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THE DYING ORPHANS OF VIETNAM

HON. PATSY T. MINK

OF HAWAII

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, May 24, 1973

Mrs. MINK. Mr. Speaker, I have sponsored legislation to facilitate ending the redtape now required in the adoption of American-fathered Vietnamese orphans. Many thousands of these American orphans face death in crowded, filthy conditions in Vietnam.

They need our help now or they may not survive. On January 29, 1973, I re-introduced H.R. 3159. This legislation has 32 cosponsors as indicated on H.R. 6793, H.R. 6794, and H.R. 7566. These bills would authorize special immigrant visas for Vietnamese orphans, one of whose parents is an American. This would clear away much of the existing redtape that has stymied efforts of American families to adopt these children.

The May 28, issue of Newsweek contained informative articles on the tragic plight of "Vietnam's War-Torn Children." I wish that my colleagues could all see the accompanying photographs of these children living in squalid orphanages. While that is not possible, I am inserting the articles in the RECORD to help draw attention to the need for congressional action on behalf of these innocent victims of an unhappy era. Many American families want to extend a hand of love and consideration. I hope that the Congress will act quickly to make this possible.

The articles follow:

[From Newsweek magazine, May 28, 1973]

VIETNAM'S WAR-TORN CHILDREN

(By Loren Jenkins)

She was 13 years old, a frail and shy child named Huynh Thi Chi. Along with her parents and six brothers and sisters, she lived in the village of Dien Bang where she tended the family vegetable patch, helped her mother clean house and, on occasion, plowed the rice fields with her father's water buffalo. Then, on a hot and steamy day in 1968, the tranquil world of Huynh Thi Chi vanished in a blinding flash. Artillery shells began to fall as Chi was working in the fields, and when the barrage ended she lay in the paddy, bleeding and paralyzed from the waist down. Last week, with the aid of stiff metal braces and crutches, Chi stood on the veranda of a Saigon home where she lives with a dozen other paraplegic children. Casting her coal-black eyes to the ground, she whispered: "I do not even know which side fired the shell that left me like this. All I want and hope is to try to live again."

Hope is a rare quality in today's Vietnam—almost as rare as a child who has not been scarred, one way or another, by the war. Unlike conventional military conflicts, the Vietnamese war knew no fixed boundaries or front lines, and it made little distinction between soldier and civilian, adult and child. Although the pain the war inflicted upon the children is impossible to calculate statistically, the estimates are immense.

Foreign medical experts say there are hundreds of thousands of maimed and crippled youngsters like Chi, children who not only suffer their physical agony but face a life of isolation in a society that has traditionally

turned its back on the weak and disabled. At least 800,000 children—and possibly as many as 1.5 million—have lost one or both of their parents to the war. While some have been taken in by relatives, countless others have been cast adrift in festering refugee camps, jammed into filthy and overcrowded orphanages or simply left to wander the streets and beg or steal. As one American doctor says, "It is a tragedy of life and limbs whose magnitude we simply will never know."

Some 8 million Vietnamese—nearly half the nation's population—are under the age of 15, yet the government in Saigon allocates only 1 per cent of its national budget for the care and rehabilitation of its crippled, diseased or orphaned children. "Orphans are not producers," Maj. Gen. Pham Van Dong, Minister for Veteran Affairs, explains. "They are spenders at a time when we need productive returns on our investment." The American Government is also niggardly when it comes to contributing funds for the children of Vietnam—despite the fact that many of those children fell victim to U.S. bombs and others are the illegitimate offspring of American servicemen. Some private American agencies have tried to ease the burden by arranging adoptions of Vietnamese children.

For the children injured by the war, medical facilities are antiquated and inadequate. The country suffers from a woeful lack of trained doctors—only one for every 8,000 hospital patients. "Some of the hospitals here," one U.S. official in Saigon said to me, "would make Dr. Schweitzer's African clinic look like Walter Reed hospital. As for doctors, the Vietnamese Army has drafted many and hundreds of others have gone abroad either to avoid military service or because the money is much better."

One bright spot in the medical picture is the modern 54-bed plastic-surgery hospital in Saigon set up by Dr. Arthur Barsky, a physician noted for his successful treatment of disfigured survivors of the Hiroshima A-bomb. The second-floor ward of the Barsky hospital is crowded with children, either waiting for their operations or just recovering from them.

