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Saigon After the Fall: Rumor,

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LONDON — The women were frightened, and angry; the soldiers, inexperienced in handling demonstrations, seemed uncertain, as if they were losing their nerve. The two groups, gathered in what used to be called John F. Kennedy Square, were yelling at each other in what appeared to be a name-calling match that finally fizzled out.

The women — wives and relatives of some of the officers of the fallen Thieu government who had been taken off for 10-day or 30-day "reeducation" courses — had come to demand that the head of the Military Management Committee of Saigon explain why their men had not returned.

They were especially puzzled because those who sent for a 30-day course had been told exactly what to bring, and it was clear that they were off to the mountains. A pullover, a raincoat and a mosquito net were required, as was enough money for food for a month. They were also advised to bring toothpaste.

By the time I left Saigon, at the end of July, none of those who had been taken off for the courses seemed to have come back, although many of the

former enlisted men had returned from their three-day courses. (There have since been reports from the government's Liberation Radio that some 800 officers have been released, more than 300 of them in connection with the Sept. 2 national day celebrations.)

When it became apparent that the officers were not coming back at the end of 10 or 30 days, something happened in the capital that showed vividly how much suspicion of the new government's good faith there was.

It began with a rumor of an accident, in which two truckloads of former officers had been ambushed, or had hit a minefield, somewhere near Tayninh. The rumor grew, until in the end one woman assured me that 2,000 of the men in the reeducation program had somehow been killed.

The effect on the women in Saigon was profound. They gathered in the apartment buildings to discuss what was happening, there was weeping and panic, and groups went to demand an explanation from the authorities. The demonstration I witnessed was only one of many.

It took a long time for the authorities to react. One Vietnamese journalist claimed that four men who had been in reeducation had been returned

to their families in coffins. These men may have been clearing a minefield, or handling old material.

To explain why all the others had not returned, the government had to admit that the 10-day and 30-day periods were minimums only. The officers would have to continue their reeducation until, they were in fact reeducated. This, it was rumored, might be a matter of one or two years.

Although the actual panic subsided, the incident had a profound effect on people's attitude to the authorities. They realized that reconciliation was not going to be as easy as some of them had expected. They saw, too, that they had been misled.

It was clear that the population of Saigon did not for the most part believe what they read in the papers. They spoke often of the gap between what the authorities said and what they did. In a situation where there was obviously a great deal of uncertainty and worry about the future, this lack of any authoritative voice was keenly felt.

The Vietnamese, rightly or wrongly, have always held great faith in the British Broadcasting Corp.'s Vietnamese-language service, and it was no accident that in the last days of the

'Reeducation' and Censorship

war the BBC came under strong attack from President Thieu. Both sides in the conflict listened avidly to the service, to the fury of the former Saigon generals.

But by the end of July the BBC was unable to work in Saigon itself; its stringer was silenced for writing a report that happened to be true, but unpalatable to the new authorities. People were being encouraged to denounce their neighbors for listening to the BBC.

The BBC and its less highly regarded colleagues, such as the Voice of America, were when I left the only source of information available to the Vietnamese that was not controlled by either Hanoi or Saigon. Radio Hanoi indicated its basic attitudes by declaring its support for Mrs. Gandhi's recent anti-democratic emergency measures.

In the last days of Thieu's presidency, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam continually voiced for a free press. After the fall of Saigon, however, one of the first acts of the new regime was the abolition of all former Saigon newspapers and the introduction of censorship.

As far as the foreign press was concerned, censorship did not wish a certain story to appear, they simply "lost" it at the post office, through which all dispatches had to pass. If a writer continually filed stories that angered the authorities, he would be politely asked to leave.

Before long, the press corps had been considerably thinned out, and all that was appearing from Saigon was being written very much with the authorities in mind. It was impossible to mention certain subjects - for instance, the question of what was happening in Cambodia - whatever you said; it was impossible to describe certain salient features of Saigon - for instance, the impoverishment of the bourgeoisie.

In certain cases, journalists were called to the Foreign Ministry and asked to change what they had written or to excise certain passages to give a better impression.

I got into a little trouble, for instance, when I mentioned a factory that had run out of imported raw materials. I had said that this factory was finding it impossible to function. What I should have said, it was explained, was that the factory was finding it "difficult" to function.

The Factory made nylon nets. It happened to have run out of nylon gut. For a nylon net factory, I should have thought this was more than a mere difficulty.

But the authorities wanted stories saying how normal everything was. Even a quite neutral report - for instance, that a bus had gone off the Datalat road, and that all passengers but one had been killed—was simply not to be known.

Communication both internally and externally were being more and more strictly controlled, but one new information service was unquestionably a popular success - the service given on the television and through the newspaper Saigon Giai Phong (Liberation) for locaton mission persons.

Every evening on the television there was a period in which those whose families have been split up during the war have a chance to try to contact each other. The service has been effective, but it made melancholy viewing, as the old photographs flashed up on the screen of soldiers who disappeared years ago. One knew that a large proportion of those are dead.