

# The Highland Refugees

*Scattered  
Fire -  
Highlands People*



*Watchtower in a newly set-up  
village for Highland-refugees*

THE  
HIGHLAND  
REFUGEES

**THE HIGHLAND REFUGEES**  
**Vietnam's Present - Day Problem**

The exodus of tribal people fleeing the Communists is the greatest political success scored by the government in recent years. It is second only to the mass exodus of one million North Vietnamese in 1954. It confirmed in a most realistic way, the success of recent military operations which created among the tribal people a growing distrust of the Vietcong and demonstrated the effectiveness of the strategic hamlet policy, a policy conforming to the wishes of the people both in the plains and in the Highlands.

**NGÔ DINH NHU**  
Political Adviser to the Presidency

## CONTENTS

*Map of the Republic of Viet Nam with its Highlands*

**Part I THE HIGHLANDS AND THEIR INHABITANTS**

*Origins of the Highlanders*

**Part II EXODUS OF THE HIGHLANDERS**

*Resettlement policy prior to the Exodus.*

*Exodus*

*Causes of the Exodus*

**Part III SECURITY AND RESETTLEMENT PROBLEMS**

*Relief supplies*

*Activities planned for the near future.*

*Conclusion*

**Appendix**

*Alphabetical listing of chief Highland tribes*



## Part I

### **THE HIGHLANDS AND THEIR INHABITANTS**

The Highlands in Vietnam encompasse the interior plateau which rises from the coastal plains along the South China Sea and extends to the bank of the Mekong river in the West. From Mount Atiguat, which rises to a height of 7,500 ft. in the Northeast, to the Mother and Child twin peaks which rise to a height of 6,300 ft. in the Southwest, the plateau descends to a level 1,800 ft. in its central area.

Both anthropologists and legend agree that most of the Highland tribes now living in the South, one inhabited the narrow coastal belt of relatively rich soil on lowland plains. In attempting to avoid the influence of new-comers to this area, they took refuge in the mountains and settled the protective walls of these mountainous ramparts. The frightening folklore reputation of the plateau area, its inaccessibility and the poverty of the soil, rebuffed the ever increasing numbers of plains peoples. The term « Highlander » has no meaning to the tribal people living in that area. It is simply a generic classification popularly applied to the almost 50 tribes living there.

The southern highlanders, unlike those living in North Vietnam and Laos, are not historically rooted mountain dwellers.

The real mountain dwellers, living in North Viet Nam and Laos, drifted southwards from China. These people actually suffer physical damage if they are forced to remain for long periods at altitudes below 4,500 ft, and they show little aptitude or inclination for life oriented around a flooded rice-field culture. The southern highlanders, on the other hand, are often excellent rice farmers. Although many of the southern tribes still pursue a primitive method of clearing and fertilizing land — by means of fire — they do practice flooded



*Rhade tribesman*

rice-field farming and grow other types of crops such as maize and dry rice. A few of the tribes in the provinces of Quang Ngai and Khanh Hoi live and work in the delta lands just as other coastal plains peoples. The sea for them is neither a surprise nor a revelation. If transplanted to the banks of the Mekong they acclimate themselves well to this new environment.

### **Origins of the Highlanders**

The consensus of anthropological opinion is that the tribal people living on the highland areas are related to many Pacific Island tribes.



*Woman  
of  
the Koho tribe  
in Tuyen Duc  
province*

According to archeological findings, such as those at Linh Cam, these areas were once inhabited by Negritos, Papuans, and Melanesians similar to those native to Australia and New Guinea. In the more recent past, a wave of Indonesian people superimposed themselves on, and mixed with, these inhabitants.

There is a most extraordinary diversity of physical types and languages to be found among these various tribes. The wide variety of dialects, customs and art forms among the highlanders is at once a cause and an effect of the isolation of one tribe from another and even from one village to another. Most of the languages and dialects are mutually unintelligible. There are, for example, about 125 distinct languages and dialects.

