

Trucks and jeeps can be seen moving on the Communist side of the river. Five or six persons stand on a boat landing there. . . . Then they turn and leave. Whoever they are, they are on their own land now. . . .

—Phillip A. McCombs, reporting from Government-held Quang Tri City (*Washington Post*, January 7, 1974)

Vietnam—a Visit to a Liberated Zone

Daniel Schechter

You may remember Quang Tri. It was the scene of one of the fiercest and “last” battles of that phase of the Vietnam war that ended when peace broke out in Paris. Eighty-five per cent of the land in this northernmost province of South Vietnam is now firmly in the hands of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), the force which elements of the American press still call the “Viet Cong” or just “the enemy.”

The U.S. Air Force turned most of Quang Tri into a vast wasteland of shattered land and broken villages as its response to the PRG’s offensive in Spring, 1972. The provincial capital of Quang Tri City, once a home for 86,000 people, is now a pile of rubble, totally uninhabited. A *Washington Post* reporter who visited the place described it as nothing more than a military outpost, a place of “eerie silence.” He looked across the river at the other side and wondered who those people were, what they were so busy doing.

As their guest, I found out last October. I also saw the Saigon flag flying over what is left of Quang Tri City. But I saw it from another vantage point. I was standing in the middle of what used to be the runway of an American air base. The base is no longer operative. Scrap metal from its decimated hangars now provide walls for houses on which peasants hang photographs of Ho Chi Minh. This part of Quang Tri Province is in the process of coming back to life again. It is one of the “liberated zones” which the PRG is developing as one base in the revolution they expect will ultimately triumph throughout South Vietnam.

Traveling with two activists of the Indochina

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Peace Campaign, I entered liberated Quang Tri from North Vietnam. That is the only official port of entry. The frontier is as formally administered as any other in the world. Visitors need visas. There are immigration formalities and customs. Although the North Vietnamese firmly support the PRG, they show respect for its autonomous and independent existence. It has its own government, which is now recognized as the legitimate representative of the South Vietnamese people by forty-two different nations. Unlike North Vietnam, which is an integral part of the Communist bloc, the PRG is a nonaligned state which does not play up the socialist content of many of its programs. It enjoys firm support from a number of nonsocialist Third World states, as well as from the socialist camp and some Western countries. Although the United States signed a peace agreement with the PRG, it still does not recognize its legitimacy, and throws all of its economic and political support to General Thieu’s regime in Saigon.

Here in Quang Tri Province the diplomatic questions seem remote. Life for the people consists of reconstructing their lives and lands which had been totally disrupted. Nine months of systematic bombing pulverized the rice fields and leveled most of the buildings. That part of the farmland not riddled with craters could not be farmed safely because of undetonated mines, bombs, and other ordnance. Hospitals in Dong Ha, the center of PRG-controlled Quang Tri, are filled with victims of U.S. antipersonnel weapons and other devices, casualties of the Vietnam cease-fire.

“We fully expect that the consequences of this war will be with us for another ten, maybe twenty years,” Nguyen Phuoc, a veteran of battles dating back to the war against the French, told us. He is now a member of the Solidarity Committee which works with the American antiwar movement. He

has met us at the border and is driving with us in two jeeps, one Chinese, one Russian, as we bump along at about ten miles an hour on what used to be a part of Vietnam's North-South Highway One. The area has been utterly destroyed. Bizarre sculptures of twisted steel and rusted tanks and vehicles still litter the fields. For miles there are no trees, a tribute to the deadly effectiveness of the defoliation program which turned this place into a no-man's-land. It was on this flat expanse of land that former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert MacNamara erected his multimillion-dollar anti-infiltration barrier, a technological Maginot Line. We were later to find handbags in the market at Dong Ha woven with the bright-colored electric wires that strung this electronic battlefield together.

The Vietnamese ability to turn all of the gruesome reminders of war into useful products is symptomatic of what is happening in Quang Tri. The province is coming alive again as reconstruction brigades rebuild the roads and farmers reclaim their fields. Some of the craters are now fishponds. Slowly, rice and vegetables are turning a moonscape into a productive area. It is slow going, but the people are being fed and are restoring social life. This is in glaring contrast to life in the Saigon zones, where correspondents report squalid refugee camps, widespread corruption and demoralization, and actual starvation.

We are a photo of our whole country," a member of the local revolutionary committee tells us with a heavy French accent. Geographically, you can see all the contrasts of Vietnam here. There are highlands, once prosperous coffee and timber country. These mountains border rice-rich lowlands famous for producing a tiny sweet banana. All of this sweeps to a fifty-mile coastline along the South China Sea, a center for fishermen and the site of scenic sand beaches.

