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4 June 75

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Dear Gerry,

Knowing you I'm sure you've made all possible efforts to keep abreast of events in Vietnam in general — and the Central Highlands in particular — and are certainly much better informed than I at this point about all aspects of the Final Offensive as well as future prospects for South Vietnam under the new regime; nonetheless I thought I would share some grapevine information and also solicit your advice on a couple of questions.

Most of my news is second-hand. I left Kontum in July '74 originally intending to take a two-month furlough from Minh Quy Hospital but extended the stay hoping to interest my wife in the idea of becoming naturalized — after being here seven months she rejected the plan, and I took her back to Thailand at the beginning of April '75 to be closer to the situation in S. Vietnam and see how the political situation would shape up in view of eventual repatriation (she was quite unhappy in the States). During this interval I made a three-day trip to Saigon and looked up a number of old friends & colleagues; in-country travel was out of the question but I did get together with a number of people who'd come in from the Highlands, and came up with the general impression that except for BanMeThuot — which as you know was the focal point of the initial NVA attack (possibly with the collaboration of the local populace, some folks say) the Montagnard people stayed put and did not join the exodus to the coast. Some apparently fled from BanMeThuot just to get out of the way of the fighting (possibly including some of our friends from Kontum Province, who'd been resettled there after the 1972 offensive as you recall — in fact there was a color photo of tribal refugees in Newsweek, and I'm positive the designs in the woven cloth were from the Kontum area...); but as for Kontum & Pleiku, I gather that the groups who took off for places like Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang and Cam Ranh down on the coast were almost entirely Vietnamese — except for possibly a few Montagnard families who had special reason to fear the NVA/VC. Kontum City itself was undergoing steady rocket attacks prior to and during the drive on BanMeThuot, also access to the coast via Highway 14 and Highway 19 had already been cut off, so the population must have been pretty jittery when the BanMeThuot thing began at the end of March. But still it wasn't until the ARVN abandonment of Pleiku-Kontum (and the evacuation of USAID) that the Vietnamese started heading south in masses to try and reach the coast. It was apparently just at the time USAID was getting out — right on the heels of the ARVN withdrawal — that Pat Smith and most of the Minh Quy international people pulled out. The foreign staff at the hospital at that time was mostly American, with one Indonesian & two New Zealanders. All left except for one American and one New Zealand doctor, George Christian (from Boston — he'd worked with Pat back in '72, maybe you remember him) and Edric Baker (previously with the NZ surgical team in Quinhon).

Pat herself is back in Seattle with the two kids, teaching Family Medicine at the University there. She and the Kontum Hospital Fund staff of course are quite concerned about the absence of news about George & Ed & the hospital in general, and the KHF secretary has asked me the available channels of communication here on the East Coast. American Friends Service Committee, Mennonite Central Committee, plus former Vietnam Christian Service colleagues have all come up with suggestions but so far to my knowledge there have been no responses to KHF's inquiries (which I gather have been addressed to Mr. Nguyen van Tien, rep. of the PRG in Hanoi; and Mme. Pham thi Minh, PRG rep. in Paris). I've sent a letter to a French woman who used to work at the hospital to ask her about making direct contact with the PRG delegation there, but no answer to this yet. The New Zealand Consul in New York has looked into the problem and reports back that a NZ paper carried a notice back on 1 May to the effect that Dr. Edric Baker was in Quang Tri, which if true is very puzzling — Ed would certainly never have left Minh Quy voluntarily, and it may be that he was pressed into service elsewhere in a situation where the PRG thought the medical needs were greater. Bishop Seitz and most of his people of course stayed behind, and in writing to Therese I asked her to try and get news of him et al. via the Mission de Paris (one French priest, old Pere Currian, was reported killed in the refugee exodus to Tuy Hoa; no news from or about any of the others).

