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PHAN THIET, SOUTH VIETNAM--While Saigon has settled back into by a "lull before Lodge", Buddhist grievances are sweeping through the coastal provinces north of the Saigon.

Buddhist leaders' announced strategy for Saigon into wait for the arrival of Henry Cabot Lodge as a new United States Ambassador in mid-August, apparently in a bid to gain his support. The American policy has been to "keep hands off" the internal Buddhist struggle against "religious discrimination" by the Catholic-led government of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

But even even a casual to statement by departing Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting Jr., produced an outburst of annoyance from Saigonese. Nolting's remark that he had seen no evidence of regi religious persecution in Viet Nam during his two and half year tour caused on Vietnamese atheist to declare, "Nolting is a rare bird. It's not a question of whether his statement is right or wrong--it's just that no one could understand why he must had to say it when he was leaving."

Observers here believe Lodge will be faced with the difficult task of revising this middle-of-the-road policy which has created only suspicion suspicious and angry enemies of of both the Buddhists and the government, without gaining support from either side.

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"Lodge will find the big problem of counterinsurgency here is ~~not~~ working with a hostile friendly government," one American official laughed.

But a more formidable problem facing Lodge is the seepage of Buddhist anti-government grievances to the unsophisticated, isolated rural provinces where the Vietnamese government--with ~~big~~ substantial American economic and military backing--has been attempting to win the support of the people as a means to defeat the Communist Viet Cong guerrillas.

A week ago a second bonze-burning in this provincial capital of 60,000 persons living x 120 miles northeast of Saigon focused attention on the sweep of ~~the~~ Buddhist discontent to the ten critical provinces bordering South China Sea from Saigon ~~in~~ 400 miles north to old imperial capital of Hue. ~~It~~ It was in Hue, President Diem's hometown, that the religious crisis began on May 8.

Of the remaining 42 other provinces in the country, those in the mountainous plateau region bordering Laos, populated mostly by primitive tribesmen ~~who~~ practicing animism instead of Buddhism, are ~~fairly~~ fairly isolated from the Buddhist flareup. In fact, in one provincial capital and division headquarters in the high plateau region, Buddhists have ~~plain~~ painted banners proclaiming their support for the government instead of their religious leadership.

The other provinces in the rice-rich Mekong Delta, where Communist activity is concentrated, have not been substantially affected by the Buddhist crisis, according to informed American sources. Many of the Buddhists living there are of Cambodian or South Vietnamese extraction, which makes them

less energetic and excitable on matters of politics and religion.

For this tiny country already besieged with the enormous problem of wiping out communist subversion and infiltration, the three-month Gold Buddhist crisis has wiped up division, disagreement, indecisiveness and emotions that reach from the stately yellow Presidential Palace to the most modest huts in Saigon and the coastal regions.

Not since late 1950s / when President Diem defeated armies of political-religious groups has he faced as much dissent as he has in the past three months. But at that time, as one government official noted, President Diem was viewed as "the great hope of Vietnam." He Now he's a tired old man that everyone is tired of."

To add to the President's--and Lodge's--headaches of defeating the Communist guerrillas, the country was hit with Buddhist religious arguments that have since become a focus of anti-government discontent. President Diem tried to quell the disturbances and demonstrations--against American advice--with the same violent tactics he would use against his communist enemy. It did not work. The issue mushroomed and emotions rose.

For the first time intellectuals and political oppositionists, long disenchanted with the little President, had an issue to grab onto. Persons whose religion was a curious Vietnamese hybrid of animism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto and Buddhism identified themselves with the Buddhist side. Young students who proudly considered themselves atheists now began showing up at Buddhist pagodas for memorial services.

Vietnamese housemaids, after reading Buddhist leaflets, pasted pictures of Buddha on kitchen walls and began lighting joss sticks for nightly prayer sessions.

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H Husbands and wives began arguing. One 62-year-old husband told his wife not to participate in a demonstration. "She scolded me," he said. "She said she was a Buddhist and would die for Buddhism." She went ~~on~~ the demonstration.

Tempers flared at cocktail parties between Catholics, Buddhists and Americans until pro-government Vietnamese no longer accepted invitations of friends and long-time associates.

And while Buddhist charges of discrimination are aimed at the President's alleged favoritism towards Catholics, ~~in fact~~ the government is now in the process of losing some of its Catholic support. In a pastoral letter dated June 27, the Archbishop of Saigon, Paul Nguyen van Binh stressed, "The Church always teaches and practices justice, charity, harmony and peace towards all, without distinction of race, language or creed."

Yet, while the Buddhist-government controversy remained isolated in urban centers like Saigon where the battle against the Viet Cong was not being waged, the problem was still relatively simple. It has now become increasingly complex. The concern now is two-fold: How to prevent its moving further into the provinces where it will benefit the Viet Cong guerrillas; and second, how to solve not only the religious controversy, but also to quell the political discontents who have become attached to it.

The problems are serious, for the intensity of emotions in Saigon have been ~~fanned~~ fanned into the provinces. In the northern provinces, civilian population defiantly wear yellow Buddhist patches, which "means they've joined the ht club," one government official said. Young girl students act as liaison agents and messengers by carrying Buddhist leaflets between Saigon and the provinces.

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More significantly, it caused one 18-year-old ~~male~~ male student, a Buddhist, to say: "I'd rather go to jail than be drafted (into military). There's no purpose in fighting the V. C. (Viet Cong guerrillas)—it's only to keep a privileged group in power."

To become such a potent force in Viet Nam, the Buddhists have swiped a page from the Communist guerrilla handbook. By short, ~~skin~~ simple, yet emotional leaflets; by pagoda meetings where the people laugh, sing, clap and chant; by direct contact with the people through demonstrations and processions; by use of an explosive religious force comparable to Communist ideology, the Buddhists have begun to win the hearts and minds of the population which the Vietnamese government has been unable to do with its American-supplied equipment, money, training ~~and other means~~

"If the Viet Cong were ever discouraged," one ~~government~~ official lamented, "This Buddhist business should pucker them up."