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pl48. ...a total of 448 candidates (including 78 tribesmen) competed for 366 seats, while 89 Southern delegates were carried over...

Minorities Policies

The relative success of the D.R.V.N.'s minorities policies, particularly in contrast to the policy of outright and total assimilation in the traditional manner practiced in Viet-Nam south of the 17th parallel, is perhaps one of the brighter aspects of the regime. The war with the French had forcefully driven home the point that Ho and his men could not survive without at least the passive cooperation of the mountaineers, who knew the country and who, unlike their Vietnamese lowland comrades, were not intimidated by the mountains and the jungle. Little wonder that several VPA divisions (notably the 312th, 316th, 320th, and the more recently formed (335th) are made up largely of mountaineers.³²⁵ As in the case of the land reform, the Viet-Minh did not let the war prevent it from promoting its designs for the future. A conference of 140 mountaineer delegates representing 20 ethnic groups met from August 30 to September 10, 1953, in the northern mountain areas. The conference president was Chu Van Tan, the Tho chieftain who had become a member of the Central Committee of the Lao-Dong and a VPA general. The beginnings of a mountaineer policy based on local self-government were elaborated, no doubt with the intention of reassuring the ethnic minorities who traditionally fear the expansionist designs of the Vietnamese. Implementation followed less than a year after the 1954 cease-fire.

On May 7, 1955 - on the eve of the first anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu - came the establishment of the "Thai-Meo Autonomous Zone" comprising almost all of North Viet-Nam west of the Red River and north of the Laotian "bulge" of Samneua and with a population of close to 500,000, including seventeen nationality groups. In a North Vietnamese article, the "autonomous zone" was defined as being

...not a separate state, apart from the DRVN (but) on the contrary an integral part of the latter and placed under the authority of the central government. However, contrary to administration in the other administrative zones, the various services of an autonomous zone are recruited from among the local cadres.

In other words, there is almost no difference whatever between a lowland Khu or UBHC and that of an autonomous zone, - except that in the latter non-Vietnamese mountaineers will be in ostensible control. Thus the UBHC elected by a "Congress of Minorities" of the Thai-Meo Zone on May 11, 1955, includes ten Thai, five Meo, two Vietnamese lowlanders, two Muong, one Man, and five representatives of smaller groups. The titular head of the zone is a

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is a Thai tribal chieftain, Lo Van Hac, and the capital of the zone is Ban Chieng Ly (Tuan Chau), a small town northwest of Son-La. In all likelihood, the new capital site, which has no historical connotations, was chosen in preference to Lai-Chau or Son-La, whose preeminence was associated with the days of the French administration. Internally, the zone is divided into the traditional sixteen chau (counties) of the Thai tribal federation, in addition to two counties - Thau Chua and Mu Cang Chai - that are fully Meo. But here also, a gradual integration into the normal Vietnamese administrative pattern seems to be the aim of the North Vietnamese rulers. On October 28, 1962, the DRVN National Assembly decided to change the name of the Thai-Meo Zone (which has a distinct tribal connotation) to Tay-Bac, which simply means "Northwest" in Vietnamese, and the zone was divided into three regular provinces: Lai-Chau, Son-La, and Nghia-Lo. The latter province is newly created.

The second autonomous zone, embracing all of the northeastern Viet-Nam to the Red River Valley, was created on August 10, 1956, with its capital at Ho's wartime headquarters of Thai-Nguyen and its presidency going to the faithful Cu Van Tan. However, the hopeless mosaico of tribes, which had earlier given the French endless trouble, did not permit the establishment of an administrative area dominated (as in the Thai-Meo Zone) by one or two major ethnic groups. The area thus was given the "neutral" name of Viet-Bac (Northern Viet-Nam); just as the French had named it Cao-Bac-Lang after the three provinces of Cao-Bang, Bac-Kan, and Lang-Son that were its major components.

A third zone presented even more serious difficulties. Carved out of the upper Red River provinces of Lao-Kay and Yen-Bay and the remote Mountain area of Ha-Giang, it was known as Lao-Ha-Yen. Its UBHC was established on March 25, 1957, but the diverse ethnic and cultural characteristics of the populations apparently made the area totally ungovernable. It was quietly abolished on March 23, 1959 - "at the request of the population," I was told in Hanoi later. The two valley provinces were attached to the central administration and Ha-Giang was made a part of Viet-Bac on April 2, 1959.

At central government level, there is an advisory Committee on Nationalities (Uy Ban Dan Toc), functioning as an autonomous body subordinated to the office of the DRVN Premier. Its advice must be sought on all measures applied to the autonomous areas. The Committee was headed in 1966 by Major General Le Quang Ba, a member of the Tho (now called "Tay") minority and former commander of the famous 316th VPA Division. The Committee operates on the guiding principles of "Union-Equality_Mutual Help" and sees to it that its charges get a fair share of the country's economic and social development. This is especially in

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ment. This is especially important as the North Vietnamese minorities represent, according to the 1960 census, 2.5 million people (or 14.8 per cent of the total population). See Table 1 p. 151) That numerical strength is clearly reflected in the DRVN's legislature, where there is a "mountaineer bloc," consisting of the 60 legislators representing the minorities and presided over by Chu Van Tan. (By way of contrast, there were only three tribal representatives in the legislature elected in South Viet-Nam in 1959

