

Reader's Response

Let the Vietnamese Speak for Themselves

Le Thi Anh

In the last couple of weeks (and months and years) I have read a vast amount of printed materials about Vietnam by non-Vietnamese. I especially appreciated the articles by Theodore Jacqueny and James Finn (*Worldview*, April). But what about letting the Vietnamese speak for themselves? For, after all will have been said, heard, written, read, commented, analyzed, discussed, argued pro and con, fought over, and finally forgotten on the subject, it is only to the Vietnamese that this matters personally. They are the ones who have to live or die with this reality. They cannot afford the luxury of casual, thoughtless comments.

Even before the fall of Saigon, since they would have to live with it, the Vietnamese had to think about life in South Vietnam under Hanoi's rule—and act accordingly. They are the ones who have to pay with their lives and liberties for any error of judgment. If they bet on a "bloodbath" and exiled themselves and now there is "peace" and "reconciliation," they would have lost a home and a homeland for nothing. If they believed in the Communist promise of "reconciliation" and stayed in Vietnam, they may find themselves today in a concentration camp. It is a matter of life and death for thousands of South Vietnamese, not for comfortable democratic armchair intellectual speculation.

If onlookers, Western commentators of every persuasion, made an error of judgment, if they bet on "peace and reconciliation" and 300,000 South Vietnamese are in concentration camps today, not one single habit of their lives has been disturbed. All they have to do is keep their eyes and ears shut, look the other way, and let someone else pay for it. No one holds them accountable for the damaging consequences of their comments upon thousands of Vietnamese lives—except, perhaps, their own consciences. But they can always shield their conscience against the news

of massive imprisonment and deportation.

Since all foreign eyes and ears, e.g., non-Communist correspondents and nationals, were ordered out of Saigon in May, 1976, hard information on conditions inside Vietnam has had a difficult time reaching out to the American consciousness. To do so it has had to overcome two formidable barriers; the bamboo curtain and the barrier erected by the American conscience to shield itself from such news. Understandably, Americans in general, from "doves" to "hawks," want to forget about Vietnam and to divest themselves emotionally of that faraway land, its people, and its unpleasant memories. Many "doves" prefer to live in the "reality" the Communists have built for them and entertain the vague notion that the Vietnamese are now "living in peace and reconciliation," whatever these may mean. This belief is particularly important to those who were instrumental in bringing down the non-Communist order in the South, or who were unable to save it.

American "doves" and "hawks" share, for once, the same desire to keep a lid on "bad" and potentially embarrassing news from Vietnam. So does the officialdom and a large segment of the press. Each has its own reason for "ostriching" the Vietnamese reality. "Doves" need to rest assured they have not indirectly and by inadvertence caused the death and imprisonment of thousands of South Vietnamese, many of whom were their friends in the non-Communist opposition to Thieu. "Hawks" do not want to be reminded of how they failed to "win the war" and how they failed to evacuate those "high risk" Vietnamese who had collaborated with them. According to Frank Snepp, the CIA analyst in Saigon, the U.S. Embassy was unable to destroy its top secret files. The full listings of those working with the U.S. (CIA henchmen,

in the Communist jargon), "traitors" and top "criminals," on the Communist blacklist, fell into Communist hands. Thirty thousand Vietnamese working in the Phoenix Program, a U.S.-sponsored operation responsible for the elimination of thousands of Viet Cong covert agents, were reportedly eliminated.

Many U.S. newsmen, once so investigative, prefer not to foray deep into today's Vietnamese reality, and content themselves with the information provided them by Hanoi. Thus the deportation of a million South Vietnamese to the North to break down their resistance to the regime was labeled "population shift" and the American press was unanimous in printing "population shift." French journalist Brigitte Friang calls it by its true name: deportation.

Despite the bamboo curtain and the American shield, the true picture of life in Vietnam today begins to emerge. How can anyone hide an elephant under a basket, as the Vietnamese would say.

Reports by independent observers, visiting journalists, mostly French, foreign priests recently expelled from Vietnam, repatriated foreign nationals, French, Chinese, and Indians, concur with reports from recent escapees and Communist public statements in piecing together a very grim reality.

Sometimes the refugees are personally involved in the incidents being reported and can give details and the "feel" that the general report lacks. For instance, in November, 1976, reports of the massacre of some hundred Vietnamese refugees off the coast of Cambodia, presumably by the Khmer Rouge, appeared in the Western press. Only one boatload succeeded in escaping to Thailand and five others perished. One of the lucky survivors now lives in Washington and recounts how, at the critical moment, a few of his fellow passengers, defecting Viet Cong, gave the order to counterattack in French, which their Khmer Rouge captors could not understand. They threw their captors overboard, captured the boat, and fled to Thailand. The remains of their family members on the other boats were later found floating, hands tied to

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gether, and throats sliced. The Viet Cong in the boat were the ones who engineered the escape, bribing their fellow Viet Cong coastal guards.

