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DINH TUONG REFUGEE SITUATION - May 1966

HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR ON MICROFILM

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FIELD RESEARCH MEMORANDUM ~~no. 1~~ no. 1,

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NOTES ON THE REFUGEE SITUATION IN DINH TUONG PROVINCE  
REPUBLIC OF VIET-NAM

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15 15 May 1966

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## PREFACE

This Field Research Memorandum presents observations on the refugee situation in Dinh Tuong Province, one of a series of provinces in the Republic of Viet-Nam visited by members of the HSR Field Team between February and April 1966. The objective of these trips was to determine the character of the refugee problem in various areas, as well as to ascertain the nature of field conditions to be met in later data collection efforts for HSR's one-year "Study of the Refugee Problem in Viet-Nam," being conducted for OSD/ARPA RDFU-V.

Dinh Tuong Province was visited twice: from February 28 to March 5, and again from April 18 to 21, 1966. Government of Viet-Nam officials at both the provincial and district levels were systematically interviewed, as were MACV sector and sub-sector advisors, USAID representatives, and various private and religious organization representatives. The seven districts in the Province were visited and a number of refugee resettlement centers in each district were inspected. A number of refugees were interviewed, including elected/appointed chiefs of various refugee centers.

The purpose of this Memorandum is not to present wholly new empirical data on the refugee situation in Dinh Tuong, but rather to draw together and interpret existing material as derived from observations made in the Province and from extensive interviewing of cognizant officials.

The author expresses appreciation to the officials of Dinh Tuong, both Vietnamese and American, whose cooperation made this report possible. The views expressed, however, are solely those of the author.

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## SUMMARY

1. The refugee "problem" in Dinh Tuong is much less acute than in other areas of Viet-Nam, both because the refugee population is relatively small and because area resources are relatively abundant.
2. Refugees tend to be mobile and temporary because of geographic factors as well as the level of insurgency.
3. Refugee movement is motivated by a combination of factors, including:
  - a. increased military activity, both Viet-Cong and GVN, since 1965;
  - b. abandonment of government outposts;
  - c. increased danger from artillery and bombing; and
  - d. general disruption of rural economic and social life.
4. Refugees have generally moved in single family units, but once in a secure area have tended to re-group in village units.
5. Estimates of the total number of refugees registered or re-settled in Dinh Tuong (in April 1966) were approximately 40,000. However, because refugee populations tend to be shifting, only a small percentage of the total refugee population at a given time is ever registered or re-settled. Others either spontaneously return to their villages or subsist on their own.
6. An effective use has been made of refugees in Dinh Tuong's pacification program. By resettling refugees along the crucial National Highway 4, the Province has provided a new security "buffer" for the road, and by attaching them to "New Life Hamlets," their strength to resist Viet-Cong pressures has been increased.

## SƠ LƯỢC

- 1.- Vấn đề dân tỵ nạn tại Định Tường không đến nỗi gay gắt như nhiều nơi khác tại Việt Nam, phần vì dân số tỵ nạn tương đối nhỏ, phần khác vì tài nguyên của tỉnh tương đối dồi dào.
- 2.- Do yếu tố địa dư và tầm mức hoạt động của quân phiến loạn trong khu vực dân tỵ nạn tại đây thường lưu chuyển và tạm thời.
- 3.- Nguyên do thúc đẩy phong trào dân chúng di cư tỵ nạn gồm nhiều yếu tố như sau:
  - a.- Sự gia tăng hoạt động quân sự của cả Việt cộng lẫn QLVNCH từ năm 1965 đến nay,
  - b.- Sự rút lui một số các tiền đồn của QLVNCH
  - c.- Sự nguy hiểm mỗi ngày một gia tăng của các cuộc pháo kích và oanh tạc, và
  - d.- Sự sụp đổ hoàn toàn của nền kinh tế và đời sống xã hội nông thôn.
- 4.- Nói tổng quát, dân tỵ nạn di chuyển từng gia đình lẻ tẻ, nhưng một khi đã ở trong vùng an ninh thường tụ tập thành đơn vị làng.
- 5.- Con số ước lượng về tổng số dân tỵ nạn đã kiểm nhận và định cư tại Định Tường vào tháng tư năm 1966 khoảng 40.000 người. Tuy nhiên, dân tỵ nạn thay đổi chỗ ở luôn luôn nên trong một khoảng thời gian nào đó chỉ có một phần xuất nhỏ dân tỵ nạn này đã thực sự được kiểm tra và định cư, những người khác hoặc đã trở về làng hoặc đã tỵ túc lo sinh sống.
- 6.- Tại Định Tường dân tỵ nạn đã được sử dụng vào công cuộc bình định rất hiệu quả bằng cách định cư dọc theo một xa lộ quan trọng: quốc lộ 4. Làm như vậy nhà cầm quyền tỉnh đã đem lại cho xa lộ này một vùng "trái độn" an ninh, đồng thời việc sáp nhập số dân tỵ nạn này vào các ấp Tân sinh cũng gia tăng tiềm lực kháng chiến chống áp lực của Việt Cộng.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dinh Tuong Province is in the strategic heart of South Viet-Nam's delta. It stretches along the Mekong River and is traversed by several of the principal canals leading to Saigon. It is dissected by National Highway 4, the main road linking Saigon with IV Corps. Dinh Tuong is also one of the more heavily populated provinces in the delta (more than 313 persons per square kilometer), and its economic base is typical of the delta: agriculture is focused mainly on the production of wet rice, with fruits a secondary crop, while an active fishing industry exploits the resources of the Mekong, and various small industries are located around major towns.

