

Deepe

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RED RULE IN THE 'PINK' DELTA

SA DEC, SOUTH VIETNAM--Since the February 7th bombing of North Vietnam, the Viet Cong Communists in the Mekong Delta have initiated a crunching policy to advance their frontline areas and to consolidate their rear areas, by tightening their control of the rural peasants.

Officially, the Mekong Delta south of Saigon--where no American combat units have yet been based--is one of the bright, quiet spots where the Vietnamese government is progressing well. The simple tranquility of fishing boats passing through the finger-like canals, the hectic automobile traffic on the roads, the unbroken routine of peasant life would seem to confirm the official version.

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But, according to villagers, the Viet Cong have virtually seized political control of this rich rice-bowl area of Vietnam. The process of seizing control is not one of violent, visible military battles, but is instead the invisible strangulation and isolation of government authority. It is an economic, political, social and semi-military process of subversion which might be termed termite warfare. The limits of government authority has been squeezed into a small ring of villages around provincial and district capitals and ~~subordinate~~ the main isolated triangular outposts along the main roads and canals, apparent government-controlled centers are now contested a "pink" area on maps between the expanding "Red" areas and the government "white" hard-core areas.

For example, six miles from Sa Dec, the headquarters of the Vietnamese 9th Infantry Division, lies the village complex of ^{Nha-Man} ~~Nha-Man~~. Two of the three villages are already controlled by the Communists. The third village named Tan Nhuan Deng is protected by one company of 100--^{some} plus paramilitary troops, plus platoons in two smaller outposts one and two miles away.

This is the story of the Nga Ba outpost, situated two miles from the company headquarters and the Ba Thien of one platoon situated one mile from the company headquarters.

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The company of paramilitary troops, housed in a former French fort, is assigned to protect the village, and particularly the bridge stretching across a placid river on which sides several rice mills and brick factories are functioning. The two outlying outposts, however, are completely encircled by the Viet Cong guerrillas and as of last month were totally isolated from the local population. To pay salaries and to bring in supplies to the defenders of these two posts, the government has to use at least ten armored boats, including troops, and on every voyage they draw Communist sniperfire.

The defenders of these two small posts dare not to leave their compounds, although theoretically their small unit patrols for intelligence information makes them the "ears and eyes of the regular forces."

But, more accurately, as one villager explained, "they are blind men in a jail," because they are so isolated. Rarely do they dare to leave their post even to fetch water from the river two twenty yards away because the Viet Cong have posted snipers around the perimeter. Last week, one defender did stray from the outposts in barbed wire fence perimeter to get some water from the river.

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He was wounded by sniperfire on the bank of the river. None of his fellow defenders dared to rescue him. ^{He later died and} After ~~three~~ ^{two} days, ^{his body was left} he died in the same spot. The post commander asked his higher headquarters for troop reinforcements to pick up the body that was twenty yards away from his own post. This request was refused. The defenders of the post were ordered to bury the corpse inside the post itself. The defenders again refused to pick up the body. Again, they were ordered to bury the body. The second time, they obeyed the order, but since their outpost lacked shovels they used their knives to dig the grave and since they lacked lumber and nails they used their knives to rip off the wood from the walls of their outpost to make the coffin.

Following the grotesque burial, the morale of the defenders of the outpost was so low that the company commander decided to rotate them. But the 100-man company ordered to ~~90~~ relieve the platoon refused to accept the commander's order and the majority of the troops defected, leaving behind their weapons, rather than be assigned to the ^{Nga} Ba outpost. The province chief and the district chief were forced to visit the company and persuaded the deserters return to the government ranks--but the order to shift to the outpost was rescinded.

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Last month, the Viet Cong ordered the peasants and local businessmen working and living within a half-mile radius of the outpost to leave the area. Within this half-mile radius, none of the local villagers are allowed to live or to move. Villagers have ~~been~~ assigned small canals for their sampans rather than letting them move on the major river twenty yards from the outpost.

One of those moving out of this one-half mile radius was a rice mill owner, who moved his mill block-by-block and machine-by-machine to a location nearer government authority.

"The Viet Cong were very nice to give him the permission to move his rice mill," one villager explained. "Otherwise, he would have starved to death. No one would have brought ~~this~~ rice to him to be polished since he was within the half-mile radius around the post."

Since the bombing of North Vietnam, the Viet Cong Communists have taken drastic and strict measures against the population as they press forward with their policy of expansion and consolidation. In their monthly propaganda meetings with the villagers, the Viet Cong cadre announces that "the Americans are waging an all-out war against the Vietnamese people. The people have to make a clear-cut choice between their friends and their enemies. Those who want to fight with the Americans can go to the government-controlled area.

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Those who want to fight against the Americans can stay with us. There is no third choice."

The one exception was ~~for that~~ ^{but} those families who have suffered from American bombing and strafing raids could flee to government-controlled territory--but they could not cooperate with the government.

Hence, in this Sa Dec division headquarters town, the refugee villagers ~~have lived~~ ^{live} in their sampans ~~and live~~ parked along the riverfront. But they have refused to live in the refugee housing provided by the government.

Many of the wealthier landowners have already been forced to flee to the government-controlled zones, which has given the Communists the effect of an economic purge of the area. The vacated lands of the landowners, especially the fruit groves along canals, has been systematically boobytrapped and mined by the guerrilla forces.

Now, the Viet Cong have told the large and the small landowners that their land will be confiscated if they allow their children to become government soldiers. The few wealthy landowners who remain in the area have been warned they will not be allowed to hire peasants to help till the land.

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--And the peasants have been warned not to be hired to the landowners. ^{these} ~~The wealthiest~~ of those landowners must then do the ~~work~~ ^{BACK - Breaking} peasants job of planting and ^{harvesting} ~~seeding~~ the rice. Within the past month, the Viet Cong have also withdrawn permission previously granted to the population to visit friends and relatives in the government-controlled areas. Even the father of one of the highest ranking generals at the Vietnamese high command in Saigon, who had previously been authorized by the Viet Cong to see his son, is now a semi-prisoner who is not granted the authorization ~~only~~ to leave the Viet Cong areas.

The Viet Cong use pre-teenage ~~and~~ children to collect taxes from the local businessmen, such as rice mill and brick factory owners. The Viet Cong have recently increased their tax on the peasants rice to 40 per cent of the amount not consumed during ^{the year} ~~the year~~ By the individual family ^{FTN} ~~as~~ "export tax" is levied on, ^{And} ~~rice~~ and fish produced in the Viet Cong areas ~~not~~ sold in the government areas, as though the foodstuffs were passing from one foreign country into another. And, in ^{own} ~~an~~ invisible way, the Viet Cong have established their government in the Mekong Delta which has almost eroded the authority and presence of the anti-Communist Saigon regime.

(Tomorrow: American Marine and Pacification headaches.)