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THE PLIGHT OF THE PEASANT

HOA NINH (HARMONIOUS SECURITY), SOUTH VIET NAM--

This is the story of a village peasant who has been caught in the middle of the war in South Viet Nam.

As the 60-year-old war non-Catholic war refugee explained, in 1962, the Vietnamese government forced him and the other nine members of his family to move to a strategic hamlet, three kilometers from his home. Then, in April, 1964, the Viet Cong attacked and conquered the strategic hamlet. Five months later, the Viet Cong ordered him and his family to return to his home village.

To the village peasant there wasn't much difference between living under the Vietnamese government in the strategic hamlet and living with the Viet Cong Communists in their combat hamlet. Throughout the interview, he used the Communist terminology of cac ong giai phong--which means Mr. Liberators--to describe the Viet Cong Communists.

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To the 60-year-old peasant, there wasn't much difference between the American Marines patrolling near his village and the French Army two decades ago or the Vietnamese national army during recent years.

"We are caught between two different groups," he explained, Pointing up the dusty red clay road leading towards the mountains, he said, "Up there are the Liberation Forces (the Communist Viet Cong); down the road is the government district council, and the Americans. We are here in the middle."

He sat on the footsteps of a Catholic Church between the Viet Cong-controlled mountainous areas and the territory constantly patrolled by American Marines as they attempted to defend the Danang airbase two miles away.

"If we live or if we die--it is the will of the gods," the peasant villager explained.

He said that for two generations his family had lived in the hamlet of Hoa Trung (Harmonious Middle), where he owned two hectares of rice land plus an orchard of fruit trees and tea plants.

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"All of the people had enough to eat," he explained, "and some of villagers even had more than enough." He said about 200 families had lived the hamlet--a number of small hamlets comprise a Vietnamese village which is the lowest government administrative unit, issuing birth certificates etc. Now he said a few of the families had come to the Catholic Church as refugees; he implied, but was afraid to say openly, that most of the villagers had left for the mountains to join Mr. Liberator.

Then three years ago, the Vietnamese government regrouped the people of this village with other villagers into a strategic hamlet, where the villagers had no land.

"We stayed more than two years in the strategic hamlet," he explained, "and life was very hard. We had nothing to eat; we had no water--even the children had no water to drink. We had no water to wash ourselves. The soil was poor--only sand.

He was asked how his family managed to live.

"We took some things to the strategic hamlet, but we left out houses in the old village," he explained. "Sometimes we went back to the old village in the morning and returned to the strategic hamlet in the afternoon. We collected fruits and tea and harvested rice from our old village. If we couldn't go back to the old place, we went into the forest to cut wood.

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"The hamlet council gave us no rice or food--nothing in this time. Sometimes when we asked permission to back to our old hamlet to harvest rice--if they didn't want us to go, they'd simply close the village gate.

"When we were sick, if we had money we would go to the city and pay 100 piastres (US\$1.25) a day for a hospital room. If we didn't have money, we'd collect medical herb leaves, boil them and drink the juice. If we live or if we die--it is the will of the gods."

Then, in April, 1964, the Viet Cong guerrillas attacked the strategic hamlet.

"On that day we got permission to go out to collect tea leaves, which was our main source of income. At 4:30 in the afternoon the shooting began.

"We didn't know it was a Viet Cong attack. We thought the Vietnamese army people were just shooting. They used to shoot a lot of times. Only when the strategic hamlet was captured by the Mr. Liberators did we know it. The fight was very short. Only one Vietnamese government militiaman was killed and another was wounded. The government had a 40-man unit of irregular troops in the village.

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"When the Mr. Liberators attacked they captured one half of the platoon and the other half fled. Five days later, the Mr. Liberators released all the government troops and they went back to the district headquarters. The Mr. Liberators killed two members of the village council.

"Then we returned to the strategic hamlet, it was all over. The Mr. Liberators had troops on the road between the rice fields and the strategic hamlet gate. We waited for the government troops to come to give us security, but they didn't come."