Militarily, Dinh Tuong has been the focus of considerable Viet-Cong insurgent activity. As in much of the rest of the delta, the level of insurgency in Dinh Tuong is classically "guerrilla" in character, not yet having escalated to more conventional warfare forms. The principal Viet-Cong challenge is not that district towns will be over-run, but that the presence of government will continue to be eroded in outlying villages and the arteries of communication that run through the Province cut. Hence, Government of Viet-Nam (GVN) military plans emphasize a steady expansion of the area of "pacification," and the maintenance of the security of transport rather than on large offensive operations against Viet-Cong main force units.

## II. CHARACTER OF REFUGEE MOVEMENT

### A. The General Picture

As throughout Viet-Nam, the combination of Viet-Cong insurgent activity -- harassments, terrorism, taxation -- and of GVN/US military operations, has served to severely disrupt rural life. As a result, large numbers of refugees, or more accurately, displaced persons, have been generated. However, the character of the refugee problem in Dinh Tuong, as in much of the delta, contrasts sharply with the character of refugee movement in the central coastal provinces, largely because the extent of disruption has been different.

In fact, as most Vietnamese and American personnel in Dinh Tuong argue, the refugee problem in the Province is not really a "problem" as much as it is a "situation." They adopt such a position because, first, refugees in Dinh Tuong form a relatively small percentage of the population,<sup>1</sup> hence they are less of a burden on the resources of the Province as well as being more manageable for provincial authorities to handle.

Second, it is superficially difficult to distinguish a refugee from much of the general population. A fine line exists between the needs and condition of temporary refugees and the plight of poorer elements of the local population. Food and resources (except land) are relatively plentiful in the delta so that it is possible for the resources of an area to absorb the

<sup>1</sup>Refugees in Dinh Tuong represent approximately five percent of the total Province population. This contrasts with the central coastal provinces, such as Binh Dinh where refugees comprise 17 percent of the provincial population, or Phu Yen where 14 percent are refugees. (These figures are based upon official Ministry of Social Welfare statistics, provincial estimates, and computed from population statistics from the National Institute of Statistics, Statistical Yearbook of Viet-Nam: 1963, Saigon, Viet-Nam, p. 25.)

temporary refugee -- either through the assistance of family, friends, or religious organizations (e. g., Hoa Hao, Catholic, Cao Dai). But where food is scarce, the need of the local population is almost identical to that of the temporary refugee. However, should the refugee desire to stay -- to "resettle" -- for a longer period, he faces the more significant problem of being detached from his land and source of livelihood. And because land is scarce, and employment opportunities limited, the long-term refugee does have unique needs. In Dinh Tuong, government assistance has been directed almost exclusively to such "resettled" refugees.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>In official GVN parlance, three categories of refugees are recognized: "resettled," "in temporary shelters," and "returned to villages." In Dinh Tuong the distinctions are more bureaucratic than descriptive. Presumably a refugee "in a temporary shelter" has been officially registered as a "refugee" by the Ministry of Social Welfare representative and is receiving seven piastres\* per day for periods up to two months. After that time, if he is still unable or unwilling to return to his village, he is entitled to receive a resettlement payment of 2,500 to 3,500 piastres. He then is a "resettled" refugee. The third category, refugees who have "returned to villages," are usually simply refugees who either never were registered or counted; usually they are more numerous, but also mobile.