Past contact with the outside world has been limited. But today they are meeting the world around them in force. The impact of modern government, economy and technology has, however, only begun to be felt.

Before the end of this century, these highlanders will have spanned a cultural gap that ranges from the stone age to the 20 century.

## Part II

### **EXODUS OF THE HIGHLANDERS**

#### **A — Highlander Resettlement Policy prior to the Exodus**

The general development of the tribal societies living in the highlands has remained at the primitive level. Past regimes — imperialist, colonialist and communist — have



#### *Exodus*

*Single file, the mountaineers travel  
over the hills of the vast expanse  
which is their home*

indulged in a demagogic alms-giving type of policy towards these people.

The improvement of their standards and conditions has been undertaken since the Republic of Vietnam became an independent nation under the leadership of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

The first step in a positive direction was to grant full citizenship to all Highlanders.

In the economic field the Government is attempting to end their nomadic way of life, which they forced upon themselves by their primitive agricultural technique



*Bhanat house*

involving the burning of forests for clearing and fertilizing purposes. This practice is not only harmful to themselves it is also extremely destructive to our woodland resources, destroying 10,000 hectares of precious wood each year, In line with this the Government has been sending instruction teams to these people in order to teach them lowland rice farming and the use of buffaloes for clearing and ploughing land.

In the social field other teams of Government instructors are charged with the task of teaching home-building techniques that take cognizance of sanitation principles. These teams have also been instructing in the use of modern medicines as a replacement for ineffective superstitious healing practices.



*Exodus*

*Highland Refugees on their way to a better life,  
secure from Viet Cong attack*

In 1957 the Commissariat General for Land Development created several agricultural development settlement centers in the Highlands, 4 are located at Binh Tuy, 2 at Ninh Thuan, 2 at Darlac and 1 at Pleiku. The 10,000 Highlanders living within this agricultural resettlement complex enjoy financial and material assistance from the Government in addition to the above-mentioned instruction teams.

At the end of 1961 the President assigned the Commissariat General for Land Development to the task of dealing with all matters connected with the Highlands.

At that same time 128 million piastre project, for the implementation of sedentary agriculture and the resettlement of highlanders, was also drafted. This was aimed at raising the standard of living of those Highlanders living in villages bordering the lowland development centers. Using the latter as hubs, the Government's plan is to set up three outer rings in order to provide all inhabitants with the most effective protection and guidance. Included within the scope of this plan are 200 Highland villages with a total population of about 150,000.

#### **B – Exodus**

At the same time that the Government was trying to work out the three-ring project, about 4,000 refugees in Kon Tum province left their homes before the Government had an opportunity to contact them, and headed for the highways. They took temporary shelter in huts built by themselves. Taking with them whatever they could, farm tools, livestock, household effects, they burnt or destroyed whatever they were not able to carry.

Immediately, as these 4,000 refugees were being resettled, an additional 4,000 rushed into the same area

seeking governmental assistance. These two initial groups of refugees were the forerunners of the tens of thousands of more refugees who were also fleeing their homes. They began flowing in to the secure areas around Pleiku, Quang Duc, Darlac, Phuoc Long, Long Khanh, etc.

The exodus continued at a high rate throughout all parts of the Highlands. The Government has been doing its best to take care of these citizens. The Commissioner General for Land Resettlement has reported, so far, a total of about 150,000 refugees. This figure tells its own story.



*Sight of desolation left by the Viet Cong after destroying a village of the Highlanders*

#### **C — Causes of the exodus**

For those familiar with the life of the Highlanders it is startling that such an event ever could have taken



*Rice pounding in a Rade village where work seems to be play*

place. They have traditionally sought refuge in their mountain retreats and have stayed from any form of challenge and competition. They have worked hard within their own confines and have lived a meagre existence in the wilderness.