Aside from the AFSC and MCC staff members who stayed behind voluntarily in places such as Saigon & Danang and who have been able to get word back to the States, there's another person I'm particularly concerned about: Kerry Heubeck, a graduate of Cornell School of Veterinary Medicine incidentally, who had been working under CARE sponsorship on a pig-raising project to benefit Minh Quy Hospital and the montagnard villagers in that area. He had recently married a Rhade girl from BanMeThuot (you may know the family as they were quite prominent; H'Cham herself had studied nursing in Japan for four years; her sister married Paul Struharich, the USAID Prov Rep in BanMeThuot who was captured when the attack commenced but is reportedly alive; and her father, whose name I don't know, was a distinguished judge — the chief judge in Darlac Province I gather.) Anyhow, H'Cham had returned to BanMeThuot from Saigon at exactly the wrong time to do some paperwork preliminary to getting a passport — got caught in the fighting, and was reported killed by some of the tribal refugees from BMT who later got down to Nha Trang. Kerry, still working for CARE although the Minh Quy project had been abandoned, stayed on to get confirmation of the reported death and, according to my brother Ed (who stayed in Saigon up until the final evacuation — jobless, but working as a volunteer to help extract Vietnamese dependents) — he learned belatedly that H'Cham had only been wounded and was convalescing on a plantation somewhere outside BMT. So Kerry too remained behind in Saigon, the only foreign staff member of CARE on the scene — but their New York office has no word from or about him. Apparently commercial cable connections between Saigon & Hong Kong have been re-established, but no word yet to CARE via that channel.

So, in a nutshell, question number one is Would you have any connections of your own in Paris, Geneva, North Vietnam, either in academic or international social welfare circles, that might be of assistance in getting word to and from our missing friends?

Now about the situation of the refugees here in the United States. I was at a meeting yesterday of volag people from various agencies in Philadelphia which are involved in processing & assisting in other ways at the new center in Indiantown Gap, which is expected to reach a population of 15,000 very shortly. It is incredible that State Dep't never worked out more detailed contingency plans for this and other relocation centers years ago — e.g. back in the '72 offensive when it looked like the NVA might roll right into Saigon with their tanks — but apparently this was not done, and procedures all along the refugee pipeline from Saigon to Pennsylvania are being worked out in an extemporaneous ad hoc manner. Ron Ackerman — you remember we were together in Dak To for a couple of years — went back over in the final week before Saigon fell to fetch out some of his Vietnamese in-laws, and because he had his Vietnamese dependents in tow he went through the entire stream including the Embassy compound in Saigon, Navy carrier & cargo ship, Subic Bay, C-130 to Guam, finally Pendleton and home to the farm in Illinois — in the same accommodations as the masses of VN refugees and really got a worm's-eye view of the whole process. His phone call the other day documented my impression about the spontaneous, unplanned nature of the entire project; not only from a logistic angle, which one would expect — but also from the angle of screening processes & paperwork, which one wouldn't necessarily expect. The general impression that policies & procedures for the entire refugee program have not yet entirely crystallized and are still somewhat in a formative stage was reinforced by a visit to the new center at Indiantown Gap last Monday. Caseworkers & administrative staff from various volags which have been contracted by State Department to screen the refugees and solicit & process sponsorship offers are now appearing on the scene, offices are being set up and an all-out effort to get people & procedures sorted out now seems to be coalescing. I met some very impressive people among the volag folks including several old acquaintances from Vietnam, and it struck me that on the administrative side (outsiders aren't allowed into the refugee living compounds, which are closely restricted) there was nothing terribly frenetic about the scene and that the socialworkers were calmly going about setting up shop, which is remarkable in view of the numbers of agencies & individuals involved at the processing end, let alone the refugees themselves. But I also got the impression that there will be emphasis on production, that the tempo might be stepped up as refugees continue to pour into the camp from Guam and that pressure may develop to turn the processing business into a crash program. I'll enclose a clipping describing the situation at Eglin in Florida, which speaks for itself — so much additional human misery could occur among the refugees (and among sponsors too) if there is total emphasis on quantity at the expense of quality in screening & matching.

