

Vietnam Bulletin

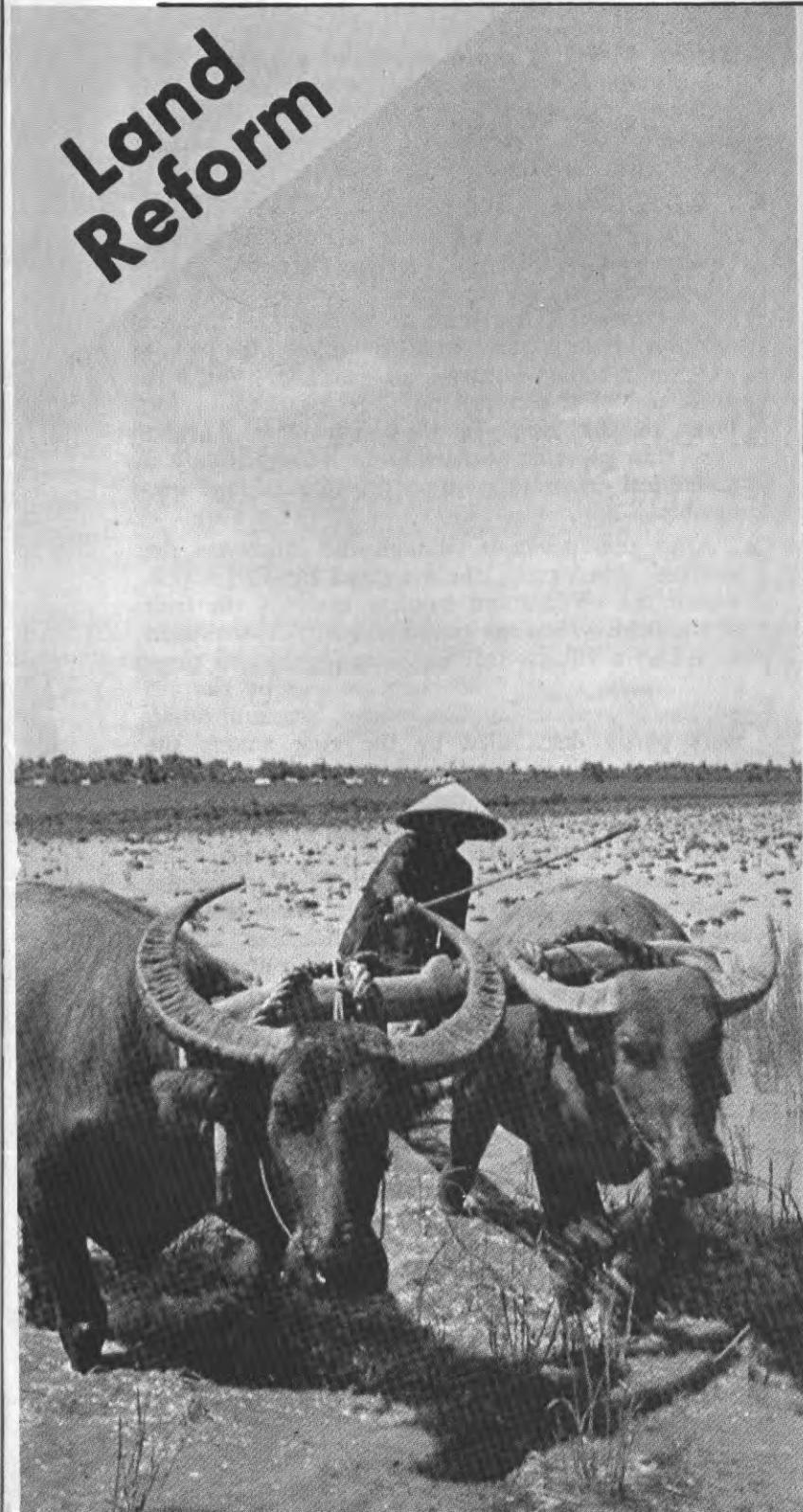
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Land
Reform



LAND REFORM

of Viet Nam through the history

by PHUONG-ANH-TRANG

As the concept of democracy started spreading, justice and freedom became increasingly the focuses of attention. And with this movement in political thought, reforms considered as means to improve social justice were for a while the subjects of polemics in Europe. Theories on nationalization or land reform advocated by such thinkers as Wallace, H. Gossen, John Stuart Mill or Henry George became popular at the end of the 19th Century, and due to them, social reforms were carried out here and there in Europe. One of the greatest in recent European history was the confiscation of all the lands owned by landlords, decreed by Soviet Russia immediately after the success of the Revolution in October 1917. This land reform was carried out with much bloodshed, and the ensuing tragedy was the elimination of all the landlords. In this bloody land reform, millions of farmers were thus exiled or executed.