The pockets of tyranny and exploitation plaguing this country have not spared even these poor and peace-loving peoples. Living in scattered and isolated tribal communities, the Highlanders have offered an easy prey to the Viet cong. The communists have taken over their rice fields, ransacked their farm produce, their livestock and their savings. Their naivety has been exploited and they have been drafted for various kinds of labor such as porters for supplies and weapons. The Viet cong, in avoiding Government forces, have also forced some Highlanders to leave their homes and follow them so that they could continually draw upon these people as a source of labor and food.

The communists have also employed subversive devices and tactics in their efforts to propagandize these peoples. Suspicion and division between the Highlanders and the Government had been fostered, resulting in the use of Montagnards as a cover-up for Viet cong retreats from Government military forces. This tragic situation was discovered in 1961 during our operations in Kon Tum and other parts of the highlands.



*Highlander's  
representatives  
at a ceremony  
in Saigon*

The Highlanders however, explored their own experiences and made up their minds. Regardless of their naivety they have arrived at the most vital decision of their lives ; they have chosen freedom. They have abandoned their birth place and their lands to seek the protection and assistance of the Government. They have also sought weapons so that they may stand up and fight back the communists who drove them from their mountain homelands. The hollow propaganda of the Viet cong became apparent to these Montagnards as they witnessed Viet cong defeats at the hands of Government forces.

In addition these tribal people have also had the opportunity to witness the success of neighboring strategic hamlets. They have begun to realize that the national political value of the hamlets is based upon association between different ethnic groups. They have begun to realize that social revolution, as promulgated by the Republic, is aimed at building up a legal democracy which provides for security and collective advancement for all.

A survey has been conducted, among these refugees, determine whether the Viet cong had succeeded in forcing able bodied male highlanders to remain with them. The survey results clearly prove that the Viet cong failed in its attempt. The highland refugees' population includes almost 50% able-bodied males.

They have had increasing faith in the Government's final victory and have been wholeheartedly coming over to the Government side.

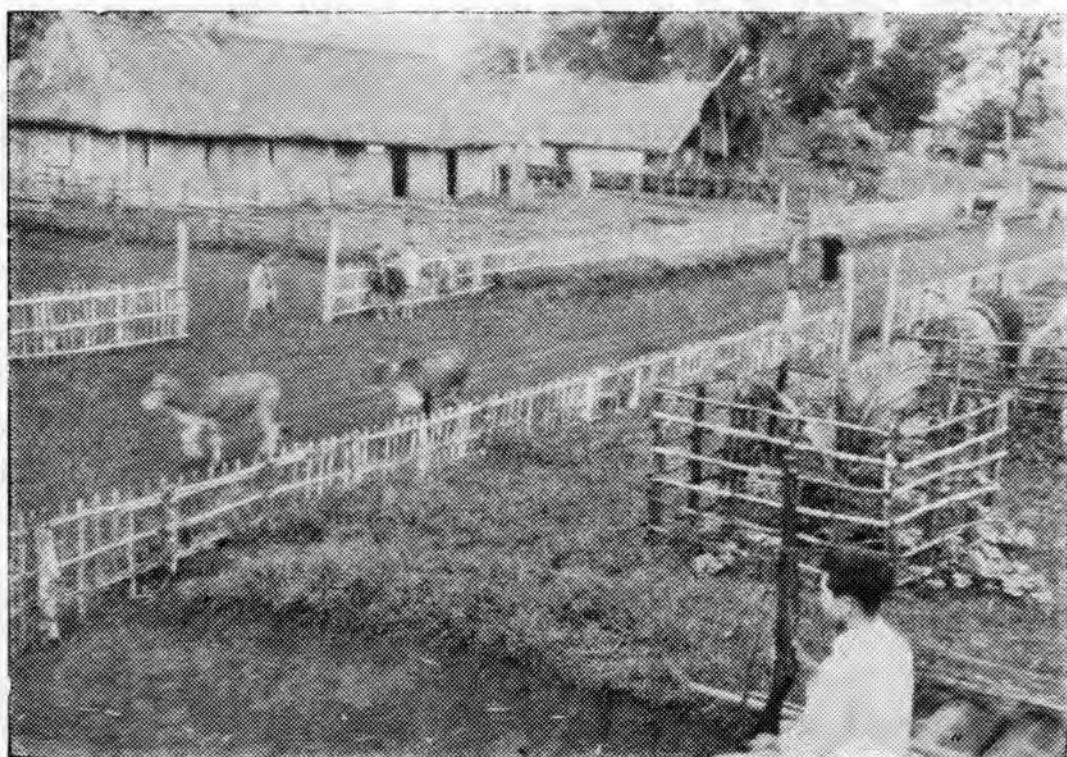
The following table indicates the total numbers of highland refugees from different regions and provinces. The table is complete up to January 1, 1963.

