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Viet Nam: Reunification and Reconciliation

by Sophie and Paul Quinn-Judge

American Friends Service Committee, resident in Saigon until July 1975

Despite the profound physical and psychological scars war has left on Viet Nam, its people have turned to the task of rebuilding with considerable speed and grace. For the last year, those of us who witnessed the end of hostilities in Viet Nam have been following events there with a sense of wonder and excitement: although the new government continues to stress the immense problems facing the Vietnamese people, tremendous changes have already occurred.

Perhaps the most dramatic change in this first year of peace has been the reunification of Vietnam—not at the governmental level but at the family level. One had only to follow the newspapers to realize the extent to which things had changed for the Vietnamese. In the last days of the war, the newspapers in Saigon were crammed with advertisements, placed by people searching for members of their families, from whom they had been separated, during the panic-stricken evacuation from the Central Provinces. At the end of the war, these small advertisements were quickly supplemented and eventually almost displaced by another group of people trying to find their relatives.

This time the people had not just been parted from their loved ones for a few weeks but for years, and after decades: members of the resistance were finally able to ask for news of their families:

"Mrs. Pham Thi Duong seeks news of her two younger brothers, Giap and Vinh, who followed the Revolution from the first day of the coup against the Japanese. They regrouped to the North in 1954, after the peace agreement. No word since then."

Another woman from Quang Ngai province asks for news of her husband, a Viet Minh soldier who went North in 1954, and adds, "Our daughter was born 8 months after his departure."

These poignant voices from the shadows, a reminder of the suffering and privations which the Vietnamese had endured for 30 years, were a clear sign of the deep change which was taking place.

No discrimination

After thirty years of bitter struggle, one might have expected a period of reprisals and settling of accounts. But the new government's willingness to treat soldiers of the former Saigon regime as victims, and not enemies, has smoothed the transition to peace. The strong emphasis on building an independent and prosperous Viet Nam is bringing people together: as Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh recently commented, "for those who committed crimes in the past but who are now living normally as other people, abiding by the law, we let them live as other people, without discrimination."

Re-education is in essence part of the process of unification. Virtually every family had some members on the "other side" during the war, accounting in large part for the depth and sincerity of the spirit of reconciliation in Viet Nam today. A Vietnamese expatriate who visited one of the re-education camps during a visit home, found that the best way to sum up the atmosphere at the camp was by the words, "ruot thit," which can be loosely translated as, "from one

family." Many of those who have completed their period of re-education are at home now, preparing to vote in the nationwide elections which will bring formal re-unification.

In the western press it is popular to portray this step as the final move to bring the "South" under the "North's" domination. This interpretation ignores the new political realities in Viet Nam (see box). For the first time in many years, Vietnamese of different political outlooks, from veteran communist activists to bourgeois politicians, are able to cooperate in solving their own problems peacefully. Respected Saigon neutralist leaders, such as Ho Ngoc Nhuan and Mrs. Ngo Ba Thanh, who a year ago were being harrassed and muzzled by the Thieu regime, are now playing an active part in their country's development—both were part of the southern delegation to the Reunification talks last November.

After thirty years of struggle, one year of peace is a very short time. The trauma of war is something that can never be wiped out. One Vietnamese acquaintance explained it this way: "The Vietnamese are not like other people. I have not been normal since the day when I was a child, playing with friends by the banks of a river, and saw dead bodies floating past me down the river." Young people like student leader Le Cong Giau, well-known for the savage beatings he endured from Thieu's police, will carry the marks of repression for his entire life.

Already the Vietnamese have shown a resilience and spirit that is truly inspiring. As they heal their own internal divisions, they are offering to share their experience of reconciliation with us. Will our nation prove to be as apt at building peace as Viet Nam?

Viet Nam is one country

While certain journalists and US officials have tried to portray North Viet Nam as "exploiting" the South economically, by stripping it of both rice and manufactured goods, the fact is that the people North of the 17th parallel have given significant material aid to those in the South since liberation. DRVN Deputy Premier Le Thanh Nghi reported to the National Assembly in December that about one million tons of material assistance has been sent to the South since the victory.

One important component of this aid was rice to feed unemployed and poor people in Saigon and other cities. Although no figures are available on how much rice was diverted to the South, Ambassador Dinh Ba Thi told Vietnamese residents in the US last summer that many people in the North were eating wheat instead of rice in order to help the South.

Another aspect of the North's assistance is in the restoration of animal husbandry and fishing. From May 1975 to the end of the year, some 7,000 buffalo were sent South to replenish the supply which was largely destroyed during the war. Some 80,000 fertilized chicken eggs were also contributed to the South to develop its poultry-breeding industry. In addition two million fish were sent South for breeding.

(*Liberation News Agency, November 18, 1975 and Tin Sang, November 12, 1975.*)

Here We Go Again. . .

In the media contest to see who can produce the most extreme version of the "terror in Cambodia" story, *Time* Magazine has won hands down. Referring to the Cambodian government as "one of the most brutal, backward, and xenophobic regimes in the world," *Time* (April 19) repeats stories of people buried alive by bulldozers, or suffocating from plastic bags tied over their heads, and declares that there is now a "pogrom" aimed at "anyone with an education."

Such horror stories have been reported by journalists in Thailand for months. Virtually all the reports are based on the same four or five Cambodian refugees interviewed at Aranyaprathet, Thailand. Ironically, these same journalists were careful to point out that refugees are not reliable sources of information on the situation in Cambodia:

— Daniel Southerland, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, (2/4/76) quoted a Western diplomat who, after carefully studying the reports, warned that refugees tend to exaggerate in order "to arouse sympathy for themselves and to justify why they abandoned their country."

— H.D.S. Greenway noted in the *Washington Post* (2/2/76) that "Skepticism about atrocity stories is

necessary, especially when talking to refugees who tend to paint as black a picture as they can . . ."

— Martin Wollacott wrote in the *Guardian Weekly*, "In the strange subculture of refugee camps, men and women who have to justify their own decisions to themselves and to foreign authorities, merge fact into fantasy."

It was left to *Time* to turn these stories into historic "facts." And it is *Time* which offers for the first time in the US media "estimates" from unnamed sources of the number of deaths in Cambodia from starvation, disease, and reprisals. The estimates—500 to 600 thousand—just happen to approximate the number of Cambodians whom the Cambodian government believes were killed during the war by the American bombing.

Like the "estimates" of the numbers allegedly killed in North Viet Nam's land reform in the mid-1950's, these figures obviously originated with US officials, for whom they served the useful purpose of deflecting attention from, and ultimately justifying, the American war against Cambodia. What we are now seeing is a new "bloodbath myth" rivalling in political significance the now-discredited myth of the "bloodbath" in North Viet Nam. — GP

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