

RESETTLEMENT: First victory of the anti-communist Vietnamese.

Early in September 1954, , those who went to spend their week-end in Dalat through Highway N°I, could not see without emotion thousands of families living in tents, along the road, approximately 10km. from Bien Hoa. They were just plain farmers from North Vietnam who did not want to be handed over like animals in a deal with the Communists. They reluctantly had left their fields and homes to take refuge in the Southern part of the country and to continue their fight for freedom. Here, at the end of their long and hard exodus, they set up some ten thousand tents along miles after miles of road, on a waste land, under a baking sun and pouring rain. In the tents, old men and women were seen crouching on dry spots with their grand-children in their laps.

Many a week-end travellers have asked this question:

- How will the Ngo Dinh Diem governement solve the problem of these refugees who are mainly old people and children?
But they did not know that thousands of able men, women and old men were felling trees and clearing land to win room for their new homes and to open up new land for their fields.

Most of the refugees were from the delta area of North Vietnam. They were flat-land farmers who had thought of mountains and forests only as low, dark blue silhouettes outlined against the horizon of their plains during the clearest days of autumn. But before their will to live as free men and women, forests had to give way.

The same travellers, who happened to pass the same spots three months after, would have been amazed by the changes which had happened

during this short period. Where the road had been only a narrow strip of asphalt threatened by invading wild bushes and trees, there was now a clean street, a 10-mile main street of a village, or a string of villages. The wild vegetation had been pushed back away from the road. Tents so low that a child had to crawl to get in had been replaced by wood or bamboo houses covered with thatched roofs. Most of these brand-new houses had either clean yards or kitchen gardens already covered by green vegetables. Some even had small corn-fields already in blossoms. Over many doors were hung signs which read: Tho May (Tailor), Cat Toc (Hair cut), Pho (Beef Soup with Vermicelli), etc. Here and there along the road, groups of children played gleefully in front of newly set-up primary schools. Two or three markets already operating gathered crowds of brown-clad people. Each village, which keeps its old name, had its own church, built with bamboo and covered with corrugated iron or asbestos sheets. Large piles of firewood, ready for transportation to the markets in Bien Hoa and Saigon were stacked up along the road. Away from the road, trees were still falling and bushes burning: more new land being opened up.

In the same way, after only about 100 days, over 200,000 refugees have been re-settled in 12 South Vietnam provinces, in over 55 re-settlement centers. More than half of these 200,000 were resettled in Bien Hoa alone, because of the specially favorable conditions offered by this province.

Located in the Eastern part of South Vietnam, Bien Hoa is the largest and also the least populated province of the region: 11,000 square kilometers with 14 inhabitants per square km. Cultivated

land covers only a small portion of the whole area,-- in the basin irrigated by the lower part of the Donai River where a large majority... of the population concentrates. Up north are the hills of "Terre Grise" (Grey Land) and "Terre Rouge" (Red Land) which extend over a wast region. The woods and bushes covering them become denser and denser toward the North until they meet the tall forests of the Central Vietnam mountainous area. Highway N°20 leading to Dalat, Highway N°15 leading to Cap St Jacques meet National Highway N°1 near Bien Hoa, which runs parallel with the Trans-Indochinese Railroad.

On these patches of woods and thorny bushes along the Donai River and along the above highways, refugees from North Vietnam have come to establish their new homes. Getting off the Government buses and Army trucks, the first action of the refugees was to pick up a handful of earth. In several small groups, they discuss about the fertility of the land. Next, they went about looking for streams hidden under the wild vegetation. "Water first, then fertilizer": the thousand-year old recommendation still sounded clearly in the ears of those who live exclusively on farming. On their buses and trucks, they have gone through immense rubber plantations. Impressed by the orderly and straight rows of trees, their minds were haunted by images of the miserable life of the "plantation coolies" under the old colonial time: half-starved and ragged people, yellow with malaria which gave them a huge belly. Shuddering at the thought of same kind of life awaiting them, they drew closer around the priests their leaders and protectors from the time they had left their native villages.

Farmers from HaTinh to LangSon, from SonTay to QuangYen, all have representatives in these Bien Hoa re-settlement centers... As all Vietnamese farmers, they do not want anything temporary; they want something permanent, something which will last as long as possible. The refugees want first of all a home of their own, even a hut, in order to be able to leave the canvas tents which the Government has provided them. In some places, such as Honai, Tanmai, a certain number of model houses were built by the government contractors; but in most cases the refugees decided to build their own homes themselves. So, under the direction of their priests and their experienced elders, the young men went to the nearby forest to cut bamboo and timber while groups of women mowed the high grass growing close to their tents. God has bestowed all the necessary materials, the refugees got together to set up a home for each family.

Toward the end of the rainy season, the refugees had built enough shelter to live grouped together into families, hamlets, villages, according to the same old pattern they had back in their native land. Churches also had been transferred out of the hot and tight tents into new halls built with wood or bamboo: their new worshipping places were simple, but did not lack solemnity. Under the bright sun and the cool wind, they turned their efforts toward creating more security for their future. Government subsidies were limited.

With the passing of each day, with each piece of earth turned up, with each bush cleared away, the refugees discovered new things. The fears they had first felt had been the first to dissipate, leaving the place for new difficulties, new problems.

