The Viet Cong Clinches Grip On Countryside

Saigon teems with activity, but not many miles away in the countryside the landscape is hushed and the war sometimes seems far away. This South Vietnamese militiaman in a native helmet mans an isolated outpost, always on the alert for movement by the Viet Cong.



Herald Tribune photo by BEVERLY DEEPE

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HOALONG, South Viet-Nam.

In this small government district headquarters only 30 air miles from Saigon, the ragamuffin Vietnamese children shout "comrade" instead of "hello."

An elderly Vietnamese man in the traditional long flowing gown drove his motor scooter near an American correspondent and fanged out a one-word curse: "Death."

At one end of this town of 1,000 persons, a lone yellow-and-red government flag straggles limply from a tree branch near the market with this sign painted near the roof: "We welcome aid from friendly countries."

But at the other end of the village—only half a mile—is a newly erected archway over the road, with banners reading: "Hurrah for the seven-day cease-fire of the National Liberation Front of South Viet Nam" (the political organization of the Viet Cong guerrillas) and "The people should compete in the fight for many accomplishments during the year 1965."

The archway, made of crude tree branches, was bedecked with gay yellow-and-white envelopes containing propaganda leaflets.

RED BANNER

Near the archway, a Viet Cong banner dangling above the gate of the government primary school read: "Our brother soldiers" (of the government side). "Oppose the restriction order; insist on being allowed to come home and celebrate the Tet" (the lunar New Year). Viet Cong flags, made of celluloid paper, had been pasted onto the gates of individual homes—and even on the government's "turn right" road side.

In the middle of the village, near the turn of the only dusty road, two government marine companies are dug in behind bulldozed dirt embankments, like a miniature fort, which they will leave in several days to move their patrolling operations elsewhere.

Officially, and on paper, Hoa Long is one of the 230-plus district headquarters in Viet Nam which the government considers it owns. Unofficially, and on the ground, Hoa Long illustrates the ever-tightening grip the Viet Cong have clenched around the citizens and peasants.

'NICE HOUSE'

The district chief, whom one citizen said he had never seen, reportedly estimated that 90 per cent of the villagers are Viet Cong sympathizers. ("The district chief has a nice house; why should he leave it?" a villager complained.)

"In 1964 the Viet Cong fought for and won the villages in the country," explained a veteran French colonel who had fought in the French Indochina War almost a decade ago. "Now the Viet Cong will use the villages to encircle and grab the towns. That's Mao Tse-tung, Paragraph 2."

We stopped at the edge of the village to talk with Nguyen Linh, who was riding his toffee-colored bull in a small grassy area near sawed-off trees, foundations of destroyed houses and a modest-sized Buddhist pagoda. Mr. Linh, who voiced Viet Cong arguments, said he was actually 43 years old, but when he was born it took so long to get his birth registered that he is officially only 40 years old. He was hard-muscled, of dark complexion, with deepset eyes and a tuft of a tobacco-colored beard protruding from his chin.

'TET IS SAD'

"Tet here is very sad this year," he said, referring to the Christmas-like festivities of the lunar New Year. "Tet used to be a happy time for us, but not now."

"The crops are very bad this year. We usually have a good rice harvest, but this year the crop was very bad. The government airplanes fly over and make the rice lie down—just like they had pulled a huge grass mat over the field and made the rice flat. The rice on the bottom is soggy and is ruined. Of course, the planes fly high but they still flatten the rice. . . ."

By this time he was in a visible state of irked excitement and had jumped off his bull and tied it to his white bull.

". . . and look here—right here where we are standing," he continued, getting more animated and twisting his beard into a wispy cone. "The government soldiers came in here and bulldozed our houses away. They came and told everyone living in this area that they would have to move because it was insecure here. Those that could afford it rebuilt houses nearer the district headquarters. Then, a few weeks later—just a month ago—the soldiers came back and said that everyone had to move immediately. And they did not offer to help us transport our goods or to pay us money for our land.

"And a few days later they came and started bulldozing the houses—just like the big flatiron—and they bulldozed down our breadfruit and sabotje trees. People used to make money on these trees. The ones too big to bulldoze, they had other soldiers saw off.

LOST LAND

"And it was private land, but the government just took it. I heard that American aid was going to give the people 500 piastres ($7) for their thatch houses and 1,000 piastres ($14) for their cement block houses.

"Several days ago government troops went to a village six kilometers from here and told the people they would have to move. The people were allowed to take nothing except what they had on their backs. They all wanted to take something, because everyone must have something new to put on the first days of Tet, but the soldiers wouldn't let them. Then yesterday at noon the people came back to their homes—but their homes had been looted—everything worthwhile was gone. I don't know who did it—both the government troops and the Viet Cong are capable of doing something like that. If you have any influence get the government to give us security so we can do our work and make a living without being terrified all the time. We are truly miserable."

WAR MIMIC

Rather elated at the way he had verbally explained the misery of the townspeople, he then enacted a one-man pantomime of a battle, in which with the stiff, stylized gestures of a Chinese opera he became in one moment a guerrilla sneaking through the forest and the next moment a bayonet-wielding marine.

We asked him if he had had a chance for much education, to which he replied "Oh, yes," and immediately blurted out a countdown of from one to 20 in French.

"I can count further than that, but it takes me longer," he added.

He hopped back on his bull and we walked down the road to the marine encampment around a large house strewn with army cots and mosquito nets. When we asked about the troops looting the houses in the neighboring village, an American marine adviser tugged at his sweaty T-shirt and yelped:

"They should have burned those houses. That's a Viet Cong village — they have trenches 13 feet deep all along the village perimeter. The Viet Cong have tunnels leading from the houses out 50 yards into the forest.

"The Special Forces moved the people out so they could wait for the Viet Cong to return. What do the people have to complain about? We lost one of the best Vietnamese troopers there just a couple of days ago."

U. S. AID

We then walked 50 feet down the dusty road and met Mr. Vo Huu Ba, a 63-year-old farmer, also with a wispy gray beard but leading a pony from his house. He said he had never been married and then assured us he knew nothing about politics, including even American aid.

A younger-looking man in an old, white, but clean shirt and shorts explained that "American aid" is "those goods which America gives to Viet Nam."

He then took it upon himself to explain the situation in his own terms, which were very much the terms that Viet Cong propagandists and cadre use consistently.

"We have never received any American aid here," he said specifically, though he stood only 50 feet away from the cement blockhouse built with American funds and used as an information center. Government posters, printed by the United States Information Service, had been either ripped or washed off by rain.

"And we've never seen a representative of American aid or the Vietnamese government giving aid. The province and district officials get all the aid. We don't see it at the village level.

"Besides we don't want any American aid. If you want to help us, try to find a way so there's no more fighting. We just want to have quiet so we can make a living."