After World War II, the «cry for land» has been considered as the expression of the aspiration common to all the peoples, especially those in Asia, who have been fighting for national independence, and whose objectives, freedom and happiness, are identified with land reform.

Therefore, in a violent or non-violent way, since the 19th Century, humanity has experienced or at least had the taste of land reform.

In Vietnam, the «Land-to-the-Tiller» Law, which has just been promulgated, is regarded as a comprehensive and advanced solution, the final product of a long and continuous evolution of land reform which has been going on in Vietnam from time immemorial.

Indeed, before land reform was started in 1949 by Mao-Tse-Tung with greater bloodshed than in the Russian land reform, before the appearance of the theories on land reform conceived by Wallace H. Gossen, John Stuart Mill and Henry George, before the slogans concerning social justice were adopted and considered as wonderful solutions which could liberate the proletariat, in Vietnam, which was not at all well-known, land reform had been carried out since the 11th century, and regulations concerning public lands had been en-

forced. Measures aimed at obtaining a fairer land distribution had been continually improved through different dynasties, and here are the most memorable details which the students of land reform in Vietnam should keep in mind.

Before we study land reform through the history of Vietnam, let us have some notions concerning landownership under the old Vietnamese law.

According to the traditional view, common to all the East, all the lands in a country belonged to the supreme owner, the king himself : the people were only tenant-farmers who were permitted to make use of the crops and were expected to pay taxes to the king. In the Vietnamese Ancient Law this supreme ownership is however, only a theoretical ownership, only a principle of land ownership.

After this principle, though the king was the supreme landowner, the king and his Court permitted the villages and hamlets to enjoy the fruit of the land. When the people requested permission to set up a village, the King usually granted them some public lands. The farms set up by the old policies of land exploitation, once in working order, were partly distributed by the king among the settlers as private lands, and partly retained as communal lands. The communal lands were distributed to the people in the villages according to established regulations. The villages which were underpopulated but had large pieces of communal lands were asked to give some of their lands to other villages. Thanks to these measures, almost all the villages in Vietnam had communal lands and the people of the villages always had the means of production.

At the time it was engaged in the war against the Sung in the Chinese mainland, the Ly dynasty in 1075 promulgated the policy of fair distribution of communal lands, distinguishing clearly the private lands from the communal lands.

In the history of Vietnam, this was the first time the distinction between private and communal lands was made. We must remember that there was no such distinction in China, though Chinese culture permeated Vietnamese institutions.



Traditional outfit making up for the lack of tractor ploughs.

Under King Triệu Đà (207 B.C.) the agrarian system in V.N., which had been greatly influenced by the Chinese system, was reorganized. Under the Hsia, every 10 families cultivated a plot of land, the crops were divided into 11 parts, and one part was given to the administration. Under the Ch'ou was established the system of «tinh dién» (tsing t'iän) : a piece of land was divided into 9 plots, 8 plots of private land surrounded a central plot of public land. Every 8 families were granted a «tinh» (tsing), each family had to cultivate, besides their private plot, a part of the public land ; the crops of this central plot were given to the government.

The Ch'ou also decided that a male citizen at the age of 20 was to be given 100 mâu, (meou, each meou equals 3,600 square meters) which would be taken back when he reached the age of 60 and given to another man. Any family which had more than one male child was given 125 mâu when the second son reached the age of 16. Thanks to this system of land distribution there was no large gap between the rich and the poor citizens.

Under King Tran Thuận Ton (1388) a decree on land distribution stipulated that nobody could own more than 10 mâu, and that the lands in excess should be returned to the Government.

In 1397, under Ho quy Ly whose reign initiated more progressive reforms than any other in the history of Vietnam, were promulgated the regulations on the limits of landownership, which were similar to those of the Tran Dynasty : each farmer could only keep 10 mâu, the remaining lands should be given back to the Government, while for the noblemen, each according to his ranks, could only own lands within the limits established by the regulations.

Two years after his accession to the throne, king Lê Thai Tô (1428-1433) re-organized land distribution which had become fair due to the disturbances of the war against the Ming.

The land policy he advocated was a redistribution of the communal lands to the people : from the great mandarins to the common people: soldiers, old people, orphans and widows, each according to his rank in society, was entitled to landownership. The villages which had too much land and too small a population must give a part of their land to other villages. Thanks to this policy of fairer land distribution, between the rich and the poor there was not much difference.

King Lê Thanh Tôn (1460-1497) created two new categories of mandarins called the Hà Đè (Rivers and Dams Officers) and Khuyễn Nông (Agricultural Development Officers) to take care of agriculture. The lands which were not cultivated were registered and distributed to the people. The Court also set up 42 farms and distributed lands to poor farmers and veterans so as to give them employment..

