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The Population of Vietnam

by Judith Banister

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The Population of Vietnam

Background

Vietnam is a tropical coastal country on the South China Sea and the Gulf of Tonkin, bounded by China on the north and by Laos and Cambodia on the west. (Please refer to Map 1.) The population is concentrated in two fertile deltas—the Red River delta of northern Vietnam and the Mekong River delta of southern Vietnam, separated by almost 900 kilometers of central highlands and narrow coastal plains. Around 80 percent of Vietnam’s surface area is mountains, high plateaus, and jungles, all of marginal agricultural productivity.

The ancestral home of the Vietnamese people is the Red River delta in the north, where people of Indonesian stock gradually intermarried with immigrants from Thailand and southern China during approximately the first millennium B.C. to form a distinct Vietnamese ethnic group with an authentic local culture.

The Red River delta was annexed by China’s Han dynasty in 111 B.C. and for a thousand years, to A.D. 939, Vietnam (the northern half of today’s Vietnam) was under Chinese control. During that millennium, the Red River delta progressed in irrigation, water control, agriculture, pottery, and mining, and became a maritime trade center. But forced Sinicization led to repeated uprisings which finally expelled the Chinese. For the next millennium, the Chinese empire continually tried to annex Vietnam again, and succeeded for only a few decades under China’s Ming dynasty in the 15th century.

During the first several centuries of the second millennium A.D., independent Vietnam developed its government, transportation, and agricultural systems, as well as its literature and culture. This relatively stable and prosperous period resulted in increased population size. To deal with the problem of excessive population density on the tilled areas of the Red River delta, Vietnam needed more arable land, which it got by clearing jungle, swamp, and forest, and by expanding its territory southward. Gradually, over several centuries, Vietnam conquered the Champa empire to the south and took the Mekong delta from the weakening Cambodian empire. During and after the 18th century, the thinly populated Mekong delta was penetrated by Vietnamese peasant settlers from the Red River delta. Vietnam attained approximately its present boundaries in 1757.

European penetration of Vietnam began with Portuguese explorers in the 16th century, followed by French missionaries and traders in the 17th century. France gradually conquered all of Vietnam during 1858-83. After 1893, the French controlled Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos as the “Indochinese Union.”

During the French colonial period, 1883-1954, the French administration expanded agriculture, mining, railroads, and harbors in order to export primary products, but discouraged the industrialization of Vietnam. Insurrections against French rule had begun immediately, and continued to be fueled by the repressive and exploitative character of the colonial government. Ho Chi Minh began his resistance movement in 1925 and in 1930 founded the Indochina Communist Party, which by 1940 had become the strongest faction in Vietnam’s nationalist movement. During World War II, Vietnam was under joint Japanese-French rule, and after Japan’s defeat, the Viet Minh, a united front organization led by Ho Chi Minh, proclaimed Vietnam’s independence in Hanoi. But the emergence of a united Vietnam under Communist control, which could have happened in the vacuum left by Japan’s defeat, was postponed for 30 more years by French and later by U.S. intervention. French armies reimposed French colonial control immediately after 1945. The Viet Minh retreated to the mountains and countryside until after 1949, when the Chinese Communists began supplying them with weapons. Then the Viet Minh took the offensive against the French and defeated French armies in 1954. But Ho Chi Minh was forced by an international conference in Geneva to accept the division of Vietnam with an anti-Communist regime in the South. The United States assisted a succession of South Vietnamese governments in resisting the reunification of Vietnam under Communist control. This escalated into full-scale war during 1965-75.

The economic modernization of Vietnam was difficult or impossible during these decades of war. During the 1950’s, North Vietnam’s economy was socialized, agriculture was collectivized, and rapid industrialization was attempted with aid from other Communist countries. But wartime bombing of the north and south was so massive that the economic infrastructure was badly crippled, and when the war ended in 1975, Vietnam was a battered nation whose subsistence agricultural economy had been disrupted by war and could not feed the whole population. Meanwhile, the human cost of the French colonial period, the Japanese occupation, and 30 years of civil and international war between 1945 and 1975 cannot be adequately described or measured. Millions of Vietnamese people were killed and many millions more were wounded.

