

Land Reform: the Long Delay

Next to the problem of security, the peasants of South Viet Nam are most interested in land reform. The disenchantment of the peasants with government land policy—or the lack of it—makes them easy prey for Viet Cong propaganda. In this fifth of a six-part series, the Herald Tribune's Beverly Deepe explains the importance of land reform and what has and has not been done about it.

By Beverly Deepe
A Special Correspondent

SAIGON.

"The most important question in the Vietnamese countryside besides security is land reform," an American technician said. "Yet virtually nothing has been done about it."

"The Viet Cong are gaining a lot of points with the peasants by simply issuing land titles—and it costs them nothing. They take the land from the landowner and give it away. Nothing we give to the peasants—like pigs, insecticides or fertilizer—is as important as land."

American technicians and provincial officials for the past several years have urged the implementation of an effective land reform program. Two land distribution schemes currently have been written, but neither has been accepted. Higher officials in the American Embassy and in the Agency for International Development believe "land reform is not the panacea for Viet Nam's problems."

A program for the training of land-reform cadre is under consideration. But the program will not be instituted until "the other day"—when the Viet Cong Communists have been defeated.

WARNING

However, one Vietnamese general recently warned American generals and officials that American-backed efforts to pacify the provinces would fail unless they were linked with land reform.

"When the Vietnamese National Army goes back to pacify areas from the Viet Cong, the local landowner goes back with them, offering to serve as intelligence agent," the general explained. "Obviously he wants to collect his back rent. So when the army pacifies the area it pacifies it for the landowner and not for the peasant."

"Of course, 35 per cent of the peasants are landless. They become fanatics and will fight for the land given them by the Viet Cong because it's as important to them as life."

One U. S. official described as "horror stories" the actions of some landowners to collect back rent, once government forces had pacified Viet Cong areas.

In Viet Cong-controlled areas, if landowners or their agents return to collect back rent the matter is simple. The peasant complains to the Viet Cong, and the agent is shot.

American officials who have talked with large numbers of Viet Cong prisoners and returnees believe the Viet Cong recruits within South Viet Nam are almost entirely from the rural population, probably indicating not the strength of the Viet Cong appeal so much as the accessibility to rural masses for Communist recruiting.

Furthermore, an estimated 30 per cent of the Viet Cong strength recruited in the South are considered to belong to the "farm labor class," the lowest in the semi-Confucianistic, rigidly stratified rural society.

The five rural classes in Vietnamese countryside area are: the landowners (who lease out all the land they own); the rich peasants (who own more land than they till, and lease out some of it); the middle-class peasants (who own all they till); the tenant farmers (who rent all their lands), and the farm laborers (who cannot rent land, but are seasonally hired for planting and harvesting).

LONE PEASANT

"The question of land reform is quite simple," one low-ranking Vietnamese provincial official explained. "The government represents the landowners: the ministers and generals are either landowners or friends of landowners. The Catholic Church owns land. The Buddhist Church owns land. Nobody is interested in fighting for the poor peasant. And the top Americans—well, they talk to only the ministers and rich people so they don't push it either."

The land-reform issue in Viet Nam—involving not only issuing of land titles, but also law enforcement on land rents, land security for tenants and fixed rates on the interest of borrowing of money—is not considered as acute as in other parts of Asia. The Japanese say, for example, that a peasant without land is like a man without a soul. The victory of Chinese Communists in taking over mainland China was achieved not so much by armed guerrillas as by the promise of land to the poverty-stricken, landless peasantry.

"The land for the landless" campaign in the Philippines virtually broke the back of the Hukbalahap insurrection in the Fifties.

According to reliable sources, the Viet Cong guerrillas in Viet Nam have a haphazard, inconsistent land-reform program which varies from area to area in sections of the country they control. However, the current government has virtually no program at all. One American provincial official estimated that the Viet Cong had issued land titles to 50 per cent of the peasant families in his province; the government had issued none.

In some areas, the Viet Cong take some of the land from the rich peasants and give it to the landless tenant—who still pays rent, to the Viet Cong.

So far, the Viet Cong have not killed or harassed the rich peasants as they did before their seizure of power in North Viet Nam.

In some cases, the Viet Cong program in the rural areas is considered self-defeating. They have made a definite push for higher rents as they move toward the mobile warfare phase.

In some areas, Viet Cong taxes and indirect taxes in rice have doubled over that of last year. In other areas,

the Viet Cong are known to have redistributed the land, increased the land tax from 100 to 900 piastres and increased the rice tax from 50 to 300 piastres.

In the countryside outside Hue, which has lately fallen under their control, the Viet Cong are attempting to collect 10-15 per cent of what the peasants had raised during the past decade, when they lived in peace. The peasants are said to be discontented about that. In isolated cases, peasants have burned their own crops rather than pay Viet Cong taxes.

One American provincial official in Viet Nam, who had served in the Philippines during the Communist Huk rebellion, said that in the early Fifties, more than 80,000 armed Filipino guerrillas controlled virtually all of Luzon Island and were fighting on the outskirts of Manila.

Then Ramon Magsaysay took over as President and promised "land for the landless." He ordered Army units to clear acres of forested land, to build houses, and a number of the Huk fighters laid down their arms and took advantage of the offer to live peacefully.

"Magsaysay was a dumb guerrilla fighter, he wasn't brilliant," the American said.

"But he traveled in the provinces; he sacked colonels he saw sleeping on the post; he promoted on the spot sergeants who had fought well."

"He instituted the Presidential Action Committee, where any peasant for a few cents could send a telegram from any postoffice complaining about anything. Within 48 hours there was an investigating team out there to see what was the matter."

In Viet Nam, in 1963, a plan was formulated whereby the late Mr. Magsaysay's scheme of giving land to win back peasants from the Communists would have been implemented.

But the plan fizzled during the turbulent Buddhist crisis.

"Last year alone there were 700 American tractors of all varieties in the warehouses in Saigon," one low-echelon American agricultural expert explained. "They had been turned over to the Vietnamese government, which refused to release them for use. If a province chief wants a tractor, he has to rent it from the Saigon government for \$200 a hectare—but where would he get the money, except from Saigon. Now, those tractors should be in the mountains, clearing land for defected Communists."

Tomorrow: The U. S. rural aid programs.