In the 7th year of the reign of king Lê Dụ Tôn (1706-1729), it was decreed that the redistribution of lands was to be carried out once every 6 years. The villagers according to their ranks, were all entitled to land-ownership. The regulations also stipulated the registration of lands. Then using the data obtained as a basis, the government redistributed the lands according to the populations of the villages. Those who had already sufficient land to cultivate just kept their land. Those who had not enough land, according to the regulations, were given more land.

Land distribution brought about in a systematic way was started by the Nguyen Dynasty (from 1802 onwards). In 1803 and again in 1804 king Gia Long promulgated two Decrees re-establishing the regulations on public lands and the distribution of communal lands to the people.

In the reign of King Minh Mang (1802-1840) there were also laws concerning the improvement of land policy, which stipulated, for example, that the lands which were not cultivated were expropriated and made communal lands, then redistributed to the farmers, or that big land owners had to give up 3/4-10 of their lands, which would become communal lands. The most important reform in reign of King Minh Mang was the land reform in Binh Dinh province which was considered as a pilot province, for it has much rice land and a large population. This reform did not concern villages in which communal lands were equal to or exceeded private lands, but only aimed at those villages in which communal lands were less extensive than private lands. It was decided that each farmer could keep 5 mâu to cultivate ; the lands in excess became communal lands before they were redistributed to landless farmers. This reform which was accompanied by an administrative reform succeeded in giving small but overpopulated villages some more communal lands which helped in their development and in giving landless farmers a living.

If one speaks about land reform under the Nguyen, must mention the work of Nguyen Cong Tru,

the Royal Delegate for Rural Development, a man who had the initiative of transforming the wasted lands in such areas by the coast of North Vietnam as Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Hai Duong, into fertile rice lands then distributed them among the farmers.

The requirements for land ownership set by Nguyen Cong Tru were very simple : anyone who could enroll 10 farmers was given 100 mâu with sufficient equipment, such as 2 buffaloes, a plows, a harrows, etc... Within a few years, 40,000 mâu of waste land had become fertile rice land which was distributed to tens of thousands of farmers : an experiment which succeeded at the same time as an effort in agricultural development, and as a show case of land reform.

It was unfortunate that those efforts in land reform were interrupted later on. At the end of the 19th century, with the disturbed political and economic world situation, Vietnam had to oppose French aggression and then underwent a period of foreign domination for almost 100 years.

At any rate, those efforts had contributed much to the cultural heritage of the Vietnamese nation. This heritage proves that if Vietnam today is a new state, the Vietnamese are a nation with a long history.



Rice-planting season.

Technical, Economic and Social Aspects of Land Reform in Viet Nam

by HOÀNG ĐÔNG

EDITOR'S NOTE

The «Land-to-the-Tillers» Law, promulgated recently, has become a frequent theme of debate in the Vietnamese Press. The author of «Technical, Economic and Social Aspects of Land Reform in Vietnam», Mr. Hoang Dong, had a hand in initiating the policy and the use of computers in Land Reform.

As the Chairman of the Implementation Drafting Committee for the «Land-to-the-Tillers» Law, Mr. Hoang Dong, an Engineer in Public Works and Photogrammetry and a graduate of Laval University (Canada), has made various trips to observe the implementation of Land Reform, especially to Taiwan where the greatest success in such a program is recorded.

In their attempt to subvert the regime of South Vietnam, the Communists have always tried to exploit social evils and injustices. In an underdeveloped nation, constantly undermined by Communist subversion for the last decade, these social evils and injustices have been exaggerated and dramatized to such a degree that the population has become dissatisfied with the present society and aspires to build a new one which would be fairer and better. One of the arguments the Communists often use to charm and woo the people, especially the farmers, is Land Reform, as they are fully aware that it is what the people are waiting for, though not knowing what would become of it in the future.



Promulgation ceremony of the «Land to The Tillers» Law in Can Tho.

Looking at Land Reform in the North, as well as the unchanging propaganda of the Communists, one can see that for them, Land Reform is not designed to wipe out injustices, but is simply a mean to carry out a tactical political objective, that is, destroying the landlords and initiating a class struggle, to pave the way for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the final aim of Communism.

In order to foil this devious scheme, and to develop a self-reliant economy and carry out far-reaching social reforms needed for national development, the RVN recently started implementing a Land Reform policy which is at the same time radical and appropriate to the situation of a country suffering from ideological warfare.