In Dinh Tuong only a handful of "temporary shelters" exist, and they are usually for persons in the process of being "resettled," i. e., receiving resettlement payments. Upon registration by district officials, refugee families usually receive from the GVN: (1) temporary welfare payments of seven piastres per person per day; (2) 15 kilos of rice per month for up to six months; (3) resettlement payment of 2,500 piastres for a family of two-three, 3,000 piastres for a family of four-five, and 3,500 piastres for a family over six (occasionally a portion of this payment is considered as a loan and must be repaid, but this varies); and (4) assistance in obtaining equipment for farming, etc. This is the extent of official GVN assistance. In addition, refugees may receive special help from religious organizations, such as Catholic Relief Services, Hoa Hao, etc., as well as commodity support from USAID.

The truly "temporary" refugee in Dinh Tuong -- those moving out of an area for only a few days or weeks -- are never fully counted or recognized. Presumably they live with relatives or friends or subsist by their own devices.

\*NOTE: At the official rate of exchange, one US dollar is worth 74 piastres; the unofficial rate is US \$1 for 160 piastres.

Third, refugee populations in the delta tend to be more fluid and temporary than in the central coastal or highland areas. The number of "resettled" refugees -- that is, those receiving government resettlement payments and land on which to construct a house -- is relatively small compared to the number of "temporary" refugees. This is largely due to the comparative ease of transportation in Dinh Tuong -- the many canals, rural feeder roads, and major highways -- which encourages a high level of population mobility. For example, fishing villagers will simply move their sampans down a canal to live and fish in a new location, temporarily, until military operations or Viet-Cong harassments cease and they can return to their home areas. In spite of their high mobility, the delta refugees on the average probably travel a shorter distance than in the northern provinces. It is estimated in Dinh Tuong that on the average refugees migrate only six to eight kilometers.

Fourth, few large-scale military operations occur in the delta which serve to dislocate whole district populations. In Dinh Tuong they are neither as large, frequent nor as devastating as in northern provinces where large sweep-and-clear and fix-and-destroy operations are frequent. More typical are small unit attacks against localized Viet-Cong units. Even then, the posture is more "steady" than "offensive;" "pacification" is planned through slow politico-military action, not wholesale military occupation.

There are, however, a few areas in the northern portion of the Province (see Map I), principally along the edges of the Plain of Reeds and in the southern mid-section, that are considered a kind of "no-man's land" where no effective government presence is maintained, and where intelligence indicates frequent Viet-Cong concentrations. These areas are subjected to intensive artillery fire and air attack, and as a result most of the village populations have made semi-permanent resettlement elsewhere.

## B. Motivation

Generally, the decision of refugees to move appears to be the result of a combination of factors. In Dinh Tuong, according to interviews<sup>3</sup> with officials and selected refugees, this combination involves:

1. Increased military activity, both Viet-Cong and government;
2. Abandonment of an outpost by government troops;
3. Increased danger from artillery and bombing; and
4. Disruption of rural economic and social life to a point that seems intolerable or hopeless.

In at least one instance (reported in Appendix I), the government encouraged people to become refugees, using loud-speakers and leaflets to promise direct aid to villagers who left a certain locality.

## C. Form of Movement

Refugees have usually moved in single family units. Even where whole villages have been abandoned the movement has occurred over a period of time and the initiative to move rested with each family. However, many of these villages have tended to re-group in the new resettlement areas, even though the component families moved separately. Occasionally, resettled refugees have retained their old hamlet or village name, and frequently the old hamlet chief retains his office in the resettlement. This re-grouping along village lines has been encouraged by several district chiefs, although the government has no rigid policy on the matter. Probably more

<sup>3</sup>Province authorities, both Vietnamese officials and American advisors, at the district and provincial level, were systematically interviewed as part of a program of questionnaire pretesting.

important, refugees seek out old neighbors in resettlement areas because a small number of families usually leave the village first and when word returns of their successful resettlement with government assistance, others follow to the same location. It would appear that the mental and social disruption caused by moving to a strange area is somewhat eased by at least resettling with familiar faces.

