

The Deaf Kids Of Vietnam

Hanoi

One particularly complex, long and costly problem facing North Vietnam after 30 years of war is that of re-educating deaf children.

There are no statistics for the whole country, but Professor Tran Huu Tuoc, North Vietnam's top ear, nose and throat specialist, said that in four provinces south of Hanoi — Thanh Hoa, Nghean, Ha Tinh and Quang Binh — 16 children per 10,000 under 10 had been deafened during the war.

Given a population of six million in the four provinces, two million of which are under 15, the number of deaf children comes out at 3200.

The causes of their affliction are many: Burst eardrums and broken middle-ear bones because of heavy bombing, ear canals infected for too long as they lay for years in damp huts, or lack of medical care at a time when doctors were busy with more urgent cases.

To bring these children out of their world of silence — "the worst there is," according to Tuoc — two ultramodern centers have been set up, one in Thanh Hoa and the other in Hanoi.

In Hanoi, Tuoc, with the help of 200 assistants and material aid from several countries, is attempting the impossible — to establish communication between a horde of deaf children with wide-awake eyes.

At first sight the classrooms seem like any others: a blackboard, maps on the walls, a white-bloused teacher with a stick of chalk.

Ten boys and girls sit behind their desks. They are no different from other pupils, except that each wears a pair of stereophonic earphones, feeding in the lesson at various intensities to suit the individual.

The teacher makes a sign. A pupil rises, hears a sound, draws it on the blackboard and has to pronounce it. If necessary, the teacher repeats the sound ten times, her voice modulated for the whole class through their earphones.

In one room, a teacher is trying to coax intelligible sounds from a little girl. She can see the tone of her voice — which she has already begun to master — displayed on an oscilloscope. The teacher repeats the sound and the child tries to correct her voice by trying to match it to the curve on the screen.

In another room, a 4-year-old boy is learning basic sounds — a cock-crow, a train-whistle, a car horn. To help him learn, the train-whistle sounds when he presses a button to start an electric train. Intrigued by the game, he presses the button again and again.

Tuoc, whose work with adults includes operating on brain tumors and cancers of the larynx, seems to have a predilection for his young deaf patients.

He says with passion: "A child who has been deafened at the age of two because a bomb dropped near him is a life-long cripple. Total deafness plunges a human being into absolute nothingness."

To stress the importance of his work, Tuoc cites the case of a 10-year-old girl who can now speak, although not yet very well. "But she is lively and happy. She jokes with younger friends," he points out.

"When she first came here she showed all the signs of a completely anti-social being. She did not want to see anyone. She was a kind of wild animal.

"Today, this former savage takes care of her hair and her fingernails. She communicates. This is why something has to be done."

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