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May 19, 1965

SAIGON---"The most important question in the Vietnamese countryside besides security is land reform," a low-echelon American technician explained. "Yet virtually nothing has been done about it. The Viet Cong are gaining alot of browny points with the peasants by simply issuing land titles--and it costs them nothing. They simply take the land from the landowner and give ~~it~~ it away. Nothing we give to the peasants--like pigs, insecticides or fertiliser-is as important as land."

Low-echelon American technicians and provincial officials for the past several years have urged the implementation of an effective land reform program. Two land distribution schemes have currently been written, but neither have been accepted. Upper echelon officials in the American Embassy and in the Agency for International Development (USAID) believe "land reform is not the panacea for Vietnam's problems."

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

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However, one Vietnamese general recently warned American generals and a member of the Henry Cabot Lodge party that the American-backed efforts to pacify the provinces would fail unless <sup>key</sup> ~~it~~ 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 taxes. So once the army pacifies the area--he pacifies it for the landowner and not for the peasant. Of course, 35% 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 their life."

One U.S. official labelled as "Horror stories" the actions of some landowners to collect back taxes, once government forces pacified Viet Cong areas.

According to reliable sources, in other cases, when the Vietnamese government army attempts to pacify the area, the commanders simply ignore the problem of land reform, refusing to collect back rents and taxes--but also refusing to confirm the land ownership rights, in some cases, peasants family offer to give land back. In Viet Cong controlled areas, if landowners or their agents return to collect back taxes--the matter is simple. The peasant screams to the Viet Cong--and the agent is shot?

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American officials who have talked with large numbers of Viet Cong prisoners and returnees, believe the Viet Cong recruits within South Vietnam are almost entirely from the rural population, rather than the cities, probably indicating not the strength of the Viet Cong appeal so much as the accessibility of rural masses for Communist recruiting. Furthermore, an estimated 30 percent of the Viet Cong strength recruited within the South are considered to belong to the "farm labor class," which is the lowest class in the semi-Confucianistic, rigidly-stratified rural society.

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

"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."

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One Vietnamese general recalled that during the war with the Communists against the French in early 1950's, he was ordered by Imperial Decree to have landowners in his security district in North Viet Nam divide up the land with the peasants. There were two large landowners in the area, he recalled, one of them a Catholic Bishop and the second was a relative of the finance minister.

"The Catholic Bishop refused to divide the land because he said he had to support 2500 seminary students with the rent money; the big landowner also refused. The general explained: "I warned them both if they didn't give the land to the peasants the Communists would take over not only the land, but also the seminary and the landowner's house." But they wouldn't listen. The big landowner told the Finance minister what I was doing; I was quickly transferred to another place---and three years later the Communists took over."

The land reform issue in Vietnam---involving not only issuing of land titles, but also law enforcement on land rents, land security for tenants, 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 was achieved not so much by armed guerrillas as by the promise of land to the poverty-stricken, landless peasantry.

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"The land for the landless" campaign in the Philippines virtually broke the back of the Huk insurrection in early 1950's.

According reliable sources, the Viet Cong guerrillas in Vietnam have a haphazard, inconsistent land reform program which varies from area to a rea 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% of the peasant families in his province; the government had issued none.

In some area, the Viet Cong take some of the land from the rich peasants and given it to the land-less tenant--who still pays rent.

So far, the Viet Cong have not killed or harrassed 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 definite push for higher rents and taxes as they move towards 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, <sup>rent</sup> ~~lent~~ increased the land tax from 100 to 900 piastres and increased the rice tax from 50 to 300 piastres. In the country-side ~~unlike~~ outside of Hue, which has recently fallen under

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their control, the Viet Cong are attempting to collect 10-15% of what the peasants have raised during <sup>the</sup> ~~so~~ past decade, when they lived in peace. The peasants are considered to be discontented about that; in isolated cases, the peasants have burned their own crops rather than pay Viet Cong taxes.

In the mid-50's, President Ngo Dinh Diem attempted to correct the injustices in the countryside. But his effectiveness was limited. A U.S. government bulletin published in January this year explained:

"Under the ordinances approved in 1955, a program was being carried out to regularize tenancy agreements through written contracts. The contracts established minimum and maximum rents of 15 and 25 per cent, respectively, chargeable by the landlord against the tenant's main crop. While a start has been made in land reform, real progress has been negligible and a review of the entire program needs to be undertaken."

One American advisor in the provinces explained:

"The Viet Cong had passed out their land titles before Diem did, The peasant then grabbed one of Diem's titles for the <sup>SFM</sup> piece of land titled by the Viet Cong--he figured he would be able to retain his land no matter which side won the war."

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One American provincial official in Viet Nam, who had served in the Philippines during the Huk rebellion said that in the early 1950's, more than 80,000 armed guerrillas controlled virtually all of Luzon Island, and were fighting on the outskirts of Manila. Then <sup>Ramon</sup> 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 just a dumb guerrilla fighter, he wasn't brilliant," the American explained. "He once told the Filipino Congress to repeal the law of supply and demand because it was creating problems for him. 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 post office complaining about anything. Within 48 hours there was an investigating team out there to see what was the matter."

In Vietnam, in 1965, a plan was formulated whereby Magsaysay's scheme of giving land to the Communists would have been implemented. Great tracts of land in Vietnam were to be cleared to induce the Communist fighters to accept a better way of life

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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 the Communists.

It's still not too late."