1Brief histories of Vietnam can be found in Buttinger, 1972; Nguyen Van Thai & Nguyen Van Mung, 1958; and Shah, 1960.

2For assessments of the French colonial period from a variety of perspectives, see Ennis, 1936; International Chamber of Commerce, 1946; and Buttinger, 1968 & 1972.
Map 1. Topographical Map of Vietnam
Political and Economic Developments Since 1975

As of 1975, Vietnam, though devastated by war, had a reservoir of good will and support from those people and governments who had opposed United States involvement in Vietnam. Much of this foreign friendship has diminished in succeeding years. The government of Vietnam has antagonized the governments of most neighboring countries, and of other Third World countries and capitalist countries. China, Vietnam’s Communist neighbor to the north, had given Vietnam much aid during the war and continued to do so after 1975. But relations were strained, partly because China and the United States began normalizing their relations before the United States had left Vietnam. By 1977, Vietnam’s government had singled out its ethnic Chinese minority for particular harassment, both because of traditional ethnic antagonism and because the Chinese in Vietnam were primarily urban merchants, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs, bankers, and members of other professions generally suspect to a Communist government. The Chinese minority were viewed as unpatriotic, as disguised representatives of China’s interests in Vietnam. 3 After hundreds of thousands of Vietnam’s Chinese residents were forced to flee to China and abroad in 1977 and 1978, the split between China and Vietnam became explicit. The ill will between Vietnam and its Southeast Asian neighbors is caused in part by Vietnam’s de facto expulsion of ethnic Chinese and ethnic Vietnamese residents of southern Vietnam who are viewed as undesirables. Neighboring countries have been flooded with these unwanted refugees. The other irritant in the relationship between Vietnam and its neighbors is Vietnam’s apparent policy of expansionism. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia to topple the bloody, genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge, which had been attacking Vietnam’s southern provinces. Since then, instead of withdrawing its military from Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam has consolidated its military hold over both countries. It is the continuing occupation of two contiguous countries that has caused most of Vietnam’s current diplomatic and economic isolation. Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia, coupled with the maltreatment of its Chinese minority, angered China’s leaders, who briefly invaded Vietnam’s northern provinces in February 1979 “to teach Hanoi a lesson.” Since then, Vietnam has been engaged in frequent military skirmishes and constant military standoffs along its border with China and in Laos and Cambodia, all of which drain Vietnam’s economy. 4 Vietnam continues to maintain one of the world’s largest armed forces, estimated at between 600,000 and 1 million men not including the militia. 5

Foreign aid is sorely needed by Vietnam’s economy so that it can rebuild from war damage and embark on a path of economic development. The government’s policies have, however, caused the cessation of much aid that was forthcoming. Aid from China ceased in May 1978 as the Sino-Vietnamese dispute escalated. Reunified Vietnam had begun receiving assistance from capitalist developed countries in 1977, but almost all such aid was frozen or withdrawn in 1979 after Vietnam intervened in Cambodia, and in most cases the flow of assistance has not resumed. Vietnam has since depended heavily on the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries for both military and economic assistance. 6