The problem is how to find a legal solution capable of effecting a compromise and taking into account the complex reality of an under-developed and over-populated country, achieving thus the objective of economic development with equal opportunity for everybody in the community, while guaranteeing the rights of the landowners. All this must be in accordance with the principle of reciprocity.

procal interests for capital and labor, which underlies the social policy of the RVN, so to arrive at a solution giving due consideration to all the national policies in the political, economic and social fields.

From Realities To Solutions

Vietnam is an agricultural country, with 75% of its population living on farming; but land distribution here, from time immemorial, has never been just or rational. This situation not only created poverty in the rural areas, but also put a limit on crop production, and kept Vietnam in a state of under-development.

Everybody knows that the institution of tenant farmers hinders the improvement of farm yields. For generally, since the tenants are not the owners of the land on which they work, they never make a maximum effort to improve land which does not belong to them. Furthermore, if they are willing to improve the land and increase the yield, they are not the sole beneficiaries of the additional produce ; on the contrary, the greatest part of



Tractor plough-distribution ceremony in Lam Dong province.

it will go to the landlords who, as the owners, have unjustly the lion's share of what comes from the labor of other people.

Besides, the system of tenant farmers is the product of a feudal and colonial society, a shameful brand on the psychology of the farmers, which impedes the process of building democracy in the rural area.

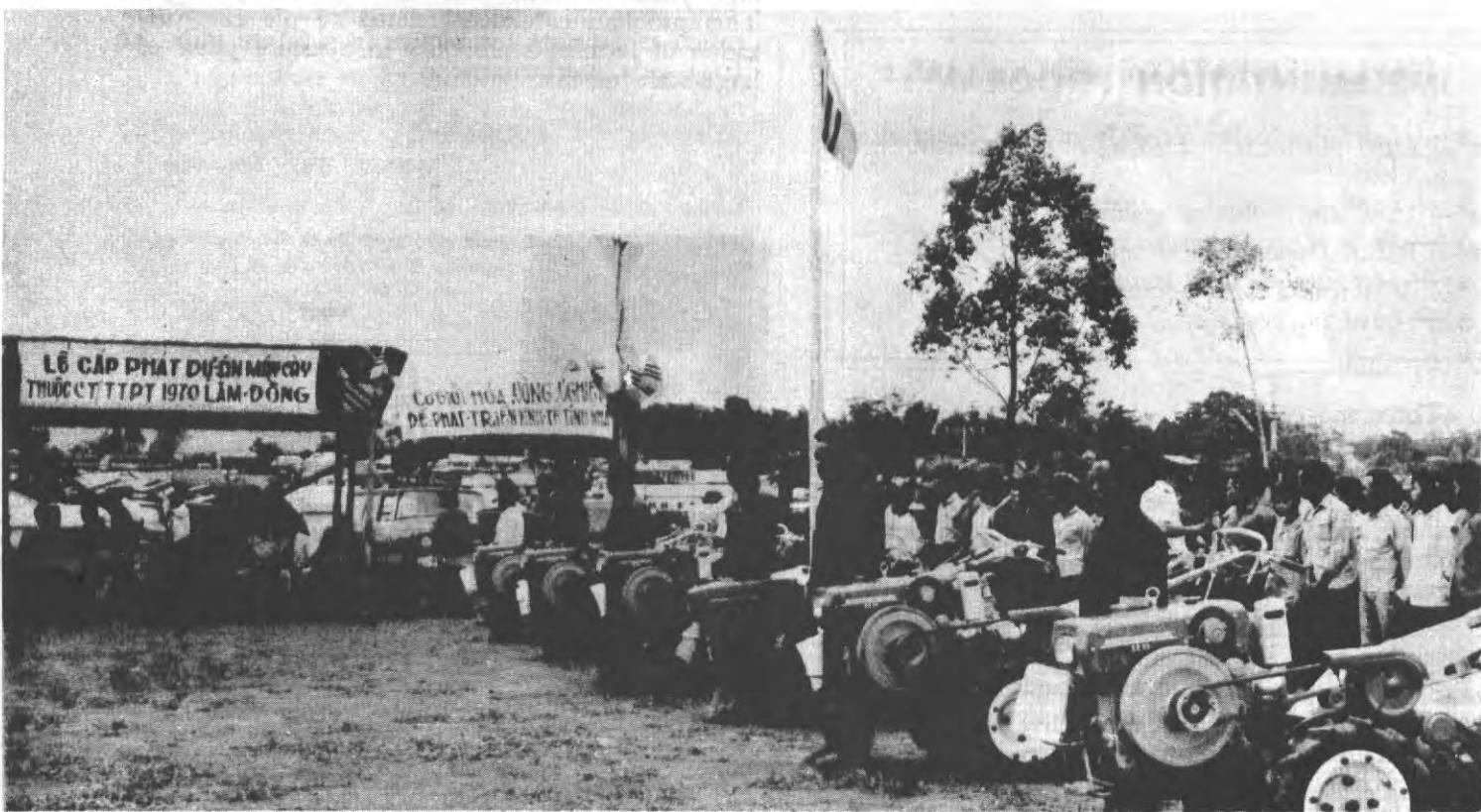
Faced with these realities, the new RVN Land Reform policy does not simply aim at improving the relationship between landowners and tenant farmers, by imposing low rentals and recognizing the rights of tenant farmers on the land they rent as in Decree 57 promulgated under the First Republic, but boldly announces the abolition of the system of farm tenancy.

