

Buddhist Discontent Gaining Support in Viet-Nam Provinces

By Beverly Deepe

Special to The Washington Post

PHAN THIET, South Viet-Nam—While Saigon has settled into a "lull before Lodge," Buddhist grievances are sweeping through the coastal provinces north of Saigon.

Buddhist leaders' announced strategy for Saigon is to wait for the arrival of U. S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in mid-August, apparently in a bid to gain his support. The American policy has been to "keep hands off" the internal Buddhist struggle against so-called religious discrimination by the Catholic-led government of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

Observers here believe Lodge will be faced with the difficult task of revising this middle-of-the-road policy which has evoked only anger and suspicion from both the Buddhists and the government, without gaining support from either.

Grievances Spreading

But a more formidable problem facing Lodge is the seepage of Buddhist anti-government grievances to the unsophisticated, isolated, rural provinces where the Vietnamese government—with substantial American economic and military backing—has been attempting to win the support of the people as a means to defeat the Communist Viet Cong guerrillas.

A week ago a second Buddhist monk committed suicide in this provincial capital of 60,000 persons, 120 miles north-east of Saigon. The suicide focused attention on the sweep of Buddhist discontent to the 10 critical provinces on the edge of the South China Sea. These provinces stretch from Saigon 400 miles north to the old imperial capital of Hue. It was in Hue, President Diem's hometown, that the religious crisis began on May 8.

In these northern provinces, the civilian population now defiantly wears yellow Buddhist patches. Young girls act as liaison agents and messengers by carrying Buddhist leaflets between Saigon and the provinces.

More significantly, it caused one 18-year-old male student, a Buddhist in Phan Thiet to say: "I'd rather go to jail than be drafted (into the military). There's no purpose in fighting the V. C. (Viet Cong guerrillas)—it's only to keep a privileged group in power."

So far the Buddhist controversy has not spread to the 42 other provinces in the country. Those in the mountainous plateau bordering Laos, populated mostly by primitive tribesmen practicing animism instead of Buddhism, are fairly isolated from the Buddhist flareup. In fact, in one provincial capital and division headquarters in the high plateau region, Buddhists have painted banners proclaiming their support for the government instead of their religious leadership.

Other Areas Unaffected

The other provinces in the rice-rich Mekong Delta, where Communist activity is concentrated, have not been substantially affected by the



Photo by Beverly Deepe

Monks and soldiers are shown in Phan Thiet, a provincial capital 120 miles south-east of Saigon, where Buddhist demonstra-

tions flared earlier this month. Buddhist protests against alleged discrimination have spread from Saigon into provinces.

Buddhist crisis, according to informed American sources.

For this tiny country, already besieged with the enormous problem of wiping out Communist subversion and infiltration, the three-month-old Buddhist crisis has created division, disagreement, indecisiveness and emotions that reach from the stately yellow Presidential Palace to the most modest huts in Saigon and the coastal regions.

The Buddhist religious arguments have now become a focus of anti-government discontent, and the crisis is continuing to mushroom.

For the first time intellectuals and political oppositionists, long disenchanted with the President, have an issue to grab onto. Persons whose religion was a curious Vietnamese hybrid of animism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism have identified themselves with the Buddhist side. Young students who proudly considered themselves atheists are now showing up at Buddhist pagodas for memorial services.

The government now also is

beginning to lose some of its Catholic support. In a pastoral letter dated June 27, the Archbishop of Saigon, Paul Nguyen van Binh stressed, "The Church always teaches and practices justice, charity, harmony and peace towards all, without distinction of race, language or creed."

Page From Reds' Book

To become such a potent force in Viet-Nam, the Buddhists have taken a page from the Communist guerrilla handbook. By short, simple, yet emotional, leaflets, by pagoda meetings where the people laugh, sing, clap and chant and by direct contact with the people through demonstrations and processions, the Buddhists have begun to win the hearts and minds of the population which the Vietnamese government has been unable to do with all its American-supplied equipment, money and training.

Yet, while the Buddhist-government controversy remained isolated in urban centers like Saigon where the battle against the Viet Cong

was not being waged, the problem was still relatively simple. It has now become increasingly complex.

The concern now is twofold: How to prevent its moving further into the provinces where it will benefit the Viet Cong guerrillas; and second, how to solve not only the religious controversy, but also to quell the political malcontents that have become attached to it.