There can be no doubt that this policy of limited self-government (the real power lies, of course, in the hands of the majority Vietnamese operating as Party or administrative cadres in the mountain zones) has had a great impact on the mountain tribes of the South Vietnamese Highlands (PMS). As early as 1957, American social scientists in South Viet-Nam warned the Saigon government that perhaps as many as 10,000 tribesmen had gone north with the Viet-Minh in 1954 and were receiving advanced training in Hanoi. The Central Minorities School in Hanoi is a handsome campus-like college turning out teachers and political cadres from the tribes; there are also special schools for the southern Bahnar, Jarai, and Ede (Rhade) tribesmen living in the North. The Tay, Nung, and Meo languages and several of the southern mountain dialects have been provided with Latinized alphabets, as is shown by Communist propaganda found in the PMS. Outstanding tribesmen from the South, such as Y Ngon Niekdam of the Rhade, were sent to the USSR for further training and now hold seats in the DRVN legislature. Communist propaganda in the PMS tribal areas makes special mention of future "autonomous areas" that would be set up in case of a Viet-Minh victory in the guerrilla struggle. Those who today shape Vietnamese policies in both Saigon and Washington ignore the fact that because these mountain tribes have a long tradition of freedom from outside interference and high social organization within, they are easy prey for any propaganda that promises them a return to that state of affairs. It is now forgotten (if it ever was known) that the relations between the tribes and the Vietnamese rulers were about on the level of those between Viet-Nam itself and imperial China: a few gifts of tribute here and there, a meaningless affirmation of suzerainty, and noninterference by either side most of the time. The arrival of the French changed this in only a few places; some tribes did not submit to French rule until as late as 1939; others, such as the Sedang, were sufficiently organized to form a federation of tribes under a single chief, in the fashion of the American Indians. In the 1880's, a French adventurer, David de Mayreana, proclaimed himself "Marie I, King of the Sedang," in the hope of emulating the White Rajahs of Sarawak. He ruled a vast Sedang state for almost three years until the French Colonial administration brought "Marie -I" and the

Sedang under control.

In backing a policy of local self-government for the ethnic minorities, the Communist North Vietnamese regime cannot lose in an area where the West and the indigenous governments it sponsors resolutely ignore the aspirations of the tribes in favor of a centralization that is as clumsy as it is unenforceable.

see map p. 150 North Viet-nam's territorial Divisions, 1963

p. 16 *ibid.*

Thus, much of what today is the Republic of Viet-Nam south of the 17th parallel has been "Vietnamese" for a shorter span of time than the Eastern seaboard of the United States has been "American." This is a reality that cannot be simply talked away, for it affects the very fabric of the nation in times of stress and crisis, as in the 1960's.

Having consolidated their hold on the lowlands, the Vietnamese committed virtually the same error as their Cham predecessors: They failed to give their country sufficient depth. Literally teeming in their narrow deltas, few Vietnamese had any particular desire to face the inhospitable forests and primitive tribes of the highlands, and save for a few government-sponsored settlements in the mountain areas of both zones, 95 per cent of all those who are Vietnamese ethnically, rather than by political fiat, live at an altitude of less than 900 feet (300 meters). see map p. 7.

In the highlands, the fierce Thai, Muong, and Tho tribes tolerated Vietnamese overlordship with about as much good grace as the latter tolerated their own submission to the Chinese. Tribute in ivory, precious woods, and spices was exacted by Vietnamese mandarins who otherwise left the tribes to their traditional leaders, and Vietnamese annals are full of mountaineer uprisings. In fact, the tribal Thai were left almost entirely to themselves from the middle of the eighteenth century until the arrival of the French in 1893. The primitive southern tribesmen presented a problem of their own. the Vietnamese kings sagely recognized that they constituted a buffer zone against the still dangerous Khmer empire, and simply left them to their own devices, after the tribal chieftains had made their formal submission and paid a symbolical tribute. That direct relationship between the Vietnamese crown and the mountain tribes continued until 1955.

Nevertheless, the failure to integrate the mountain minorities into the Vietnamese national community has remained a serious problem to this day and is unlikely to be resolved satisfactorily in the near future.

pl12. *ibid.*

Had land reform, for example, been a major item in the Viet-Minh's psychological arsenal, then the Viet-Minh's popularity should have been strongest in Cochinchina (where 2 per cent of the landowners at one time owned 30 per cent of the land), while in Tongking, with its 1 million Catholics and independent farmers (98 per cent of whom cultivated their own plot of land), it should have been weakest. But the situation was precisely the reverse; the Viet-Minh was strongest in the north and weakest in the south. There were other anomalies in the Viet-Minh's operations that did not fit Mao's theories or even the pet theories developed by latter-day Western theorists on the subject; for example, the fact that although Ho Chi Minh and nearly all his major subordinates were Vietnamese from the lowlands, all major Viet-Minh strongholds were in areas inhabited by mountain minorities that traditionally hate the Viet-nameese! It must be considered one of the Viet-Minh's signal achievements that it succeeded in at least partly winning over the mountain tribes of Viet-Nam without the successful wooing of those tribes, Ho and his staff would sooner or later have been betrayed to the French. A Tho chieftain, Chu Van Tan, quickly rose to the rank of major-general in the VPA; and one of the elite divisions, the 316th, was largely recruited from mountain tribesmen, which explains its efficiency in highland operations. Two other People's Army divisions, the 325th and the 335th, included large groups of minorities. At no time did Mao Tse-tung - with the exception, perhaps, of a brief period during the "Long March" - have to rely on the good will of the non-Han tribes of China as Ho had to rely on the non-Vietnamese tribes of Viet-Nam for almost eight years. This demanded a political rethinking of the situation, which the Viet-Minh never left in the hands of its military commanders, but placed where it properly belonged - with its Party thinkers....