As a photograph of Vietnam, Quang Tri has been blown up and overexposed. Falling as it does across the 17th parallel, the DMZ, it has been hotly contested. U.S. troops occupied the area early in the American intervention. It became a testing ground also for the Vietnamization policy. It was on Highway Nine, which winds west from Dong Ha, that Saigon's finest units mounted their ill-fated "incursion" into Laos in 1971. Quang Tri experienced virtually every aspect of the war—pacification, strategic hamlets, search-and-destroy missions, defoliation, and carpet bombing.

Throughout this period Quang Tri remained a center of Vietnamese resistance. It had been a Viet Minh stronghold during the first Indochina war. It was one of the provinces most directly affected when the "temporary demarcation line" physically divided it in 1954. To this day the PRG considers the southern part of North Vietnam a part of Quang Tri, and, in turn, Hanoi administers it as a special zone.

It was always a strong base for the National Liberation Front. Its guerrillas harassed U.S. troops while many of its peasants resisted attempts at pacification. Main force PRG units finally overwhelmed the Saigon army. On May 1, 1972, the Province celebrated its liberation. Although the ARVN was in flight, moving South with thousands of refugees as their cover, U.S. military strategists plotted their counter-attack. The PRG say their victory involved capturing twenty-four military bases and posts, routing thirty thousand soldiers and killing or wounding about 6,800 more. Although they did not release their own casualties, it is reasonable to assume they were high.

In Saigon the loss of Quang Tri was taken seriously. It was seen as a Communist beachhead in the South, a base from which the North Vietnamese would mount their oft predicted final offensive. (In several days of crisscrossing the province by road, we encountered no North Vietnamese Army units.) The decision was made that Quang Tri would be better dead than Red. On June 28, less than two months after the province "fell," the air force and six companies of the best ground troops began the effort to retake the area. Half of the U.S. B-52 fleet joined in the systematic bombardment of Quang Tri, as did offshore batteries of the Seventh Fleet. It went on for 270 days—nine months. "We can say," a cadre who witnessed all this told us, "that the enemy used all kinds of weapons except the atomic bomb. They have dropped on our small ten square kilometers a quantity of bombs and ammunition equal to the power of seven atomic bombs. We have had our Hiroshima." When the smoke cleared, Saigon had regained only 15 per cent of the land.

Parts of Quang Tri resemble those photos of Hiroshima. Virtually every large structure was leveled. Of the villages only three had not been totally destroyed. There had been 582. In all, some 50,000 homes were wiped out. More gruesome still was the ecological destruction. A team of American scientists warned that the bombing might make it permanently impossible to reclaim the land. The PRG is trying, however. There are plans to cut down what is left of the old trees, dig out the trunks, and replant the area in pepper and tea. The agricultural economy was totally disrupted. The irrigation system had been shattered, the supply of livestock depleted. A member of the local governing body ticked off the census of destruction. It included 95 per cent of the cattle herds. Of 35,000 oxen they could find only 2,778 when the bombing stopped. Of 25,000 water buffalo only 330 survived. Of 80,000 pigs, only 457. Elephants met a similar fate. (Our guide interjected to ask: "Do you know what is an elephant?") There had been 300; now only 3 remained to act as beasts of burden. With the forests denuded, the rice fields destroyed, and the country-



Market in Dong Ha
(photo: Steve Cagan)

side a vast minefield and graveyard, there was not much of Quang Tri left to liberate. The last full-scale bombing raid on the province was on the very day that the peace agreement was signed in Paris.

The PRG had prepared as best they could for the liberation they knew would come. During the bombing many people lived underground. Others had been evacuated to the mountains and returned when the fighting subsided. Life was very difficult at first. A North Vietnamese journalist reported: "Meager were the first meals in freedom—rice, salt, wild vegetables,

less often, powdered fish." Reclaiming the land and achieving self-sufficiency became a first priority. Today the market of Dong Ha, while not as prosperous as the one in Hanoi, is bustling. All the staples were in good supply, as were a wide range of fish, pork, chicken, vegetables, and some fruit. There were also imported goods, much of them shipped directly into the PRG's one functioning port at Cua Vet in Quang Tri. Shipments are received there from Mainland China, the Soviet Union, North Vietnam, and even some Western countries like Italy.