Some re-grouping has also occurred under the leadership of various religious groups -- particularly the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai. In Giao Duc District, for example, approximately 4,500 Hoa Hao refugees have moved in from neighboring Kien Phong Province. Only a small number of these have been "resettled" through government assistance; most have been cared for and encouraged to move by Hoa Hao leaders. They have established neat village areas along Route 30 from Giao Duc toward Kien Phong Province. According to district authorities, Route 30 has long been closed because of Viet-Cong sabotage, but prospects are that it will be opened in the near future as the pacification plan proceeds. District officials suspect that the Hoa Hao hope to follow the pacification effort along the road in order to claim lands for their followers. Thus, many of the Hoa Hao "refugees" can perhaps more accurately be described as "migrants" from Kien Phong who are seeking improved economic opportunities. However, district officials have not discouraged this kind of re-grouping, for to have Hoa Hao along Route 30 serves to increase security and assist pacification efforts.

#### D. Definition of Refugee

The operational definition of "refugee" is a simple one in Dinh Tuong. Both provincial and district authorities assert that a "refugee" is anyone who lived in an area controlled or contested by the Viet-Cong, and who has since moved to a government controlled area for whatever reasons. Such persons automatically qualify as "refugees." It is assumed that if they have left their homes, and thus their land and sources of income, they need some kind of assistance. Further, provincial authorities assume that since economic life in rural areas -- particularly Viet-Cong controlled areas -- has been severely disrupted over the past year, anyone moving from such areas needs economic assistance. However, a brief and relatively unsystematic screening is required before refugees can be registered for assistance.

#### E. Refugee Statistics

Accurate totals of the number of refugees within Dinh Tuong are nearly impossible to find. First, many "temporary" refugees never come to the attention of district officials and are thus not registered or counted. Second, official statistics are almost entirely based upon registration, rather than a careful census of the refugee population -- and far fewer are actually registered than could be counted. Third, statistics are usually cumulative, hence do not reflect the number of refugees within the Province at the moment. (Since May 1965 when the Ministry of Social Welfare first began to issue statistical reports on refugees, new bulletins were issued twice-weekly. However, these simply "up-dated" the previous bulletin, failing to indicate the current situation.)

Within these limitations, official statistics for Dinh Tuong indicate that there are (or have been) 79,269 refugees in the Province up to April 1966. Of these, 12,625 are "resettled," 47,816 have "returned to their villages," and 18,826 are in "temporary shelters." However, since few "temporary shelters" exist, and since even "resettlement" housing is "temporary," a more accurate and meaningful statement of the current total of refugees in Dinh Tuong would be: 40,000 refugees<sup>4</sup> living in some kind of semi-permanent resettlement ("temporary" refugees are generally too transient to be countable).

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<sup>4</sup>This figure is based upon the estimates of USAID officials in My Tho, and separate tallies in several districts.

### III. USE OF REFUGEES IN PACIFICATION EFFORT

A significant feature of the refugee situation in Dinh Tuong is the provincial government's ability to strategically use refugee movement and resettlement in the pacification program. This has been accomplished through a scheme of resettling refugees along the principal roads as a means of increasing road security and extending pacification.

National Highway 4, which runs nearly the length of Dinh Tuong, has inevitably become the focus of much of the ARVN 7th Division's military activity within the Province. With highway security given the highest priority, one further measure to increase security was to resettle refugees along the road at particularly strategic or vulnerable points.

The rationale was that since the refugees for the most part had left Viet-Cong controlled areas of their own volition, and had been given material assistance by the GVN, they would be resistant to Viet-Cong demands to assist in sabotaging the roadway. More important, the refugees could provide the government with intelligence information on Viet-Cong activity and troop movements along the road.

To some extent, this strategic resettlement has provided a "buffer zone" along the major road in the Province. At several points where Viet-Cong sabotage and harassment were particularly acute five months ago, the incident rate has sharply declined. For example, one of the most dangerous portions of Highway 4 used to be the bend in the road between Cai Lay and Cai Be Districts (see Map I). Now four large refugee resettlements are located there and district authorities report a considerable reduction in minings and roadblocks. A similar process is now at work in Giao Duc District, where in the past few months three

refugee resettlements have been established along the highway from Cai Be District. Again, the district chief reports an increased ability to detect mines on the basis of intelligence reports from refugees. However, the effectiveness of such strategic resettlement obviously rests on the GVN's ability and interest in fully using the intelligence and strategic resource the refugees present. There is some evidence that ARVN units have not always used this resource as frequently as they might.

