

Rich Get Richer and Poor Get Poorer

FOR many women in South Viet Nam the war has meant deprivation and direct involvement in the fighting. Others, living in the comparative sanctuary of Saigon, have looked out only for their own interests. Herald Tribune special correspondent, in the fourth of five articles on Vietnamese women, discusses the effect of the war on the peasant women and on the housewives of Saigon.

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SAIGON.

Between the wealthy Saigon housewife and the peasant woman is a world of difference.

The rich Saigon housewife worries about the price of rice and milk; the peasant woman has rice, but she worries how long she can hold it before paying off Viet Cong or government troops.

The high-class Saigon housewife frets about getting her children into Saigon's exclusive French-run schools; the young peasant mother wonders how long it will be before the Viet Cong or the government destroys the simple village school.

The upper-class Saigon housewife is an expert in real estate, especially renting to Americans; the peasant woman is an expert on building underground bomb shelters.

To the wealthy Saigon housewife, diamonds are her best friend. She is an expert on good diamond buys smuggled in from Bangkok, Hong Kong, Laos or France. She can tell the quality, the carat and the price in a flash. She buys them not for rings but to stash away in a biscuit box—the literal equivalent of an American's hiding money in an old sock.

The housewives buy diamonds as an investment and a safeguard against inflation. Savings accounts and purchases of war bonds are considered insane. During the past eight months inflation has eaten up at least 30 per cent of idle capital. A second reason for diamond purchases is that they can be smuggled out of the country quickly and more easily than gold, dollars or francs.

SMUGGLING

Diamond smuggling by the wives of high-ranking officials is so commonplace that Premier Nguyen Cao Ky in a recent press conference took special pains to explain he did not take his wife with him on state visits to Taiwan and the Philippines. Obviously, he was afraid the Vietnamese people would think she was engaging in illegal diamond transactions. When she more recently accompanied him to Malaysia, the Premier told newsmen that anyone could check their luggage for diamonds at the airport.

Gold also is considered a good investment. Lower middle-class women frequently make bracelets of it, thus acquiring the equivalent of walking bank accounts. But gold is too difficult to smuggle out of the country in quantity. Still, the price of gold has jumped in the past few weeks from 7,500 piastres (\$75) a tael (37½ grams) to 8,700 piastres (\$87).

It is commonly accepted that many wives influence their husbands—the generals and ministers—who rule the country. American advisers have been astonished to discover Vietnamese officers who have tough reputations among their troops are virtually henpecked at home.

Wives of Vietnamese generals, colonels and ministers generally are the business managers within the family. This is so the husband can avoid even an indirect involvement in possibly corrupt business dealings.

More often than not charges of corruption are directed at the wife or the mistress.

Some officials' wives are involved in legitimate businesses, such as import-export. However, reliable Vietnamese sources indicate that a few of the wives of top military figures are "involved in trafficking of influence."

Thus, if a captain or major

wants a transfer from a hot-spot province into Saigon, or a transfer to a post known for lucrative rake-offs (such as the engineering corps), he usually sees the wife of the general, rather than the general. So if proper orders are later signed, the general has, according to official rationale, done a favor for his wife and not the officer. Obviously, the wife of the general is also given "a token of appreciation."

CORRUPTION

Some charges of corruption among the wives of high-ranking officials could be Communist-inspired propaganda, still they are so commonly accepted that Premier Ky recently warned government services and agencies against corruption as a result of several cases of officials' wives misusing their husbands' positions.

One necessary status symbol for Saigon's upper-crust housewife—along with air-conditioning and an American or French car, all of which have become more conspicuous with the increase in American aid—is to enroll her children in a French school. There are five French-operated schools in the capital and the French government supplies 400 lovely French schoolteachers.

Lists for school admission are so long that a 10,000 piastre pay-off is mandatory. In addition, gifts to the teachers—such as cameras and watches are considered musts at examination time. "If you

don't think so, just look at how many French teachers leave Viet Nam and invest in hotels on the French Riviera," one Vietnamese housewife said.

A French diplomat recently said, "We don't care how many Vietnamese generals make anti-French speeches at press conferences. We know when the student exams roll around, their wives will crawl in the back door begging us to let their kiddies pass." Last summer when Saigon broke diplomatic relations with Paris, the French diplomatic staff was expelled, but the French schoolteachers remained.

In contrast to the aristo-

cratic role Saigon's upper class women fill, is the plight of a young woman who recently lived in a war-infested province of the Mekong Delta. Nguyen Thi Bay, 19, who recently fled to Saigon, where

she receives 1,000 piastres (\$10) a month plus room and board as a maid, told this story:

"Last April, several jets circled over our house about five times and then bombed and strafed it. My parents were working in the rice field and I was paddling my sampan coming from a relative's house when I saw the flames pouring out of our house. I ran toward the house to try to salvage some of our belongings, but instead I found my elder brother near the family bomb shelter with blood gushing from his head and my younger 12-year-old brother with his face full of blood.

IN SAIGON

"My elder brother was rushed to the medical unit run by the Filipinos and the doctor said it was better to leave the metal fragment in my brother's head rather than to operate. My younger brother was lucky; none of the shrapnel got into his eyes; but his face is now crisscrossed with scars. After that my parents moved into the provincial town to live with my uncle and I came to Saigon to get a maid's job to help support them."

In Saigon, Miss Bay (which means the Seventh Child) looked at the trenches built as protection against possible retaliatory bombing raids from North Viet Nam and

laughed. She said, "In the villages, if we built trenches like these, all of us would be killed.

"In our villages, the peasants built two kinds of shelters. One kind is inside the house right under the bed. When we hear any artillery, mortars or groundfire we just roll out of bed into the trench. The second kind is usually in the yard or garden and is used when aerial bombing and strafing starts. Even our family dog knew exactly which hole to run into. When there was mortar or artillery shelling, he ran into the shelter under the bed. But if there was bombing from airplanes he would lead the family to the big trench in the garden. He could even tell the difference between a cargo plane and a fighter; he didn't even run out of the house when a cargo plane passed over.

"Some of the families in our village have pretty plush bomb shelters. Some have put their money together to build a community shelter deep in the ground with concrete walls and floor so they can sleep there during the night-time."

The girl said that because more and more men were leaving for the battlefields the jobs of building the shelters and planting and harvesting the rice were being performed by women.

TOMORROW: The U. S. troop build-up brings build-up in bars and brothels.