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V.C. Wanton Drives against Malaria Eradication Program

Of all V.C.'s subversive actions against the South Vietnamese Government's social improvement programs for its rural people, that directed against the defenseless DDT spraying teams is probably the most vicious, according to a Vietnamese official of the Malaria Eradication Program.

These teams, composed of over 2,800 men, roam the country spraying the homes of rural people unarmed, generally without escort, and usually in danger to their lives. They are supported by a US\$ 1.2 million annual program by USOM which supplies the materials and the GVN the salaries for the sprayers.

Over the past few years, nine of the men have been killed, two wounded to physical incapacity for life, and 46 others have been abducted and their fate unknown.

Despite this, the teams continue to go about their work. Since 1959 over 10,000,000 houses have been sprayed. The results : reported malaria cases since 1957 have decreased from 612,071 to 249,430 in 1963 and deaths from 661 to a mere 60 in 1963 - an almost 100% improvement, according to USOM Public Health statistics.

The most savage VC attack on a single spray team took place in Hong An three years ago. Four spraymen were killed, their heads chopped off. The other deaths have resulted from separate sniper and mine attacks since that time. Kidnappings occurred regularly, the most recent one was on April 7th. To date over 300 have been captured, given mock trials, then released.

"Confessions"

According to the Vietnamese official, who prefers not to be identified, he himself was once captured and released. "Once captured," he states, "victims are generally submitted to almost endless night-time questioning sessions during which the interrogators try to get written 'confessions' that the men are spies not sprayers. Frequently trials are held. The assumption is that many who have not returned were sentenced to death."

That these men are spies is highly unlikely, the Vietnamese project manager states. "We recruit our men, who are trained with the help of USOM, from the locality in which we are to spray. They are paid 50 piasters a day, and Vietnamese and American technicians supervise their activity".

When captured, according to reports, the men usually accept any charges made against them. As one official says, "These are simple men, trained only to spray and survey their work, not how to combat brainwash."

The VC then march the captives, hands tied behind back, from one hamlet to another where people's courts are held and the confession rebroadcast. While much of the village remain silent, VC and Communist sympathizers loudly voice approval for the inevitable decision.

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One Vietnamese official captured in Tay Ninh province in 1961 credits his release to one outspoken old villager. Brought forth by the VC as a "people's witness" against the five men and their supervisor, he spoke out loudly: "I'm too old a man to fear death, I must say the truth about these men now standing before you. They are innocent. They have done good for us. They have made our village more healthy. They have been friendly and helpful. I will not condemn them."

Their hand called, with murmurs of approval by the rest of the village, the six men were released by the Communists. "This is the reason why we do not arm nor regularly ask for escort," the Vietnamese official reveals, "To have weapons or an escort is to draw attention, provide a possible source of weapon for VC attackers."

BACKFIRE.

As a result, officials state, incidence of murders and attacks for injury have decreased while that of harassing kidnappings and trials has tended to increase over the past six months. "Still, teams are getting slightly used to it. So too we hope are the villagers."

But both American and Vietnamese officials agree that attacks against these simple health workers may have backfired and become increasingly unpopular among the rural people who have come to appreciate less sickness due to malaria. Still we get stories back, the American head of the Malaria Program reveals that villagers are now being told the teams are spraying bed-bug eggs not mosquito killing material. Bedbugs are rural villagers constant source of irritation.

"Much of the damage is now being done to the equipment," John E. Taylor, USOM Malaria advisor states, "and this is particularly true in the past year." He reports the damage has run into millions of piasters. To date some 331 sprayers have been stolen or destroyed, seven motor bikes, 51 bicycles and over 300 survey kits confiscated.

To support this program. Taylor, who will have been in Vietnam six years this September, has twelve advisors spread into six zones throughout the country. He reports three have been involved in shooting incidents but have fortunately escaped unharmed.

These men act as are supervisors, keep needed supplies of equipment and DDT on hand and distributed. To date they have trained over 250 squad supervisors and 100 area supervisors over the past few years. They make week-long field trips to see that the teams are adequately supplied and are doing the job properly.

HALF A BILLION.

In some delta provinces, however, Taylor states, "we have had to suspend operations. In Go Cong, for example, (a small province south of SG," we have had to cease spraying, so great was equipment damage and harassment to the teams." As a result, according to the Malaria adviser, the disease has gone from less than 1% to 10% over the past year.

Why all this effort against a disease which has apparently claimed so few lives? Program Director Taylor, who is from Memphis, Tenn., and spent a good part of life combatting the disease puts it this way : "Malaria is a debilitating not a killer disease. That is, it does not kill a person on first attack. High and continuous fever caused by the disease physically incapacitated people for long periods, they become unable to work, don't want to work. Everything in the afflicted villages go to pot, more or less. As such, it is a serious setback to the income and the economy of a rural area and robs victims of the will or the energy to raise their crop or work."

With full support of the Government of Vietnam, starting in 1958 a largescale program was undertaken. Support was immediately forth-coming from the US Operations Mission and the World Organization. With GVN support, nearly half a billion piasters have been expended on this vital program.

For this year 92 million piasters have been allocated to further the program which "plainly illustrates this government's determination to go ahead with this humanitarian task,unprecedented in the history of Vietnam," one high USOM official comented.

But of course, in the end, it is the often courageous work of Vietnamese sprayment, who continue to venture forth day after day in all parts of the country, who must be called the real heros in Vietnam's fight to bring better health to its people.

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