In other respects provincial authorities also look upon refugees as having a distinctly favorable impact upon the pacification effort. In addition to placing refugee resettlements along roads, they have also attached them to existing "New Life Hamlets," thereby strengthening the self-defense capability of the "New Life Hamlets."<sup>5</sup> Refugees provide a new labor source to the government (i.e., some new recruits for Regional and Popular Forces), as well as denying it to the Viet-Cong.

Although the refugees have been used as a group in the pacification effort, they have not yet been used as imaginatively as they might in psychological warfare and informational programs. No special propaganda effort has been directed solely at the refugees, although they are in theory an acknowledged target for government psychological warfare.

On balance, the experience in Dinh Tuong indicates that refugee resettlement can play an important role in the government's pacification effort in a guerrilla war situation, as well as provide opportunities for political-propaganda action.

<sup>5</sup>"New Life Hamlets" are the somewhat altered successors to the older agrovillage and "strategic hamlet" concepts under the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem. Cf. Milton E. Osborne, Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1965), pp. 40-41.

APPENDIX I

Refugee Conditions in Cai Be District -- Dinh Tuong Province

To present a more detailed picture of the refugee situation in Dinh Tuong, this appendix describes conditions in one representative district -- Cai Be. Located in the western portion of the Province, Cai Be has received the largest influx of refugees of any district in Dinh Tuong.

District authorities estimate that there are 9,900 refugees in the District, 5,517 of whom are registered in 22 refugee resettlement centers (see Table I); the rest are either in process of registration or in temporary situations. Out of an estimated district population of 80,500, refugees represent 12 percent of the population of the District, in contrast to the five percent average for the Province.

A. Living Conditions

In keeping with province policy, the bulk of refugees are located in resettlement centers sited along the District's principal roads (see Map II). Refugees have been given resettlement payments and provided land "on lease" from, or through, the government. Nearly all have constructed single unit thatched-huts, with either cemented or hardened-earth floors, that are difficult to distinguish from those of native residents. Because the plots of land are small, farming is impossible, although vegetable gardens are common. Most families have established fish ponds and keep ducks, chickens, and pigs; few, however, have cattle.

Refugee resettlements can be distinguished from other villages by the neatly laid-out character of the houses, the light color of new thatch, and the fact that most are attached to the outskirts of older villages

TABLE I  
REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT CENTERS IN CAI BE DISTRICT  
APRIL 1966

<u>CENTER</u>	<u>NUMBER OF PEOPLE</u>
My Quoi	337
My Phu	53
Hoa Phu I	336
Hoa Phu II	69
Hoa Hao	129
Hau My	*
Hau Hao	130
An Binh	75
An Thiem	41
Phu Khuong	208
An Thuc	150
An Thuc B	323
An Thuc C	421
An Nhon	*
An Thi	41
An The I & II	1839
An Nghia I	167
An Nghia II	624
An Hoc I & II	270
An Phu	304
Total 22 Centers	5517 People

\*No Figures Available

Source: Cai Be District Office

(occasionally outside the bamboo and wire fortifications). Reportedly, many refugee children are attending class in existing village elementary schools, but the extent of attendance is doubtful. In terms of medical assistance, as well as all other community services, the refugees' lot is the same as the local villager.

#### B. Employment

The greatest problem confronting refugee families is the sudden isolation from their source of livelihood: land -- whether they previously farmed their own or rented land. This situation is made more difficult in Cai Be, as in much of the Province, by the absence of industries, hence limited employment opportunities. According to several refugees, most are working as laborers (receiving from 70 to 95 piastres per day for men, 60 to 80 piastres per day for women). Some refugees report that, when possible, they have returned to their lands on occasion to harvest crops that they had already planted.

Employment remains the refugees' greatest problem as well as their greatest stimulus for returning home. Government assistance in this area has been more symbolic than real. A few self-help projects and public works programs have been initiated, where, through USAID support, refugees are paid in commodities for work done on community projects, such as a small brick-making operation in An The center. It appears that some efforts at vocational training would also be helpful.