In sharp contrast to life in the Saigon zones, social and educational services are being extended to the people. Free schools have gone up in all the towns and most villages. Adult literacy classes take place at night, and the local committee claimed that almost 70 per cent of the people are now literate. We visited one small village school, which resembled a one-room classroom in America of the last century. The school was built of thatch and bamboo with corrugated steel walls courtesy of the U.S. air base. It runs on a triple shift. We counted as many as fifty children in each of four classrooms. The students were clean and disciplined. They sang a song about Ho Chi Minh and asked us about the attitudes of American schoolchildren toward Vietnam. As we left, the orderly appearance broke down and the children chattered, laughed, and waved at these funny looking foreigners, the first to visit their villages since the withdrawal of the American troops.

Social and economic life in Quang Tri has not been collectivized. Private enterprise is still practiced, and most land is privately owned, although much of it is cooperatively farmed with a clear socialistic spirit. The accent on cooperation is evident everywhere. A free health clinic in one village was built by the villagers themselves. Now some of them have been trained as nurses and assistant doctors. There are programs of preventive health education and inoculation. A doctor tells us that the most serious health problems are to be found in those people who used to live in the Saigon zones and had allowed diseases and other health problems to go untreated. This was particularly true of women who could not afford to treat gynecological disorders.

In their own zones the PRG seems to be practicing the approach to reconciliation they want to see extended to all of South Vietnam. We met one woman who had been trapped in the PRG area when the fighting began. Her husband is still in the South Vietnamese army, and she feared that she would be punished because of it. Instead, according to her testimony, she had been welcomed, helped to find shelter and a job. "I feel freer here," she told us, "than I did under the Saigon side. There I was always being stopped for an I.D. card check and was restricted in every way. I was also hungry a lot. Here I have the right to go to school, to join any organization I like, to go anywhere." The PRG professes the belief that persuasion and example are the best methods for mobilizing the people and winning their loyalty. "If our revolution is to succeed," a cadre explained, "it will be because the people support it."

There were no visible signs that coercion is used to keep an unhappy population in check. There were no armed police in the streets, and no checkpoints except in military zones. The city of Dong Ha is in process of being rebuilt. A Buddhist pagoda func-

tions openly, as does a Catholic Church. The population is encouraged to join a variety of mass organizations, including a womens' union, youth league, and a trade union. The people we met were animated, as curious about our impressions as we were about their experiences.

The reconstruction in Quang Tri is taking place in an atmosphere of continual hostilities. During our stay in the province one PRG soldier was shot while raising a flag. The shot was fired from the Saigon zone. In another incident, just a week before, an unarmed reconnaissance "drone" was shot down by PRG gunners. Officials here continuously stress Saigon's violations of the Paris agreement. The Thieu government has made similar charges, but the PRG dismisses them, noting that the PRG has everything to gain and nothing to lose by "scrupulous adherence" to the Paris agreement. "Thieu's regime has no popular support," we are told by Le Hai, secretary of the PRG's peace committee. "The fighting in Vietnam is not just between our side and Saigon. It is within the Saigon zone as well. Thieu must continue to repress the people in order to continue the war, to continue as a stooge of the United States."

Although most of the population in South Vietnam lives in the Saigon areas, the PRG remains confident that they support the Paris agreement's goals of peace, reconciliation, and eventual reunification. "Thirty years of war is not a pleasant dream," Luu Quy Ky of the Vietnamese Association of Journalists had told us in Hanoi. But the dream of a free and independent Vietnam continues to be an inspiration. The confidence and optimism one encounters in Quang Tri is overpowering. It is clear that the PRG will never accept a permanently divided country. Its leaders stress the "provisional" nature of their mandate and continue to press for the full implementation of the Paris agreement, which is the mechanism they believe will return peace to Vietnam.

To American visitors they emphasize the U.S. role in continuing the war. They urge us to press our Congress to cut aid to the Thieu regime. "Your government is still financing attacks on our areas, killing our people," a youth cadre told us soberly in a small hut used by his village committee for meetings. "The American people can end this war. You must go home and tell them to do it."

Meanwhile, the Vietnamese will continue to fight, breathing life back to their own zones, and, if they must, fighting on the battlefield, giving and taking heavy casualties. They seem to have integrated a patriotic commitment into their lives. "We Vietnamese are not superhuman," a PRG minister told a gathering of Europeans who, she felt, tended to overidealize and romanticize their struggle. "But we are well organized and experienced. We have been fighting for a long time, and we know how to fight. The cause we fight for is also a just one. And we will win." It is hard to argue against that.