Fourteen-year-old Le Thi Ut, a tiny girl with a body seared by flame and torn by shrapnel, is about to undergo yet another of the dozen operations she must have. She sits in bed with her right leg and left arm in splints and scarlet-red graft scars still healing on her thighs and hips. "I was out working in the fields," she told me, "when I found some bullets and grenades lying around. I wanted to get rid of them because I did not like war. I threw them into the fire but they exploded." Le Thi Bo, 13, was playing in her home in Saigon when a bullet tore her chin away. When I say her she had just been wheeled out of surgery after the seventh operation to graft a rib onto her jaw to rebuild her chin. "It is horrible what has happened to some of these children," says Dr. Caesar Arrunategui, "but you would be surprised at how much we can do to fix them up so they will not have to go through life thinking they are freaks."

FLOTSAM

Not all the children can be fixed up. One needs only to step outside the door of the venerable Continental Palace Hotel in Saigon to see the youthful human flotsam that the last decade of war has cast adrift. Ragged children of all ages and sizes—some orphaned, some maimed—swarm through the streets scraping a pittance by shinning shoes or washing cars or selling garlands of jasmine. Some just beg; others steal or become prostitutes—and some, even the youngest, have turned to pushing drugs.

Cau is a veteran of the streets, a tiny 8-year-old who has been selling peanuts at the Continental Place's veranda bar since she was 3. For Cau there has never been a

childhood, and it shows in her hardened face and eyes which hardly ever reveal even the hint of a smile or a sign of warmth. She does not know her surname—when I tried to ask her about herself and her life, she just shrugged, looked blank and said in nasal English: "Buy peanuts, Joe?"

Among the forlorn pack of street urchins, there is a sad and haunting unwillingness to talk about the past—if they remember it. To many, the past is only something to erase from their minds; to forget is to escape. Ten-year-old Doung would only tell me his name and age. He would not say how he had lost one leg, or how he got the napalm burns that scar his remaining leg and both his arms. He lives on the street and sleeps on the sidewalk, hoping that the horde of rats that infest Saigon will not bother him. When I asked Doung how he was wounded, he choked back tears and said, "I do not want to talk to anyone about it."

Other children have been so traumatized by their experiences they cannot recall what made them what they are. Nguyen Thanh Son is a tall, handsome boy of 12 whom I saw one day standing by himself at the tawdry Go Vap orphanage in the town of Tu Duc, gazing at the world through his one good eye. The other is just a gaping socket. At first, he would not reply at all to my questions, but finally he kicked the dirt and said, "I don't know what happened. I have been this way since I was 2."

As Son and I talked, other children among the orphanage's 200 charges sat in the dusty courtyard unattended. There are supposed to be six nuns to care for the children at Go Vap, but the only person around when I visited was the housekeeper. The children, most of them barefoot and in rags, many with sores or obvious maladies, simply wandered aimlessly with no guidance. In the nursery, emaciated and malnourished babies lay in the cribs in diapers made from old sacks, once used to hold rice donated by the U.S. Go Vap is not unique; almost all of the 133 "approved" orphanages are squalid, poorly equipped, understaffed and overcrowded—worse than any Charles Dickens described. "The state some of the babies are in when they are brought here is simply incredible," said a nurse at one orphanage. "And we have only enough staff to change their diapers and feed them." Too often, the children seem to be little more than swollen bellies carried on stalks of legs—and the mortality rate ranges between 50 and 70 per cent.

BURDEN

In part, the tragic condition of Vietnam's orphanages stems from an Oriental belief that it is the responsibility of relatives—not strangers—to care for parentless children. "We intentionally do not want to build more orphanages," says Tran Nguon Phieu, the Minister of Social Welfare, "because we want the people themselves to take care of the children." Many orphans are indeed being tended by relatives—but U.S. Agency for International Development officials say that at least 150,000 of these are living in "severely disadvantaged" conditions and urgently need the kind of care and medical attention that impoverished relatives cannot provide. However laudable the government's child-care philosophy may be in principle, the fact remains that in Vietnam today the people cannot—or will not—assume the extra burden of caring for the children who need help.

