

Details of North Vietnamese casualty figures - 500,000 - and his estimate of how long the war would last - "as long as necessary ... even 50 years" - were given by General Vo Nguyen Giap, N. Vietnamese Defence Minister, in an interview with the correspondent of an Italian magazine. They were missing, however, from an "official" version of the interview supplied to the correspondent later. "This alone is authorised for publication", the correspondent, Miss Oriana Fallaci, of the magazine L'Europeo, was told.

Miss Fallaci, the only non-Communist in a four-member delegation of the Italian Women's Union which recently visited North Vietnam (February 7-19), published both her own report of the interview and the North Vietnamese version. They appeared in the April 6 issue of The Washington Post.

In the interview recorded by Miss Fallaci, General Giap, who in addition to being Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the North Vietnamese Armed Forces is also a member of the Politburo of the Lao Dong (Workers') Party, replied "That's quite exact" when the correspondent said that, according to the Americans, North Vietnam had lost half a million men. Previously, the North Vietnamese have never admitted to having any men in the South.

Giap, however, refused to reply when asked about the 1968 Têt offensive, referring all questions to the "Liberation Front", the Communist-controlled National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NFLSV). "This is a touchy question", he said. "You ought to see that. I can't pass judgment on things of this kind, on what's going on at the front. It's a delicate matter, very delicate".

He was more forthcoming on other matters: The United States would be "beaten with time, worn out"; Paris was "for the diplomats", but back in Vietnam a total military victory was still being pursued; "We won a military victory over the French, and we'll win it over the Americans too. Their Dien Bien Phu [Giap commanded the forces which defeated the French at Dien Bein Phu in 1954] is still to come. And it will come".

Giap emphasized that the North Vietnamese would not climb down from their position and that the Paris talks would go on for a long time. "We're not in a hurry. We have patience. While the delegates talk, we fight. ... For us, peace must mean total victory". Asked how long the war would continue, he replied: "It will last as long as necessary - 10, 15, 20, 50 years. Until, as our President Ho Chi Minh says, we have won total victory. Yes, even 20, even 50 years. We aren't afraid, and we aren't in a hurry".

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The same day as the interview, Miss Fallaci received a typewritten carbon copy of the 'official' version, with the explanation: "The staff officers did the job of writing it up for you, and he [Giap] gave his approval. He wants you to know that he won't recognize anything different, this alone is authorized for publication".

The prepared document contained no reference to casualty figures, the Têt offensive, the pursuance of military victory, or the length of time the war would last.

Miss Fallaci's three Communist companions urged her to "tell how it actually happened" as they had witnessed the real interview. She described the "official version" as "a sad testimony to official mutilation of the truth, and distortion".

The diary of Miss Fallaci's first three days in Hanoi was published in L'Europeo on March 27. When she arrived in Hanoi, her sympathies were with the North Vietnamese, but her disillusionment over life there was as great as it was over her interview with Giap. She was not allowed any personal freedom whatever, not even being permitted to meet other journalists. Two guards were constantly with her. Hanoi was old and dilapidated, the Vietnamese all dressed alike, and there was a "total absence of comfort, cheerfulness, beauty".

At the headquarters of the NFLSV mission in Hanoi, Miss Fallaci was shown a girl "heroine", who described the loss of her leg: "Americans cut it off. I am a victim of American atrocities". On questioning her, she discovered that the leg had been amputated by American surgeons in hospital after the girl had been seriously wounded in battle. From what she saw, Miss Fallaci was convinced that relations between the South Vietnamese of the NFLSV and the North Vietnamese were strained and uncomfortable.

By the end of her first few days, she had discovered that all 'guests' in Hanoi are shown the same 'heroes', taken to the same showpieces, and meet the same people who say the same things. A Russian journalist, whom she met inadvertently and illegally, told her that to him "the development of friendship with Vietnamese is forbidden, travelling without an escort and without authorisation is forbidden, and the dispatch of articles containing adjectives is forbidden".

Miss Fallaci got the impression that the North Vietnamese loved war for its own sake, and almost needed war to survive. A Czech journalist told her: "Peace means choosing the Russians or the Chinese. War, instead, enables them to balance between the two. The longer it lasts, the better".