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priests--1-- article 2 of 3 article series

feb. 5, 1965

CHU HAI, SOUTH VIET NAM--Religious clergy--whether in black Catholic robes or saffron Buddhist gowns--have reluctantly agreed to peaceful co-existence with the Red commissars in this countryside area.

Hugging the South China Sea only three miles from the provincial capital of Phuoc Le and ^{thirty} fifty air miles ^{Southeast} northeast of Saigon, the increased pressure of Viet Cong Communist guerrillas has forced the clergy to accept a tacit agreement at this village level.

At the Saigon level, Catholic priests wielded considerable influence againsts the Communists until the downfall of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in November, 1963. Since then, militant political Buddhist priests in Saigon have been gaining in political power as they sucessfully spearheaded opposition to Diem and successive governments. Many Saigonese, including ex-Prime Minister Tran Van Huong, accused the Buddhist leadership of aiding the Communists~~movement~~.

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insert after para 1, page 3 x x x the government strategic hamlets x x

We asked why the Viet Cong allowed him to go free.

"Oh, they let me alone because I have convinced them that I am concerned only with matters of the soul and do not get involved in politics," he explained laughingly. "Of course, since they do not believe in the soul, they figure I cannot hurt them."

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The villagers of Chu Hai ~~complained~~ complied with Viet Cong orders that they were not to fly the yellow and red government flag ~~ever~~ ^{during} the Chinese New Year holidays, but the ~~an~~ Communist guerrillas had not told them to fly ~~Liberation~~ Front flags of the ~~the~~ National Liberation Front, the political backbone of the guerrilla movement.

A ~~two~~-ye twenty-year-old Catholic seminarian, studying his first year of philosophy in Saigon explained that the Viet Cong rarely enter this village skirting a national paved highway. But several nights ago the Viet Cong entered early in the evening to wish the people a happy Chinese New Year over a loudspeaker. He said that villagers regularly encounter the Viet Cong when they go out into the fields to farm their rice paddies, or are enroute to the sea to fish or go to the forests for cutting wood and making ~~charcoal~~ charcoal.

"But as long as the people pay their taxes to the Viet Cong, they let us alone," he explained, "so we can make a living."

uppick para 3 page 2 x x x a younger catholic priest x x x

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"We live in a no-man's land," explained the ^a 57-yearold, crew-cut Roman Catholic priest in this village abounding in firs, banana trees and three thousand refugees from North Viet Nam in 1954.

"Most of the time no one is really in control, but occassionally both sides pass through. For the next three days, the area belongs to the government because we ^{+ HAS} have a marine company based here. But even then the Viet Cong can roam around ~~at~~ at will only half a mile away. We Catholics will not oppose any regime except a positively Communist one; otherwise we are not particular who's in power."

A younger Catholic priest from the village of Binh Gia, famous for one of the bloodiest and longest battles of the war last month, explained that the Viet Cong had recently come to his parishioners begging for rice and money.

"Yes, they always ask very politely for money and food," he ~~ep~~ explained patting his greying crewcut that was about three weeks overdue for a trim. "But in their polite request there are undertones of a threat.

"I've arranged a modus ~~veven~~ ^{vevendi} vevendi with them. I've told them we'll pay their taxes and give them rice occasionally and once in a while we'll serve ~~far~~ as their porters. But I told them we have fought against the French for so long in North Viet Nam that we are all tired out. But even then they still take some ~~ofm~~ of my parishioners as recruits.

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"However, I told the Viet Cong if they push us too hard, we'll jump into the fight here in the South--of course, I don't tell them which side we'll jump in with," he said laughingly. "And this leads to my second point, comrades, I tell them. If you ~~in~~ ~~people~~ tax us too heavily or pressure us too much, we will move into the armed camps (the government strategic hamlets)."

He explained that the Viet Cong taxes had risen sharply, giving as an ~~expiam~~ example that a rubber plantation worker earning 10,000 (US\$150) a year would have to pay half of it to the Viet Cong, while last year he would have paid only one-tenth of it, (US\$15). A Buddhist charcoal maker also explained ~~the~~ that he had to pay one piastres (1½ cents) for every bundle of wood he cut more than two miles from his home.

In a small Buddhist pagoda only two miles from the provincial capital, a saffron-robed, shaven-headed monk explained that "the people in this area ~~had~~ are very miserable because of the fighting.

"The Viet Cong have never ~~harras~~ harassed me," he continued, "and the Viet Cong never hurt the people or take anything from the people without paying for it. I'm not particularly against Communism, but Buddhists could ~~never been~~ ^{PE} Communists because Communism is political and Buddhism is purely religious. The Buddhist leaders are only trying to keep Buddhism from being ~~oppres~~ oppressed."

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He explained there had not yet been any religious trouble in this area, "but I was warned by the Saigon Buddhist leaders to watch out for such oppression by the government in the near future." (The opposition of the Buddhist leaders in Saigon left one Buddhist lay² follower here bewildered. "I don't understand the Buddhist leaders in Saigon," the Buddhist follower explained. "They must be different Buddhists from us, because our kind of Buddhists are not supposed to upset things—we're supposed to try to get along with things as they are and improve ourselves morally.")

The Buddhist priest, however, who seemed to reflect the anti-American stand of the Saigon Buddhist leadership said "There has been no American aid in this area because the big shots take all of the aid for their own pockets. The aid never gets to the people. The people in this area make just enough to live on. They too have ² to pay ² taxes to the Liberation Front (the Viet Cong guerrillas), but the taxes are not very high."

The Catholic priests in the area, however, ~~simply expressed the~~ expressed the belief that the Buddhist "oppression" ²complaints were "obviously part of a Communist conspiracy. The Communists have a certain number of Communist party members on the high Buddhist councils—but it really only takes one Party member and the ²main agitators can do the rest. We think there are Communists at all levels of the government and the society and their chief aim is to agitate and keep the minds of the leaders and the Americans glued on Saigon so that nothing much can be done effectively to raise the standard of living of the people—that's one of the ways to fight the Communists—to make Communism unattractive."

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One Catholic priest agreed with the arguments of the Buddhist priest on the topic of American aid.

"The American aid is not effective," The energetic Catholic priest explained, fingering his beret. "The Americans trust people too much. You must bargain with the Vietnamese—like any ~~an~~ Oriental.

"You give us gifts, but there's no responsibility attached to it—and without responsibility there's ~~an~~ no assurance of loyalty. You give aid to the government officials and just suppose they will give it to the people—but they don't."

^{20 year old} One Catholic seminarian, the son of a farmer, ^{EXPRESSED THE VIEW} explained that the Americans ~~were~~ are trying to help the Viet Vietnamese people have a higher standard of living. "K

"I don't know whether much progress has been made or not," he explained, "but I read about Mr. McNamara (American Secretary of Defense) and Mr. Taylor (American Ambassador to Viet Nam) saying that things are getting better, ~~so~~ so I probably don't understand everything. As for people in this village, some things are improving and some are not. When we first moved here several years ago from North Viet Nam, this was only woods and forests, so we cleared it and set up temporary houses—and now you see, there are even several cement houses.

"But on the other hand, there seems to be more Viet Cong than ever before."