

VIET-NAM

INFORMATION NOTES

OFFICE OF MEDIA SERVICES, BUREAU OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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BASIC DATA ON SOUTH VIET-NAM*

THE LAND

Size and Location

The Republic of Viet-Nam is a narrow, crescent-shaped strip of land curving along the southeastern tip of Asia on the South China Sea. Only slightly larger than Florida, the country is approximately 800 miles long; the widest portion measures less than 130 miles and the northern border less than 50. To the north, across the 17th parallel and directly south of China, is Communist-controlled North Viet-Nam, called the "Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam." To the west of South Viet-Nam

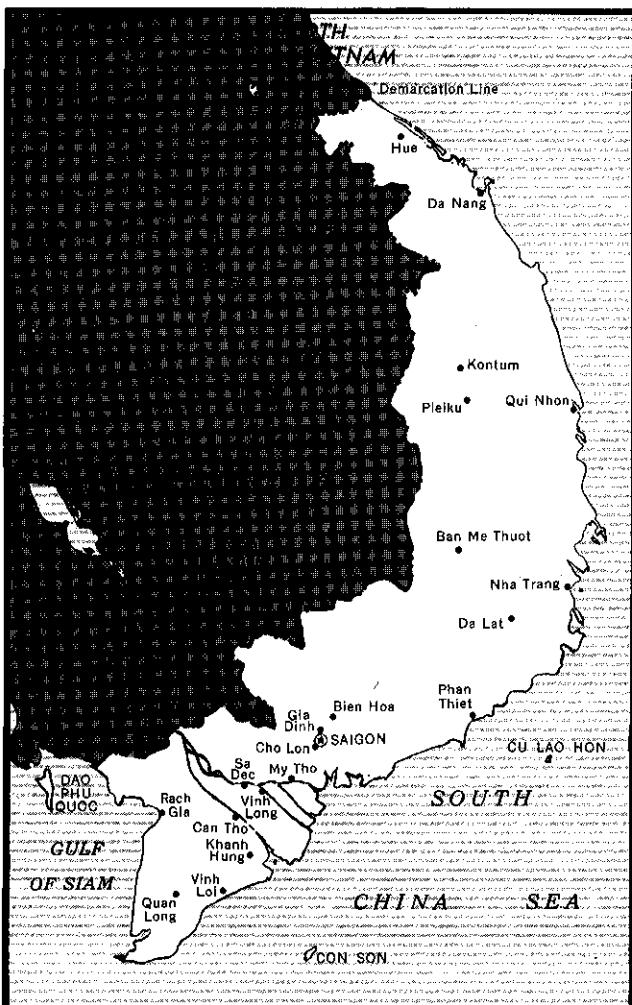
lie the Kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia; westward of those two countries lie Burma and Thailand.

Topography and Climate

South Viet-Nam has several distinctive topographical regions. The lower third of the country is dominated by the estuary of the Mekong River system. This very fertile area--the "ricebasket" of South Viet-Nam--is flat and often marshy. The northern margin of the Mekong delta merges with the small delta of the Saigon River, on which the capital city of Saigon is located. North and northeast of Saigon the land rises gradually, progressing from tropical rain forest and "red earth" plantations to upland forest and the rugged terrain of the southern end of the Annamite Mountain chain. This backbone of mountains dominates the rest of South Viet-Nam--low-lying, fertile, coastal plains and broad, partly cultivable, high plateaus.

South Viet-Nam's climate is characterized by heavy rainfall (78 inches annually at Saigon; 115 at Hué) and high temperatures (annual mean temperature is 80° F.). As a result, more than five-sixths of the land has a cover of rapid-growing, natural vegetation--usually dense and hard to penetrate.

SOUTH VIETNAM



THE PEOPLE

The population of South Viet-Nam is approximately 17 million and is increasing at the rate of about 2.8 percent annually. Population density varies greatly throughout the country--from about 13 to 2,000 persons per square mile, the highest density in areas suitable for rice production. Less than 20 percent of the people live in cities.

