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THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE VIET CONG, ACCORDING TO
L'EXPRESS

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Introductory Note: French correspondent Georges Chaffard wrote three articles on the war in Viet-Nam and his experiences with the Viet Cong. They were carried in the Democratic-left-wing Paris news magazine Express in April.

Chaffard's reports of Viet Cong difficulty attracted considerable world-wide attention because of the dearth of substantive information on the war from the enemy's side written by a trained Western news reporter.

Portions of his articles were carried by U.S. wire services. The series is also being printed in a large Japanese newspaper.

The Viet Cong Now Fear Defeat . . .

How to get rid of the Americans? The political tactics of the leaders of the Viet Cong up to the present have always been to work for the overthrow of the "puppet" government of Saigon and its replacement with some sort of regime, even a moderate neutralist one, which would call for the withdrawal of the Americans in the interests of peace.

Since the Americans have always maintained that they only were intervening at the request of the legitimate government, the appearance of a regime that would call for their departure would remove any justification for the presence of General Westmoreland's 30,000 troops.

Tidal Wave

But the Viet Cong leaders know that they cannot hope to take the capital by a military operation. They must thus have recourse to popular agitation making use of the weariness of the city-dwellers cut off from the countryside, the thirst for peace of the bourgeois, and the dislike of the ordinary people for the American "occupiers." According to their analysis, the redoubling of pacifist or simply anti-American trends must sooner or later become an irresistible tidal wave which would sweep away the shaky Saigon government.

The Viet Cong leaders say that it would matter little that they would not be the direct beneficiaries of this event, that for a time the neutralist bourgeoisie or the old religious sects would take power. The essential thing is to put the Americans under the military and political obligation to leave, or at least to agree to leave.

But the weakness of the Viet Cong strategy is that it was elaborated in terms of South Viet-Nam alone, without taking account of possible developments in the North or in China. Imprisoned by their own calculations, from which they have never for a moment freed themselves, the Viet Cong leaders never believed that the Americans would dare attack the North and defy China. What is happening now in Viet-Nam is, moreover, that the stakes of the conflict are being raised to a point at which the future of Viet-Nam and of the Liberation Front is in danger of being reduced to being nothing more than a counter in the game.

The demonstrations of American air power, the landing of Marines in Central Viet-Nam, the employment of new weapons, the relative passivity of China and the USSR have resulted in halting the pacifist movements which had begun to have free rein in Saigon. They are no longer so sure in the capital that the Viet-Cong are still the virtual conquerors. American determination has made them think again. In short, a reversal of public opinion has begun.

It is significant that the Cao Dai dignitaries, the most numerous sect, have discreetly rejoined the Americans in recent days. The recent expulsion to the North of the three militant neutralist leaders has engendered prudence among their followers. The Buddhist hierarchy, long divided, has even made the insurgent bonze, Thich Quang Lien, submit to the demands of his superiors that he abandon the "Movement for Peace and Welfare" that he started in February. So much for the political side.

Against Danang

In the military field, the inflow of military equipment and the announcement of the sending of new units of Marines will oblige the Viet Cong leaders to attempt some sort of decisive operations before the weight of the formidable American war machine can become a long-term threat to them. It would not be surprising then if an attack of regular battalions were launched soon against Danang, regardless of the cost. In any event one has noticed in recent days the convergence of numerous units toward Central Viet-Nam. An attempt to throw the Americans into the sea would be both a military and a psychological project.

But the redoubling of effort required of the Viet Cong is going to coincide with the palpable reduction of the flow of aid by land and sea from the North to the South.

Of course the guerrillas have enough light and medium arms, taken in combat, given up by deserters from the national army, or smuggled from Singapore or even from Bangkok, to continue for a long time their classic guerrilla operations.

On the other hand, the heavy weapons, 105-mm cannon, antiaircraft guns, 82-mm mortars which are necessary for attacking Americans in force and neutralizing their air attacks, are very much more rarely obtainable in the same ways. They must even undergo great risks to get them from the North.

Malaria

The winding roads along the Lao frontier are a well-known means of infiltration. But they only carry a restricted traffic, in the first place because the American air bombardments in Laos, carried out with the permission of the government of Souvanna Phouma, occur almost every day; in the second place because the duration of the journey is many weeks, and sometimes the personnel involved is decimated before arrival by malaria and dysentery; and finally because American-Vietnamese Special Forces operating along the frontier have well-developed means of detection which permit them to anticipate well in advance the truck convoys which try to come down the Ho Chi Minh trail.

