

LETTERS FROM HO CHI MINH CITY

(Editor's note : What follows was received in late 1982 from a former junior officer in the South Vietnamese army who had recently returned to the place everyone who lives there still calls only "Saigon", after more than five years in the "re-education camps." The sender, whose name and background are known to us, writes English quite fluently, and only minor editing for English usage has been needed.)

Letter No. 1

Seven years ago, when communist North Vietnam took over South Vietnam, there were some South Vietnamese who had hopes for the new regime. The communist leaders more than once had promised a new society based on equality, liberty and prosperity. Social evils ascribed to capitalism would be eliminated.

Seven years have passed. The country is now going down an irreversible slope into an economic abyss. No one, even among the most obdurate communists, could deny this deterioration. For the last few years prices have been rising at an incredible speed. From January to July prices of most agricultural products rose more than 150%, and the trend continues. Every measure to control deficits and inflation has failed. This economic failure together with poor leadership and management has had its social effects, and the social evils claimed to be non-existent in a socialist regime are in fact growing fast and wide.

Bribery has spread to every level, and the degree of corruption is several times greater and more serious than during the former South Vietnamese Thieu regime. Any approach to any authority must be accompanied by a "gift" if the applicant wants any quick or easy results. Prices for such "mutual understanding" vary widely. The highest compare with the payoffs during the Thieu regime eight years ago, but the practice now extends further down the scale. Thus a single filter cigarette is a very common "gift" in the simplest cases. Goods already taxed at their point of origin will certainly be subjected to added "duties" at several checkpoints en route to market, even within Saigon city itself. Any policeman may impose such "tax" as he wants, payable of course in cash with no receipt given. For example a cyclo transporting vermicelli from the west to the east side of Saigon may be taxed four or five times, especially in the early morning when the policeman needs to buy his breakfast. Such transportation before 9 a.m. is therefore always avoided.

Agricultural shipments from the provinces to Saigon above a certain quantity will be confiscated en route and not reported to higher authorities, while lesser amounts will be "taxed" at many checkpoints. Trading therefore becomes a tricky game of avoiding checkpoints, and patrolling has conversely become the best occupation for the police. Central Committee efforts to check corruption have failed, and there are now only a handful of officials, mostly of high rank, who do not solicit bribes. Since they already receive special privileges from the Central Committee, it makes more sense for them to keep their hands clean.

The new communist ruling class can be seen in Hanoi and Saigon living a luxurious life. Consisting of province level and urban officials from the comparative rank of Lieutenant Colonel upward, they live in well-equipped quarters with sedans, servants and guards, enjoying a lifestyle even more lavish than that of Thieu's corrupt generals before 1975. The most luxurious hotel-restaurants in Saigon are still operating, now under State control. One of them is the First Hotel, located a few hundred yards from the main gate of Tan Son Nhut airport. It often welcomes rich communist officials who come to dine on the best dinners, drink the best liquors and enjoy stag movies as well as "poules de luxe." The Vietnamese people no longer believe in the "communist revolutionaries" since these depraved practices are taking place quite openly in every corner of the country.

Meanwhile, in the streets of Saigon and other major cities, thousands of homeless people are now living. Most have come back from the "New Economic Zones" which were hurriedly established from 1975-1977, to avoid starving. Beggars are increasing in number.

Public health is another critical problem. Modern medicines are in very short supply, with herbal remedies being used instead. Expensive medicines are reserved for high-ranking officials or sometimes for emergency cases. Ordinary people often have to rely on the black market. The best hospitals are also reserved, including the former Vi Dam and Chung Cheng. Even seriously injured accident victims rushed to these reserved hospitals for emergency first-aid are turned away.

Goitre is prevalent. VD and intestinal diseases are out of control. Occasional efforts at preventive medicine are made, but when for example there were news reports of the distribution of iodized salt to prevent goitre, the supplies never reached the general populace, even in Saigon.

About three-quarters of the former South Vietnamese doctors have already fled to the free countries, while physicians graduated from Hanoi Medical School are not trusted by the patients who will, for example, pay bribes to be operated on by a former South Vietnamese surgeon, rather than risk their lives in the hands of a "socialist" quack. Recognizing the situation, the authorities for the first time in communist history are allowing doctors to work privately in their spare time, and doctors who are arrested trying to flee the country by boat are released after only a few days' interrogation, while ordinary people may spend several years in jail.

Social evils such as robbery, prostitution, narcotics addiction and juvenile delinquency are escalating. Theft and robbery occur mostly in the major cities, with Hanoi leading even Saigon in this respect. Prostitution thrives in Saigon as it did ten years ago. Narcotics addiction remains a problem. "Scag" can still be bought, although now more expensive. The communists made millions funneling narcotics into South Vietnam in the past. Now it is time for them to pay. In North Vietnam, opium is preferred. A new generation of young hoodlums is coming into being both in Saigon and Hanoi, with some of the ringleaders being children of Communist Party officials. These "little mandarins" sometimes sport the camouflage uniform of the former South Vietnamese Marines. They may attack with guns and hand grenades even in Hanoi itself, while the murder rate in Saigon is far higher than in 1975.

Police measures against the criminals seem ineffective, although many thousands have been sent to join the hundreds of thousands of political prisoners in the so-called "re-education" camps. The police are more effective in fulfilling their political responsibilities. Given unlimited powers, they make underground political activities very difficult. Anyone can be arrested for any reason, and although this system creates animosity among the people, it has been effective.

The communist fiction is coming to an end in Vietnam. In April 1982 a train wreck occurred in Long Khanh in which twelve passenger cars ran off the rails at high speed, killing or injuring at least 500 people. No foreign press ever reported this major railroad catastrophe, no official report of investigation was made, no compensation was given to the victims' families. Vietnamese people asked, is this socialism ?

Visitors to Saigon today might find the city almost as noisy as before 1975. Coffee shops are everywhere, with mostly Western stereo music now replacing the shrieking soprano "red music" from Hanoi. Goods of all kinds are sold on the streets, mostly sent from the U.S. in aid packages to relatives. People say that Saigon is living on carrion left over from the Thieu regime and on green dollars from Vietnamese who have ~~xxxx~~ escaped to the U.S.

Russians and Eastern Europeans are often seen in Saigon. Some hotels and restaurants are reserved for them including the former U.S. officers' club on the top floor of the Rex. They enjoy good food and dancing, but the Saigon market seems to attract them even more. Many Russians hang around buying such new appliances sent from the U.S. as TVs, cassette recorders, cameras, radios and watches. To the South Vietnamese they look like hillbillies, especially to those used to more lucrative dealings with Americans in the past. In Cam Ranh the Russians have even been stoned by the people.

Most Vietnamese today no longer believe in socialism as a good solution for any poor country, except for people who have good jobs in the communist regime itself. Communist propaganda which was very effective during the war now fails to impress. More people are becoming stiffnecked and most are expecting some great change, feeling that any other regime would give them better opportunities. They show a passive, even resisting attitude toward the Party and its minor officials. Young men do their best to enjoy life, spending all their money on coffee shops and clothes. Saving is unthought of. Love-music hits composed in South Vietnam before 1975 are always preferred, especially in Hanoi, despite a "new culture" campaign to get rid of them.

Never in Vietnam's cultural history have there been so many political jokes as today, aimed at the Party, its leaders and Communism, and especially prevalent among the students. For example, "Le Duan's sayings are all true except one - 'We will successfully build our socialism.' Nguyen Van Thieu's were all false except one - 'Don't believe what the communists say, see what they do.'"

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