p 120. In the plateau area of the PMS, the war also developed favorably to the Viet-Minh, Anchored on the three provinces of Quang-Ngai, Binh-Dinh, and Phu -Yen, which, as Interzone V, had been a Communist bastion since 1945, Viet-Minh control had slowly spread to the large Bahnar, Jarai, and Rhade mountain tribes and smaller groups. Thus, (by 1952), they literally "hollowed out" Franco-Vietnamese areas in Central Viet-Nam to the point where they merely covered a few narrow beachheads around Hue, Tourane (today known as Danang), and Nha-Trang. The only areas where the Viet-Minh was visibly losing ground

pl. 141. *ibid.*

In Article 3, the DRVN openly acknowledges the polyethnic character of Viet-Nam, and it is the only Vietnamese regime to realize that mountain'

tribes of Malayo-Polynesian origin cannot be treated like Vietnamese lowland rice farmers. Thus, the country is defined as being "one nation composed of several peoples," and the mountaineers are guaranteed the right to preserve their mores, languages, and writing systems. As in the other polyethnic states of the Soviet bloc, this approach to the minorities problem has gone beyond the realm of theory and has given the DRVN a competitive advantage over all its neighbors, who still persist in a forced-assimilation policy...

p280 *ibid.*

Jan 4 1962 ...The new eleven-point program promised the following:
8. A special effort will be made to have the mountaineer minorities share in the progress of their (lowland) compatriots."

....Of the eleven points, only two showed any special responsiveness to Viet-Nam's own problems" the items concerned with the training of village officials and with improving the lot of the mountaineers. But as early as 1957, the cream of village officialdom had been murdered by the Communists, who had correctly identified this group as a key element in the struggle. In any event, the major problem at that level is not so much the effectiveness of the village officials in their relations with the population as the effectiveness of the central and provincial administrations in their relations with the village officials.

In the case of the mountaineer, the Saigon regime has much to apologize for. American scholars, including those working for the Vietnamese Government within MSUG, have warned the Vietnamese both officially and privately of the negative effects their colonization plans were having on the inhabitants of the Southern Mountain Plateau. The mountaineers were not given even the semblance of local self-government, were often illegally deprived of their ancestral lands, and until very recently were provided with fewer schools and less adequate health services than under the colonial administration. North Vietnamese Communist indoctrination programs, advanced both by infiltrators and by radio, were ignored or their importance discounted; most important, they were not opposed by more effective Southern programs. More than 6,000 Rhade and perhaps 4,000 warlike Jarai, Bahnar, and Sedang had gone north with the Viet-Minh in 1954. Many of them now reappeared south of the 17th parallel with a deceptively simple program that offered the mountaineers, downtrodden under a harsh lowland Vietnamese administration, the prospect of an "autonomous area" like the Thai-Meo and Viet Bac zones of the DRVN. Since Ngo Dinh Diem, who did not envisage local self-government even for the Vietnamese lowland areas, was unamenable to real reforms in the mountain areas, any American program in the Plateau was of necessity limited to

was of necessity limited to increasing the effectiveness of South Vietnamese military operations in the area and to making, as the January 4 program pledged, a "special effort" to bring some material improvements to the mountaineers. Once more, an lastute Communist psychological - political move was matched on the Western side by an attempt to either "buy off or kill off" the natives. In the circumstances, this may not have been a bold enough answer.....

p365 ibid.

In terms of territorial administration, the NLF has split South Viet-Nam into three interzones (Lien-khu), the Saigon-Giadinh Special Zone, and seven zones, which more or less follow the zone boundaries of the 1945-54 Viet-Minh structure. These are, in turn, subdivided into thirty-odd provinces along the old French provincial boundary lines, each of which is headed by a provincial committee. There also exists within Zone II, the Western Highlands (Tya-^{fa} Nguyen), an Autonomous Nationalities Movement, led bny Y-Bih Aleo, which was to give the Montagnard minorities of the area the kind of autonomy for which they have been begging on the governmnet side for the past decade, and which led to two serious non-Communist rebellions in 1964 and 1965. Note 39 p489 reference:

39. The mountain tribal organization not dominated by the NLF and led by Chau-Dara and Y Bham, is known as the FULRO (Front Unifie de Luttte de la Race Opprimee). Created on August 1, 1964, its extreme wing demands full independence from both Viet-Nams. FULRO participated as a separate organization at the February, 1965, Phnom-Penh Conference of Indochinese Peoples.

pl44-145 Chu Van Tan and the Autonomous zones pl82, Cju Van Tan and the Lien-Viet

...Early in 1964, Y Bli was transferred to another camp at Buon Sarpa. Here, with Cambodia and the guerrilla infiltration routes not far away, he participated in border surveillance patrols. But the commanding officers at Buon Sarpa were Vietnamese, and before long the new arrival felt the ethnic tensions weighing still more heavily on him. There were good reasons why they should. For example, Montagnard soldiers were not always paid the full amount they had coming to them. Besides that, the Vietnamese officers sometimes sent Montagnards out on operations without going along to share in the danger. When the officers did go along, they had Montagnard coolies carry their packs. There were smaller grievances as well. Vietnamese officers often failed to return the salutes of the Montagnard soldiers, and the Montagnards felt that the enterprising Vietnamese barbers who had set up business at Buon Sarpa were overcharging for haircuts. Y Bli began to wonder what he was fighting for. "We fought for the French and got nothing," he said. "Now we fight for the Vietnamese and they give us nothing."

