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SAIGON--The war within Vietnam is relentless, but not necessarily ruthless. It can be silent; it can be invisible. By combining guerrilla warfare and political subversion, the communists have invented what one ~~Those~~ Regimental commander/ called "termite warfare".

In example, is the government strategic hamlet of cans, situated in the relatively secure province of Binh Thuan, 130 miles Northeast of Saigon, a peaceful seaside collection of more than 400 houses, the hamlet was formed 30-plus years ago for more than 1000 workers in the largest of the French operated salt fields. The hamlet faces the seaside, with picturesque mountains to the rear. A government road and railroad provide easy communications and transportation; government scout cars frequently patrol the area expeditions-large Japanese ships which pull in to load salt for export. Occasionally government naval boats slide in for security.

The hamlet is ruled by an elected hamlet chief and hamlet council-- part of the the American "democratic" prerequisites for supporting the multi-million dollar pacification program of fortified villages_ the announced keystone for victory in Vietnam.

The hamlet is protected by usaid-provided barbed wire; it is defended by more than 2000-armed hamlet militia.

In government books, it is one of the most secure hamlets.

But it is 100 per cent dominated by the Viet Cong communists-- through secret political subversion and intimidation by their armed guerrillas.

The communist guerrillas come into the village to play soccer games--against the government's hamlet militia--some of whom are blood relatives. The communist political agents in the village agitate for and organize kangaroo courts against those persons with "incorrect attitudes," they once beheaded the hamlet chief. When the guerrillas need weapons and ammunition; they arrange a "hollywood battle" with the government militia -there's lots of noise, weapons are ^{handed over} but no one gets killed. When the communists need more guerrilla recruits, they hold a "week kidnapping" of the hamlet's youth. Regular "USG" shows are held by the communist theatrical troupe; week village newspaper is distributed. Students from the government school write the news items.

"For the government the hamlet is a bright spot--like a shiny red apple," one Vietnamese explained. "But inside the worms have eaten all of it. It is completely rotten."

The Communists have used four separate, but inter-related tactics to accomplish this: They have converted some persons as political activists and armed guerrillas, they have made part-time sympathizers of others; the anti-communists are either neutralized ("You don't have to work for us--just don't work against us.") or "liquidated."

Last year, the communist clandestine cadre in the hamlet instigated Kangaroo Court proceedings against the hamlet chief. First, the cadre agitated the people to complain about the "brutality" of the chief--or any other government worker who does not compromise with the communists then they threw into his house a "letter of the first warning" instructing him to "review his attitude."

Later a second letter of warning was thrown into his house along with a Viet Cong flag--red and blue with a large golden star in the middle.

The third warning was a letter, with a vietcong flag. On the flag was painted a picture of a dagger. This was the village sentence to death. The people were agitated calling for a court in center of the hamlet. He was convicted and beheaded. (on the outskirts a similar kangaroo court was staged two years ago.)

Future hamlet chiefs, if selected by the people, are considered pliable by the communists, the people are generally forced to side with the communists. If the government imposes a "hard-live" anti-communist on the hamlet, the people again agitate or simply "liquidate" him.

From 1956-1959, the hamlet people denounced to the government a number of communists left behind after Vietnam was partitioned in 1954. Many were arrested. But now the pro-government, anti-communist persons have been neutralized.

"They're human vegetables... that's all," one USMC villager explained.

In 1957, one staunchly anti-communist villager was working on U.S. financed national highway more than 150 miles further south. His father had been killed by the communists during french war; later communist cadre apologized to his mother for the slaying. The construction worker sat under shade tree at noontime one day eating lunch with other workers.

Looking at American caterpillar, he remarked "I wish we had that in my village of Cans--I'd take it into the mountains and grin the heads of the V. C. with it.

Two years later, the worker returned to Cans and bought a small local bus company. One day the Viet Cong kidnapped him, said they had apologized to his mother for the killing of his father, "but you still have a position against us and want to kill us."

The terrified worker denied it.

The Viet Cong cadre recalled his remark he had made under the shade tree two years earlier.

"I was only talking," the worker answered.

We kidnap you, so that you will clear your ~~own~~ mind.

We do not ask you to help us; just do nothing to hurt us."

The worker fled to Saigon.

A relative of his, also anti-Communist, was denounced by the workers of the salt factory, who forced the French salt company to fire him. He's now unable to get work in the ~~the~~ hamlet.

Two months ago, the gover nent sent in an agent to live in the hamlet; the Communists immediately detected him and he was chased out through intimidation.

The Communist cadre in the hamlet also organized cultural activities; a roving theatrical troupe performs comedies poking fun at the government.

The cadre encourage youngsters to attend the government-operated school, but to write news items for the the Viet Song weekly, one-page newsleaflet. The students also draw cartoons for the bottom of the page, ridiculing the government. The news items includes listing of government casualties (but not Communist ones); number of newly-liberated villages in the district; number the way in which the people should become more self-sufficient (examples: after pulling the bu tubers of a manioc plant, similar to sweet potatoes, the people should break the stalk into five parts, plant each in the ground, water it. In several month, five plants will be thriving.)

The inexpensive newsleaflet is reproduced off of a jolly-like substance made from sea algae, ~~with~~ Only the ink and paper are items of cost.

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In 1961, the Communist guerrillas lived in the nearby mountains and maintained a 12-man squad. Two years later, they had two squad squads. Now—a year later—they have a 45-man platoon.

One of the means used to increase their strength was the "Hollywood battle." The Communists first persuaded two or three young men to volunteer to join them, but set up "mock fighting" so their families would not be punished by the government.

The Viet Cong platoon, reinforced by elements of the district company, invaded the village, openly fighting the hamlet militia (who had prior knowledge of the attack). The government defenders called the district headquarters for help, knowing it rarely came at night. Leaving behind their weapons, they retreated to the seaside.

"The Viet Cong "held" the hamlet for several hours; "kidnapping" the village youth by jerking them from their homes, brutal bruising and cutting their families, but wounding none seriously.

Next day, the hamlet militia returned, reporting the "kidnapping," the loss of weapons, ammunition and grenades.

Suspicious district officials investigated the report; villagers "confirmed" the "battle"; parents of the missing youths wept and showed displayed their wounds.

The district officials were helpless: should they leave the hamlet undefended or issue six more rifles? They allocated more weapons.

How can the government officials arrest the relatives of the "kidnapped" youths, when it is the governments responsibility to protect the village

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even though they do lack the troops to do so.

The Viet Cong platoon will probably not be expanded to more than its 45-man strength. They need youths to work for them inside the hamlets, providing information, working as liaison with political cadre. Many of the villagers are relatives of the Viet Cong.

"Nobody's going to rat on the Communists in the village," one former member of Cana village explained. "I'm not. Who will protect my life; my relatives still live in the village. They would be killed. Besides what can the government do--take out the "rotten" village and move in another one. That would have drastic economic effects. Anyway the new village would probably be rotten too."

One Vietnamese regimental commander explained, "It's always the quiet places where the most is happening. The Viet Cong don't have to fight in the villages they already control. Nobody sees them or hears what they're doing. They're just busy little termites."

~~Tomorrow:~~ The Three Viet Nams.
(Informatively, source is the cousin of your new correspondent here, Phan Xuan An. Cousin used to live in this village until two months ago when he came to Saigon for university work. An's great-uncle founded the village; many of the stores here are An's relatives.)