Vietnam’s economy was seriously depressed from the end of the war until 1981. A Hanoi economist, for example, reported an official government estimate of a 9 percent increase in national income between 1975 and 1976, indicating some recovery from wartime disruption, but only a 2 percent annual increase in aggregate national income from 1976 to 1978 in constant prices. His calculations showed per capita national income stagnant at about US$100 during those years. The International Monetary Fund estimated for 1978 a 2.2 percent real increase in Vietnam’s gross domestic product (GDP), but declining real GDP in 1979 (-0.5 percent) and 1980 (-3.7 percent). 7 Because Vietnam’s population was growing at a rate of 1.9 to 2.6 percent during each of the years 1976-80, real per capita income and real per capita GDP were stagnant or declining throughout the period. Food shortages have been chronic all over the country, but more serious in the north, where the standard of living was declining in the postwar period at least through early 1981. 8 Vietnam’s officially reported foodgrain production decreased from 1976 through 1978, then rose in 1979 and again in 1980, but per capita grain production in 1979 and 1980 was calculated to be only 266 and 267 kilograms respectively, lower than the 1976 figure of 274 kg. 9 In the early 1980’s, Vietnam’s leader Le Duan admitted that many shortcomings and errors in leadership and management had been the main cause of Vietnam’s economic and social difficulties. The state of the economy was so unacceptable by 1981 that the government decided to allow more control by farmers over their own production, greater retention of the food they produce, and increased individual enterprise in the rest of the economy in order to raise production incentives. 10 The introduction of a contract quota system in agriculture is given much of the credit for increasing aggregate foodgrain production, from 14.4 million metric tons in 1980 to 15.1 million in 1981 and 16.3 million in 1982. 11 With improved production, however, imports of foodgrain were cut back sharply, leaving available food supplies tight. 12 Since these more

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3 Dough, 1982, p. 27.
4 "On the costs and benefits to Vietnam of its occupation of Cambodia, see Quinn-Judge, 1982, pp. 11-14.
6 The promising beginnings of postwar bilateral and United Nations aid to the SRV as of 1978 were described in UNFPA, 1978, pp. 32-35. See also de Barrin, 1981, pp. 17-19.
7 Phung The Truong, 1981, p. 9; personal communication from the International Monetary Fund.
8 See, for example, Albons, 1980, and de Barrin, 1981.
9 "May Con So Va: Van De Luong Thuc O Nuoc Ta" (A Few Statistics about the Subject of Food in Our Country); DDK, Oct. 14, 1981: 7.
pragmatic economic policies were introduced, Vietnam has achieved real aggregate growth of 5 to 8 percent annually in the GDP (3 to 6 percent per capita) during the years 1981-83, but prospects for further improvement are clouded because Vietnam's more ideological leaders, fearful that socialism is being compromised, continually threaten to curb the economic freedoms that appear to be responsible for those gains in production so recently achieved.13 Meanwhile, Vietnam's light industrial sector was crippled until 1981, when new production incentives increased output of consumer goods but left quality unsatisfactory.14 Despite some improvements, Vietnam's economic situation remains bleak in terms of aggregate production and consumption, and even worse calculated on a per capita basis because the population is growing rather rapidly.

Sources of Population Data

Before this century, Vietnam occasionally attempted to count not the whole population but only taxable males and those males liable to military service. For example, an emperor who reigned in 1802-19 took a census of this type every 5 years.15 During the French colonial period, a census of the whole population was taken in the Mekong delta area (then known as Cochinchina) in 1921, 1926, 1931, and 1936.16 Population data for the rest of Vietnam, also under French control, came from administrative estimates reported from local areas, estimates probably much less reliable than the census data from Cochinchina. After World War II and the division of Vietnam, North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, DRV) took a census in 1960 from which fragmentary data were reported. Again in 1974, North Vietnam took a count, and after reunification, a hurried count was taken in South Vietnam in 1976. Finally, in October 1979, Vietnam's first nationwide modern census was taken, with some help from the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). Very few of the data collected in this census have been published. Part of the reason for the unavailability of 1979 census data may be incomplete keypunching or computer tabulation of answers to some items on the questionnaires, but the main reason for the dearth of revealed census results appears to be Vietnam government secrecy.

In addition to censuses, occasional population surveys have been carried out. For example in South Vietnam, a population survey was taken in some rural areas in 1971, and another demographic survey of 14 cities was taken in 1974. In recent years, the General Statistics Office of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) has conducted a labor force survey in rural areas each year in October.17

Data on birth and death rates come from Vietnam's vital registration system. In North Vietnam, registration of births and deaths began in the cities in 1956. Gradually the system was expanded. By 1968, all areas in the north were covered by the vital registration system.18 In South Vietnam, prior to reunification, vital registration was too incomplete to provide usable data from most areas. Since 1975, the SRV government has attempted to improve the vital registration system in the south. As of 1981, however, a visiting delegation from the United Nations Fund for Population Activities cautioned that coverage of vital events remained incomplete in southern Vietnam, so that birth and death rates calculated from registration data were unreliable.19

Vietnam also has a permanent population registration system, which was established in North Vietnam in 1971.20 Persons are required to be registered where they live, and to report all changes in residence and household composition to registration authorities.