As a natural result, lands which are not directly cultivated by the landowners will be expropriated with fair compensation, and distributed free of charge to farmers, so as to give the means of production to producers, or in other words, to practice the principle of «Land-to-the-Tiller.» This land redistribution does not take into account the political affiliation of the farmers; its only concern is to determine who are active farmers and to give them first priority.

The problem here is whether this land redistribution will increase land fragmentation and impede the mechanization of agriculture advocated by the Government. We should not forget that the main objective of Land Reform is to initiate a total reform in the rural area, having in mind the enrollment of a maximum number of farmers to support the policy. In this direction, the Farmers' Association will set up plowing cooperatives to use heavy (more than 20 horse power) and medium (from 6 to 12 horse power) ploughs, and thus greatly facilitate mechanization. In a new phase, to meet the needs of the situation, we will have to find new appropriate solutions. Land Reform must always keep close to realities, that is, it must take into account the special factors of the moment and the area involved.

The «Land-To-The Tiller» Law

Land Reform is carried out in the RVN according to the provisions of Law 3/70 which stipulates the general line of the «Land-to-the-Tiller» policy as follows :



- Elimination of land tenancy.
- Distribution of communal land.
- Permission granted to each landowner to directly cultivate a surface not exceeding 15 hectares.
- First priority given to farmers who are actually cultivating expropriated land.
- Quick and reasonable compensation to expropriated landowners : with payments of 20 percent in cash and the remainder in bonds guaranteed for eight years and bearing 10 percent interest, (these bonds may be pledged, transferred or used to buy shares in private or national enterprises).

The most striking feature of this «Land-to-the-Tiller» Law is the elimination of land tenancy.

This effectively liberates the farmers from their age-old inferiority complex which has kept them down and killed their initiative.

With the «Land-to-the-Tiller» Law, in activities in the rural areas, there will be no more conflicts between landowners and tenant farmers, since everybody is a small landowner.

and psychological conditions favorable for the development of our national economy and the building of democracy at the lower levels. Indeed the Land-to-the-Tiller Law is the starting point of a process of revolution initiated in the rural areas.

Foreseen Problems

But this is only the starting point, complete development is still a long way off, and various difficulties will demand continual creative efforts from workers at every level.

As a matter of fact, in Land Reform there are a number of expected problems. Once land redistribution is performed, the immediate problem is how to give farmers the minimum of production, such things as seeds, fertilizer, equipment, and training to accustom them to work in a spirit of community cooperation to assure development of the rural areas according to the principles of self-defense, self-administration and self-sufficiency.

Next, how does one improve the farming techniques so that the small landowners cultivating a small surface (less than one hectare) will obtain high yields in their rice and secondary crops. This problem is closely related to the rationalization of farming techniques in a future phase of large-scale mechanization.

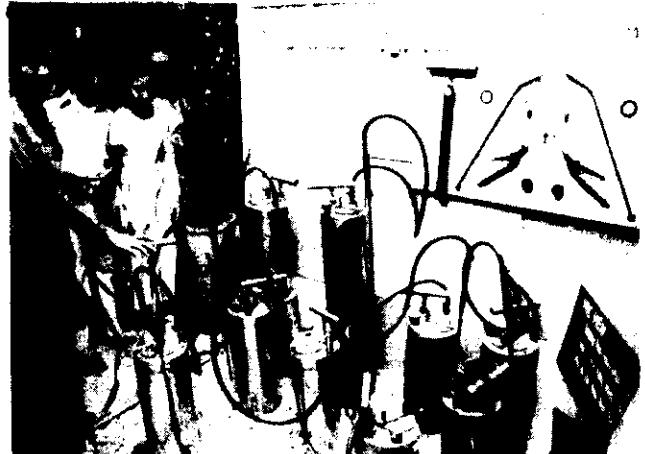
IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM :

- 1 — Land distribution at Refugee and Resettlement Centers.
- 2 — Land distribution to squatters.
- 3 — Public Domain concession.
- 4 — Montagnard land identification.
- 5 — Land to the Tiller.

