

Subversion in the Mekong Delta

This is the third of a series of four articles reviewing the war in Viet Nam during 1965 and assessing the prospects in 1966.

SA DEC, South Viet Nam.

Officially, the Mekong Delta south of Saigon—where no American combat units have yet been based—is one of the spots where the Vietnamese government is progressing well. The simple tranquillity of fishing boats passing through canals, the hectic automobile traffic on the roads, the unbroken routine of peasant life would seem to confirm the official version.

But those who live in the villages say the Viet Cong have seized virtual control of this rich rice bowl.

The process is not one of violent battles, but the invisible strangulation and isolation of government authority. It is a process of subversion which might be called termite warfare. Government authority has been squeezed into small rings of villages around provincial and district capitals, and into isolated outposts along the main roads and canals.

At Sa Dec is the headquarters of the Vietnamese 9th Infantry Division. Six miles away is the village complex of Nha Man. Two of its three villages are already controlled by the Communists. The third village, Tan Nhuan Dong, is protected by one company of about 100 paramilitary troops. An additional platoon is assigned to each of two smaller outposts—Ba Thien, one mile away, and Nga Ba, two miles off.

ENCIRCLED

The company at Tan Nhuan Dong lives in an old French fort. Its job is to protect the village and a bridge which stretches across a river flanked by several operating rice mills and brick factories.

The two outposts are encircled by Viet Cong guerrillas. Last month they were totally isolated from the local population. To bring in supplies and support for these two posts, the government has to use 10 armored boats. On every voyage the boats and their complement of troops draw Communist sniper fire.

The platoons in each of the two small posts theoretically send out small, regular patrols to gather intelligence. They are called the "ears and eyes of the regular forces." But recently, a local villager described them as "blind men in a jail." For it is rare that a member of either platoon dares leave his compound, even to fetch water from the river 20 yards away.

Last week, one defender crossed the outpost's barbed-wire fence for water. He was wounded by a sniper and fell on the river bank. No one dared rescue him. He died and his body was left on the same spot for three days. The commander asked headquarters for reinforcements,

to pick up the body 20 yards away from his post. The request was refused.

The platoon was ordered to bury the corpse inside the post, but again the men refused to pick up the body. On repeated orders, they eventually brought in the corpse, but the outpost had no shovels, so they used knives to dig the grave. They had no lumber or nails, so they ripped wood from the walls of their outpost to make the coffin.

After the grotesque burial, morale was so low the company commander decided to transfer the platoon. The 100-man company ordered to relieve them refused to obey their transfer order and most of them defected to the Communists rather than man the Nga Ba outpost. Most returned after the province district chiefs were forced to visit the company of deserters, but the order to man the outpost was rescinded.

ISOLATION

The influence of the Communists goes, however, far beyond the terror built with snipers' bullets.

Last month, the Viet Cong ordered peasants and business men working or living within a half-mile of the Nga Ba outpost to move away. The word went out: No one was allowed to move inside the half-mile limit. Rather than sail on the river 20 yards from the outpost, villagers' sampans were assigned to small canals.

One rice miller moved his mill brick-by-brick, machine-by-machine, to a new spot nearer government authority. One villager's reaction: "The Viet Cong were very nice to give him the permission to move his rice mill. Otherwise, he would have starved to death. No one would have brought rice to him to be polished within the half-mile radius of the post."

In monthly propaganda meetings with the villagers, Viet Cong political agents claim "the Americans are waging an all-out war against the Vietnamese people. The people have to make a clear-cut choice between their friends and their enemies. Those who want to fight with the Americans can go to the government-controlled area. Those who want to fight against the Americans can stay with us. There is no third choice."

In Sa Dec, refugee villagers prefer to live in their sampans moored along the riverfront. They have refused to live in refugee housing provided by the government.

Many of the wealthier landowners already have been forced to flee to government-controlled zones, producing the effect of an economic purge of the area by the Communists. Their abandoned lands, especially fruit groves along the canals, have been boobytrapped and mined by Red guerrillas. The Viet Cong have warned landowners that their lands will be con-

fiscated if they allow their sons to become government soldiers.

The Viet Cong forbid landowners to hire local labor, and terrorize potential workers—drying up the labor force from both ends. Once-wealthy landed proprietors must plant and harvest their own rice—backbreaking work.

VISITS HALTED

Within the last month, the Viet Cong have withdrawn permission to local residents to visit friends or relatives in government controlled areas. Even the father of one of the senior generals at the Vietnamese army headquarters in Saigon—who previously had been allowed by the Viet Cong to visit his son—now is forbidden to leave the Viet Cong area.

But the Viet Cong efforts are not all just erosive. They have established efficient—

though unofficial and terroristic—taxation. Often using children as collectors, they force millers, small factory owners and business men to pay regular levies.

Peasants must turn over to the Reds 40 per cent of the rice they grow above their own family's consumption. Any fish of grain grown in the Red controlled area which is sent into government territory is taxed by the Viet Cong—as if they maintained a national border.

So under the noses of government officials and a major army force, the Communists have established their own government in the Mekong Delta. It has almost eroded away the authority of the anti-Communist Saigon regime, and, perhaps more significantly, has taken major steps toward replacing it with an authority of their own.

The next, and final, article

in the series will examine the problems of rooting out Viet Cong control of villages in the mountain areas, and the role played by the U. S. Marines.