Finally, on September 19, 1964, the Montagnard leaders at Buon Sarpa - like others elsewhere in the Highlands - revolted. At one o'clock in the morning they shot eleven Vietnamese officers. They raised the Montagnard flag over Buon Sarpa and tied the Vietnamese commander to the flagpole. The Americans in the camp looked helplessly on. Certainly they were opposed to the violence, but they had always tended to sympathize with the underdog Montagnards. (Eventually, the Americans were evacuated by helicopter.) The revolt lasted eight days, and in all the Highlands more than eighty Vietnamese were killed. Y Bham, a famous man to the young tribesmen, visited Buon Sarpa during this time. He had spent five years in jail in Hue for his role in an earlier rebellion and was the leader of the Montagnard nationalist movement, FULRO (Front Uni pour la Liberation des Races Opprimees - United Front for the Liberation of the Oppressed Races). After the 1964 revolt, Y Bham, with some of the Buon Sarpa leaders and a few hundred followers, remained in the vicinity of the Cambodian border (some thought actually in Cambodia).

At Buon Sarpa the revolt ended when a Vietnamese armed force, larger than was customarily used against the Viet Cong, arrived from Ban Me Thuot. The Montagnards surrendered. General Nguyen Khanh, then prime minister, came for a ceremony at which the Vietnamese flag replaced the Montagnard colors. The two adversaries exchanged pistols and made new promises to each other.

Area Handbook for South Vietnam April 1967 Foreign Area Studies of
the American University

Chapter 5 Ethnic Groups and Languages: p 85. The Rhade:

To the south of the Jarai are the Rhade, whose numerical strength, relative sophistication and strategic location across a Viet Cong supply line gives them first-rank importance among Montagnard peoples. The Rhade are centered around Ban Me Thuot, capital of Darlac Province. They are, however, dispersed over a wide area, including the neighboring provinces of Quang Duc, Khanh Hoa and Phu Yen, as well as portions of Eastern Cambodia. Estimates of their strength range from 100,000 to 150,000.

Rhade participation in public affairs have been more extensive than that of other Montagnard groups. The community includes a number of individuals who have acquired education and administrative or technical competence, and it has provided leadership and initiative in the Montagnard autonomy movement. Y. Bham, a Rhade, is a former government official and currently president of the Unified Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (Front Unifie pour la Liberation des Races Opprimees - FULRO), the

independence movement of certain montagnard groups (see ch. 14, Political Dynamics; ch. 27, Subversive Potential).

ibid. p244.

Ethnic Minorities

South Vietnam's minorities, especially the ethnically diverse montagnards of the Central Highlands and the predominantly urban-based Chinese, are significant elements of the body politic; the former, because of their strategic geographical position and separatist sentiments; the latter, because they have considerable influence over the nation's economy. Neither of these two minorities has been effectively assimilated into national life, but outwardly at least they express allegiance to the Saigon government. Similarly, the Khmers (400,000) and the Chams (35,000) of the lowlands have remained alien enclaves in the Vietnamese society around them (see ch 5, Ethnic Groups and Languages).

The Montagnards

The 700,000 montagnards, ethnically distinct from the Vietnamese and divided by language and custom into 40 or more groups, are not a cohesive entity. They are, however, traditionally hostile toward the Vietnamese. Moreover, they are exposed to Viet Cong efforts to gain their favor for the purpose of exploiting the sparsely settled Central Highlands, in which they live, for use as infiltration routes and as sanctuaries. Under these circumstances, accompanied by increasing outside influences which they historically have resented, the montagnards are beginning to acquire a political awareness and a sense of unity hitherto unknown among them. The montagnards' traditional hostility was further aggravated in 1954 by President Diem's action terminating the special status they had enjoyed under the French and bringing their homelands under Saigon's direct control. Thereby, Vietnamese law superseded customary law, and Vietnamese administrators were appointed to the highland districts. Other activities of President Diem's government added to montagnard resentment and resulted in an uprising of the Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade and Koho against the South Vietnamese Government in 1958. It was quickly suppressed, and seven leaders were jailed. Five were released in 1962 but two, Y Bham of the Rhade and Paul Nur of the Bahnar, were kept in prison until after November 1963.

Realizing the importance of winning the loyalty of the montagnards, the Diem regime in 1961 initiated a more liberal policy. At the same time, the United States Special Forces advisers began the selection and training of montagnards for service in counterpart South Vietnamese units. These United States advisers demonstrated an ability to work with the montagnards but were unable to transfer the trust placed in them by the montagnards to the South Vietnamese officers who were assigned by the Saigon regime to command these small units. Hostility aggravated by this action on the part of the government was further heightened by the montagnards' knowledge that certain Rhade, Jarai, Bahnar and Hre, who had been induced to fight with the Viet Cong, were permitted to do so in units officered by fellow tribesmen.