There will no longer be landowners' associations and farmers' syndicates, with each side strengthening its ranks to oppose the other, in defense of its own interests. All will unite to improve agriculture and will cooperate to solve the various problems of the rural areas, as equal small landowners having the same aspirations.

A million citizens, who were still tenant farmers recently, have become, thanks to the «Land-to-the-Tiller» Law, a million small landowners having an average of one hectare each to live on.

Therefore, the «Land-to-the-Tiller» Law has created a legal basis guaranteeing land ownership to a million farmers and at the same time political



These insecticide sprayers, in an exhibit organized by the Land Reform Ministry, are part of a display designed to promote modern agricultural-production methods.

LAND TO THE TILLER PROGRAM :

PURPOSE : Abolishing farm tenancy and creating a nation of farm owners. Title will be given, free of charge, to all persons who now till rice land, whether as tenants, sharecroppers, squatters, or Viet Cong appointed cultivators.

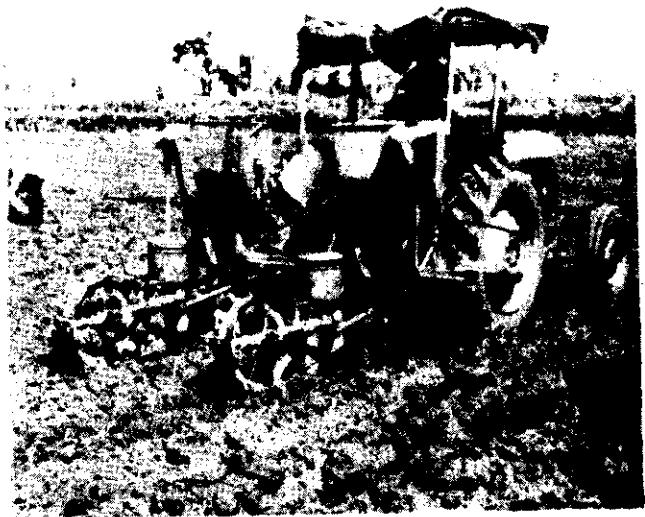
SCOPE : About 800,000 farmers are now living in a state of tenancy, farming 1,300,000 hectares of rice land.

IMPLEMENTATION PRINCIPLES :

1. Farmers tilling land with or without contracts will be allowed and encouraged to make application for ownership. Landlords will be compensated by the Central Government.
2. Farmers tilling communal riceland will also receive title. Villages will receive limited compensation for communal land expropriated.
3. Titles will be issued by the village Administrative Committee and registered with the Province and Central Government.
4. Present farmers, upon receiving title to the land they farm, will be entered on the village land register and the village tax rolls. They will pay land tax to their Village Administrative Committee. Farmers will pay neither back rents nor back taxes.
5. Compensation to landlords will be a percentage down payment in cash, and the remainder in government bonds. These bonds will be negotiable, and will bear interest.
6. The price of land will be determined by a Special Committee according to governmental guidelines, based on the average income in rice during the past 5 years.

How can we improve the supply of means of production, so that they are available to remote rural communities ? How shall we improve the harvesting, sale and distribution of farming produce in an organized, effective and scientific way, and so as to guarantee the rights of farmers ?

The improvement of farming techniques demands that we lay emphasis on urgent research work to adapt new inventions and techniques to the field of agriculture, to the climate of our country. These inventions and techniques must be so-adapted to become sufficiently profitable to facilitate their adoption by essentially conservative farmers.



From the buffalo to the tractor plough, a big step has been taken in agricultural development concurrently with the promulgation of the «Land to the Tillers» Law.



READY FOR MILLING — Young women of Ham Long District carry newly threshed rice from fields. Next step is milling, and many families here have small new mechanical rice mills to process all the rice intended for home consumption.



Pleinf harvest.

The improvement of the supply of means of production as well as the harvesting, sale and distribution of farming produce requires the development of the current system of farmers' associations, aimed at pushing forward the creation of producers' as well as consumer's cooperatives and mechanization cooperatives.

Another problem is how to encourage the expropriated landowners to use their compensation money effectively, that is, profitably for themselves, and yet at the same time, not increasing inflation but giving the Government more financial means to develop the national economy.

Currently, the Land Reform specialists have the

responsibility to rally the support of farmers in the shortest time and to aid the building of farming facilities such as water-pumps, systems of irrigation, and land consolidation. On the one hand the Government must persuade the farmers to use their additional proceeds resulting from the non-payment of rent and taxes in the first few years to invest in the building of the above facilities. On the other hand it must encourage the expropriated landowners to use their compensation money to invest in private or national enterprises, or to deposit it in the Agriculture Development Bank, so as to keep them from squandering their money and to solicit their help in industrial development.