Ethnic Groups

The ethnic Vietnamese, about 90 percent of the population of South Viet-Nam, have a recorded history of more than 2,000 years. Throughout this long span they have been

*Text based on South Viet-Nam: Background Notes. For a list of the available Background Notes on individual countries and territories (more than 150) write to: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

among the most vigorous people in Asia, predominantly as village-dwelling rice cultivators or fishermen. The educated elite of South Viet-Nam are almost entirely ethnic Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese retain a strong sense of national identity despite two periods of Chinese occupation, one of which lasted more than 1,000 years. Nonetheless, they are physically related to the Chinese, and their culture reveals many Chinese elements. Art forms, the Vietnamese language, and the profound respect accorded learning, age, and ancestry are examples of the Chinese influence. Vietnamese culture is marked to a lesser degree by the classical Indian civilization and by European elements introduced during nearly 100 years of French rule.

There are several ethnic minorities in South Viet-Nam, the largest being the Chinese (more than 1 million), the mountain-dwellers or Montagnards (600,000), and the Cambodians (500,000). Smaller minority groups include Chams, Malays, Indians, and French.

Religion and Education

The religion of most of the 17 million South Vietnamese is a mixture of Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and animistic practices such as reverence for village guardian spirits. About 1.5 million are Roman Catholics.

Education, one of the most vital needs of the South Vietnamese, is receiving increasing attention, especially in the hamlets. In the 1966-67 school year more than 2 million students were enrolled in schools through the university level, as compared with 1.5 million in the 1960-61 school year.

HISTORY

Pre-19th Century

Historians believe the Vietnamese people originated in the valley of the Yellow River in North China, and that they were slowly driven southwards by the Han Chinese. By the second century B.C. they were a tribal people inhabiting the Red River delta in the Kingdom of Nam Viet, now North Viet-Nam. In 111 B.C. this area was incorporated as the southernmost Chinese province (Giao Chi, later Annam), and Vietnamese events for more than a millennium were part of the history of imperial China. Throughout this period the Vietnamese were in frequent revolt, finally achieving independence in 939 A.D. They called their new state Dai Co Viet and, by paying regular tribute to China, succeeded in maintaining independence for more than 900 years, with the exception of 20 years of Chinese reoccupation in the early 1400's.

Dynastic power struggles during the 17th and 18th centuries divided the North (Tonkin)

from the South (Cochin) along the 17th parallel. The two regions finally were reunited in 1788. The country was named Viet-Nam in 1802.

1858-1954: The French Colonial Period

Between 1858 and 1867 the French established control over all of Viet-Nam, Laos, and Cambodia, which they administered as Indochina.

In 1940 Japanese troops entered northern Viet-Nam; in 1941 they moved into southern Viet-Nam and remained until their surrender to the Allied Powers in 1945.

While the French managed to reestablish themselves in the South, anticolonial elements led by Communists took control of the North. The "Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam" was proclaimed in September 1945, with a veteran Communist, Ho Chi Minh, as its leader. The French recognized the new government as a free state within the French Union in March 1946, but Viet Minh (Viet-Nam Independence League) leaders disagreed with French interpretation of the pact. War broke out in December 1946.

The French were unable to win the confidence and support of the non-Communist nationalists, even after establishing a nominally independent State of Viet-Nam under former emperor Bao Dai in 1948. The Viet Minh fought a highly successful guerrilla campaign and eventually controlled almost all of rural Viet-Nam. The French military disaster at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 and the conference at Geneva, where France signed an armistice in July 1954, marked the end of the 8-year war and French colonial rule in Indochina.

1954: The Geneva Agreements

In May 1954 at Geneva, representatives of Cambodia, the "Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam," France, Laos, Communist China, the State of Viet-Nam, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States met to discuss the problem of restoring peace in Indochina.

The Geneva agreements, issued in July 1954, established a provisional division of Viet-Nam approximately at the 17th parallel, called for an end to all hostilities, and set up an International Control Commission (representatives of Canada, India, and Poland) to supervise the execution of the agreements. The final declaration of the conference called for free elections in 1956 to unify the country.