Tensions between the montagnards and the South Vietnamese mounted. On August 1, 1964, Y Bham, the Rhade leader, announced the formation of a Unified Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (Front Unifié pour la Libération des Races Opprimées - FULRO) claiming to represent the Khmers and the Chams as well as the montagnards. The announcement accused the South Vietnamese of systematically suppressing and mistreating the minorities and declared liberation from the "Vietnamese yoke" to be the purpose of the Front. In Darlac Province, on September 20, 1964, montagnards of the local defense groups, including Special Forces in five camps, revolted,

Y Bham

killed their South Vietnamese officers, raised their own flag (red, green and black with three yellow stars) and occupied the radio station in Ban Me Thuot, the provincial capital, whence they broadcast a demand for an autonomous tribal state. Simultaneously, Y Bham issued a declaration accusing the South Vietnamese of practicing "extermination" of the minorities.

Major General Nguyen Khanh, then prime minister, hurried to Ban Me Thuot to put down the revolt. He was prevailed on by United States advisers not to use force to retake the rebel camps and, after a week of negotiations with tribal leaders and the rebels, the camps were turned over peacefully to the South Vietnamese. Prime Minister Khanh refused to consider autonomy for the seven highland provinces where the montagnards are in the majority but agreed to "give consideration to their just aspirations" for equality.

Important concessions were promised. Villages were to be given title to an area four times as large as the land they actually occupied. Tribal customs and courts were to be restored. Highlanders were to be given preferential treatment when they sought admission to South Vietnamese high schools, the Thu Duc Infantry School and the Da Lat Military Academy. Tribal languages were to be taught at the primary school level with Vietnamese being introduced gradually at higher levels.

Meanwhile Y Baum had disappeared into the jungle, but in March 1965 he appeared in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, as guest of Prince Sihanouk (Chief of State) at an official dinner. During a speech at this dinner, Y Bham praised the Cambodians for their help to his people and attacked the Saigon government. Later, however, he expressed satisfaction to Prime Minister Khanh for his promised concessions, but demanded the right to fly the FULRO flag at montagnard camps and to organize a 50,000 man highlander army under its own officers. He also wanted United States aid to be canceled directly to the highlanders without passing through South Vietnamese intermediaries.

Desultory consultations were held between FULRO representatives and the Saigon government; FULRO groups continued to operate in the highlands, much to the displeasure of the II Corps commander, who branded them as rebels. On July 22, 1965, Chief of State Thieu promulgated Decree No. 6-65, which reorganized the tribal customs courts and defined their jurisdiction, and on July 27, accompanied by Prime Minister Ky, he visited Pleiku to open a montagnard center for the training of local security forces.

The promised restoration of tribal courts and other concessions to the montagnards, however, went unimplemented, and, on September 10 and 11, 1965, 400 tribesmen in Special Forces camps near Ban Me Thuot revolted but were disarmed by South Vietnamese marines. Chief of State Thieu made a hurried visit to the highlands to "convince the Montagnards that they were full-fledged citizens...and that the South Vietnamese government was trying to eliminate the social injustices that may have existed."

After this revolt was suppressed, Prime Minister Ky visited Ban Me Thuot, where the tribesmen reaffirmed their loyalty to the South Vietnamese Government. The Prime Minister promised the highlanders that the government would reassign all military and administrative personnel of montagnard origin to services relating to the tribal population and would facilitate the admission of their youths into the National Institute of Administration, the Thu Duc Infantry School and the Nha Trang Non-Commissioned Officers' School. Action was taken immediately by the government to set up an office in Ban Me Thuot called La Direction Speciale des Affaires Montagnards (Special Department for Montagnard Affairs). Although this office was headed by a South Vietnamese, his superior in Saigon was Paul Nur, a montagnard.

Unrest among the montagnards recurred on December 17, 1965, when FULRO sympathizers rose in the three provinces of Phu Bon, Darlac and Quang Duc. In Quang Duc they temporarily occupied the provincial capital, Gia Nghia; in Darlac they took over for a short time two Special Forces camps; in Phu Bon, they killed some 30 South Vietnamese, including a district chief. As in the previous September, the revolt was short lived. On this occasion, however, a military tribunal tried 20 leaders of the rebellion, charging them variously with treason, murder and attempted murder. Four were ordered executed by firing squad; others received sentences ranging from 5 years of hard labor to life imprisonment. Four were acquitted.

By February 1966 the FULRO-led dissident activities in the highlands were reported to be gaining momentum, but no new rebellious actions had occurred through April. Meanwhile, in March the Special Commissioner for Montagnard Affairs in Saigon, Paul Nur- the first montagnard to attain the status of a top government official - appealed to the highlanders to seek 'closer unity with the lowland people and to give up any suspicion in order to help realize a new Vietnamese society, in which all racial groups will merge into a single national entity." He stated that the present government's policy was based on principles of racial equality and solidarity and on respect for montagnard ways and customs, and he promised them measures to improve their welfare. Labeling FULRO as a group of dissidents, he asserted that "once the aspirations of the montagnards are realized, there will be no reason for the FULRO movement to exist." Moreover, he stressed that his office was planning to improve programs aimed at increasing security among the highlanders.

