

Saigon's Precocious Pitfalls

THE WAR in South Viet Nam has brought many changes in the way of life for the country's women, such as the ones shown here in a Saigon bar. Some have joined up as WACs, some have gone in for black marketeering, most have endured increasing hardship.

Herald Tribune special correspondent Beverly Deepe, in the last of five articles, discusses the boom in bars and brothels.

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SAIGON.

The build-up of American forces has produced a plethora of bars, brothels and cheap hotels and battalions of prostitutes.

For the young Vietnamese woman, the soldier's needs for "entertainment" have given her an unprecedented chance to reach undreamt of social heights.

To the American and South Vietnamese governments, the bars and prostitutes present not only an economic, social and moral problem, but they have affected the security and political fields as well.

For instance, when Premier Nguyen Cao Ky recently proposed legalizing prostitution so as to bring it under a measure of control, both Saigon intellectuals and the Hanoi radio attacked him as a "pimp for the Americans."

The almost magical opportunities for a young peasant girl to earn a luxurious livelihood in the cities marks one of the important social explosions of Vietnamese womanhood. It means emancipation from the family, from rural or low-class life and from traditional cultural values. For many girls it may mean the first time in their lives they can afford to own a dress.

Young Vietnamese women from the provinces, who a few years ago came to Saigon as housemaids, began recently to work as bar girls and waitresses in restaurants. Middle-class Saigon housewives complain they can no longer find maids, housekeepers and baby-sitters.

A bar girl's ambition is to become a bar owner—which



IN THE TUDO BAR in Saigon, American men dance with Vietnamese girls.

she calls being a business-woman. For some, it's not difficult. Reliable sources report that one very successful bar girl saved one million piastres (roughly \$10,000) within a two-year period.

Less successful bar girls complain, however, that by the time they pay off the bar owners and the police for protection they have less than 5,000 piastres (\$50) a month left. "It's better to be a prostitute to one American man for 10,000 piastres a month until he goes home," one bar girl said.

In the past three years a transformation has taken place on Saigon's main street, called "Tu-Do," which means freedom. Garish hotels, called "short-time brothels," and bars have mushroomed. There are 146 bars in one downtown area. There are several thousand throughout Saigon.

Whatever the economic wonderland for Vietnamese women, the bars and brothels plague the Vietnamese and American governments.

Politically, the problem takes on three aspects.

¶If Premier Ky goes through with his proposal to legalize prostitution, he would be criticized by the Vietnamese in the urban centers.

Likewise, American officials blanch at the thought of repercussions within the United States.

¶In the words of one American official, "The American GI is now competing with the Vietnamese government soldier for two of the scarcest commodities in the country—women and booze. Obviously, the American has more money and wins—which doesn't endear him to his Vietnamese allies."

¶The American image has been immeasurably tarnished by the flourishing trade of what the Communists call "decadence." One American official, witnessing the mad rush of drunken GI's and bar girls for cyclos and taxis at the curfew hour in Saigon, groaned "The American image here is terrific! These poor fellows lose the war in Saigon but die to win it in the provinces."

The security and intelligence side of the problem is considered as tangled as the political.

"You must know the Viet Cong have a cell in every block in town, in every bar and in every restaurant," one highly reliable security source explained. "The waiters or the doormen or the bar girls—someone has to be Viet Cong

or the bar would not be allowed to exist."

One bar girl confided, "Oh, the Americans tell us everything. They even tell us where they'll build new airbases and installations so we can buy up the land in that section."

Often the American GI is robbed. In some cases, the GI loses his weapon; other times his billfold, including his American military identity card. Some security officers fear these cards are being used by Communist Caucasians to penetrate American installations.

¶Medically, one official said, "There is a high incident rate of venereal disease—and that rate is rising, but it is not rising as quickly as is the increase in the number of American troops." In one random catch of 44 bar girls in the U. S. Marine Corps enclave at Da Nang, 21 had venereal disease.

There is no compulsory, government-sponsored or approved medical program for the bar girls. But in some of the remotest outposts and towns, American Special Forces medics are known to treat medically the women involved. A Vietnamese government program of medical control is now under discussion.