There were no mosquitoes, carriers of malaria, but the refugees had to fight against blood-sucking ticks and dangerous scorpions of all sizes which crawled out of the undergrowth and grass.

Dysentery acquired during the exhausting flight from the Communists and the hard life in concentration camps at Phat-Diem, Con-Tron (North VietNam) is no longer draining their energy. Smallpox and measles disappeared a short time after their departure from the hot and tight reception camps in the cities. There remained only beri-beri caused by lack of vitamins, resulting from under-nourishment under the Communist regime. Rice-bran, traditional remedy for beri-beri, was easy to find in the rice-rich South. Vegetable sprouts from new gardens also contributed to the rapid decrease of the disease. Father Manh, formerly of Phuc Nhac parish (Ninh-Binh, North VietNam) now in Gia-Kiem center, found out that he could use his knife to cut grass without as much pain as during the first days in the camp. New schools were being set up with bamboo furniture. The chairs were occupied mostly by volunteers and students-priests. Each class-room was used by two shifts, morning and afternoon, of over 80 students each. "Winter" in South Vietnam is cool as Autumn in the North, particularly at night, when the refugees fell asleep in a fresh atmosphere of freedom, after short discussions on the work to be done tomorrow.

The red earth at Gia-Kiem was very good for vegetables. The field at LacAn was ready for rice-planting. Buffaloes raised at BenGo were picking up more weight. But the springs and small streams gradually dried up. Several wells had to be abandoned particularly in centers established on the "grey land", such as HoNai and TanMai. Teams of experts with the most up-to-date drilling equipment had been despatched by the Government to solve this problem. The leaders of the DocMo and GiaKiem centers talked of digging a canal to take water from the DoNai, 5 kilometers away. Ai Lac-An, Father Minh was planning to submit a request for a pump to be set up on the Donai dike, in order to obtain water for the irrigation of 500 hectares of land being opened up.

On the other hand, another urgent problem of the refugees was to find markets for what they had produced or extracted from the forest. In every center, particularly at Honai, tens of thousands of cubic meters of timber, bamboo, firewood were in need of a market, in exchange for funds to buy farm animals. The creation of production and marketing cooperatives was the current topic of refugees' meetings and discussions. A certain number of cooperatives had been officially established, and several others were underway, pending the approval of the Government and loans from agricultural and handicraft credit agencies.

Advice, along with material help, from the South Vietnamese population were invaluable for the North Vietnamese refugees. The LongDien village people had lent their school to refugees from Phat-Diem and Nghe-An who had recently been re-settled at BenGo. Troops of the BenGo military post had helped the Phat-Diem refugees with material and labor, for the creation of a straw-mat weaving factory. With capital lent by the local population for the purchase of jute, rush, etc,... this factory had produced over one thousand pairs of high quality mats of all sizes, which will bring in around 50,000 piasters.

In general, after only a little more than one hundred days, 100,000 refugees being re-settled in BienHao had neither enough time to build all the houses they needed, nor enough facilities and means to become completely self-supporting. However, with the habit of this collective life, with their determination, they had insured their own future and the day was not very far off when they could support themselves.

This determination was found not only in Catholic people but also in all non-Catholic refugees. Old man Luu Thuc, of Huong Cat village, Truc Ninh District, Nam-Dinh (North Vietnam), now in Tan-Mai re-settlement center, when hearing of the investigation being carried out by the International Truce Control Committee at the request of the Viet-Minh who alleged that 800 non-Catholic people had been forced to evacuate to the South, said indignantly :

- " I am over 50 years old. Back in my native village, I have only 3 "sào" (sào: one-tenth of an acre) of land, but the Communists would not let me alone. We non-Catholic wanted to come to the South more than the Catholics. Unfortunately we have no good leaders as the Catholics who have their priests. For nearly ten years, under the Viet Minh, the Catholics received a better treatment at their hands than we did because the Communists had tried at one time to avoid friction with the Church. But the Non-Catholics had never been spared anything: taxes, loans, "Voluntary contributions", the non-Catholics were the first to pay. We had the first taste of various Communists movements and campaigns, years ahead of the Catholics. Down here, we are enduring great hardship, but it is nothing as compared with the "voluntary" works and the "people's labor" we had to do for the Communists in their forced labor camps. When planting a row of sweet potatoes, I am no more afraid that the "Can Bo" (Communist agents) will come and count the roots to determine the amount of tax I will have to pay. Sometimes we had to sell whatever good clothes we possessed to pay the Communist taxes. Down here, we have enough food and decent clothing. When we lay down to sleep, we are not afraid that the party's Can Bo will come and rouse us out of bed to some political meetings until 2 a.m. Going out to work at dawn, I no more jump up when I see a shadow near the corner of my house: I know it is just my water jar, and not a Can Bo spying on my house.

" We are now building a brick furnace for our Cooperative. I never made bricks before, but now I know. Down here, life seems much easier than in North VietNam: I am not saying that we will get rich quick, but it will not be so hard to earn a living. I feel sure that if Old Man Ho were a farmer, he would certainly have come down to live in this re-settlement camp with us ! ..."