Discussing Land Reform, many politicians said that if the First Republic had enough time to carry out Decree Number 57 on Land Reform, the war would not have been so long or so violent.

The new Land Reform policy with the «Land-to-the-Tiller» Law, aimed at carrying out a great change and considered as most progressive and a revolution instead of a reform, will effectively help in the success of the program of rural Pacification and Development which is currently being implemented by the RVN. After the pacification of an area, the first problem is how to give employment to the population living in that area. Land distribution will give the farmers the means of production and help create for them a new life and new opportunities for development. Pacification and Development helps initiate Land Reform, then Land Reform contributes in rural Pacification and Development. The two programs are not separate, they support each other in the overall policy of the country. This proves that to carry out Land Reform during war-time is not to take a risky step, as some doubting minds argued at the beginning. In developing countries of the modern world, Land Reform is a necessary and profitable measure. Developing nations whose economy is primarily agricultural, like Vietnam, before arriving at a state of advanced industrialization, must develop agriculture : a necessary phase on the way to industrial development and a necessary step in political stabilization which is a precondition of economic development.



The harvest rice.

WORK TO BE DONE

Under the «Land to the Tiller» Law, the Government has 1 million additional hectares of land to distribute to about 800,000 families.

In order to distribute these million hectares of land to farmers, the following targets have been established :

1970 : 200,000 ha.
1971 : 400,000 ha.
1972 : 400,000 ha.

In the implementation of the «Land-to-the-Tiller» Law, 174,936 billion piasters are needed to compensate the land-owners in cash in the first year and in bonds in the 8 following years.

Operational expenses are 1,400 billion piasters. The total budget for the program is 176,336 billion piasters.

The appropriate implementation of the «Land-to-the-Tiller» Law will enable the RVN to carry out this economic development, and to be in a position of strength derived from the masses. From this position of strength, and the favorable military situation today, the RVN will enter peace talks with an advantage over the enemy. For peace which comes at that moment will be a lasting peace, founded on the will and the rights of all citizens. And experience shows that the Communists can not persuade or excite people in a just and prosperous society.

LAND DISTRIBUTION 1963-1970

| Until the end of | Distribution of expropriated land | Distribution of former French-owned land | Land distribution at Refugees and Resettlement centers | Regularization of squatter's land | Montagnard Land Identification Program | Land-to-the Tiller Program | Total |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|---|---|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1963 | Farmers 115,321 246,166 Ha | | | | | | 115,321 Farmers 246,166 Ha |
| 1964 | Farmers 115,594 246,940 Ha | | | | | | 115,594 Farmers 246,940 Ha |
| 1965 | Farmers 115,912 247,774 Ha | | | | | | 115,912 Farmers 247,774 Ha |
| 1966 | Farmers 116,051 248,092 Ha | Farmers 2,349 3,990 Ha | Farmers 4,370 10,010 Ha | Farmers 2,516 1,760 Ha | | | 125,286 Farmers 263,852 Ha |
| 1967 | Farmers 116,835 250,548 Ha | Farmers 2,729 4,498 Ha | Farmers 7,682 18,759 | Farmers 2,961 2,161 Ha | | | 130,207 Farmers 275,966 Ha |
| 1968 | Farmers 116,986 250,972 Ha | Farmers 5,994 14,955 Ha | Farmers 9,846 22,306 Ha | Farmers 4,059 3,449 Ha | | | 136,867 Farmers 291,682 Ha |
| 1969 | Farmers 128,228 281,113 Ha | Farmers 26,082 70,270 Ha | Farmers 24,451 35,517 Ha | Farmers 13,325 7,976 Ha | | | 192,086 Farmers 394,876 Ha |
| 1970 | Farmers 135,000 298,347 Ha | Farmers 32,352 87,461 Ha | Farmers 50,110 49,863 Ha | Farmers 30,521 20,780 Ha | Farmers 13,891 38,569 Ha | Farmers 162,341 210,371 Ha | 424,215 Farmers 705,391 Ha |

NEWS IN BRIEF

NATIONAL FARMER'S DAY

March 26, is "National Farmer's Day" and an official holiday. This year, it is the first anniversary of the proclamation of the "Land to the Tiller" law.

LAOS OPERATIONS

Saigon, March 17, 1971. - Operation Lam-Son 719 : At 0838 yesterday, an RVNAF element found 150 fuel drums, 100 houses and 3,000 kilos of rice destroyed while searching a bombed area southeast of Tchepone.

Yesterday, the enemy conducted six indirect fire attacks with 82mm mortiar and 130mm cannon against Phu Loc and Bravo bases and positions of RVNAF elements northwest of Lao Bao resulting in very light casualties with no fatalities.