#### C. Demography

No reliable survey has been conducted as to the demographic characteristics of the refugee population in Cai Be (or the Province). The best estimates are that in Cai Be approximately 30 percent of the

refugees are adult females, 15 percent adult males, 40 percent children under 15 years old, and 15 percent persons older than 40 years. It is common for the head of the household to be a woman. The absence of males between 20-40 suggests to most district officials that many of the refugees are families of Viet-Cong members. Yet, most feel this should not deter the giving of government assistance, since it would be impossible to adequately screen the refugees and it would be difficult to know if the husband was a "willing" or "unwilling" member of the Viet-Cong.

#### D. Character of Refugee Movement

There are ten villages in Cai Be District, five of them located along Highway 4. Generally, the movement of refugees has been from within the District's five outlying villages -- especially the northern villages.

Specifically, the largest number of refugees originated from Hau My, My Thien, My Thanh, Xuan Son and Hau Thanh villages (see Map II). In the case of Hau My and Xuan Son villages, district officials report that they are nearly abandoned, and the remaining population is presumed to be Viet-Cong; in the others, only a small percentage of the original population remains.

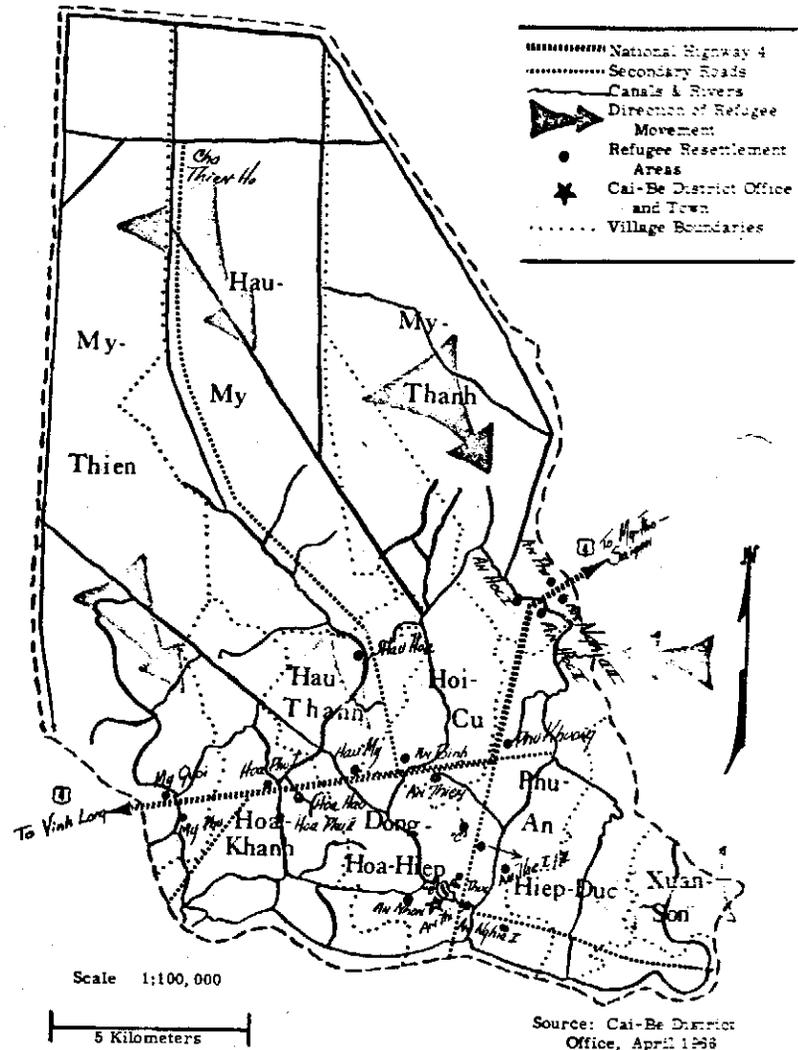
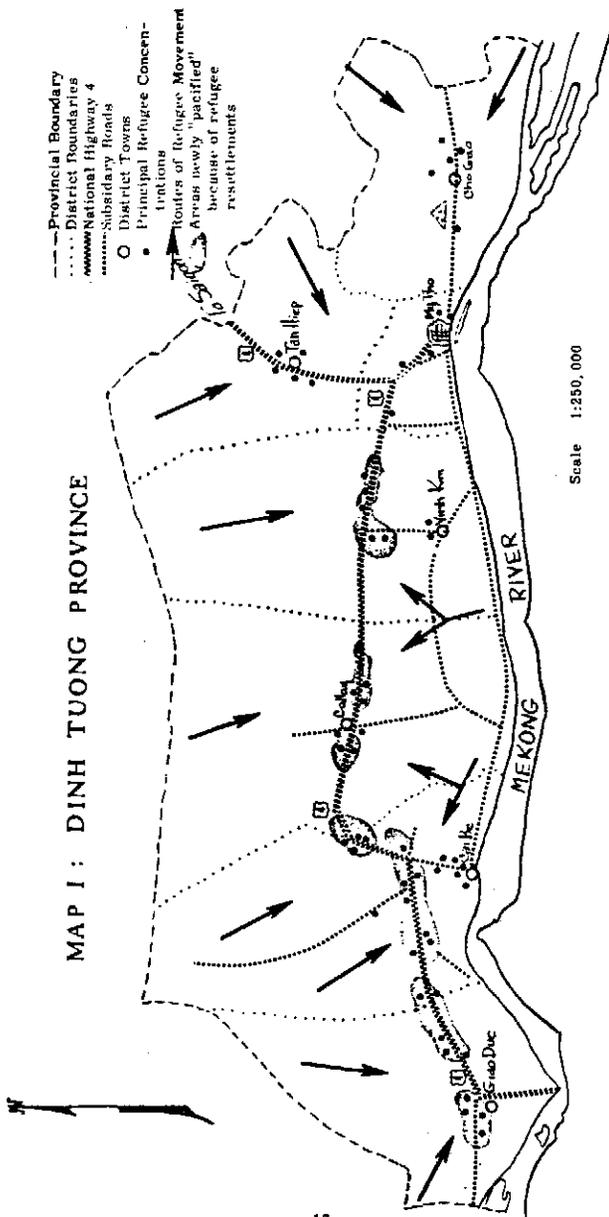
The principal determinant of refugee movement in Cai Be is geographical. The northern villages lie in an area bordering the swampy marshes of the Plain of Reeds -- an area long exposed to Viet-Cong activity. The terrain provides considerable protection against government military operations and, equally important, it is an area removed from the principal channels of government control: the main road arteries.

