From Da Nang to Canada: The Precursor to the Boat People Exodus

The *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series provides an essential window into the internal deliberations of American policymakers during moments of global crisis. Compiled by the U.S. State Department's Office of the Historian, FRUS volumes contain declassified memos, transcripts, and cables that reveal in real time how U.S. officials assessed and responded to unfolding events. In the case of South Vietnam's collapse in 1975, these documents offer an unfiltered look at the rapidly changing military situation, the breakdown of civil authority, and the early contours of a refugee crisis that would eventually reach Canadian shores. Drawing from these records, this article traces how the fall of Da Nang marked the beginning of the *boat people* migration—one of the most significant humanitarian movements of the late 20th century. These excerpts are from Collapse and Evacuation, February 26–July 22, 1975 - *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume X, Vietnam, January 1973–July 1975*

By the spring of 1975, the Republic of Vietnam was in freefall. While the world would later fixate on the iconic images of helicopters lifting evacuees from rooftops in Saigon, the real beginning of the humanitarian crisis—and of the Vietnamese diaspora to countries like Canada—can be traced to earlier moments, particularly the collapse of Da Nang.

In March 1975, Da Nang, South Vietnam's second-largest city and a key northern stronghold, descended into chaos. As one U.S. official noted in a high-level conversation, "the political situation now is radically different," with Communist forces gaining ground and establishing what many viewed as a legitimate revolutionary government. Ambassador Martin tried to argue that Da Nang might still hold or link to the south, but his view was challenged by others who insisted that the South Vietnamese forces were stretched too thin and facing imminent collapse.

This was not an overstatement. By late March, military analysts predicted Da Nang could fall "within a few days" due to overwhelming North Vietnamese pressure, disorganized South Vietnamese defenses, and mass civilian panic. One internal memo noted, "the situation in DaNang is chaotic," and that "its defences could simply collapse". President Thieu, then still in power, was reportedly considering pulling forces from the city entirely—a strategic retreat that left the civilian population vulnerable.

Meanwhile, U.S. President Gerald Ford and his advisors were receiving dire updates. CIA Director William Colby predicted that Da Nang would fall even if elite Marine units remained in place. “It should fall within two weeks,” he said, “even if the Marine Division stays”. When asked about the evacuation of civilians, Colby described “terrible mob scenes” at both airports and ports, where thousands tried to flee. Soldiers were firing their way onto ships. Law and order had broken down entirely.

What emerged in Da Nang was not just a tactical withdrawal or a city lost—it was the collapse of an entire civic order under the weight of war. The distinction between military personnel and civilians dissolved as desperation overtook discipline. Refugees overwhelmed the last remaining points of escape, creating a humanitarian crisis that left even U.S. officials stunned by its speed and scale. These early signals from Da Nang, echoed in classified briefings and policy cables, began to shape how allied governments would later understand their responsibilities—not just in geopolitical terms, but as urgent moral imperatives. In Canada, although formal resettlement programs were still years away, these early images and reports laid the groundwork for a new kind of foreign policy conversation: one that placed refugee protection at the heart of international engagement. The seeds of Canada’s eventual leadership in refugee resettlement were sown here—in the failure to protect, and the dawning realization that the world would soon be asked to respond.

This was more than a military failure. It marked the first wave of what would become a global humanitarian emergency. The fall of Da Nang was the beginning of a refugee crisis that would swell into the exodus of the *thuyền nhân*—the *boat people*—fleeing Vietnam by sea. Canada’s eventual involvement in resettling these refugees has become one of its most important modern migration stories, but the roots of that response lie in the scenes of terror and flight that emerged in places like Da Nang weeks before Saigon itself fell.

What distinguished the collapse in Da Nang was not just the loss of territory, but the unraveling of social and institutional fabric in real time. Unlike the images of orderly withdrawal sometimes projected in official narratives, the reality on the ground—documented in these U.S. diplomatic cables—was of disintegrating command structures, mass panic, and a population abandoned by any sense of coordinated response. It was

in these moments that survival became individualized. Families fractured at airfields, children were separated from parents, and decisions were made with no time, no plan, and no guarantee of safety. The trauma of that sudden collapse carried forward into the boats, camps, and eventual resettlement pathways that followed.

The stories of those who would later arrive on Canadian shores—traumatized, stateless, and often separated from loved ones—began in these early, chaotic weeks. While many Canadians remember the arrival of the boat people in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the seeds of that journey were planted in the final weeks of the Vietnam War, when the international community was still struggling to comprehend the scale of what was to come.

For Canada, the fall of Da Nang and the refugee flight that followed posed both a moral and logistical question: how would the country respond to a new, mobile, and vulnerable population created by geopolitical collapse? The answer, forged in policy rooms and across civil society, would help redefine Canada’s refugee policy and multicultural identity in the decades to follow.

The 65-person polyurethane sculpture “La Foule Illuminée” (“The Illuminated Crowd”). Sculpted by Franco-British artist Raymond Mason, this public art has stood in front of the

BNP/Laurentian Bank Tower since the mid-1980s. In the words of the artist: “A crowd has gathered, facing a light, an illumination brought about by a fire, an event, an ideology—or an ideal. The strong light casts shadows, and as the light moves toward the back and diminishes, the mood degenerates; rowdiness, disorder and violence occur, showing the fragile nature of man. Illumination, hope, involvement, hilarity, irritation, fear, illness, violence, murder and death—the flow of man’s emotion through space.”

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