From censuses, surveys, vital registration, and permanent population registration, Vietnam has recorded and gathered vast quantities of demographic data. But the government habitually stifles information and keeps it out of the public domain. Therefore, only a tiny proportion of the collected population statistics has been published. Those tidbits of data which are released are so fragmentary that demographers outside Vietnam have almost no information with which to assess the completeness and validity of the reported population figures and vital rates. This problem is compounded by Vietnam having few trained demographers of its own. The General Statistics Office has a Population Studies Unit responsible for conducting censuses, administering the vital registration system, and analyzing and interpreting the collected population data. But by 1981, only two officials in that unit had received advanced training in statistics and demography.21 They were trained in the Soviet Union.

Trends in Population Size and Growth

With an enumerated population of 53 million in 1979, Vietnam ranks as one of the world's most populous countries. Out of about 200 countries and territories in the world, only 12 have a larger population than Vietnam.22

Table 1 lists the census counts in Vietnam from 1936 to 1979. These collected data, unadjusted for any systematic underenumeration or other errors, indicate that Vietnam's population has been growing rapidly during these 43 years. The statistics imply that in spite of famine losses, war-related deaths, and significant net migration from Vietnam, there has been rapid population growth resulting from high fertility and moderate to low mortality.

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12See, for example, Blanchard, 1982, pp. 8-9. GDP data: personal communication from the International Monetary Fund.
16Ng Shu Meng, 1974, pp. 17-18.
Table 1. Official Population Totals and Implied Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Annual implied growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cochinchina</td>
<td>1936 census</td>
<td>4,483,000</td>
<td>(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1936 estimate</td>
<td>5,656,000</td>
<td>(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonkin</td>
<td>1936 estimate</td>
<td>7,471,000</td>
<td>(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>1936 estimate</td>
<td>17,610,000</td>
<td>(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Vietnam</td>
<td>March 1, 1960</td>
<td>15,916,955</td>
<td>1960-74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>Oct. 1, 1979</td>
<td>52,741,766</td>
<td>1936-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The north and south components of the 1979 census were not reported. Figures in parentheses were derived from provincial census counts. Vietnam's 1979 census population was divided into the populations of the north and the south using the reported provincial totals with an arbitrary breakdown of the total from previously divided Binh Tri Thien province. Monnier, 1981, p. 612.

Sources:
1936 - Ng Shui Meng, 1974, pp. 21, 32-33.

Generally speaking, the more recent the census in Vietnam, the more complete the count may be. For example, the count and estimates of 1938 are thought to have underestimated the population size by at least 10 to 20 percent. This was because the population figures were based on the tax rolls, and people avoided being taxed. In contrast, the 1979 census may have been the most complete count ever taken in the north or south. Vietnam's census officials note that in preparing for the 1979 census, they were able to learn from their experiences and problems with the two previous censuses in the north and one in the south. They carried out a census pretest in early 1978, and had some assistance from the UNFPA and from ESCAP (the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific).

If Vietnam's 1979 census was a more complete count than the estimates and count of 1936, as seems likely, then the high population growth rate for 1936-79 implied by the reported totals may exaggerate the actual population growth.