The value of winning montagnard loyalty or support has been equally recognized by the Communist-controlled, self-styled National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NFLSV), which also has a program stressing autonomy for the tribal areas. Y Binh Aleo, a Rhade, is a vice chairman of the Central Committee of the Front and its Presidium, as well as chairman of the Executive Committee of the so-called Highland People's Autonomy Movement....

LETTERS

Flight of the Dega

I witnessed many of the events that took place in Vietnam's Central Highlands between 1956 and 1973, and so read with great interest "Ceasefire in Cloudland" [EYEWITNESS, Dec. 6], which chronicles the most recent chapter in the sad history of the people of that area.

In recent published histories and in TV treatments purporting to document the Vietnam War, the important role played by the Highlands and the Montagnards has been ignored. Moreover, one of the war's most tragic consequences was the destruction it brought to the Montagnards. About a third of the estimated 1 million population were dead by 1975; 85% of their villages had been abandoned or forcibly evacuated.

Ironically, the Montagnards wanted only to be left alone. For centuries, they had lived in small communities whose moral order was expressed in respect for the individual, tribal justice, and sharing of resources. There were classical forms of art, music, dance, architecture. They sustained themselves by farming rice on slopes and bottomland in seasonal cycles. In nearby streams they drew water, bathed, fished. From the forests they took game, wild fruits and vegetables, and wood, bamboo and rattan for their houses and artifacts. They scrupulously observed ancient rituals, heeded signs and omens, and tried to keep in harmony with their many deities. They had a symbiotic, almost mystical, attachment to their green uplands. For many years they struggled to preserve their way of life.

Manifest in the development of a leadership and identity embodied in the Rhade term *Dega* ("Sons of the Mountains"), pan-Highland ethno-nationalism was expressed in the Dega Highlands Provisional Government. It had been expressed in other ways. In the late 1930s the Python God Movement spread through much of the Highlands, promising a golden age when the area would be free of outsiders, namely the French and the Vietnamese. In 1958 Bajaraka, one of two later movements mentioned in your article, sought to counter the Diem Administration's attempts at forcible integration of "ethnic minorities" — Montagnard, Cham, Khmer and Chinese — into the Vietnamese cultural sphere. (Bajaraka is an acronym for Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade and Kaho.) Those of its leaders who

weren't jailed went into hiding. The government continued settling large numbers of lowland Vietnamese on lands claimed by the Montagnards and suppressing institutions such as the tribal law courts.

In 1964 Y Bham Enuol and his group launched FULRO [the United Liberation Front of Oppressed Races]. This burst forth with a revolt in five upland Special Forces camps, bringing a new era of armed dissidence and making Montagnard ethno-nationalism a force to be reckoned with. Coming at a time when the communists (who had long been promising autonomy for the Montagnards) were gaining in the Highlands and threatening to cut South Vietnam in half, the uprising surprised and shocked the government in Saigon and the U.S. Mission there.

With American encouragement, the Vietnamese opened negotiations with FULRO. They also made some effort to satisfy the demands of the Montagnard leaders, many of whom were sympathetic to but not part of FULRO. A Ministry for Ethnic Minorities' Development was established in Saigon with Paul Nur, a member of the Bahnar tribe, as minister. New laws gave land titles to Montagnard villagers and re-established the tribal courts. But as the situation improved, the government again became indifferent to Montagnard desires. Negotiations dragged on and implementation of laws was very slow.

In 1971 the ministry came under the able leadership of Nay Luett (a Jarai) and his colleagues Touneh Han Tho (a Chru) and Pierre-Marie K'briuh (a Sre). Social and economic programs began to move ahead. But the war was intensifying, and the communist offensive early in 1972 turned thousands of Montagnard villagers into refugees. Programs collapsed. The struggle to maintain ethnic identity was eclipsed by the struggle for sheer survival.

In 1973 the last U.S. forces left South Vietnam. Trying to cope on rapidly dwindling U.S. aid, the Thieu government had little time for Montagnard affairs. Meanwhile the North Vietnamese Army became predominant in the Central Highlands. FULRO splintered and became ineffective, a situation that contributed to the communist capture of Ban Me Thuot in March 1975. The South Vietnamese abandoned Kontum and Pleiku, and the resultant rout in the Highlands precipitated the communist victory in

South Vietnam.

On the day Saigon fell, few of the ministry's leaders were able to leave as refugees. Those who remained were jailed; some (including Minister Nay Luett) are said to have died in harsh conditions. In Phnom Penh, as *Asia-week* notes, Fr. Ponchaud saw Y Bham Enuol and other FULRO leaders being led away by the Khmer Rouge, never to be seen again.

Hanoi's policy was spelled out in programs and public statements reminiscent of the Diem era. All land was nationalised and the tribal courts abolished. Vietnamese were settled in the Highlands to bring "civilised ways" and "development."

Men like the young leaders named in your story — Nay-Rong, Thoraban, Y Ghok Nie Krieng — and their followers remained Sons of the Mountains, living free in the forest. With the dissolution of the Dega Provisional Government and its liberation front, the most crucial phase in the Montagnard struggle has ended. One hopes against hope, but the inescapable conclusion is that the Montagnards, their way of life, their world, are passing into the twilight between zero and infinity. GERALD CANNON HICKEY

Chicago, Illinois

The Future Now

Arthur C. Clarke, who predicts an "attaché-case" unit that will provide instant audio, telex and video communications [PEOPLE, Jan. 12], is behind the times. A U.S. publishing group already has reporters in the field with back-packs working to satellite dishes in all media — experimentally but practically. Also already experimental is the Tokyo newspaper delivered by wireless.

