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Ghoulish Air Of Saigon, City In Death Grip

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SAIGON.

Saigon is beginning to be a capital without a country. It is beginning to suffer visibly from strangulation in slow motion—but it is not yet being starved to death.

"The Viet Cong are putting the squeeze on Saigon," one Vietnamese intellectual who had once served with the Communists explained. "But they won't go to the breaking point to starve Saigon—until they are ready to seize power. And that is several years away."

Saigon is the hub for five main road arteries plus the national railroad.

Route No. 1 and the national railroad running northward for 400 miles has been cut for six months, as the Viet Cong and a devastating flood combined to sever the country, creating a runaway inflation of prices in the northern provinces.

A second road leading northwesterly to Cambodia has also been cut for months.

A third road linking Saigon to the sea and to the popular beaching resort of Cap St. Jacques is open only at the pleasure of the Viet Cong, which creates a shortage of salt in the city by restricting transportation from the salt centers near the sea. High-class Vietnamese and French residents complain bitterly when the Viet Cong will not let them pass—by paying "road taxes"—to spend a weekend on the beaches.

A fourth road leading directly to the high plateau has been cut for months. It has been the scene of so many ambushes that American GI's call it "bloody Route 14."

A fifth leads to the rich Mekong Delta region. The Viet Cong place "road taxes" on rice, charcoal and fish coming into Saigon through this route but have yet to snip completely the roads, bridges and ferry crossings. That will come later. But at this time Saigon still survives on the charcoal and other produce the Viet Cong allow to flow.

The electric power lines leading from a newly constructed multimillion-dollar hydroelectric dam, built by the Japanese as part of the war reparations program, have recently been cut by the Viet Cong. Now electricity is virtually rationed in Saigon, with certain blocks being blacked out each night. Both big commercial companies and poor families have stockpiled candles or kerosene lamps. Restaurants serve dinners in the eerie gaslight atmosphere of the previous century.

AIR OF FANTASY

There is a ghoulish air of fantasy and unreality in Saigon. Saigon *appears* to be a seat of government; instead it is being governed. It has the aura of prosperity; yet a rice crisis develops—and housewives and Chinese speculators hoard the precious white grain—once the Premier mentions dropping the price.

It appears to be a center of anti-Communist resistance, yet in the invisible subversive war, the number and influence of the Communists are growing politically within the city. It is the anti-Communist families—and not the pro-neutralist or pro-Communist ones—that are afraid of being kidnapped or assassinated.

"The Western idea is to have Saigon as the capital and use it to control the countryside," a Vietnamese intellectual explained. "The Viet Cong idea is the opposite. They use the countryside to surround the towns and ultimately seize control of the towns—but Saigon will be the last of the towns to be seized."

Under President Ngo Dinh Diem, who ruled from 1955 to 1963, power was centralized in Saigon—specifically in the Presidential Palace. Since his fall in November, 1963, however, power and leadership have fragmented and crumbled. The ministries in Saigon no longer are linked strongly to their provincial representatives.

"Never believe that these neon lights and this pretty middle-class life is Viet Nam," one high-ranking Western diplomat explained. "It is the little people wearing black pajamas in the jungle that control the country, and Saigon is simply reacting to these waves of pressure splashing in from the countryside."

Saigon is an upside-down city. American pilots, who risk death during their daytime flights, enjoy excellent French food and wines, while lovely Vietnamese singers harmonize in love songs. From the roof of Saigon's hotels, where businessmen meet for cocktail parties and dinners, the bright flashes of machinegun fire can be seen in the distance.

It is a city of instant sex and sin. American and Vietnamese troops relax here, escaping from their daytime trials of the war.

The Viet Cong, however, use Saigon as the economic and political frontline—to create political divisions among political leaders, to gain intelligence information from Vietnamese colonels or bargirls; to buy drugs or black material for uniforms.

The city once known as "the Paris of the Orient" formerly sparkled with sidewalk cafes along the tamarind-lined streets. But by 1962, with the influx of American advisers, the sidewalk cafes disappeared; they were too good a target for a Viet Cong grenade.

Not many Vietnamese like to walk near American installations. Vietnamese taxi drivers refuse to drop passengers near them. Since the Viet Cong terrorist bombings, Vietnamese have learned to stay away from places usually frequented by Americans.

Yet despite the tensions, terrorist incidents, small problems of rice, Saigon is a privileged city—and considers itself such. The impact of the real war of the countryside is noted only on the obituary pages, which daily list the condolences to the victims' families.