrorism.

"They voted with their feet," said Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton. He added:

"We have evidence of growing disenchantment among villagers who have heretofore complied with Viet Cong demands. There are two good reasons for this: first, the Viet Cong have failed to make good their promises to the people; and second, the horrors of war are likely to follow wherever the Viet Cong intrude."

Excerpts from his testimony:

THE GREATEST CRUELTY of war and the greatest crime of aggression is the suffering inflicted on the innocents uprooted from their homes and set to wander among the ravaged countryside.

In the struggles the world has known this century, perhaps no element has evoked more sympathy than the plight of those seeking refuge from conflict. Even more than the spectacle of physical pain, the spectacle of families separated, of homes destroyed, of hopes shattered has disturbed all men of good faith. . . .

I would like to commend the good work of this committee in keeping the plight of the refugee in the

public's conscience and in helping to find solutions to this unfortunate by-product of war. . . .

When the Geneva Accords of 1954 partitioned Viet-Nam into the free republic in the south and the communist-led state in the north, nearly seven percent of the population in North Viet-Nam sought refuge from communism. By foot and by oxcart, carrying their former happiness and future hopes on their backs, they made the long, hot trek to freedom. Even after the deadline for overt movement had passed, they risked grave dangers to board U.S. vessels waiting off shore.

They voted with their feet.

By 1957—just two and one-half years after the exodus—the government of Viet-Nam, with assistance from the United States, had largely completed the task of integrating these one million refugees into a free society. I here call the committee's attention to an important fact of this exodus: the direction of the mass refugee flow—away from communist domination. This is a fact that the world at large should note. . . .

As this blatant aggression, called by the communists "national liberation," began to gnaw at South Viet-Nam's village structure, Phase II of the refugee problem began: exodus from the horrors of guerrilla war. This is the constant flux of refugees—for the most part ethnic South Vietnamese refugees—who flee from insecure areas to seek safety near or in district and provincial capitals.

In 1962-1963, one hundred thousand refugees fled Viet Cong terror in Viet-Nam's rugged central highlands.

Since late 1964, over 600,000 refugees have left insecure areas.

In August the government of Viet-Nam reported

that there were a total of 376,000 Vietnamese listed in refugee status, 300,000 in the coastal plains and central highlands areas. . . .

The more the terrorism and hit-and-run attacks, the greater the number of refugees. The alternative to fleeing is joining the Viet Cong—submission.

In 1964, 1,728 civic officials were killed, kidnaped or wounded by the Viet Cong. In the same year, 11,746 plain civilians were killed, wounded or kidnaped. So far this year, casualties of officials through Viet Cong terrorism number over 600, and casualties for other civilians have passed 6,000.

A logical question to ask is why the Viet Cong pursue terroristic methods against the people whose minds they hope to win—especially since the Viet Cong must depend on the peasants in the villages for funds, food, shelter, intelligence and conscripts. . . .

When the Viet Cong enter a village, they immediately attempt to win the local inhabitants to their cause. In some cases, however, to insure complicity, terror is liberally applied to any potential opposition. If the local teacher is teaching the children of the village to be loyal to their government, the Viet Cong sternly warn him to stop it. If the teacher continues, he is likely to be shot; his corpse may be mutilated. If the village chief does not cooperate with the Viet Cong, he too may be shot. In addition to enforcing complicity, the terrorism serves the equally important function of disrupting the process of government and causing the villagers to lose faith in the ability of the central government to protect them.

Partly out of disenchantment with the Viet Cong and partly from pure fear, many Vietnamese flee to areas where they will be safe.

In recent months, the Viet Cong has studiously

avoided large-scale contacts with U.S. and government forces because of their well-founded apprehension of superior firepower and mobility. . . .

But while large-scale attacks have been avoided, the Viet Cong, reinforced by infiltrators from the north, have maintained their terrorization of individuals and whole villages. They have continued their interdiction of roads and highways and to prosecute the protracted warfare of the guerrilla.

We have also evidence of growing disenchantment among villagers who have heretofore complied with Viet Cong demands. There are two reasons for this disenchantment: first, the Viet Cong have failed to make good their promises to the people; and second, the horrors of war are likely to follow wherever the Viet Cong intrude. Frequently, when the Viet Cong seize a village and turn it into a fortified stronghold, it is necessary for government forces to enter the village and secure the area. But humanitarian principles guide government actions in this case. Except in extraordinary circumstances, before entering a village, loudspeaker broadcasts in the Vietnamese language are made cautioning the people to leave the area. Pamphlets may be dropped from helicopters, or other means of informing the populace may be used to warn innocent civilians of impending danger. Frequently, of course, the Viet Cong also heed the warning and disappear into the jungles. Nonetheless, the area can then be secured and Viet Cong fortifications destroyed. If a shooting battle with the Viet Cong takes place in the village, widespread destruction of huts and houses is often unavoidable from the crossfire. In these instances, when their domiciles are destroyed and their villages are being fought over, the villagers have no choice but to join the increasing

numbers of refugees seeking shelter and safety in other areas. . . .

Militarily, the regaining of villages from the Viet Cong is a necessity. To avoid these operations would be to jeopardize the war effort, and the result would be to leave even more Vietnamese to the terror and torture of the Viet Cong and the eventual total domination by communism.

Another major cause of the increased refugee flow is nature herself. Natural disasters like floods often leave thousands homeless and swell the refugee rolls. With the heavy monsoon rains swelling Viet-Nam's rivers and swamps, there is a possibility of heavy flooding this fall, and a subsequent large increase in the numbers of refugees.

To date, the refugee movement has had very little effect on our total effort in Viet-Nam. Supplies generally have been adequate to handle the situation both for the civilian and military personnel.

Open roads and lines of communication have not been clogged by refugees to the extent that they could not be used. Relief facilities have been strained in some instances; however, most of the people have been fed, sheltered and some medical care has been available—sometimes at a level above that available in their home villages. . . .

There are presently two main camps located along the coast in central Viet-Nam with about 55,000 refugees living there. These camps are located near the large cities of Da Nang and Qui Nhon, where adequate supplies can be stored and where intracoastal transportation facilitates logistics and communications. In addition, there are three main areas of refugee concentration in Quang Ngai, Quang Nam and Binh Dinh provinces with about 150,000 refugees.

These are in addition to those in Da Nang camp (in Quang Nam province) and the Qui Nhon camp (in Binh Dinh province). Ninety percent of these refugees are women, children and old men. . . .

The refugees assist the counterinsurgency effort by providing badly needed information. The refugees are debriefed, one at a time, as they enter safe areas or camps, and information is obtained. Attempts to recruit refugees for counterinsurgency operations, however, have met with relatively little success because of the intimidation and terror they have been subjected to prior to taking refuge. . . .

If an area is under Viet Cong control, the government urges people to move; but if only small numbers of Viet Cong are present, the GVN prefers that the people stay in the area. At the present time, relief supplies are still available for the refugees in the provincial capitals. . . .

Although supplies and facilities are sufficient for the present, a large influx of new refugees would strain current ability to deal with the problem, but the need will be met. The major problem—that of resettlement—is going to be the one most difficult to solve. At present, there simply is not enough nearby land under GVN control in the central provinces to accommodate the large-scale resettlement necessary. As areas of South Viet-Nam are secured, the refugee problem will correct itself, since the refugees will return to their original homes.

The U.S. Government effort is currently expanding to meet the refugee problem. . . .

Because the refugees are a cross-section of the very people we are in Viet-Nam to help, and because simple human compassion demands it, the refugee problem is one that shall continue to have our closest attention.