"Then the Mr. Liberators told us to dig trenches and to fix bamboo spikes for them and to make what they called a combat village.

"The defense was the same in the (Communist) combat village and the (Vietnamese government) strategic hamlet. The only difference was the Mr. Liberators had only one line of defense--behind that line the population lived and behind the population was the mountains. And the line of defense was for the purpose of fighting the government troops who would come.

"The fence of the (Communist) combat hamlet was bamboo and barbed wire; in front of the fence there are trenches and in the trenches we put the bamboo stakes.

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"We saw the Mr. Liberators with guns and rifles-- they were running everywhere but we didn't dare ask questions. "We, the people, could see everything, but we couldn't ask questions. If we did, we'd be arrested.

"From time to time Mr. Liberators told us we would have to get together for a meeting and they would tell us to increase production. If we were lazy, they said, we would be hungry and so we must increase the production.

"We lived with and around the Mr. Liberators for five months--then in October, 1964, they gave the order for the people to disperse and go back to their former places. And they took away all our houses.

"So we returned to our former village, and lived there from October to a month ago. The Mr. Liberators didn't want us to leave our old village, but we escaped un-noticed. They told us to stay in the village and not to be lazy or we would be hungry. They said if we went to the government-controlled areas, we would be hungry.

"Now, all our hamlet is deserted; some people went with the Mr. Liberators--a small group of us came to this Church. Our hamlet is destroyed; our hamlet council now lives in a government-secured hamlet. The council told us that if we must come to this church or else the hamlet would be bombed and shelled and we would be killed. If we were killed or wounded, we had no right to protest because we had been warned. So, we were afraid of being killed and a month ago we came to this church.

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"We stayed at this church and would walk back to our old village to collect fruits and tea leaves. My house was still in my old village until the Americans came and burned it about ten days ago.

"One day after the operation we returned to the village and saw the house burned and all the fruit trees destroyed; some of corn, sweet potatoes and some manioc was destroyed. So we returned to this village and asked the village council about that. The council said you know what is the army. It's impossible for us to intervene with the army in your favor.

"When the Americans had the operation, we were at the church. After the operation, we went back. We knew the operation was over when we saw the troops return. This was about 10 days ago--the operation was with only American troops.

Another villager from the same area said the one house was burned by bombing and shelling.

He was asked what he thought of the Americans.

"This is the first time we saw the Americans. We aren't afraid of them. But, well, the Americans don't understand. They stop us and check our (government) identity papers. They can arrest us. We aren't afraid of being arrested; the Americans take us to the village council and they let us free. But we lose one day of work and that's very precious to us. The Americans can't read our papers; they see only the picture of us on the identity card. They don't do any harm to us, but the whole day is lost.

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"When the Americans see anything they don't understand, usually they take it away--like our big knives to cut grass. Maybe they want to play with it or confiscate it--or take it back to their fort to throw away.

"We have lived two generations in this place. It was the same thing under the French. The French had many troops in many places. Their troops go in and come out like the Americans do now. But there are more Americans here than French troops. The Americans and the French look alike, except the Negroes--we didn't see any Negroes among the French troops.

"We are caught by different groups--up there are the Liberation Forces (Communist) and down on this side is the district council and the Americans. There are only two groups--one up there and one down here--we are here in the middle.

"Now, we have written a letter of application to our hamlet council for permission to move into the next village. They have sent for approval of the higher authorities, but haven't yet received the permission. We must even get a letter of permission from the hamlet council to go to the market to buy things--if we have no paper we can't go to the market; even if we have the paper, we can't buy too much. We can't buy enough rice, salt and shrimp paste for us to eat. The hamlet council says we will supply the Viet Cong, but this isn't correct because we have the U.S. Army up there.

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"Now, we just wait here at the church, we haven't received any money or rice from the hamlet council--not one single grain of rice. We haven't even received any promises."

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