

MEMORANDUM

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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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July 10, 1976

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: BRENT SCOWCROFT (BS)

SUBJECT: Escape from South Vietnam

Our Embassy in Bangkok has compiled information (Tab A) on the most recent instances of Vietnamese refugees fleeing from South Vietnam. Since the risks involved are so serious and the sacrifices so large, I thought you should have this brief summary of the report.

The Embassy states that even now, more than one year after the fall of Saigon, the flow of refugees from South Vietnam continues. More than 400 persons are currently at ports in Thailand hoping to continue on to the U.S. or other countries following their escape by sea. Others are in Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and even Brunei.

These refugees have told Embassy officers that escape is a risky undertaking requiring preparations carried out in utmost secrecy over a long period of time. Gasoline required for the long journey is scarce, expensive, and rationed and therefore must be obtained in small amounts and kept hidden until the day of escape. The most dangerous part comes when the escapees must rendezvous, load the supplies undetected on to the boat, and then somehow evade the constant coastal security patrols. The refugees say that new laws in South Vietnam prohibiting meetings in groups of three or more people make these efforts even more difficult. Finally, if the people do get past the patrols and out into the open seas they find themselves in the hostile environment of a vast ocean with frequent storms and dangerous currents.

Apparently most of those starting out to flee do not make it. Some refugees estimate that about one half are caught by authorities before they can get under way and perhaps one third of the remainder perish at sea. Our limited intelligence reporting confirms that some groups have been captured.

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One of the most interesting cases detailed in the Bangkok report involved a former ARVN officer who had become a shrimp fisherman. For nine months he carefully saved the food and fuel needed for the journey and learned the timing of security patrols. On the appointed day in mid-May he brought his small fishing boat into shore and loaded 23 people on board including 7 children. The boat, never designed for the high seas and powered by an engine with only two working cylinders, was so overcrowded that the passengers could not lie down. The only map available was a page torn from a travel brochure which contained a four inch map of the entire South China Sea. In the six days and nights it took them to get to Thailand, they survived one severe tropical gale and several lesser storms during which everyone had to bail water to keep the boat from going under.

Another fascinating case is that of a refugee who first escaped from Vietnam months ago, entered the U.S. refugee system and settled in Brooklyn. After obtaining travel documents here, he traveled to Thailand where he lived on a boat and secretly returned to Vietnam. In Vietnam he assembled 16 members of his family, developed an escape plan, and then successfully sailed back to Thailand once again.

In a separate episode, a Communist coastal patrol intercepted a boat at sea and placed an armed crew on board to bring it back to Vietnam. As the boat was making its way into port, the unarmed escapees, including women and children, rushed the crew, threw them overboard, and then steamed off for Thailand.



*(Handwritten notes in the bottom right corner, including '2000-05-01' and other illegible text)*