The maritime route is at the same time shorter and more efficient. More than 70,000 fishing junks plow the seas along the 1,700 kilometer South Vietnamese coast. It is easy to slip in there from time to time with cargoes of arms or ammunition or, of course, disassembled artillery.

Around the North

The ships of the 7th Fleet, lumbering around like elephants on an ant's nest, cannot control the passage of fishing craft between Dong Hoi and Danang. But the delivery of smaller craft will be stepped up and reinforced by the sending of small groups of mine-sweepers.

The reduction of the flow of aid at the moment when the Viet Cong need it most and the psychological repercussions of the American operations against the North will place the Front in a difficult position in the weeks to come.

This is not by any means to say that these tough fighters, whose cadres fought as guerrillas against the French before 1954, are inclined to come to terms. There is no indication of such a thing. They continue to say they believe in the rightness of their analysis, and to bank upon the refusal of the Americans to risk the fatal step of escalation.

Indeed, various remarks from time to time indicate that they feel that after all it is the North's turn now to suffer -- this North from which one has long awaited more substantial aid, but which has been hiding behind dreams of peaceful coexistence, and which has treated the South condescendingly as showy but not very effective. A weakened North, whose leaders have once again, eleven years after Dien Bien Phu, felt the breeze of a passing bullet, could do nothing else but show itself more understanding and less like annexationists in its future relations with the South.

Fraternal Countries

At Hanoi they are certainly mortified by their position of weakness under the American bombs, a position which prevents them from playing the role of the great and perfect protector of the Liberation Front. The leaders of the DRV have known for a long time how much a small country, even a socialist one, can expect in the way of disinterested help from the great powers, even those belonging to the same ideological bloc.

During my last visit to Hanoi many persons I talked to were already expressing themselves bitterly on the subject of the economic and technical aid from the USSR and China. Is it known that North Viet-Nam is not yet entirely free from the debts contracted with "fraternal countries" for furnishing war equipment utilized at Dien Bien Phu?

Further, the government and the leaders of North Viet-Nam began, at the time of the first American raids in the Gulf of Tonkin, to prepare a new "resistance movement." They concentrated stores of food and arms in the hills and in the former citadels held against the French.

The military training of militia drawn from the peasants and workers was stepped up. A plan of evacuation of the factories and administration buildings was worked out. After the bombing of Dong Hoi in February, part of the civilian population of Hanoi was moved to the provinces, beginning with women and children. Since March 80,000 persons have thus left Hanoi. The ministers have planned to leave in Hanoi only a skeleton force, and to evacuate the bulk of the central government and its files.

The Famous Industrial Complex

The principal danger for North Viet-Nam is not the eventual landing of American troops. The Peoples Army and the regional militia are numerous and well-equipped enough to defeat them. The DRV fears destruction of the economic foundation of the nation, built during ten years at the price of strenuous labor and the sacrifice of living standards.

If American planes raze the factories that ring Hanoi, destroy the port of Haiphong, make the coal mines of Hongay unworkable, crush the famous iron complex of Thai Nguyen, the pride of North Vietnamese industry, and finally cut the three railroads which connect Hanoi to Haiphong, and China (through Lang Son and Yunnan), and the country is paralyzed, fifteen million North Vietnamese reduced to a subsistence level and isolated from the rest of the world -- "Well, in that case we will be out of luck" an important person from Hanoi admitted to me last year in Paris.

To prepare for this disaster the DRV needs antiaircraft weapons and planes capable of fighting the American armada. She needs to rebuild her chain of radar stations which the American bombardiers have methodically destroyed. She needs no "volunteers" from China or elsewhere -- these could not be used as long as there is no danger of a land invasion.

The Mongol Invasions

The presence of Chinese volunteers is in the meantime feared because of the political theory that they would be a weight upon Tonkin. The North Vietnamese leaders have not forgotten either the invasions of past centuries (attributed in the language of present-day Hanoi scholars to the "Mongols" or the "tartars") nor the encumbering "protection" provided by the Chinese in 1945 against the Japanese troops.