Regions — Provinces	Amount
Quang Tri	15,291
Thua Thien	56
Quang Nam	52
Quang Tin	926
Quang Ngai	19,728
Binh Dinh	2,243
Phu Yen	2,649
Khanh Hoa	3,945
Ninh Thuan	1,966
Binh Thuan	2,206
Kontum	17,808
Pleiku	26,747
Phu Bon	17,309
Darlac	3,343
Quang Duc	1,471
Tuyen Duc	10,373
Lam Dong	1,620
Binh Tuy	2,324
Long Khanh	1,825
Phuoc Long	16,665
Phuoc Thanh	330
<b>Total...</b>	<b>148,927</b>

## Part III

### **SECURITY AND RESETTLEMENT PROBLEMS**

Because the exodus of the Highland tribes has taken on such enormous proportions it has been impossible, regardless of an all out effort, for local authorities to adequately meet even the emergency housing needs of these people.



*The picture of peace  
Highland refugees resettled in newly set-up hamlets*



*Strategic hamlets set up in secure areas to resettle Highland refugees*

For immediate security reasons these mushrooming Highland villages need to be organized into strategic hamlets. The Viet-Cong, taking advantage of the fact that some of these new settlements are not at first adequately defended are infiltrating into these areas and ransacking property. In other cases, some of these highlanders have attempted to return to their mountain homes to pick up those items and livestock they left behind. Often, last attempts to recover these things are met with Viet-Cong ambushes and pitiless slaughter, such as the one which occurred in Tuyen Duc province.

The local authorities, operating under the pressure of time and unprepared for the gigantic dimension of the exodus, have not always been able to carefully select resettlement centers. Many of the refugees will run short of food in the coming season. The time for

planting new crops is past and some centers lack proper soil quality and farming space.

The President of the Republic, to meet this emergency food requirement, authorized the Commissariat General for Land Development and Rural Affairs to earmark 50 million piastres as relief funds. This Agency has also sought assistance from private charity and philanthropic organizations for the same purpose.

All of the above steps still fall short of the immense needs required to fully tackle this problem. An adequate and efficient program is being worked out in order to fully assure the security and self-dependent economy of these unfortunate people.



*Highland refugees are trained to defend themselves against the Viet Cong guerrillas*

REGIONS-PROVINCES	Funds granted by the government to each province	Relief supplies donated by				
		C A R E		U S O M		
		Rice	Salt	Maize	Maize Flour	Dry bean
Quang Tri	VN\$ 4,778,654			36t708	6t100	20t900
Thua Thien	22,154					
Quang Nam	134,389					
Quang Tin	421,094					
Quang Ngai	7,337,082	37t950	1t150	47,580	7,700	27,300
Binh Dinh	741,52					
Khanh Hoa	1,145,531			7,608	9,600	8,600
Ninh Thuan	1,059,149	16.500	0,500	7,164	1,100	4,100
Binh Thuan	706,566					
Binh Tuy	1,089,996					
Long Khanh	577,172					
Phuoc Long	7,767,732					
Phuoc Thanh	110,334					
Kontum	6,894,236	49 500	1,500	38,896	6,400	22,300
Pleiku	8,027,854			64,200	10,700	37,300
Phu Bon	1,402,524			18,636	3,100	10,500
Darlac	1,423,014					
Quang Duc	895,100					
Tuyen Duc	4,651,770	16 500	0,500	29,208	4,300	16,300
Lam Dong	795,371					
Trung Uong	18,522					
Total...	VN\$ 5,000,000	120t450	3t650	250t000	49t000	147t300

