

THE STRUGGLE OF VIETNAM

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VN Report
(SAIGON)

By Shri Pitamber Das

Mr. Shri Pitamber Das headed a delegation of members of the Parliament of India in a observation tour early this year of the Republic of Vietnam. He gives impressions of his visit in this article.

I happened to lead the team of those four members of Parliament who, in response to an invitation of the South Vietnam government, visited their country in the second week of February this year. The other members of the team were Shri Prakash Vir Shastri (BKD), Shri C. Muthusami (Swatantra) and Shri K. Lakappa (PSP). We arrived in Saigon on the 9th and left on the 12th. During those 3 or 4 days we paid visits to their high dignitaries and met leaders of the Indian community. We were also taken around several places.

The Situation

South Vietnam had been in the midst of war — in some form or the other — for about three quarters of a century now. As is well known the French had at one time secured complete mastery over the territory of Vietnam. The inhabitants of the country had begun their protracted resistance against the French rule in 1885. They were arranged, broadly speaking, in two groups, one — popularly known as «Viet Minh» — was a short for «United Front» forged by the Communists.

The other were «Nationalists» with a strong base at Saigon. Both of these groups had been working for national liberation, in their own ways of course.

In 1945 the «Viet Minh,» with some assistance from the Japanese, took over Hanoi, but failed in a similar effort in Saigon. A provisional government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was formed by them.

In 1946, the French agreed to recognize this as a free state within the Indo-Chinese Federation in the

framework of the newly formed French Union. The Nationalists were openly critical of the Communists for having agreed on anything short of complete freedom. The French, for protecting their interests, fomented regional and personal rivalries in order to break the unity of the «Nationalist Front» and to check the progress of nationalism in Vietnam.

They even applied pressures and threats. The «Nationalist Front» obviously suffered from the disadvantage of fighting the French on one hand and resisting the Communists on the other.

Despite all this a time came when it remained no longer possible for the French to hold on to power. The final hour of their domination had arrived. As a result came some agreements known as «Geneva Agreements of 1954» which gave excessive concessions to the Viet Minh.

The country was partitioned at the 17th parallel, and the Communists acquired a favorable position to initiate further struggle against the «Nationalists.» The Democratic Republic of Vietnam violated the Agreements almost as soon as they were signed. They organized what came to be called as the «Army of Liberation.» South Vietnam has thus continued to be at war, with elements led, trained, inspired and encouraged by Communists whose loyalty lie elsewhere and who are attempting to overthrow a legitimate government that has been freshly formed. This attempt has been taking different shapes and forms from time to time, and a strong sense of nationalism has sustained the South Vietnamese in their struggle all these years.

The people of South Vietnam earnestly feel that their defeat means the imposition on them of the slavery of China or of Russia or of both. They take it to be a question of life and death for them. They therefore seem to be determined to meet this challenge at any cost and with any help available. Hence

the heavy concentration of American forces on the South Vietnamese soil.

The Problem

The Americans are there with highly sophisticated weapons, heaps of ammunition and a large contingent of efficiently trained soldiers, yet at present they cannot be much effective. They can no doubt very successfully meet a large scale offensive or an open aggression but the Communists have changed their strategy. They have now adopted the policy of infiltration and penetration. They have also taken to guerrilla warfare and terroristic activities, whose tactics is to hit and run.

A bomb had, we were told, exploded a day or two before our arrival in the very vicinity of the big hotel where we were lodged. While going from one place to another outside the city of Saigon we noticed clouds of smoke rising in the sky far in the jungle at two or three places, where bombs had exploded.

South Vietnam has no natural boundaries so as to be able to prevent the infiltration. The looks of the population on both sides of the border are similar, and they have relatives residing across the borders. This makes matters all the more difficult for the South Vietnamese government.

The American soldiers, not being familiar with their faces, can neither distinguish one from the other, nor can discriminate between a friend and a foe. The South Vietnamese government, therefore, is training its own forces, but this is bound to take time, for which the danger is not going to wait. Hence the wrong.

It is only constant vigilance and active cooperation of the local population at the border that can successfully check infiltration and penetration and also combat guerrilla tactics and terroristic activities. An undeveloped or an under-developed people are always likely to fall easy prey to Communist slogans and propaganda.

The borders must, therefore, be adequately developed to meet the Communist menace. But a nation, whose very existence had been threatened since immediately after the termination of foreign domination and which could not have even breathing time can not be expected to afford energy or resources for development work. When, where, and how to break this vicious circle is another big problem.

Indian Community

There is a sizeable number of Indians in South Vietnam. They carry on mostly export-import trade and other businesses. They received our team in an architecturally built and spacious mosque, in a portion of which runs a school and a library.

