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SAIGON--Administrative snags and economic troubles are beginning to confront the crucial Open Arms program designed to lure Communist defectors to the Allied side.

In sheer numbers of Communist defectors, the Open Arms program, called Chieu Hoi in Vietnamese, has been successful thus far. Open Arms officials are heartened by the steady increase in the defector figures. In 1966, the 20,242 Communists who switched to the government side equalled two Viet Cong divisions; Open Arms officials estimated more than 3,000 Allied soldiers would have been killed attempting to eliminate that number on the battlefield.

"The Viet Cong come over to this side mostly because Allied ground offensives, bombing and artillery, makes life with the Communists difficult, if not unbearable," one Open Arms official explained. "But they don't come because of any political or economic attraction to the Vietnamese government.

"The biggest problem facing the program--as more and more defectors come in--is what can we do with them, how can we help them and where will they live?"

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Once a Communist defector returns to the government side, he and his family are taken to provincial centers, where for 45 days they are fed, clothed and given political indoctrination lectures. ("These indoctrination sessions are so boring and naive they sound as though they might have been written by a M.I.T. professor," one American advisor to the program said.) The defectors are interrogated and much of their information about the Viet Cong produces better intelligence material for the Allied side than any other source. They are also classified and screened to weed out any planted Viet Cong agents.

Only three cases of genuine Viet Cong agents are known to have penetrated the program. One was a woman with orders to seduce a Vietnamese Open Arms chief and then carry out espionage. In the Mekong Delta, two Viet Cong agents planted in the Open Arms centers were won over and voluntarily revealed Communist plans to attack the huge Bien Hoa air force base, 18 miles northwest of ~~Bien Hoa~~ Saigon.

"But this screening process isn't good enough," one American advisor to the Vietnamese military forces said. "They ARVNs (Army, Republic of Vietnam) believe the Communists can and are penetrating the program. They believe that if the Viet Cong think they can not win the military war, they will politically infiltrate into the government's Open Arms program and the political apparatus to stir up trouble in the future. Besides, the ARVNs have been chasing the Viet Cong for years--and when the Communists get tired, they can come to the government side and get more benefits than the ARVNs dependents."

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While in the Open Arms centers, the defectors--or returnees as the Vietnamese government calls them--are supposed to receive 24 piastres (roughly 20 cents) a day for food, 500 piastres (\$4.50) for two suits of clothing and rewards for weapons brought into the government side (the equivalent of \$7 for a pistol up to \$170 for a lethal 57mm. recoilless rifle).

But, in some provinces, the returnees complained to Open Arms officials that they were not ^{receiving} ~~receiving~~ their clothing allowance. In other cases, Vietnamese officials had made a contract with a local tailor to get a kick back and to give the returnees less than their money's worth in clothing, reliable sources reported. In other cases, returnees promised wages for helping with the construction of Open Arms buildings complained to this correspondent they had not been paid. When a Vietnamese government official was confronted with this, he simply forced several unhappy returnees to sign receipts they had paid--and then fired them from their construction jobs and transferred them to an already over-crowded, remote provincial center.

American officials, infuriated with this failure of the Vietnamese ~~of~~ government officials to fulfill their promises to the returnees, have attempted to get the hand^(ful)ful of corrupt officials removed. But, the most bothersome ones are seldom removed; American ^{adviser} explained: "The corrupt Vietnamese civilian officials are just an Indian to a higher ranking Vietnamese general. In some cases, the general is a blood relative of the civilian--in other cases, just a protector for him."

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A small number of Open Arms returnees have been resettled in special hamlets--which is a forward political strategy, one official explained. Eighteen of these Open Arms hamlets have been built thus far; 50--enough to house 5000 returnees and their families--are scheduled to be completed by the end of this year. These hamlets usually house returnees whose homes are in the Viet Cong zone or else North Vietnamese defectors who have no homes in the South.

However, this phase of the program is enmeshed in economic troubles. The Vietnamese government would like to issue land titles to the returnees to sustain themselves by farming--and to use this as a means to attract more Communist to the government side. But, the amount of available secure land in the government zone is very limited--and it is usually non-productive sandy or alum soil. The large chunks of productive government land that could be distributed are in the Viet Cong zones, *officials*

Say Thus far, American and Vietnamese armed forces are either unwilling or unable to try to the third alternative --to open new lands in an attempt to copy the "land for the land-less" program which sucked away the peasant support from the pro-Communist Huk movement in the Philippines some 15 years.

"If we had enough good productive land to promise and give to the Viet Cong fighters and supporters, they would come into the government zone in hordes," ~~many~~ one Open Arms official explained.

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In one of the 18 Open Arms hamlets, in the northern province of Quang Tri, the wife of one ex-Communist told this correspondent: "This place is ~~is~~ so hot even our chickens perish. We tried to plant sweet potatoes, but ~~still~~ the sandy soil wouldn't grow any potatoes. So we must eat the sweet potato leaves. A few of the villagers have pigs, but only if they have enough money to buy food to raise them--which I don't. We are starving to death in this hamlet."