Significantly, the movement of refugees from Hau My and My Thien villages began in July 1965 when the provincial government, under ARVN 7th Division orders, decided to close the small Popular Forces/Regional Forces fort of Hau My -- the sole government presence in the area. The fort had been deemed indefensible due to its isolated position in an area of heavy Viet-Cong concentration, and because of an anticipated Viet-Cong offensive. According to Lt. Col. Tran Van Phuc, Chief of Province, the government announced to villagers around the immediate fort area that if they would like to move, the government would assist in resettling them along Highway 4. Once the Hau My fort was closed, it was clear that the area would be entirely under the control of the Viet-Cong. More important, the removal of the last vestige of government presence indicated that when the Viet-Cong insurgents did move to occupy the vacuum, the villagers, by inevitable proximity, would become targets for future government shelling and bombings. As long as they lived next to a government fort, they knew that although they may have not been fully protected from Viet-Cong harassments, at least they were relatively immune from artillery fire and air bombardment.

The original government announcement of assistance had been directed to 900 families from nearby hamlets. However, three weeks after the closing of Hau My, the movement of refugees grew from the expected 900 families to approximately 3,000 families, or 15,000 people from throughout the northern portion of the District. This unexpected flow seriously over-burdened existing government facilities for resettlement, and constituted a large part of the initial refugee problem in Dinh Tuong in the summer of 1965 (when awareness of "refugeeism" as a problem first captured attention throughout Viet-Nam and Washington).

The experience of Hau My has been repeated in many other districts in the delta, and demonstrates the symbolic power of a simple Popular Forces fort in convincing rural populations to remain in their villages. As long as such a fort stands, villagers are at least assured that they are not in a "no man's land." There were undoubtedly other motivations for moving -- a growing sense of weariness over Viet-Cong harassments, disruption of rural economic life -- but the "final straw" seemed to be the "abandonment" of the area by the government, coupled with the incentive of resettlement assistance. Random interviews with refugees from the area sustain the impression that they still largely view their resettlement as "temporary" -- until government presence is again re-established in Hau My.

MAP I: DINH TUONG PROVINCE



MAP II: CAI-BE DISTRICT

Source: Cai-Be District Office, April 1968

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