HQ RVNAF - During the 24-hour period ending at 1300 yesterday, an additional 129 enemy were reported killed in operation Lam-Son 719, 230 individual weapons and 24 crew-served weapons seized, 750 houses destroyed. Friendly casualties were two killed and 26 wounded.

Up to 1800 yesterday, a total of 9,043 enemy have been killed in the operation, 160 taken prisoner and three defectors received. In addition, 1,132 crew-served and 3,745 individual weapons were captured. RVNAF ground forces along with artillery and tactical air strikes destroyed 110 enemy tanks, 270 Molotova trucks, one 5-ton truck, five 3/4 ton trucks, 400 bicycles, 1,462 houses, four tons of tools, four generators, three water pumps, 849,000 liters of fuel, 13,630 tons of munitions, 15 tons of 122mm rocket, 7,010 meters of pipeline, 740 tons of rice, 1,000 tons of food, 2,000,000 anti-malaria pills and a large quantity of other equipment. Friendly casualties in the operation were 786 killed, 2,984 wounded and 193 missing.

PRESIDENTIAL WARNING

March 18, 1971 - A statement made by President Nguyen Van Thieu last week sent many members of the Vietnam press corps scurrying all around for indications for a South Vietnamese invasion of North Vietnam. The Presidential statement was made during an administrative meeting at the coastal province of Tuy Hoa after which President Thieu was quoted as saying that South Vietnamese Army "can attack the enemy anywhere and at any time." On this occasion, the South Vietnamese leader also said Hanoi's continued aggression against Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam "has made it necessary for us to think of attacking the enemy in his own territory."

The Presidential statement apparently created some worries the world over, for the following day, the Presidential press office deemed it necessary to put out a communique toning down the content of Thieu's reported statement. This time, Thieu

reportedly said there were "at present no plans to attack North Vietnam." Thieu still hoped, his Secretary also said, "North Vietnam will not force us to make invasionary plans and carry them out." But even before the clarification came from Independence Palace, seasoned observers of the Vietnamese scene had considered the Presidential statement as part of a political and psychological war being conducted by South Vietnam to keep as many North Vietnamese troops in North Vietnam as possible.

But to make the threat not completely devoid of substance, the South Vietnamese High Command reportedly had quite a few small scale raids launched against North Vietnamese installations in the southern panhandle of the Communist republic. This tactics apparently has borne fruit since Hanoi Radio has lately come up with hysterical denunciations and has ordered its military and para-military forces along the coast to prepare themselves for the worst. Old people and young children in southern cities apparently have been sent to the countryside.

BLEAK NVN PICTURE

March 18, 1971. - Two Communist defectors last week drew a grim picture of North Vietnam a few days after they surrendered to South Vietnamese troops in Southern Laos. The defectors were Master-Sergeant Nguyen Thong Quyen, 31 years old, and Le Vinh Thong, a former school teacher.

Thong disclosed that the reason prompting him to desert was the complete lack of freedom in North Vietnam. "Freedom in North Vietnam is like that of a bird living in a cage," Thong said, adding that "nothing is plentiful and everything is tightly rationed, even such small things as thread and needles."

Quyen said he defected his job as a deputy platoon leader of the 304th NVA (North Vietnamese Army) Division because "the Communists tried to deceive me. They told me we were moving down to liberate the South." But Quyen found himself in Laos fighting the elite units of the South Vietnamese Army. "That's why I defected," he said.

Asked whether the North Vietnamese were worried about a possible invasion of the North, both men said the civilian population had been warned to expect landings by South Vietnamese troops, "especially after the American raid at Son Tay to liberate U.S. prisoners of war detained in North Vietnam."

CHICOMS IN HANOI

An important Communist Chinese delegation had just completed a secret four-day visit to Hanoi. The visit was only announced after it had been completed and the matter was viewed in Saigon as indicating it was not a successful visit.

Indeed, when Chu En-Lai and his seven-man delegation, including top military commanders in Peking, arrived in Hanoi last March 4, the world was kept in the dark. Radio Hanoi, which usually announces this kind of visit with highly resounding statements, failed this time to inform the North Vietnamese people they had in their midst the Premier of the great Chinese Republic.

According to Agence France Presse, the only western press agency with a correspondent in Hanoi, the Chinese leader's visit was presented by North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong as "a serious warning to the U.S. aggressors." Hanoi Radio also reported Chu En-Lai as stating that his country was now convinced of "the lunatic character of Washington's policy" and was fully prepared to counter it.

But Hanoi watchers in Saigon are convinced that the Chu visit had more to do with the current struggle for power in North Vietnam and are of the view that its success or failure can only be assessed accurately after the coming April 11 elections in Hanoi.

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