The State of Viet-Nam objected to the partitioning of the country and maintained that free elections would be unobtainable in the Communist North. It was not a signatory to the agreements, nor was the United States. However, a unilateral U.S. declaration stated

that our policy would be to refrain from the threat or use of force to disturb the agreements, to view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the agreements as seriously threatening international peace and security, and to continue to seek unity through free elections supervised by the United Nations.

The Assault on South Viet-Nam

In July 1954 Chief of State Bao Dai appointed a well-known nationalist, Ngo Dinh Diem, as Prime Minister. Diem was faced with the prospect of administering a country whose economy had been ruined by 8 years of bloody strife and whose political life was fragmented by rivalries of religious sects and political factions. In the ensuing 9 years, he was able to consolidate his political position, eliminate the private armies of the religious sects, and, with substantial American aid, build a national army and administration and make significant progress toward reconstructing the economy.

The Communist leaders in Hanoi, the North's capital, had expected the South to collapse and come under their control. In 1956, when they realized that the country instead was making rapid progress, they began a deliberate campaign to overthrow the Government of South Viet-Nam and take power by force. First they reactivated the network of Communists who had stayed in the South along with hidden stocks of arms. Then they began to exploit the growing resentment toward the authoritarian methods of the Diem government and the age-old shortcomings of Vietnamese society such as poverty and land hunger. They infiltrated additional cadres of trained guerrillas into the South and began a campaign of terror against officials and villagers who refused to support the Communist cause. Civilian deaths from assassination and terrorist raids have amounted to tens of thousands since the beginning of the conflict.

North Vietnamese efforts against South Vietnamese became pronounced during the next few years. In 1960 the Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists) organized the so-called National Liberation Front, controlled from Hanoi through the Communist Party organization. With leaders, supplies, and reinforcements from the North, they stepped up their attempt to destroy the social, economic, and governmental structure of the South by atrocities, terror, and guerrilla warfare. In 1964 Hanoi decided that the Viet Cong cadres and their supporters were not succeeding quickly enough, and ordered regular units of the North Vietnamese Army into South Viet-Nam. Today, infiltration of regular troops into the South continues by the thousands each month.

Under this heavy attack, South Viet-Nam appealed for help. As a result, military units to help in its defense have been sent by the United States, South Korea, Australia, New

Zealand, the Philippines, and, most recently, Thailand.

Some 700,000 South Vietnamese in uniform today are supported by more than 500,000 U.S. troops and more than 60,000 other free-world soldiers. The United States and South Vietnamese forces, beginning in 1965, conducted airstrikes against military targets in North Viet-Nam. Along with 31 other free world nations, the U.S. has furnished substantial economic, technical, and humanitarian assistance to South Viet-Nam.

No nation faces a greater test than South Viet-Nam today. It is striving to develop its own popularly approved political institutions, to modernize and expand its economy, and to improve the living standards of its people, while resisting a large-scale military invasion and a terrorist campaign.

CHRONOLOGY OF POLITICAL EVENTS, 1955-68

Oct. 23, 1955--National referendum deposes Head of State Bao Dai and chooses Prime Minister Diem as President of Republic of Viet-Nam.

Oct. 26, 1956--Promulgation of Constitution providing for strong executive, unicameral National Assembly, judicial system with safeguards for the individual.

Nov. 1-4, 1963--After months of Buddhist demonstrations and other increasingly active opposition to Diem, military coup overthrows regime, suspends Constitution, dissolves National Assembly. Powers centralized in Military Revolutionary Council, which announces intention to reinstall civilian leadership as soon as possible.

Nov. 1963-Nov. 1964--Military control of government; Gen. Nguyen Khanh figuring prominently, Gen. Duong Van Minh to lesser degree.

Nov. 4, 1964--Installation of civilian leadership: Tran Van Huong as Prime Minister, Phan Khac Suu as Chief of State.

Jan. 27-Feb. 16, 1965--Prime Minister Huong resigns at request of Armed Forces Council; Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat assumes control; Suu stays on.

June 11, 1965--Civilian government, unable to resolve constitutional dispute or to deal with rising scale of VC operations, asks Armed Forces to relieve it of responsibility.

June 19, 1965--Present Prime Minister, Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, assumes control.