The fact that in spite of all difficulties and uncertainties of war they had chosen to stay on in that country has created a very favorable impression on the minds of the rulers, who regard them as «friends in need».

The Indian community is allowed to enjoy not only equal rights but also certain privileges. For instance, in the case of Indians military training is not compulsory, whereas for South Vietnamese it is. The Indian Community expressed great satisfaction with the behaviour of the South Vietnamese government and the people. What seemed to disturb them at that time most was the rumor that the Government of India was going to raise the status of their consulate in Hanoi to an embassy.

This step, apart from taking away the neutral stance of India, was considered likely to make South Vietnamese rethink their attitude towards the Indians there. The leaders of the country also expressed concern over this rumor.

Real Issue

In South Vietnam it is not a dispute over territory as often crops up between two states with common borders. It is in fact a clash of ideologies. The totalitarian ways of the Communists and the democratic way of life chosen for themselves by the South Vietnamese are fundamentally opposed to each other.

The South Vietnamese want their country to remain completely free from any foreign influence, whatever its pattern and whichever its source. The results of the South Vietnam war may — to a very great extent — influence the preservation of democracy in this part of Asia.

There are countries, which are democratic-minded and peace-loving and which want for themselves the way of life they know and they love. They can never like the imposition of any system by force even if it comes in the garb and with the slogan of «Liberation.»

These countries will do well to extend their moral support to South Vietnam in its resistance to totalitarian trends.



Return to 'Street Without Joy'

HUE — In the early 50's French soldiers dubbed the coastal area north of here «The Street Without Joy.» In time, the name became an eloquent summation of the (first) Indochina war.

Now, ironically, this same area once again provides the setting for dramatic developments in the current war in Vietnam.

The «Street» is a 20-mile long stretch of paddy and marsh land lying between coastal highway one and the South China Sea. It begins a few miles north of this city and continues to Quang Tri, northernmost of South Vietnam's provinces.

Tranquility Broken

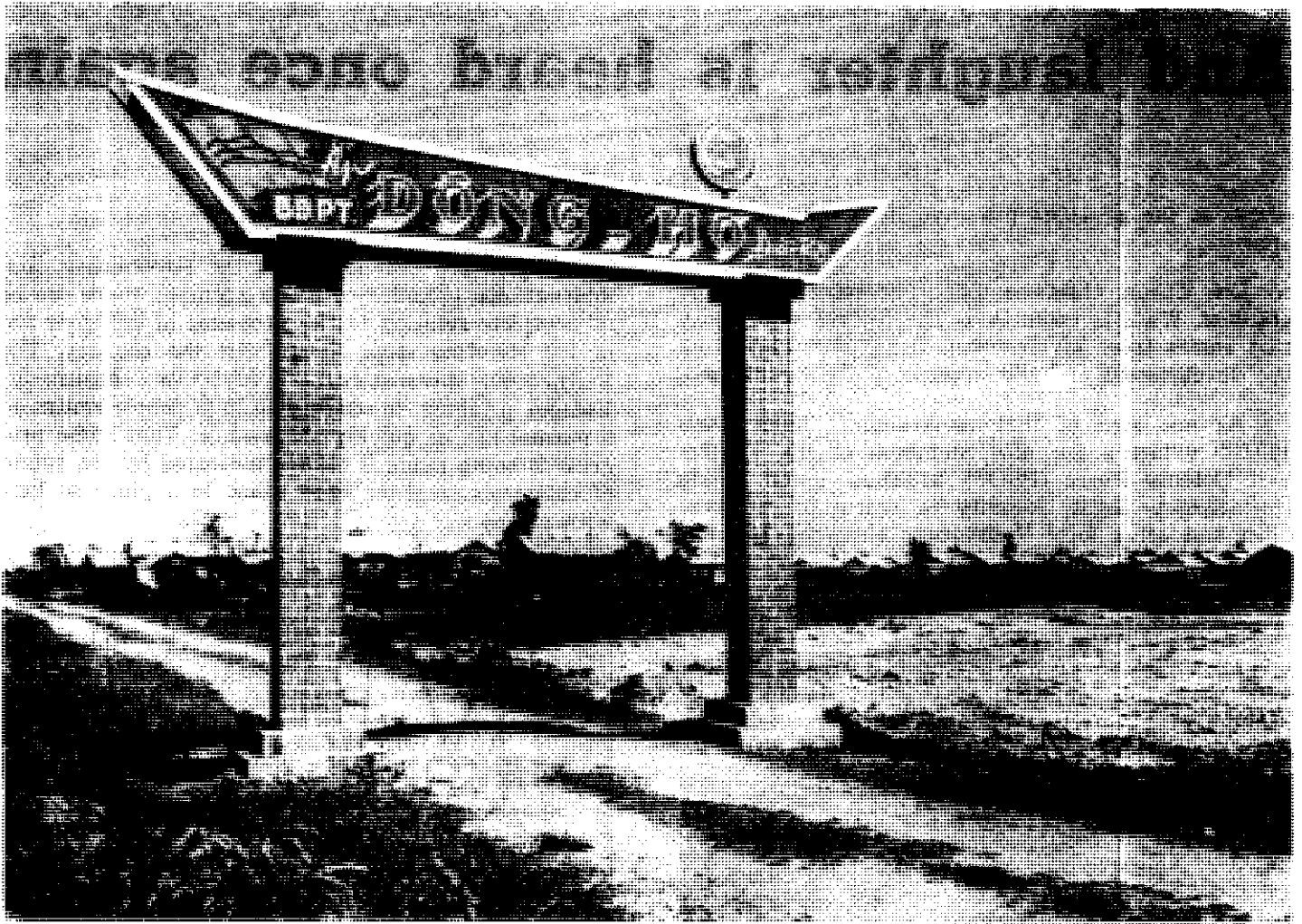
For more than a decade beginning in the mid-50's there was relative peace and the area prospered. That tranquility was shattered in the mid-60's when the Viet Cong began to apply pressure. During Tet 1968, Communist troops swept through the «Street» en route to Hue, bringing devastation and hardship. The people fled, and no one but Viet Cong lived along the «Street.»