### **Relief Supplies for the Refugees**

The Commissariat General for Land Development has, to date, sent the following emergency supplies to the highland refugees :

Rice	2,024 tons
Salt	6 tons
Seeds	17,400 piastres (cost)
Light farm tools	1,152 sets
Blankets	1,824 units

In addition, the « Central Executive Committee of the Nationwide Drive for Aid to Highland Refugees » has sent clothes, blankets, mosquito nets, soaps, sandals, olive oil, carpenter tools, note books, pens, paper, ink, matches, rice, salt and many other miscellaneous articles amounting to 97,710 piastres.



*Shooting drill*

### *Future Courses of Action*

- To ensure, at all times, the physical security of the tribal refugees.
- Assist the new villages to acquire such facilities as farm land, water supply and communications in addition to other public projects that will foster adequate resettlement.
- New areas will be selected to receive refugees presently living in temporary locations that lack proper facilities, and to accommodate other newcomers.
- To integrate these refugees into strategic hamlets.



*Medical cares  
given to  
highland  
refugees*

## **CONCLUSION**

Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu, Political Advisor to the Presidency, recently said : « The exodus of tribal people fleeing the communists is the greatest political success scored by the Government in recent years. It is second only to the mass exodus, to the south, of one million North Vietnamese in 1954. It confirmed, in a most realistic way, the successes of our military operations, which created among the tribal people a growing distrust of the Viet-Cong, and demonstrated the effectiveness of the strategic hamlet policy, a policy conforming to the wishes of the people living both in the plains and in the highlands. To the communists, losing the highlanders is losing their grip on the elevated areas. On the other hand, their contact with the population of the plains is cut by the establishment of strategic hamlets. Thus we are forcing them into a blind alley from which there is no escape, and we may be assured of the final victory. »

## APPENDIX

### ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF CHIEF HIGHLAND TRIBES



*A man of the Lat tribe*

**Bahnar** : (Subgroups : Tolo, Golar, Alakog) Est. pop. 75,000. Found mainly in Kontum An Khe and Pleiku. Language : Monkhmer stock (but many understand Vietnamese and French). Third most important tribe.

**Bih** : Est. pop. 20,000, found South of Banmethuot. Language : Malayopolynesian.

**Bong Mieu** : Est. pop. 500, located in southern Quang Nam.

**Bonom** : (subgroups : Monom, Menam) Est. pop. 4,000 located in Kontum province.

**Bru** : (subgroups : Brou, Baroo, Muong Leong, Leung, Kalo, Leu Van Kiu). Fairly large group : 40,000 in Quang Tri province.

**Budip** : located in Phuoc Tam area of Phuoc Long province.

**Bulach** : Pop. 5,000 in Phuoc Long province.

**Cham** : Remnants of a highly civilized nation. Present pop. est. at 30,000. Located between Phan Rang and Phan Ri and near Binh Tuy.

**Chrac** : Est. pop. 15,000. Located in southern Long Khanh and southwestern Binh Tuy.

**Chrao** : (subgroups : Ro, Ba Gieng) Fairly small group found in Long Khanh and Binh Tuy provinces. Little information available about them.

**Churu** : 18,000 inhabitants located in southeastern Tuyen Duc province, and East of Dalat. Closely related to the Cham.

**Gar** : (Subgroups : Muong Gar, Pnom Gar) A group estimated at 10,000 found in southern Darlac and Tuyen Duc provinces.