In North Vietnam, it is also possible that each successive census from 1960 to 1979 was a more complete count than the previous one, which would mean that the population growth rates implied by the series of totals are all too high. If the three census counts in the north were about equally complete, this would mean that North Vietnam's population grew almost 3 percent a year during 1960-74, but only 1.7 percent annually during 1974-79. The reduced population growth rate in the north in recent years appears to be due primarily to reduced fertility during the late 1970's, and perhaps secondarily to net migration from northern Vietnam to southern Vietnam or out of Vietnam during 1974-79. However, one cannot yet rule out the possibility that North Vietnam's 1974 census was a more complete count than either the 1960 or the 1979 count. If this were true, the estimated population growth rate of 2.9 percent for 1960-74 would be a slight exaggeration, while the lower 1974-79 growth rate of 1.7 percent would be an underestimate. Even if there are some such errors from census to census, it seems clear from these data that the population of North Vietnam grew quite rapidly by historical standards during the two decades 1960-79.

South Vietnam recorded a very high population growth rate during 1976-79, in spite of significant migration abroad. The data imply that fertility in the south remained high, that mortality was moderate or low, and perhaps that some net migration from north to south occurred in Vietnam during those few years. Most observers, however, caution that the 1976 census of the south was a perfunctory enumeration compared to the 1979 census. If the 1976 count was much less complete than the 1979 count in the south, then the annual implied population growth rate of 3.3 percent during 1976-79 is an exaggeration.

For almost two decades, Vietnam's government has been concerned about the country’s rapid population growth and the resulting decline in arable land and other resources per capita. The early realization by North Vietnam's government of the gravity of the threat can perhaps be attributed to the excessive crowding on tilled land in the Red River delta which has gotten worse in recent centuries. The problem of population growth is salient to the SRV government partly because its seat of government is located in this area of intense population pressure.

During its long war with the South Vietnam government and the United States, the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) government diverted its attention to warfare and survival, so that controlling population growth was low on the list of priorities. As the war subsided in the early 1970’s, however, the danger of rapid population growth again loomed large. Vietnam’s Five-Year Plan for 1976-80 stated:

We must take determined steps to gradually reduce the annual rate of growth of the population in an effort to achieve a rate of population growth of slightly more than 2 percent by 1980.

By 1977, the government had developed some long-term population growth goals. The leaders did not aspire to halt population growth entirely, because they were taking into account the skewed age structure which would result from such drastic fertility decline:

The Party Central Committee’s political report presented by Comrade General Secretary Le Duan stresses the need to “continuously step up the birth control campaign in order to reach a rational rate of population growth.” Studies show that a rational annual rate of population growth...
growth would be 1.2 to 1.5 percent, but not less than 1 percent. Thus, in a number of countries, the labor force has declined after several decades, with too many aged laborers and too few young laborers. As a result, the average age of the labor force in these countries is too high. Moreover, we should realize that our country’s population should increase annually by 1 to 1.5 percent so that in the coming decades our country will be able to achieve rational population growth and labor force composition and have the population necessary for construction work, economic development and consolidation of national defense.

By 1981, after years of rapid population growth and poor economic performance, the government had decided that population growth should be reduced quickly. The official 1980 population growth rate was 2.23 percent, which, if correct, represented success in achieving the previously set target for 1980. As of 1981 and 1982, the government set the target of a national population growth rate of 1.7 percent by 1985 or 1986. But localities were urged to strive for even lower natural increase rates:

At the present time there are 1,146 villages and 21 districts and towns which have reached the natural population growth rate of less than 15 per 1000. Of that number 160 villages and neighborhoods have reached the ideal rate of 6 to 10 per 1000.