The leaping of national boundaries is complete when the consumer has a multiplex receiver for sight, sound, data retrieval and transmission, and print-out, all in one small box. The hardware and software already exist. This is so scary for many governments that they have sought desperately to clobber the global information system via UNESCO, before 4 billion people learn about all this new freedom.

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Eyewitness

... that has now been terminated, dissolved

The effect[?] of deliberations was that 1,500 Dega fighters, most of them based in the extreme west of their land, which includes part of the Cambodian provinces of Ratanak and Mondulke, proceeded[?] and laid down weapons and returned to the familiar homeland of the Annamite ~~chain~~ ^{territory} in and around the towns of Kontum, Pleiku and Ban Me Thut. There would be no going back for the leading lights: their name and faces were altogether too familiar around the highlands with the wrong people. Several had already escaped Vietnamese prisons and camps. Still, one member of the Dega inner cabinet^② who had not gone to Thailand was defense secretary Paul-Yah. He wasn't around when the decision was made to cease the war. His comrades at Site 2 South said they'd sent message, but he remains somewhere close to home, probably in Cambodia. Yet, if resistance was continuing in the highlands, said the exiles, it was by people who were not linked to the FLNPM.

The journey to Thailand by the Dega leaders and close followers and families was, as they tell it, perhaps the first time an organized group of their people had left Ala Cu Chiang - of

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their own free will and knowing they'd never return - since they settled in the highlands. They say that event was just before the birth of Christ. They'd likely gone in the opposite direction across today's Thailand during that migration. For, according to their history, the journey to the mountains was from the Malay Peninsula, before that from islands of their origin, now Indonesia. It was not the first Bega journey hereabouts in recent times, though.

Several groups have appeared since 1980 on the Dong Rak escarpment, the rugged range to the northeast of Site 2 South that marks the border between Thailand and northern Cambodia, and further eastward, the Thai Laotian border. But most turned homewards after briefly experiencing a refugee's lot.

Tharaban was one of those who has been and gone previously



Runaways from Ala Cu Chiang: Their parents' faces were too familiar

viously. This was about five years ago, when the Dega leaders had eastern Cambodia as their staging area for strikes deeper into the highlands. His group arrived at Dong Rak, recalls Thoraban, and linked briefly with a detachment of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front. "Son Sann's troops led us back," he recalls, "but all they gave us was some food and clothes." The Dega, long without support from outside, had clearly hoped for more. Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri didn't offer much either. "We lived in the jungle, the wildest part, away from the Khmers," said Thoraban. "We are roots and leaves." A particular type of tuber was very much a matter of life & death. Though poisonous when raw, it could become edible when cooked exactly right. Thoraban's group knew the forest's most intimate secrets and lived.

The Dega, in any event, didn't expect much from Cambodia. It had already swallowed some of their heroes. Y Bham Enuol, the Rhade who in the Sixties led a revolt because of Saigon-inspired machinations in the highlands, went into Cambodia with some of his followers not long afterwards because, as Nay-Rong explains today at Site 2 South, "other tribal leaders thought he had failed." In his *Cambodia Year Zero*, Francois Ponchaud recalled the immediate aftermath of the Khmer Rouge takeover of Phnom Penh. About 800 people who had sought refuge in the French embassy had to walk from the mission and face the Khmer Rouge. "They marched away sorrowfully but with their heads high," recalled Ponchaud. Y Bham Enuol and another highland leader, Y Bun Suor, led the column, which included about 150 of their tribal fighters. None have been seen since. Also in 1975, across the border and before North Vietnamese troops consolidated in the Central Highlands, the then No. 2 of the Dega, Kpa-Koi, appointed Y Ghok Nie-Krieng acting chairman of the front. Then he left with a Dega mission to the Cambodian side of the highlands. He and his men disappeared too. The Dega did, in fact, cooperate with the Khmer Rouge — who they'd earlier fought bitterly — for a period after the Vietnamese invaded

rice cultivation rather than hunting and fishing and foraging in the mountains. So there were few clashes of interest over resources.

The French, pushing into the highlands during the 19th Century from what is now Laos, achieved an understanding with the Dega once initial skirmishing and uprisings were done with. The Dega were called Montagnards — mountain people — by the colonialists and left largely to their own devices. Finally, though, in 1946 and under pressure from Vietnamese nationalists, the French recognised what the Dega said were frontiers and granted autonomous rights, including freedom to raise an army.

From 1952, when Emperor Bao-Dai scrapped those rights, it was mostly downhill for the Dega. Mention of Ngo Dinh Diem, who overthrew the puppet ruler, earns sneers of hatred at Site 2 South. His regime's unkind stance towards highlanders and other minorities led the Dega to form the Bajaraka movement. This was the forerunner to the FLHPM (1964). In the same year, the United Liberation Front of Oppressed Races — FULRO —

came into being. That grouping put the FLHPM in alliance with liberation fronts representing the Islamic Cham and Khmer Krom (Cambodians living in Vietnam). Y Bham Enuol came on the scene with an army of 4,000 to spearhead an anti-Saigon uprising across the highlands in September of 1964.