That has all changed now. By July this year unarmed civilians could drive through the area, and they could see 20,000 people living and working in 17 hamlets strung along the length of the «Street.»

This remarkable transformation was possible due to a number of factors. Prominent among them was the psychological effect of the Communist slaughter of civilians in the area in 1963, including more than 5,000 in Hue alone. Observers in the area agree that the attempt to terrorize the population backfired. Instead of being intimidated, the people reacted with bitter hatred against those who murdered their families and friends.



Vietnamese farmers return from morning's work helping dig irrigation canals near their village along the «Street.»



A proud sign welcomes visitors to Dong Ho hamlet, one of 17 resettled this year along the «Street.»

Communist popular support dried up. Says U.S. Col. John Chism, province senior advisor in Thua Thien: «The contrast between the situation in this area a few years ago and now is as different as night and day. Now the people are supplying information. They are providing security. The Viet Cong can't get into the villages. That's the difference.»

Meanwhile, Communist main force military units have been badly mauled by the allies and driven back into the remote, uninhabited mountains on the western side of the province.

First Villagers

By early this year it was decided that the situation had improved to the extent that the «Street» could be resettled. The first villagers began clearing the land and preparing their houses in February. On Feb. 24, Vietnamese and American trucks helped more than 900 persons move back to their homes for the first time in more than two years.

As the first group settled in, others quickly followed. In Phong Dien district the government planned to move 12,000 back by late this year, but that already had been accomplished by July 1, more than three months ahead of schedule.

Quang Dien district did not start the move back until mid-March, but by the end of July the district had already achieved its goal of returning 8,000 people to their homes.

Vibrant Again

All along the «Street» there is vibrant village life once again. Says Col. Chism of the contrast between the people in refugee camps and in their home villages: «It was like turning a photograph over from the blank side.»

Thua Thien province is now rated one of the most secure in the country. The Hamlet Evaluation System, computes that more than 99 per cent of the

And laughter is heard once again

people in the province now live in relatively secure areas.

Col. Chism observes that «Security is not just physical. What is essential is the feeling of security that comes from involvement, from participation in the development and the defense of the country.»

As one sign of that involvement, more than 100,000 villagers are now members of the Peoples Self Defense Force (PSDF) in Thua Thien. Along the «Street» itself, security is entrusted to these units and other local Vietnamese elements, the Regional Forces and Popular Forces.

Despite the extension of security and progress in pacification in Thua Thien, there are still several thousand people in refugee status. Nationwide there are hundreds of thousands who are in refugee camps or settled on land other than their own.



Children cavort for visitors in Son Cong hamlet. Until recently this year, no one but Viet Cong and allied military units ventured into «Street» hamlets for 2 years.

Laughter Anew

Despite the best efforts of the government, and international voluntary welfare agencies, there can be no complete solution to the problems of refugees until the shooting stops throughout the country. The Vietnamese government, through its «Return-to-Village» program, is striving to help people return to a normal life as quickly as possible. That some progress is being made is clearly indicated by the sound of children's laughter once again in a place so long without joy.

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