Perhaps the children who suffer the most as a result are the 25,000 mixed-blood babies, mostly the offspring of American GIs. (Again, accurate statistics are not available; one American foundation official told me there could be as many as 100,000 such children.) "These are the forgotten souls of the Vietnam war," says Robert G. Trott, director of CARE in Vietnam. "When the soldiers left, the money that these children's fathers—

or friends of their fathers—had provided left with them."

Many of the mixed-blood babies are half-black and, despite the Saigon government's official insistence that discrimination does not exist in Vietnam, Vietnamese readily admit that they consider the black babies "inferior." Even those who love and take care of the black babies worry about their future in Vietnam. Mrs. Vo Thi Nen, who has cared for her daughter's black baby since the child's mother died, told me: "He is too different from the other children in our community. I think he would be better off in the United States."

RESCUERS

The Saigon government does not agree. Vietnamese policy is to discourage adoptions by non-Vietnamese—a policy that Saigon implements by entangling adoption papers in mounds of red tape. The feeling that Vietnamese children should be raised in Vietnamese society certainly has merit. But as Elsie Weaver, of the World Vision child-care agency in Vietnam, notes, "The question is not whether a child will be better off being raised in his own culture. The choice is not there. I see so many babies in orphanages who are simply going to die unless somebody rescues them." The ideal rescuers, the Vietnamese, do not seem to be up to the task—in part because of their own poverty, in part because of their demoralized state of mind. "To survive, Vietnam has had to rely on negative values: corruption, graft, self-interest," says Dr. Olivetti Nikolaiczak, the only child psychologist in Vietnam. "Morality has simply disappeared in much of the society."

To be sure, Washington has funneled massive amounts of aid to Saigon, and Nixon Administration officials point out that the U.S. is spending some \$20 million this year on "children-related programs." But virtually all of that money goes for general-welfare programs, with only \$1.1 million used directly to benefit the neediest children—the orphans, the crippled, the maimed. And that sum is considerably diluted as it trickles down through the corruption-riddled Vietnamese bureaucracy. "What surpasses surprise is the insensitivity of our government," said Dr. James R. Dumpson of Fordham University, who recently completed a visit to Vietnam to study postwar humanitarian problems. "There are simply a large number of children for whom [Americans] share a responsibility—who desperately need our help—help which is not now forthcoming." If that help does not come from the United States, it may not come at all.

A NEW FAMILY FOR DUONG MUOI

(NOTE.—Shortly after he arrived in Saigon in late 1969 to join the Newsweek bureau, correspondent Paul Brinkley-Rogers and his wife, Kathleen, began to explore the possibility of adopting a Vietnamese war orphan. Now reporting from the magazine's Tokyo bureau, Brinkley-Rogers filed this personal account of the Americanization of Duong Muoi, who has since become Sarah Brinkley-Rogers.)

(By Paul Brinkley-Rogers)

A hundred ragged kids surged toward us as Kathleen and I entered the Viet-Hoa Sino-Vietnamese Orphanage in Saigon. They broke into a rhythmic chant that we couldn't understand. Some of the nimble ones clawed their way up my trouser legs and wiggled onto my back and arms; in a moment, I was immobilized by a half-dozen kids clinging to me. They knew exactly why we had come to Viet-Hoa: to adopt a child. We could see desperation in their faces. None of them smiled but their eyes pleaded: "Take me, take me."

We went up and down the rows of metal-ribbed cribs and saw scores of infants lying sick and injured. "How about this one?" we asked Sister Robert du Sacré-Coeur, the dedicated and determined Vietnamese nun in

charge of Viet-Hoa. "Pollo," she replied. "And this one, Sister?" "Retarded." "This cute little boy?" "TB." Twenty-five children are abandoned there each week, and we wondered why the orphanage was not inundated with kids. "God is fair," the sister said quietly. "The same number of children die here each week."

Then we saw Duong Muoi, age eleven months. She was flopped over on her face, as if she had no spine. She could neither sit up nor grasp anything with her hands. We were told that Duong Muoi had been brought to Viet-Hoa nine months earlier by her mother, who already had twelve other children. Because the baby was very ill, the orphanage sent her to a Saigon hospital. She remained there, half forgotten, until she was covered with bedsores and rat bites. When Duong Muoi returned to Viet-Hoa, she bore a wicked-looking 2-inch scar on her backside from rat bites, large indentations from wounds in both legs and a host of tiny pits and scars all over her body. When we first met, her face was completely expressionless—except for a pair of huge, brown eyes that followed us as we moved around the nursery.

