CONFIDENTIAL

American Embassy,
Bangkok, Thailand.
January 16, 1959.

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Vietnamese Refugees in Thailand

PARTICIPANTS: The Vietnamese Counselor Nguyen-Khac-Bang
Mr. Leonard Unger, DCM

DATE: January 14, 1959

COPIES TO: Political Section
Special Assistant
Department of State: SEA
Amembassy Saigon

Bang informed me that the Vietnamese Embassy has replied to the Thai Government that it cannot agree to the repatriation to South Vietnam of the Vietnamese refugees in Thailand. Although Bang did not make clear to me which reasons were given to the Thai Government, he said that from the point of view of South Vietnam there were two principal objections. The practical objection relates to the difficulty of transporting a group of this size from Thailand overland to South Vietnam and the problem of accommodation there. The political difficulty lies in the fact that the refugees at present do not desire to go to South Vietnam (or could not indicate such a desire because of pressure from Viet Minh leaders) and it would be impossible to move them there without resistance and disturbances which would be exploited by the Communist propaganda machine. He also stated that the Government of South Vietnam is bound by the United Nations' resolution on refugees and therefore could not be a party to the repatriation of refugees against their will.

According to Bang, in Ambassador Le-Van-An's discussions on this subject with Wisut, the latter stated that the retention in prison of the Viet Minh leaders whom the Thai Government arrested recently was going to be difficult and expensive and the Thai Government was seeking

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agreement of South Vietnam to accept, at least, these individuals if not the entire refugee population. An replied that this posed the same conflict with the UN resolution. He agreed, however, to ask his government whether it would be prepared to accept those arrested refugees who express a willingness to go to South Vietnam. Bang indicated that the number of such individuals would be small and he also feared that they would include some persons who would be going to South Vietnam on Viet Minh instructions for subversion purposes. I said that I hoped his government would nonetheless be agreeable to this limited proposal because, even though the number was small, the acceptance in principle by South Vietnam of this proposal might make it easier for the Thai Government then to bring about North Vietnam acceptance.

With respect to the refugees in general Bang returned to the arguments he has often made to the effect that these people could be won over from their Viet Minh adherence if 1) all the important Viet Minh leaders were arrested and held in prison by the Thais and 2) the South Vietnam representatives in Thailand were given a free hand to work with the refugees in general and persuade them over a period of time of the wisdom of abandoning the Viet Minh cause. He did not refer this time to the opening of consulates and information offices. Bang said that the Thai Government should permit individuals identified as "nationalists" to circulate freely in Thailand and go about their business unhampered. ("Nationalists" were identified by Bang as individuals who were known to be sympathetic to South Vietnam and had been given identity documents by the South Vietnamese Embassy.) When it became clear to the refugee group that those who have the "nationalist" documents were permitted to circulate freely and had a preferred position, he felt that there would be a gradual but continual defection from the Viet Minh ranks. He said that a slight defection had been observable even since the recent arrests but that the Thai Government has not always been cooperative in that it has, on occasion, continued to restrict the activities of holders of the "nationalist" documents just as much as other refugees.

Bang said that the Thai Government was mistaken in feeling that it would be faced with this refugee problem and expense over a long period of years. Within two or three years he felt that the complexion of the Vietnamese refugees would change sharply as the Viet Minh leaders were arrested and held in jail. At such time it would be possible to repatriate the great bulk of refugees to South Vietnam without any conflict with the United Nations' resolution. He also said that South Vietnam has no particular objection to the dispersing of refugee settlements but recalls that this was tried once before with a notable lack of success and would also not expect it to succeed now.

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I asked Bang what success the Thai police round up of Viet Minh leaders had achieved and tried to get him to express some precise measure. He would only acknowledge that "some" of the leaders had been captured and that many were still at large. He said that the arrest orders are dated and that if an individual manages to hide out at the time of the round up, he seems to be able to emerge later and run no serious risk of subsequent arrest.

We both noted that since the last time we had discussed the subject there had been some improvement in that the widely advertised proposals to move all of the refugees bodily out of Thailand seem to have been abandoned, and some arrests of Viet Minh leaders had taken place. At the conclusion of our conversation Bang asked me to keep his remarks confidential, noting that the last time his Ambassador had talked with Wisut on this subject a substantial part of the conversation had appeared the next day in the newspapers.

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