

Cong Demands Close a French Viet Plantation

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SAIGON.

A spokesman for Michelin, the French rubber company, announced yesterday that it has closed down its 25,000-acre plantation in Viet Nam rather than meet four demands by the Communist Viet Cong.

This is the first time the Viet Cong have placed such stiff demands on the French-owned and operated rubber plantations and that a French company has taken a strong anti-Communist position.

The company's action follows the capture of a French rubber plantation assistant and the murder of a Vietnamese management official by the Viet Cong.

Michelin is the fourth largest French rubber plantation company in Viet Nam. Terre Rouge is first. Michelin exports 10,000 tons of rubber a year. The rubber exports from the French plantations is one of the key earners of foreign exchange for the Saigon government.

RELUCTANT

"We don't want to give up," the Michelin spokesman said. "We don't want our workers to starve. We must close, however, until the Vietnamese government improves the security situation."

American combat units, based 50 miles away, could presumably be used to secure the plantation.

In a letter sent to the French company, the Michelin spokesman said, the Viet Cong district administration of Binh Duong province, 50 miles north of Saigon, listed four demands on Oct. 9—the day they captured a French technician:

€Payment of taxes. The Viet Cong demanded taxes of one-half piastre per kilogram of rubber sent to Saigon—or 60 piastres (about 80 cents) per standard 120-kilogram bale. Previously, the Viet Cong had demanded a 25 per cent pay increase for the 4,000 plantation workers, which could be authorized only by the Saigon government and the management association of the rubber companies.

€Viet Cong approval before Michelin promoted personnel or rotated workers from one plantation to another.

€Payment of reparations totaling 500,000 piastres (about \$70,000) for the alleged burning of two houses and the killing of a Vietnamese woman during a battle in which the Viet Cong seized rice and other supplies and engineers from a Michelin river convoy. Vietnamese Air Force planes bombed and dispersed the Viet Cong during the battle in mid-July.

€An increase of the daily rice ration for each worker. The Saigon government recently cut the rice ration to 700 grams per worker per day; the Viet Cong demanded one kilogram per day.

SEIZED

Saigon government officials have argued that the rice ration for workers on the French plantations is usually confiscated by the Viet Cong and used to feed the guerrillas.

In an apparent attempt to pressure Michelin, the Viet Cong on Oct. 5 organized a tribunal by a "people's tribunal" for a plantation "corporal" named Ta Van Thach.

In front of some of the 4,000 plantation workers, he re-

portedly was sentenced to death as a "Saigon government spy" after the "trial" lasting from 8 p. m. to midnight.

The Viet Cong cut off his head and then severed his trunk in half at the waist.

Four days later, on Oct. 9, the Viet Cong reportedly captured Jean Claude Petitpierre, a French cultural assistant on the plantation. He was released on Oct. 12 when Michelin, according to the spokesman, closed the plantation and stopped the shipment of 100 tons of rice—one month's supply—to the workers.

The closing of the plantation—and more significantly, the stoppage of rice supplies—reportedly angered the Viet Cong district chief, who told the workers, "The French colonialists are stubborn people."

The Viet Cong district chief was then instructed by his superior, the Viet Cong province chief, to occupy the plantation—which he already was doing with his 100 local guerrillas—and to seize control of the plantations' administration, occupy the buildings, and confiscate cars, boats, trucks and processing plants. Also, the district chief was allowed to shoot down the small planes flown by French pilots to their plantation landing strips.

However, the Vietnamese government troops still guard the plantation factories and buildings in the district town. The management sent 5,000 leaflets to the workers explaining, "The Michelin plantation deeply regrets having to close temporarily the plantation until security is restored. But we can't accept the process of cutting off people's heads and meeting illegal conditions." Michelin managers have stopped flying to their plantations lest their planes be shot down.

DEPENDENTS

The Viet Cong ordered the workers to continue tapping the rubber latex and threatened to sell the produce to Cambodia or to Saigon. After three days the plantation workers reportedly stopped working because they were receiving no money or rice.

Shortly after the plantation closed the Viet Cong reportedly sent workers' wives and children to the district headquarters demanding that the plantation be reopened.

The Michelin plantation comprises the only productive portion of Tri Tam district, Binh Duong province. The rest of the district is a desolate jungle.

The 4,000 workers and their families—totaling 20,000 people—live in 11 villages on the plantation. The Michelin admin in the main town and government administrative headquarters is ment district center of Dau Tieng, which is secured by a Vietnamese government battalion.

"Two years ago, the Viet Cong came from time to time at night only, hiding themselves," one Frenchman explained. "Now, with only 100 guerrillas, the Viet Cong control everything except the district town—and they could call in two battalions from Zone D to overrun that. The Viet Cong control all the plantation workers and they—instead of the government labor union—plead in defense of the workers. Each village has Viet Cong militiamen and a political organization."