In another instance the high death-rate concentration camp of Long-Giao in Long Khanh province was attacked by "rebel forces" during the night of April 24, 1976. A number of camp inmates were released; the rest were gunned down. The event was reported by the BBC and the Western press at the time of its occurrence. The widow of one of those massacred, Lieutenant Pham Mai, a French national, was later permitted to leave for France with her three children. The California-based *Trang Den Weekly* carried in its January 24, 1977, issue a handwritten letter by the widow. It included a photograph of she and her husband and her three children, and a document signed by Ho Chi Minh City authorities reestablishing Lieutenant Pham Mai in his civic rights because "he has paid his debts to his country." That is the standard government phrase to tell his family he is dead.

An eyewitness day-by-day account, "Diary of a Liberated," by Huynh Tran Duc, published by Brigitte Friang in her book, *La Mousson de la Liberté*, deserves special attention. A graduate of French and American universities, Duc left his well-paying Pan Am job and American sweetheart to return home to serve his country when it was "liberated" in April, 1975. It is a most sincere expression of disappointment with a Communist rule he actively supported until he saw it with his own eyes. He bribed his way and took his mother to Australia, where he now lives, doubly "liberated"—first from what he regarded as "American occupation" of his country and, second, from Communist myth. Duc lived in "liberated" Vietnam for one year.

Following is Duc's description of a mass execution:

"A convoy of 150 [former Saigon] officers was totally massacred en route toward a reeducation camp, except one who feigned death. Four U.S. trucks packed with former ARVN officers, their eyes blindfolded and their hands tied behind their backs. The trucks were preceded by an armored car and a tank and followed by the same in reverse.

Suddenly, in the dark of the night, the preceding armored cars speeded up, leaving the trucks behind, and the following tank opened fire on the convoy. The wounded were finished in place. All the prisoners were killed, except one, whose recovery was aided by the local population."

The official version was that the convoy was mined by the rebels. The officers' wives staged a demonstration in Saigon to demand an explanation. The news were reported by the BBC and also in the Western press.

A friend of mine, the mother of a concentration camp inmate, escaped from Vietnam this spring. She recounted that when she approached the camp, located in a remote jungle area, she encountered a nauseating smell. The four thousand inmates had not been allowed a single bath since their incarceration eighteen months before. Water is scarce in the mountain, formerly a defoliated area. Her son's body was covered with scabies (there is an epidemic in the camp): he lived like an animal, the filth built up into a crust on his skin. She said she wished he would die rather than continue this kind of life. He suffered from malaria and beriberi and has not seen toilet paper. An average of four to five people died every day in the camp, the mother learned. In their conversation as well as in his letters home the former officer invariably praised the government for its leniency in giving him the opportunity to atone for his past "crimes against the people" and be worthy of the "nation and revolution." I myself have eleven relatives and friends still in reeducation camps. Who doesn't? Because conscription was universal and all able-bodied men were either drafted into the army or served in the Administration, which makes them liable to "reeducation" now.

Communist authorities claim that 95 per cent of those sent to "reeducation camps" were returned to their families; but of my twelve relatives and friends, only one was released, and two additional acquaintances were arrested—a writer and a businessman. Their place of detention was less harsh than those for former officers, parliamentarians, and high officials of the old regime, but the starvation diet is the same. When even

"free" citizens do not have enough to eat, prisoners can't eat their fill. The already destitute economy has worsened considerably since the end of the war.

U.S. News & World Report wrote in its January 17, 1977, issue: "In South Vietnam, many escaped because they worked for the Americans or the Saigon government and feared they would be murdered by the Communists. Thousands fled—and still are fleeing—because they could no longer endure harsh North Vietnamese political and economic controls with grinding poverty, unemployment and loss of personal rights." This account is graphically accurate. But it takes four former "reeducation camp" inmates, now residing in France, their bodies still covered with traces of wounds from torture and starvation, to tell about their ordeal and recount how fellow inmates were being scalped alive like catfish under their very eyes. This kind of firsthand testimony gives the event the feel, the life, the details that this writer cannot convey.

The testimony of those personally involved deserves to be heard. Scores of recent escapees are ready to talk, provided secrecy be maintained to protect their families still in Vietnam. Among those are former concentration camp inmates who bribed their way out of the camps and out of the country, former Viet Cong now disillusioned with the "Northern liberation" of the South; and "National Restoration" forces (the new name for the anti-Communist resistance movement.)

True, the grim stories may look grimmer to their victims; there is a tendency to overdramatize personal stories. And true, personal accounts lack the balance of multidimensional approaches of outside analysts. But they gain in real-life firsthand feelings and details.

The Vietnamese voice in America deserves to be heard. It is very difficult for Vietnamese refugees to break into print and get a fair hearing (only such characters as Marshall Ky and President Thieu are judged newsworthy). For a long time the refugees have been crying in the wilderness. I write these lines in the hope that the Vietnamese voice will get a hearing.