Table 2. Population Distribution and Density: October 1, 1979, Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Population1</th>
<th>Area2 (in km2)</th>
<th>Density (persons per km2)</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Population1</th>
<th>Area2 (in km2)</th>
<th>Density (persons per km2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>52,741,766</td>
<td>331,653</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>Central coastal provinces...</td>
<td>12,161,877</td>
<td>93,766</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red River delta provinces...</td>
<td>17,503,748</td>
<td>31,818</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>Vung Tau-Con Dao special zone...</td>
<td>91,310</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanoi municipality</td>
<td>3,060,235</td>
<td>1,495</td>
<td>1,008</td>
<td>Nghi Bau province...</td>
<td>2,095,342</td>
<td>11,900</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Binh province</td>
<td>1,279,067</td>
<td>1,512</td>
<td>846</td>
<td>Dong Nai province...</td>
<td>1,304,799</td>
<td>7,578</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hai Phong municipality</td>
<td>2,345,662</td>
<td>2,555</td>
<td>840</td>
<td>Dong Ninh province...</td>
<td>1,111,989</td>
<td>22,502</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha Nam province</td>
<td>2,581,409</td>
<td>3,763</td>
<td>739</td>
<td>Quang Ninh-Dong Ninh province...</td>
<td>1,229,320</td>
<td>69,158</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha Tuyen province</td>
<td>1,620,171</td>
<td>4,609</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>Quang Tri Thien province...</td>
<td>1,901,713</td>
<td>18,340</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha Bac province</td>
<td>1,488,348</td>
<td>4,626</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>Thuan Hai province...</td>
<td>936,255</td>
<td>11,374</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinh Phu province</td>
<td>1,537,190</td>
<td>5,978</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>Northern and border provinces...</td>
<td>4,900,180</td>
<td>89,006</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha Son Binh province</td>
<td>2,532,261</td>
<td>11,138</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>Quang Ninh province...</td>
<td>750,055</td>
<td>5,938</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanh Hoa province</td>
<td>15,350,101</td>
<td>41,905</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>Bac Thai province...</td>
<td>815,105</td>
<td>6,530</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mekong delta provinces...</td>
<td>5,149,978</td>
<td>2,029</td>
<td>1,686</td>
<td>Lang Son province...</td>
<td>484,657</td>
<td>8,187</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Chi Minh municipality</td>
<td>1,264,698</td>
<td>2,377</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>Ha Tuyen province...</td>
<td>782,453</td>
<td>13,518</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tien Giang province</td>
<td>1,041,838</td>
<td>2,225</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>Cao Bang province...</td>
<td>479,823</td>
<td>8,465</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Tre province</td>
<td>1,532,362</td>
<td>3,493</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>Hoang Lien Son province...</td>
<td>778,217</td>
<td>14,852</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Giang province</td>
<td>1,504,215</td>
<td>3,854</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>Son La province...</td>
<td>487,793</td>
<td>14,468</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuu Long province</td>
<td>1,232,891</td>
<td>6,126</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>Lai Chau province...</td>
<td>322,077</td>
<td>17,068</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hau Giang province</td>
<td>1,382,787</td>
<td>3,391</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>South Central inland provinces...</td>
<td>2,823,860</td>
<td>69,158</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long An province</td>
<td>957,264</td>
<td>4,355</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>Tay Ninh province...</td>
<td>684,006</td>
<td>4,030</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minh hai province</td>
<td>1,219,595</td>
<td>7,697</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>Song Be province...</td>
<td>659,093</td>
<td>9,859</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kien Giang province</td>
<td>994,673</td>
<td>6,358</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>Lai Dong province...</td>
<td>396,671</td>
<td>9,933</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Bac Lac province...</td>
<td>490,198</td>
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<td>Gia Lai-Kon Tam province...</td>
<td>595,906</td>
<td>25,536</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
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</table>

1Source: Council of Ministers, 1980, pp. 89-90.
2Data on the geographical area of each province and province-level municipality are taken from a 1981 pocket calendar/fact book published in Vietnamese. In this calendar, population data from the October 1979 census and area data in the 1980 pocket calendar, indicating that some survey work may have been done to refine the geographical data collected for Vietnam. For data from the 1980 pocket calendar, see JPRS, No. 76777. Nov. 7, 1980: 1-10. Vietnam Report No. 2225. The figure for Vietnam's total area, derived in table 2 from summing the provincial areas, does not agree exactly with the previous figure given for Vietnam's total area, 329,566 km².
populated that the crowding rivaled that of Hanoi and Haiphong municipalities. Map 2 shows the extreme population densities of the delta provinces below Hanoi. Due to the historical legacy of advanced management of water and soil, along with very intensive farming methods, these provinces became densely populated long ago. According to population estimates for 1921 and 1931, the densest sections of the Red River delta already registered 800 to 1,200 persons per km².30

