

Vietnam's Wounded Waifs

The U.S. government is not doing all it should in behalf of the Vietnamese children who are casualties of the war.

MARJORIE HOPE

IN SOUTH VIETNAM hundreds of children are dying — some with their limbs blown off, some with gunshot wounds, some covered with burns from head to foot. The burned are treated with vaseline or not at all. The wounded may never see a doctor; today there is only one Vietnamese physician per 100,000 people to minister to the needs of civilians. The few existing hospitals are overflowing with patients; two or three people often share the same bed. Flies circulate freely on children who have been skinned alive, for in most provincial hospitals there are no facilities for hygiene, no air conditioning, no fans. Mattresses are stained with blood and urine; hospital buildings are infested with rats; sick babies die in heat that often goes beyond 105 degrees.

In Switzerland an organization known as Terre des Hommes (World of Men) procured 400 hospital beds in Europe last fall, sent representatives to Vietnam, and began making plans to bring in wounded children for treatment. Because of its limited financial resources, the organization sent to President Johnson a request for the loan of military hospital aircraft or use of unoccupied places in American planes.

I

The White House issued a letter on January 17, 1966, sympathizing with "all efforts to aid the victims of Communist aggression in South Vietnam" and assuring the Swiss organization that the American government would consider aid for needy persons within South Vietnam. Then it categorically stated that "U.S. military aircraft cannot be provided for airlift to Europe of Vietnamese children who may need medical treatment," because of "our view that the most effective way of extending assistance is on the scene in South Vietnam where children and others can be treated near their families and in familiar surroundings."

What are these "familiar surroundings"? They may be the hospitals — described by the Swiss team as "places with the atmosphere of slaughterhouses for people." Two Dutch doctors who visited Vietnam at almost the same time said the hospitals were "indescribable," and added: "Thousands of people suffering from untended burns arrive from the in-

terior of the country. Most people are tended by members of their own families, who usually sleep in the hospital, under the bed or next to it, anywhere where they can find room."

But more often the children's "familiar surroundings" are desolate straw huts, for most of the burned, wounded or sick do not even get to a hospital. They are never found, or the roads are impassable, or bridges have been shot away, or conditions are so chaotic that there is no transportation. These children suffer and die without care "at home."

What does "near their families" mean? According to one neutral source, at the end of 1965 there were at least 11,000 orphans and thousands of abandoned children in South Vietnam. Nearly a million refugees were without homes.

II

In a courteous but spirited reply to the White House letter, Terre des Hommes declared: "We are all in agreement with respect to the principle that local work is most desirable, but who has done it efficiently and sufficiently since the beginning of the war? . . . If it is so easy to save locally by modern means thousands of burned, wounded, and sick people, why has this not already been done?"

Terre des Hommes is an international nonpolitical, nondenominational organization founded in 1960 for immediate help to child victims of war. Between 1961 and 1965, it placed 1,159 children (most of whom had been wounded in the Algerian war) in clinical institutions and foster homes. It has never criticized U.S. military policy in Vietnam but has limited itself to humanitarian aid. The organization needs funds to support the work of a nurse who is seeking out seriously wounded or burned children, for a clinic it expects to open in Saigon, for an intensive care center at the Nhi-Dong hospital, and for pharmaceutical products now being sent to two of its doctors in Kontum. At the moment, however, the most pressing need is for planes to transport drugs, doctors and children.

At the beginning the project received encouragement from all sides, including American officials. A letter emanating from the International Red Cross Committee last September first brought the plight of these children to the attention of Terre des Hommes. The committee expressed approval of the project. The government of South Vietnam was

enthusiastic. A representative of the state department at the U.S. mission in Geneva appeared quite open to the plans. He suggested that Terre des Hommes contact a Dr. J. (an American general) in Vietnam. The latter favored the proposal. Yet the request transmitted to President Johnson was refused.

III

Why this refusal? Why this distinction between projects within and outside Vietnam?

It can hardly be because other organizations can fulfill the task. Over 30 groups, including the International Red Cross and some American army medical teams, are doing what they can in Vietnam, yet the situation grows worse every day. Terre des Hommes originally planned to use unoccupied places in commercial planes. The airlines, however, said they feared their customers would feel a bit uncomfortable dining on steak and champagne before the eyes of burned and wounded children. The organization has managed thus far to bring in 32 children at its own expense — \$1,500 per child. At this rate, few children can be helped and reserved hospital beds will remain empty.

It is difficult to see why the richest nation in the world cannot make a hospital plane available. According to a *New York Times* dispatch on August 9 of this year, seriously wounded G.I.s get fast flights to stateside hospitals on jets where "Air Force nurses will be aboard with medicines and soothing words, and a mess steward will serve meals from the plane's elaborate galley." Moreover, American planes have been used in the past to transport Hungarian refugees and to provide airlifts from Cuba.

The Terre des Hommes reply to the White House letter cited the American tradition of humanitarianism, pointing out that Europeans had "good reason not to forget that part of the world owes its liberation from Hitler executioners to the American people." But it added: "Without making any judgment at all on the direction of this war, we feel that the armed forces of the United States, involved in acts which have mutilated our little ones, can in no way shed that involvement when it is an urgent question of saving the lives of those children."

Recent stories of "mistaken" bombings (or simply bombings from an altitude at which no pilot can distinguish between "friends" and "enemies") make it increasingly clear that hundreds of innocent Vietnamese civilians are being killed or maimed by U.S. forces. Moreover, a large number of what the White House letter calls "victims of Communist aggression" are Vietnamese suffering from burns caused by napalm and other products of American research.

Very few Americans or Europeans have ever seen what napalm does to human beings. It is a highly flammable sticky jelly which clings to anything it touches and burns with such heat that all oxygen in

the area is exhausted within a split second. Death is either by roasting or by suffocation.

Some American journalists have reported that the most effective use for napalm — the most popular bomb in Vietnam — is to terrify peasants in Vietcong-controlled areas into moving to American-controlled areas. They quote Special Forces officers as saying that this strategic bombing kills "ten civilians for every VC." And they have described women arriving at medical stations holding children whose legs had literally been cooked by napalm. They have also reported — as Charles Mohr of the *New York Times* pointed out in a television program on August 1 this year — that the administration discourages reports on napalm.

In keeping with its nonpolitical, purely humanitarian purpose, Terre des Hommes has no formal connection with any group in this country. However, it welcomes the cooperation of all who wish to help. Its president, Edmond Kaiser, stresses the urgent need for physicians to volunteer their services at the project's hospital in Saigon. He also says that war-wounded children should be brought to the States — one of the three countries in the world that have the knowledge and the resources for treatment of napalm and other serious burns.

A number of Quakers have launched an appeal for sponsors of Terre des Hommes in this country. Members of Women Strike for Peace are sending documentation of the issue to all congressmen. Some of our senators and representatives have expressed considerable interest in the problem, and it seems likely that they will bring the question to the floor of Congress: How are we fulfilling our responsibility for these small victims of war?

The Counselor

★ YOU wonder why I listen to your words,
The whining wind, the thunderclaps
That bring the damp confessions of a storm
That never really struck, but passed
And left behind untested fear.

You wonder why I offer stern advice,
The cold imperatives I carve
From stony trials I calmly say I met
With sturdy will and solemn trust,
The trials I know are undetermined yet.

I know the counsel that I give to you
I need, to curb my appetites,
And so I caution other restless men
Against the never distant storm,
Against the cloudy pressure of my doubt.

You wonder why I listen to your words.

F. A. EHMAN

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