April 1, 1967--Promulgation of democratic Constitution, drafted by Constituent Assembly.

September 3, 1967--National elections for President, Vice President, Upper House (60 members).

October 22, 1967--Elections for Lower House (137 members).

October 31, 1967--Inauguration of President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky.

GOVERNMENT

The Constitution of the Republic of Viet-Nam took effect April 1, 1967, after having been drafted and unanimously approved by a popularly elected Constituent Assembly and promulgated without further change by the ruling military government.

The Constitution calls for a modified presidential system. The President, as Chief of State, designates a Prime Minister and Cabinet to manage governmental business. A bicameral National Assembly and an independent judiciary exercise legislative and judicial powers respectively. The Assembly can override a presidential veto of a bill by an absolute majority of the total membership of both Houses. It can also cause the removal of any or all Cabinet ministers, including the Prime Minister, by a two-thirds majority (or three-fourths if the President disagrees).

The new Constitution also contains extensive civil rights and welfare provisions and provides for election of local as well as national officials.

On September 3, 1967, some 4.8 million South Vietnamese—nearly 60 percent of the entire voting-age population—cast ballots to elect a President, Vice President, and Upper House of the National Assembly. The Lower House was elected on October 22, 1967.

On October 31, 1967, successful candidates Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky were inaugurated as President and Vice President. President Thieu chose Nguyen Van Loc as his Prime Minister. The 60-member Upper House and 137-member Lower House first convened in October and November.

President Thieu stated in his inauguration speech that his national policy would be based on three major elements—building democracy, restoring peace, and reforming society.

ECONOMY

A prime goal of the Viet Cong has been to weaken the economy of South Viet-Nam by disrupting industrial and agricultural development, transportation, and commerce. Despite this, the Government of South Viet-Nam, with free-world assistance, is mounting a growing effort to increase its economic strength. While much remains to be done, significant progress is being made.

Agriculture; Natural Resources; Industry

The South Vietnamese economy is primarily agricultural. More than 80 percent of the total population live in rural areas, and the fertile land is capable of producing a food supply suffi-

cient for internal needs as well as a surplus for export. The GVN is engaged in a comprehensive rural construction program (Revolutionary Development), which has among its goals increased agricultural productivity and eradication of land tenure abuses.

Floods and Communist interference with normal marketing have changed South Viet-Nam's historic role as an exporter of its principal food and cash crop, rice. In 1963 exports reached 340,000 metric tons; in 1966 more than 400,000 metric tons were imported. Other agricultural products include kenaf (similar to jute), maize, sugar cane, tobacco, tea, and coffee.

Aside from its fertile soil, fish and rubber are South Viet-Nam's main natural resources. The fish catch, often the only protein supplement to the rice diet, has increased from 165,000 tons in 1959 to more than 400,000 tons in 1966; consequently, fish exports are increasing steadily. And, although the Viet Cong have destroyed many rubber plantations, they have not been able to prevent South Viet-Nam from becoming a significant exporter of rubber.

Before Viet-Nam was divided, almost all of its industry was in the North. Until the Communist Tet offensive in January 1968, South Viet-Nam had in operation more than 800 new or rehabilitated factories—textile, cement, pharmaceutical, plastic, paint—employing 75,000 workers and contributing one-fourth of the gross national product. As a result of the Tet offensive, 34 plants were damaged in varying degree. Of these, 19 were textile factories. An estimated 10,755 workers were left unemployed.

Inflation

Budget deficit financing of sharply increased defense expenditures, massive spending of foreign troops and associated military construction, Viet Cong interference with the economy, and growing labor shortages have triggered inflationary pressures. The GVN is currently enforcing a difficult stabilization program—devaluing its currency, employing budgetary restraint, and overhauling its fiscal system.

Free-World Assistance

In fiscal years 1954-67, the dollar value of U.S. economic and technical assistance to South Viet-Nam was more than \$3 billion. U.S. economic aid now averages annually close to \$500 million; this does not include substantial Public Law 480 ("Food for Peace") imports. Thirty-one other free-world countries have provided economic and/or technical assistance to the South Vietnamese. The United Nations also provides technical assistance.