**Halang** : Pop. est. at 4,000 living in the very rugged, roadless mountains area in Kontum province. Speak Jarai.

**Hrey** : (subgroups, Hre, Dvak, Kare, Tava) A large (120,000) group in Quang Ngai province and parts of Kontum. Speak Mon-Kmer, Bahna and Vietnamese.

**Hroy** : (Bahna Cham) Small group in Binh Dinh and Phu Yen provinces. Language : Malayo — polynesian.

**Jarai** : (subgroups : Puan, Hodrung, Hrue) Est. pop. 150,000. Powerful and bellicose group considered the second most important. Montagnard tribe in the Highlands. Found mainly in Pleiku province, and a few in Darlac and Kontum provinces. Language : Malayo-Polynesian.

**Jeh** : (subgroups : Die, Yeh, Jeh, Perak, Jeh Brilar) Pop : 15,000 in southwestern, Quang Nam.

**Katu** : (subgroups : Attouat, Kao, Khat, Thap, Ngung Ta, Ngung Huu). Pop : 40,000 in Quang Nam and Thua Thien provinces.

**Koho** : (subgroups : Chil, Lat, Tring, Sre Maa, Rion, Nop) Pop. est. at 100,000 in Tuyen Duc and Lam Dong provinces, also in Binh Dinh and Long Khanh provinces. Many understand Vietnamese. The Education Ministry has published a Koho dictionary as well as texts in Koho.

**Kua** : (Kor, Traw) Pop : 20,000. Supplier of cinnamon. Found in Quang Ngai and Quang Nam provinces. Some speak Vietnamese.

**Langya** : Pop : 9,000. Live in some 60 villages in Quang Nam province. Language is Mon-Kmer.

**Man** : (subgroup Yao) Very large group : 2-4 million found in northern Vietnam and China. Some came South and located north of Banme-thuot speak Chinese and a little Vietnamese.

**Mnong** : (subgroups : Nong, Rolam, Preh, Biet) Pop. 20,000 in the Highlands spread over a large area. West of Banmethuot and South of Rhade. Language close to Koho,

**Muong** : Another large tribe mostly found in North Vietnam. Pop. 211,000 of which only 5,000 are in Banmethuot. 3,000 in Pleiku. Have a written language. Social organization : a replica of Vietnamese society before the Chinese domination.

**Nung** : North VN's tribe. About 1,000 came South as refugees and are now located near Pleiku. Most of them speak Vietnamese.

**Rangas** : Pop. est. at : 10,000 in northern Kontum province.

**Rhade** : (subgroups : Mdhur — Adham, Blo, Kodrao, Krung). Most influential tribe in the Highlands, Pop : 100,000 found throughout Darlac and part of Khanh Hoa provinces, centered around Banmethuot. Have a matrilineal kinship system. The females own the house, and other family items.

**Roglai** : (subgroups : Rai, Seyn) Pop : 40,000 located North of Nha Trang and South of Binh Tuy. Many speak Vietnamese.

**Sedang** : Pop : 40,000 found in the northern half of Kontum province. The fourth most significant Highland group. Many understand Bahnar, Vietnamese and French,

**Stieng** : Pop. est. at 23,000. The fifth most significant in the Highlands, Live in some 650 villages centered Phuoc Long province. Individualistic and independent minded.

**Tau Ol** : Small group : 5,000 in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. Some understand Vietnamese.

**Thai** : ( white and black ) Montagnards of North VN. Some 6,000 have come South as refugees and settled in Trung Nghia. 500 are in Banmethuot. Language, Lao Thai San family. Most of them understand Vietnamese.

**Tho** : (subgroups Embree) Pop. est. 5,000 coming from North VN as refugees and settled in Phan Ri province. Most of them speak Chinese and Vietnamese.

NHA TỔNG GIÁM ĐỐC THÔNG TIN XUẤT BẢN

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