

# U.S. Aide Reports Hanoi Is Beset by Difficulties

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By ROBERT TRUMBULL

CANBERRA, Australia, Jan. 7—An American expert on North Vietnamese affairs told a conference of Asian specialists today that North Vietnam has been severely affected by political uncertainty, stringent economic problems and a steady decline in living standards since the death of President Ho Chi Minh 18 months ago.

Douglas Pike, who has spent years in Saigon as a specialist with the United States Information Agency, also said that the North Vietnamese had indicated "a little less zeal for pursuit of the war in the south," and that leaders in Hanoi were divided on whether to give priority to the war or to domestic problems.

Mr. Pike, speaking at the 28th World Congress of Orientalists here said Ho Chi Minh's death was followed almost immediately by a drastic change in policy, with more attention to the deteriorating economy.

#### Cites Food Production

The nine-man Politburo has declared that "the war will go on," Mr. Pike said, "but it remains to be seen at what level."

An "unbelievably low" agricultural production is the heart of the economic problem, he said, asserting that 80 per cent of the people were engaged in feeding the population, "yet 15 per cent of the food eaten must be imported, a stark statistic unmatched anywhere in the world."

Citing reports in the North Vietnamese press, Mr. Pike said, "The public is charged with apathy or worse toward social goals. The young are singled out for special criticism in having traded socialist zeal for pursuit of pleasure.

"Most of the population patronizes the black market, where sugar, rice and fish are usually available but at six times the official price. The black market is virtually the only place where one can find razor blades, needles, toothpaste or batteries. There is even a black market in electricity.

#### Sees Top-Level Discord

Beset by these problems, he said, the top leadership is divided between "ideologues who argue that the way to raise the quality of life is by lectures and moral exhortations," in the manner of Mao

Tse-tung, and the "pragmatists" who would approach reforms "partly through material incentives, but chiefly by reducing the pressures on the society."

"The ultimate outcome in North Vietnam is in doubt," Mr. Pike declared. "The best one can now conclude is that the doctrinal disputes have had the net result of turning inward both the Politburo and the people there is a little less zeal for pursuit of the war in the south, or at least a willingness to draw it out in time."

Mr. Pike, who is now a special assistant for political and military affairs attached to the United States Embassy in Tokyo, said that he had based his conclusions mainly on official statements by the Hanoi leaders, in addition to reports in the controlled press. Communist propaganda "has a kind of truth to it," he said, "and has to be taken seriously."

His views were challenged by several academics belonging to a group opposed by the Vietnam War, called Concerned Asian Scholars of Australia and New Zealand. The organization is holding a rival congress among the scholars tomorrow at Australian National University, where the Orientalists are meeting.