I feel strongly at this point that, if the resources are available, everything possible should be done to make life agreeable for refugees in the various camps and that they should be encouraged to remain settled (except for special cases, e.g. those with relatives who had immigrated previously) for a number of months while the larger situation develops. If this were to become an overall policy it might help minimize the pressure and avoid hasty decisions in match-making between refugees & sponsors; more importantly, it would allow time to observe the evolution of the new regime in South Vietnam and determine whether the initial posture of tolerance & reconciliation lasts. In coming months it seems likely that there will be a number of diplomatic missions & international social agencies setting up shop in Saigon, one would think there would be an increased outflow of information and it will be possible to get an assessment of PRG's presently-stated policy of letting by-gones be by-gones. It's my impression that a great number of the refugees were swept up in the evacuation hysteria that enveloped Vietnam in March-April and that they'll be regretting this as time goes by, especially if they left close relatives behind. If people in this category can be given some immediate reassurance that they will be entitled to several months' existence at the processing centers without any pressure to settle with a sponsor and with the ultimate right to choose repatriation if the evidence indicates they're still welcome back, then I'm sure everybody would benefit — fewer misfits, fewer separated families. Other benefits of a guaranteed time-frame to remain within the camps would be that in this interval some sort of international reception & observation machinery might be established back in Vietnam (UNHCR or Red Cross) to provide extra safeguards against refugees' being persecuted upon their return; while on the other hand our own economy might be into its long-awaited upturn, some of the domestic prejudice vs. refugees may have abated and life would be more agreeable for those who did decide to remain in this country.

One condition of this arrangement would be physically & administratively improving the centers so that refugees would feel more like guests and less like prisoners. If refugee manpower were used, the opportunity to earn a little money might make for better morale; also orientation programs could be set up, instruction in English, civics, American folkways etc. for those who had a sincere interest in becoming permanent residents. And for this category provision could be made for protracted interaction with potential sponsoring groups to minimize the strangeness of the American environment and ease the final adjustment in leaving the refugee area. I'm sure the vast majority of refugees, including those who have sound reasons for staying here, are terribly ignorant of the United States — just as most Americans are profoundly ignorant of Vietnam — and the necessary minimum of knowledge & sensitivity for all parties concerned in refugee sponsorship can't be acquired if there is continuing pressure to get people out of the camps and into the community (again I refer to the *Inquirer* article).

Here then is question Number Two: if one were to try to influence policy in the direction of slowing down the processing apparatus, putting new social work emphasis on improving the ~~existing~~ social & physical environment inside the processing centers as well as the casework aspects of refugee screening & relocation, and of encouraging refugees to deliberate as rationally and with as much data as possible on the matter of repatriation — what, in your opinion, would be the best means of trying to promote this approach? Perhaps it's not economically or politically realistic. But because things still seem to be so fluid at this stage, and because this is such a large & complex exercise in social engineering and is crucially important to a great number of Americans as well as Vietnamese, I think it's urgent to insure that it's undertaken as humanely and with as much sensitivity & expertise as is possible...

Now for item Number Three, which is easier to toss in your lap than either of the two others: during the inter-agency meeting in Philadelphia that I mentioned above, it was stated that no orientation material has been developed for sponsors or would-be sponsors. As one who knows with great accuracy the Vietnamese mentality and the American mentality and the distance that separates the two, would you be able to suggest a bibliography — or better yet, xerox off whatever material you may have conveniently available — so that it could be condensed or abstracted and put into pamphlet form for distribution for the American family or group which is either considering or committed to sponsoring a Vietnamese refugee? You must be one of the most knowledgeable people in the country as concerns orientation of the Average American (or fairly average American, such as MACV & Special Forces personnel) to Vietnamese culture; there must be a huge amount of literature on this, and it would be a great help if you could give suggestions — and some actual material if possible — for compiling a sponsors' information packet.

The agency which is co-ordinating the efforts of the other volags concerned with refugee relocation in the Philadelphia area is Nationalities Service Center

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— it would be much appreciated if you could get in touch with the Director, Mr. Michael Blum, on this matter of reference materials for sponsors, as there's a definite need in this area right at the present time no matter which direction the refugee program takes in the future...

So — to reiterate — any advice or assistance you can give in the areas of 1) getting word to & from foreigners presently in South Vietnam 2) promoting a more rational approach to refugee management, and 3) putting together orientation material for refugee sponsors, will be most appreciated.

Hope yo u have found life in Ithaca agreeable after returning from Southeast Asia — as for me, I can't really say I've gotten over my re-entry crisis yet (which is disturbing because I've been doing community reltions work for the Delaware County Juvenile Court for over six months now, but can't shake off this persistent nostalgia for the Far East). Sort of envy brother Ed, who is enjoying a post-evacuation breathing period in Bangkok before going on to Singapore, where he hopes to settle for a while...

Best regards,


Bill Rose