But this modern war equipment which the army of General Giap lacks -- who will furnish it? China?

She (China) doesn't have it for herself. The Russians are certainly reluctant to plunge into the Vietnamese wasp's nest. However, their prestige is at stake with the neutralist countries of the world and, above all, with those which still call themselves socialist. And the North Vietnamese leaders, who are constrained by tactics to go along with the ideological line of Peking, feel themselves sentimentally to be friends of the USSR -- at least the old guard leaders -- Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong, Giap, Thon Duc Thang -- the old "mutineer of the Black Sea" under Andre Marty.

You would have had to hear the Soviet diplomats to understand their embarrassment at the recent Conference at Phnom Penh. They were harassed by journalists and observers of the neutralist countries that were present. How could the USSR let North Viet-Nam go without aid, a socialist country being daily bombed by the imperialist Americans? For Chinese passivity one can give various excuses: the lack of modern means. But Russia? "We have made declarations," the Soviet diplomats could only respond, in a gutteral voice and with an energetic movement of the chin.

The Trousers

And they explained in private that the USSR would not abandon the North Vietnamese, but that they preferred first to exhaust all the possibilities of a political solution before taking the risk of an armed clash with the Americans. A war between Russia and the United States, said the Soviets, would be a horrible thing, which one could calmly accept only for a stake more important than Viet-Nam. The Vietnamese leaders should begin by helping themselves, and Moscow would help them.

This is what the first secretary of the USSR embassy at Phnom Penh expressed, frivolously but eloquently, when he said: "When a man is losing his pants, do you want us to give him a belt? Let him pull up his pants first!"

Finally, in the face of the increased American bombing the Soviet government put in motion a program of military aid. But for the shipping of this aid it found itself in a dilemma.

To send it by sea to Haiphong would be to expose it to disagreeable encounters with the ships of the 7th Fleet which mounts guard at the edge of the territorial waters, though we still don't know whether they are there to intimidate or merely to hail. Many Soviet merchant cargoes have already been under the overflights of the Americans. Some have been boarded -- these only carried coal. Moscow protested without heat.

Then should one send the war material by China? The authorities in Peking hide behind the requirements of Chinese sovereignty to demand the right to control sealed freight cars. If the Soviet military ships to Hanoi rockets and other ultra-modern weapons of which China still is deprived, they will in the present state of Sino-Soviet relations, give them an opportunity to make copies very easily.

Uncle Ho

One thing is sure, if the war must extend into North Viet-Nam and the United States goes to the limit of escalation, Hanoi will not give up. Old Uncle Ho and his comrades will again take to the woods. The Peoples Army will no longer have a reason for respecting the 17th parallel as it has done, officially, so far. His regular battalions would no longer hesitate to come openly to lend a hand to the guerrillas in the South. The Vietnamese economy would be destroyed, but the unity of the two zones would be achieved instantaneously in the total "resistance," as in the time of the French.

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In a second article, Chaffard reports that in March a Viet Cong leader, Hoang Quoc Viet, Secretary-General of the country's labor organization and vice-president of the mass-membership "National Front," met an American journalist on a Cambodian airport and told him North Viet-Nam was ready to enter negotiations if the raids above the 17th Parallel were suspended for about a month. Later, the journalist received a telephone call from Hoang Quoc Viet's delegation withdrawing the statement.

Chaffard in his third article describes an escorted trip into Viet-Nam guerrilla territory from Cambodia during which his guides told him that, to permit him to move freely across the "liberated zones" and to attend a meeting of the Viet Cong Central Committee, "we would be obliged to organize a security detail of several battalions."

This explanation appeared to me perfectly plausible," he comments. "I deduced from it, however, that if several battalions are needed to cover the trip of one journalist, it is because the security of the zones called "liberated" leaves much to be desired, and that the front's control in them is not absolute."

Chaffard says the Viet Cong's propaganda with the peasants has been skillful, leaving the impression that everything that happened was the fault of the "American aggressors" and that all their troubles would cease when the American and his "valets" had been chased out.

"But the intensification of the air raids, the destructive demonstrations with napalm and gas have plunged the countrymen into a state of mind beyond revolt," he says. "They no longer even wish the departure of the Americans, which would take a hard fight. They wish for peace, no matter what peace with no matter what masters. Having reached this point, the rural population is ready to go along with the stronger side."