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Saigon

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Hamlet--1

(Note to Editor: I've intentionally changed the names of these people and decided not to send pictures of them to prevent their getting in trouble).

AN BINH (VILLAGE OF PEACE), SOUTH VIET NAM--Mrs. Nguyen Van Thi patted the dirty face of her seven-month-old daughter and sighed, "Sometimes the Viet Cong (Communist guerrillas) come and raise a typhoon over our hamlet."

For the past six months a turbulent storm has raged in this tiny hamlet, ironically ~~named~~ named the Village of Peace. Located only thirty five miles south of Saigon, it was held by the government until six months ago, then lost to the Viet Cong ~~control~~ and now the government is desperately again attempting to regain control.

The sleepy hamlet of 43 families is ~~sit~~ situated in strategic crucial Long An province--a showplace province for U. S. aid and Vietnamese military energy visited by American Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and ~~Nixon~~ former Vice President Richard Nixon. Long An is among the seven key provinces around Saigon which U. S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge has advocated the government ~~concentrate~~ concentrate their efforts.

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Hamlet--2

But progress is minimal and the joint civilian-military effort has largely bogged down.

During the six months following the overthrow of the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem in November, the Viet Cong shot the hamlet chief, beheaded his two assistants, burned the hamlet office, peppered the austere, dirty-floored schoolhouse with rifle bullets and cut the long hamlet's long barbed wire fence into foot-long strips, which American officers call "Vietnamese spaghetti." (These strips are now being used to reif reinforce concrete for ~~the~~ government-sponsored hamlet privy program.) The hamlet militia pretended they were farmers and refused to defend the area, when ~~goven~~ government forces did not reinforce it.

Now, to counter this typhoon, Mrs. Thi's ~~stragi~~ straggly bearded father has built an underground "a Vietnamese air-raid shelter" surrounded by a ~~double~~ doubly thick brick wall. And Mrs. Thi in her poorer home has built a mudwall around ~~the~~ the slab of hardwood ~~sh~~ serving as her bed. All the other families in the village have ~~fallen~~ taken the same precaution.

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hamlet—3

"We never saw the Viet Cong," Mrs. Thi explained ~~easily~~ evasively. "They came at night, or put guns in our backs when we were working." But she admitted the rich farmers—"Those with cement floors and tile-roofed homes"—paid taxes and gave them rice.

But besides the Viet Cong typhoon, Mrs. Thi's 66-year-old father explained, stem fungi and leafhopper ~~had~~ took 90% of the rice crop last year on his 2-acre plot, forcing his son to work on house construction and his daughter to do manual work—carrying 10 gallons of water for half a mile across parched paddy fields for one and half cents (U. S.). (Actually one piastre.)

"We will be hungry this year," he ~~said nonchalantly~~ <sup>explained</sup>. "But when we get too hungry, we'll kill a dog to eat."

Furthermore, Mrs. Thi lamented, she had long ago married a government trooper and bore him four children. But now he's stationed far away, has his own concubine and rarely bothers to give her any money.

For this uneducated, isolated Vietnamese family, the conflict is simply a continuation of the French Indo-China war which began in 1945 and has never stopped. When asked the difference between the government and the Viet Cong guerrillas, the old man replied, "Oh, the two groups have a difference of concepts and invade each others country. But my brain is too small to know the difference."

When asked about the big nation of China to the north, he replied, "My mind is close to the market—I have no time to think about China."

deeper

hamlet 4

The government has made a desperate attempt to counter the Viet Cong typhoon and regain control of the hamlet. Twenty cadre visited ~~the hamlet~~ An Binh to take a census and advise on security. A cement floor was laid in half of the school (so the kids won't lose their pens in the cracks of ~~the~~ dirt, Mrs. Thi's father explained.) The elderly father will be among 10 families to receive fast-fattening hybrid pigs ~~and~~ given two years to repay the government for them. A village health worker will be trained to dispense 13 basic drugs from USAID medical chest and will maintain an office in the ~~new~~ planned community hall. A new bridge is ~~proposed~~ proposed and a new road will connect An Binh with other hamlets. Military engineers rebuilt the barbed wire fence, paying village children more than a penny to carry the poles.

But Mrs. Thi's father explained, the fence was to protect them ~~against~~ the government—not against the Viet Cong. "Outside the fence, the government can kill us," he explained. "I used to go to the movies in Tan An (provincial capital one mile away). Now I must swing my lantern when I come back to An Binh late at night or the Marines will shoot me without asking any questions ~~first.~~" Now we're not free. I can't even go outside my house to the toilet. I have to keep a pot inside."

Yet, the villagers know when the Marines leave the area—as they often do—The Viet Cong will come again. The hamlet council is so frightened they sleep each night in the provincial capital a mile away.

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hamlet--5

Nine months ago, 219 strategic hamlets were listed on the statistical charts of the province. Then during the November offense last year, the Viet Cong systematically wiped them out.

"I could stand on my rooftop and see the Viet Cong burn down all the houses from here southward," one Tan An resident explained. "But we don't have that trouble now. The Viet Cong controls them all."

In early December three battalions of airborne troops came to ~~secure~~ hold the areas still under government control, and on January 15th the government launched the pacification program designed to clear the area of Viet Cong guerrillas and then to develop social, economic, educational and medical programs to win the hearts and minds of the people.

But progress has been slow. Long An now lists only 15 ~~hamlets~~ hamlets under government control--but the ~~its~~ schedule calls for 30 to be secured. During the next six months \$100,000 (repeat U. S. \$100,000) will be spent in a massive program including: free fertilizer, insecticide and rice seed for farmers, two maternity clinics, adult education under kerosene lanterns, pig programs, and a wide range of other projects.

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hamlet--6

"Yet we're getting only 50% of the value out of each bridge we build," one American observer explained. "The Viet Cong promise the people everything, but give them nothing. The government does alot to only help the people, but does not exploit it or publicize it."

One of glaring signs of low government prestige among the people is the government's inability to recruit militia. The province is already understrength 3,000 paid paramilitary or paramilitary troopers. In the 15 pacified hamlets From the 15 pacified hamlets--obviously lacking many of the younger, able-bodied men--the government scrapped up 66 trainees and sent them to a nearby military military center. Three weeks ago ago, in the battle of Go Ben, all 66 were all killed when the Viet Cong overran the post.

"We had trouble recruiting these 66 trainees," one American officer groaned. "How will ever convince any more to come to our side?"

One of the central problems of the pacification program in Long An is the lack of coordination between vietnamese military and civilian leaders. The province chief who commands the pacification plan, does not control the troops necessary to secure the area area.

"We've had so many changes of command and so many changes of troops," one advisor explained, "we don't know who's is doing what. There's a general snafu while we're playing military musical chairs. For Last month, we had a troika ruling the province--with the province chief his own deputy in charge of security and fighting the commander of the airborne. ~~Now~~ Now the airborne has moved out and we have the Marines in there."

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hamlet--7

The civilian cadre, who must be protected by military units in the hamlets, ~~are~~ also "have not been well trained and oriented for the job," one observer explained. "And there's a great deal of inertia among the civilian leadership."

In short, one American observer explained, <sup>"they're"</sup> ~~"we're"~~ going through the motions doing everything--but their hearts aren't in it."

Or, as another explained, "Everyone is on the march and moving-- but we're not going anywhere."

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