As a result of this persistent crowding, the Red River delta has been a grain deficit area with chronic food shortages and malnutrition among its people. A French economist estimated in 1937, for example, that the people of the Red River delta grew only 217 kg. of rice per capita per year, but needed 337 kg. per capita. Shipments of rice from the Mekong delta were not enough to make up the difference.31

In contrast to the Red River delta, the Mekong delta has been a frontier area for centuries, and the growing population there has enjoyed much more arable land per capita than the north. During the colonial period, Cochinchina was a rice exporting area.32 Today, the advantage of the Mekong delta persists, and the people there are still better fed than in the Red River delta.33

Because of the overpopulation of the Red River delta, and due to wartime bombing there, North Vietnam during the 1960’s attempted to move people out of the delta into the upland areas of the north.34 Since reunification of the country, the most visible population policy pursued by the Hanoi government has been relocation of population from Vietnam’s most densely populated areas to relatively underpopulated areas. In part, this has meant moving people from the Red River delta to “new economic zones” in upland northern Vietnam and throughout central and southern Vietnam.

At the same time as relocating people from overpopulated rural areas to underpopulated rural areas, Vietnam’s government has attempted to engineer an urban-to-rural population flow. In the south in particular, the disruption caused by warfare and bombing in rural areas caused a refugee flow to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) and other cities of the south in the decade prior to 1975. In the view of the SRV government, now that the war is over, these people should return to their home villages and renew agricultural production there.

Monitoring urbanization or “ruralization” trends is difficult because rural-urban population data have been sparsely reported for Vietnam. (See appendix C for a Vietnamese scholar’s compilation of urban population estimates.) North Vietnam’s population was only 9.5 percent urban in 1960.35 The urban propor-

tion increased to only 13.2 percent as of the 1979 census. South Vietnam’s population was already more urban than that in the 1950’s. By 1976, the urban proportion of South Vietnam’s population had risen to 30 percent. That the ruralization policy has achieved some success in southern Vietnam is indicated by the 1979 census result that the proportion urban in the south had been reduced to 25.6 percent.36

Vietnam’s government claimed some modest success in its population relocation program in this report on 1979 census results:

The rate of population increase in various localities has been uneven because of the migration of people from one area to another for reasons of economic construction and development. The population in big cities and in the provinces in the Bac Bo [Red River] Delta as well as in central Vietnam such as Hanoi, Haiphong, Quang Ninh, Ha Son Binh, Hai Hung, Thai Binh, Ha Nam Ninh, Thanh Hoa, Nghe Tinh and Binh Tri Thien increased very little. Ho Chi Minh City had its population reduced by 1.3 percent as compared with that in 1976 as a result of movements to the countryside or to new economic zones. Provinces with a high rate of population increase are those in the mountainous region, in the Central Highlands and in the Mekong River Delta.37

But the program to permanently relocate laborers and whole families in new economic zones has encountered many problems, especially the high cost per family and the reluctance of many to move. The original 5-year plan for 1976-80 envisioned that 4 million people would be moved, 1.5 million from the delta provinces of northern Vietnam and 2.5 million from cities of southern Vietnam.38 Instead, a total of 1,472,000 were moved, 625,000 from densely populated areas in the north and 847,000 from cities in the south.39 Undaunted, Vietnam’s government planned to move 2 million more people during the 1981-85 plan period, and a total of 10 million persons by the end of the century.40

One purpose of this policy is to ease population crowding in urban areas and in the Red River delta, but another purpose is to increase agricultural production. Many agricultural lands were abandoned during the war years, and much potentially arable land was never exploited. The ruralization of former rural-to-urban migrants and the construction of new economic zones has rapidly increased the land area under cultivation in Vietnam from 5.6 million hectares in 1975, to 6.2 million in 1976, to 6.6 million in 1977, and then more slowly to 7.0 million hectares in 1980.41 Theoretically, this expansion of cultivated area should contribute to increased agricultural production, and the potential for such...