Less than a week later, Kathleen returned to Viet-Hoa and brought Duong Muoi home. We put a pink ribbon in her hair, dressed her in a smock and tried to sit her up on our couch. She fell over. But with Kathleen filling Duong Muoi with U.S. baby formula supplied by an American doctor, and our Chinese maid and Vietnamese cook filling the baby with protein-rich fish sauce, Duong Muoi was sitting up in a few weeks. Soon, she was smiling too.

LUCKY BREAKS

But our efforts to adopt Duong Muoi turned into a nightmare of complexity. It took months to obtain the adoption papers, then a passport and exit visa for Duong Muoi and then a U.S. entry visa on top of those. We had some lucky breaks. By chance, we were in Guam when a special U.S. Federal court was holding naturalization hearings. Without going through a customary five-year waiting period, Duong Muoi was made an American citizen on the spot.

We gave our daughter the name Sarah, which to our minds seemed to fit her friendly and inquisitive nature, and the Vietnamese middle name Thuy-Nga—"beautiful moon"—which fitted her Vietnamese soul. She seemed to possess a desperate need to learn and was talking before she was standing. When she began to stand, we discovered that she could not put her left heel to the ground because wounds had shortened her calf muscle. A British medical team in Saigon did a muscle-lengthening operation. And last week in a Tokyo hospital, Sarah underwent a second operation. She is doing fine, though she now faces the unhappy prospect of several months in and out of casts.

Friends sometimes ask us if we feel differently about Sarah than we do about Chip, our own natural son who was born after we adopted Sarah. Our immediate response was "no," and it still is. No one has ever asked us if adopting Sarah has given us any kind of special satisfaction. It has. But we remember the orphanages of Saigon, where there are still thousands of kids like Sarah who have been abandoned because of the war. That memory doesn't give us any satisfaction at all.

HOW TO ADOPT A VIETNAMESE

Last year, almost a thousand Vietnamese children were adopted by non-Vietnamese families. Of this number, fewer than 400 were adopted by Americans, chiefly because of the complexities involved in the adoption process on both sides of the Pacific. Nevertheless, an increasing number of Americans are interested in adopting a Vietnam war orphan. Here is a guide to how to go about it:

CHILDREN

There are some 20,000 children in licensed orphanages in South Vietnam. There are also an estimated 100,000 parentless children in refugee camps, resettlement sites or roaming the streets of Saigon and other cities. Not all of them are available for adoption, however, and in every case surviving relatives must be given the first chance to adopt the child.

ELIGIBILITY

Americans who wish to adopt a Vietnamese child must satisfy South Vietnamese, U.S. and state adoption laws. The South Vietnamese laws are particularly stringent, requiring that both parents be over 35, have been married for at least ten years and have no children. However, a loophole allows President Nguyen Van Thieu to waive the requirements of the law—and he has done so on quite a few occasions in the past. Many of the orphanages in South Vietnam are Roman Catholic and are reluctant to turn over children to families of other faiths.

PROCEDURES

Local adoption agencies in the U.S. investigate applicants to determine whether they are suited to become adoptive parents. These agencies then make recommendations to three American agencies authorized by the South Vietnamese Government to handle such adoptions: Travelers Aid International Social Service of America, New York City; the Holt Adoption Program, Eugene, Ore., and Friends of Children of Vietnam, Boulder, Colo. Only these three agencies can make all the necessary legal arrangements in South Vietnam, handle the paper work required in the U.S. and—if all goes well—arrange to transport the child to its new home in the U.S.

COST

Fees vary from agency to agency and according to the income of the prospective parents. But the average cost—which includes the agency's processing fee, the legal fee and the price of air transportation—is a bit more than \$1,000. Some of the agencies charge low-income families only minimal fees.

WAITING TIME

Due to red tape in Saigon and archaic South Vietnamese adoption laws, it used to take an average of two years to complete the adoption process. Things have been speeded up somewhat in recent months, but it still takes a year in most cases. For those Americans who wish to adopt half-black children, the process is considerably easier, since the agencies are finding it difficult to find adoptive parents for them. Families willing to adopt a handicapped child automatically go to the head of the line.