JP!S., to the NEWS

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PHU QUOC REFUGEES

When the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Agreement of 1954 cut Vietnam in half, one million Roman Catholics. in North Vietnam fled to freedom in South Vietnam. Among them was Tran Thi Nam, a woman then 87 years young in her desire for freedom and the right to practice her religion. She and her two sons set tled on Phu Quoc, an island 50 miles off the coast of South Vietnam, where they lived peacefully as farmers for 21 years.

When the Communists overran South Vietnam in May this year, Tran Thi Nam, now 109 years old, and her family of 14 members cover ing four generations, set out to sea in a 20-foot boat searching for freedom somewhere in the vast Pacific Ocean. They were picked up by a U.S. merchant ship, taken to Guam, and arrived at Camp PendletDn California, a couple of weeks ago.

Left behind on the island of Phu Quoc are an estimated 42,000 South Vietnamese refugees, including about 17 clergymen, 300 nuns, 1,000 American-Vietnamese orphans, and a number of South Vietnamese officials.

When Hanoi consolidates its control over Phu Quoc, most of the island's residents will be marked for liquidation because they either committed the "crime II of having escap.ed from North Vietnam 21 years ago, or the alternate "crime" of having fled to Phu Quoc when South Vietnam began to crumble this spring.

Like Tran Thi Nam, these refugees are hoping someone will answer their desperate pleas for help. Several countries have indicated

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a willingness to accept them, including South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, Brazil, and Canada. The Dominican nuns of Louisville, Kentucky, have said that they will assume responsibility for the support of the 1,000 orphans.

However, there is no country that can be a St. Christopher and carry them across the water except Americans. One private steamship line has already picked up a few brave refugees from fishing boats out past the 12-mile limit, and expects to rescue others this sarreway.

The question awaiting President Ford's decision is whether or not to permit our Navy to assist this emergency humanitarian rescue operation and give freedom to those who have already risked so much to gain it. He has received requests for prompt action from Senator Jesse Helms and from 31 Congressmen.

The specter of two p st mistakes hangs over this decis ion. During World War II, U.S. officials acquiesced in the forcible repatriation of two million refugees trying to escape from Communist Russia. And in 1956, U.S. officials turned a deaf ear to the dra matic appeals of the Hungarian Freedom Fighters trying to resist the Soviet invaders. Radio Budapest's last broadcast cried out: "People of the civilized world, in the name of liberty and solidarity, we are asking you to help•••• The lighlvanishes. The shadows grow darker hour by hour."

The light did vanish in Hungary, and the shadows are lengthen ing over Phu Quoc today.

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