By 1968 the Dega had achieved a measure of understanding with the South Vietnamese government — like the French before them facing a mighty challenge from the communists. Dega fighters returned from the Cambodian areas of Ala Cu Chiang, many joining the Saigon forces. Of the Site 2 South contingent, Thoraban, Nay-Rong and R'Mah-Dock are ex-Saigon officials. Yet it was with the Americans — who recognised that "Mountain Yards" could make good units look great — that the Dega found something akin to common cause. Green Beret officers swore by "our Yards."

Hanoi's victory over South Viet-



Y Samy Ayun: Stand-in pastor



Nay-Rong, Thoraban. Y Ghok Nie-Krieng: A lost cause

name forces meant Ala Cu Chiang would never go beyond paper. Nay-Rong went to a "re-education camp" near Pleiku. "The North Vietnamese worked me like a slave. I was given one-and-a-half bowls of rice a day, and sometimes it was mixed with tapioca." He escaped in 1976 before compulsory lessons in Marxism-Leninism were complete and joined the resistance. R'Mah-Dock, the Dega camp leader at Site 2 South, was captured at Dalat in 1975 but escaped within months. Thoraban, serving as a lieutenant in the South Vietnamese forces in Darlac Province, was captured by Viet Cong in 1974 but was released soon after by Dega forces. He suffered a shoulder wound in a clash with Vietnamese in 1979, but he says he gave more than he got. "I killed a number of Vietnamese."

Y Ghok Nie-Krieng had headquartered the Dega front near Ban Me Thuot in the opening spell of resistance to Hanoi. Nominally, the front had 20,000 fighters, but no one had the means to tackle the Vietnamese effectively. Resupply systems went with the Americans. By 1979, Dega guerilla actions had all but fizzled out in the face of big-unit approaches by the Vietnamese. Twice yearly since 1975, say the exiles, Hanoi has sent three divisions — about 20,000 men — to sweep through the highlands. And Vietnamese tactics included permanent posting of small units in every hamlet to prevent food supplies reaching Dega fighters. The arrival of Vietnamese settlers in the highlands — 3 million of them, it's claimed — turned the screws tighter. The Dega front quit FULRO in April 1982 because, says Y Ghok Nie-Krieng, their policies were "ridiculous, bringing no actual benefits to the unfortunate peoples."

The Dega left Ala Cu Chiang with merely the clothes on their backs, and they had even less by the time they joined the refugee crush. "Before we came here from Nam Yun [refugee holding centre in Thailand's Ubon Ratchathani Province to the northeast] we burnt our military uniforms," says R'Mah-Dock, by way of explanatory apology for the alien jeans and T-shirts in which most of the Dega are clad. Traditional dress — black woven shirts and tops (long-sleeved for men, short for women) with silver buttons and colourful stripes — are distant memories. More enduring are thoughts of loved ones left behind. Thoraban has a wife and three children somewhere in the highlands, Nay-Rong a wife and four children, likewise R'Mah-Dock. Ex-propaganda chief Y Bhuat Eban said goodbye to a wife and six children some time back. Now he has a second wife and two more children.

God — the Christian One — most certainly lives on in the highlands. The million or more Dega are solidly Christian. (Adherents to Catholicism and Protestantism — Evangelists — are split about equally, though at Site 2 South the Protestants number 158.) Arriving at their present camp less than two months ago, one of the first acts of the Dega leadership was to construct two churches. Their most prized possession is a Bible, cherished and protected even as personal and therefore unimportant: scraps of paper and photographs were mashed underfoot on forest trails. They refer to it as their *Hadruom*, the "Book of God's Word." It is written in Dega/Rhade and was printed in

the U.S. The Dega are without pastor or priest, but they manage. Y Samy Ayun administers to the Protestants. "I learned from looking at my father, who was an Evangelist pastor," he explains. "He was killed by the North Vietnamese." There's also comfort in Dega/Rhade programs from the Christian-funded Far East Broadcasting in the Philippines.

The old ways, basically animistic and transplanted among the 1,500-metre peaks of the highlands 2,000 years ago, have never been totally submerged. Incorporated into tradition are *Mnam Puot Hua*, a period in November and December when the harvest is in. *Hua Msat* is a time for remembering ancestors. Everyday life echoes of the ancients too. The Dega are by instinct longhouse people, though single-family cottages began appearing some decades ago. After marriage, a husband moves in with his in-laws. Offspring take the mother's name. The longhouses, without rafters or beams, once measured 100 metres; now they're around 40. Site 2 South has 32 huts, and most of the seventeen women and 23 children live in a row separated from the menfolk.

H'Ngam, 35, who marched with her resistance-trooper husband Lo Miu-Ha Bhong through every battle and then into exile, says she'd like to go home. But she doesn't think that will happen: "The Vietnamese make it impossible." Like everyone else, she thinks third-country resettlement the only course. She waits on the border for something to happen. Others are in a hurry. Bangkok police last week announced they'd detained nineteen Dega in the Thai capital. If the Dega at Site 2 South knew of this attempt to leapfrog the system, then they'd kept quiet about it. Minding God's and your own business is what the people of Ala Cu Chiang believe life's all about. ■

