

Vietnam -- all of it -- will

By Bob Tamarkin
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BANGKOK — The country of Vietnam is one; the people of Vietnam are one, proclaims Ho Chi-minh's venerable slogan on billboards throughout South Vietnam that once hawked Coca-Cola and Lucky Strikes.

It took 29 years of civil war to bring Ho's words to the south.

Today, the major step toward fulfilling those words will be taken when the people of Vietnam vote to approve a new socialist society.

Both North and South Vietnamese will elect a hand-picked national assembly that eventually will ratify unification of the two Vietnams into a single nation, with Hanoi as the capital. There is no opposition slate.

Today's election takes place only five days before the anniversary of South Vietnam's crushing defeat by the North, when on that rainy morning of April 30, 1975, North Vietnam's Russian-built T-54 tanks bulled through the gates of former President Nguyen van Thieu's palace to proclaim victory.

The defeat was hastened by the panic of South Vietnamese forces and the withdrawal of U.S. support.

Few cities have been captured so quickly, and there are many problems to be solved, Lt. Gen. Tran van Tra, the new military chief of Saigon, said shortly after he arrived last May.

Hanoi knew that it would take more than just changing the name of the South Vietnamese capital to Ho Chi-minh City in order to win the hearts and minds of the 21 million people it had conquered.

Under the guidance of Hanoi's politburo, South Vietnam's new Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in the past year has concentrated mainly on indoctrination seminars for Southerners that last from three days to nine months.

The seminars preach against U.S. "imperialism" and say that the Thieu regime was a pawn in the hands of U.S. criminals. They are attended by former ARVN (Army of Republic of Vietnam) soldiers, schoolteachers, monks, bureaucrats, prostitutes, students and even Gen. Duong van (Big) Minh, South Vietnam's last president.

It is clear the bloodbath some Americans predicted has not taken place. There have been some executions to discourage resisters and criminals, but no mass killings and wholesale depopulation of cities, as reported by the refugees fleeing the new Cambodia.

Mass retaliation would only serve to alienate the South Vietnamese and cause disunity, one Western analyst said, adding: "Besides, Hanoi is trying to win international support and is very aware the world is still focusing on Vietnam."

A year after war's end, North and South will OK Red-chosen assemblymen

While the Communists have moved slowly and cautiously in trying to consolidate their hold over the South Vietnamese, they have taken no chances.

Since the end of the war, some 25,000 North Vietnamese have been moved to the south, where they have taken over government offices, public utilities and factories. There are 20 divisions — some 200,000 men — of North Vietnamese troops still stationed in the south as a precaution against resistance. An estimated 50,000 of them are based in the Saigon area.

While a bumper rice harvest in the Mekong delta has provided enough food to feed the combined 43 million population of North and South Vietnam, there are shortages of canned goods, gasoline and other commodities and raw materials.

One of the biggest problems has been the burgeoning numbers of unemployed. There are an estimated 3.5 million unemployed in the south, about a million of whom are demobilized ARVN soldiers, police and civil servants.

Many of them migrated to Saigon, swelling its population to more than 3 million in 1975. At the start of the French-Indochina war in 1946, Saigon's population was only about 500,000.

In an effort to reduce the ranks of unemployed and thin out Saigon's population, the PRG has opened new economic zones throughout the south from the highlands to the delta.

Families who agree to move to rural areas are given 2.5 acres of land, tools and a six-month supply of rice. So far, some 400,000 Saigon residents have left for the fields. Some, however, have migrated back to Saigon after realizing how difficult life is in the new economic areas. The PRG hopes to move at least 1.5 million more people this year.

The Communists are trying to create the Vietnam that existed in the 1930s. Says an Indochina expert,

vote today

April 25, 1976 ☆☆☆ Section A Page 29
S.F. Sunday Examiner & Chronicle

The south will become the food producer and the north the industrial center."

To help in its reconstruction efforts, Hanoi turned to Russia for \$500 million in aid that will be spent in its 1976-1980 five-year plan. China, it is estimated, has pledged about \$200 million.

In return for the Soviet aid, Hanoi last fall signed a most-favored-nation pact which declares both the Vietnamese and Russians are loyal to Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism.

There also has been encouragement by the PRG for foreign investors. The big French Michelin rubber plantation is still operating, and there is at least one Japanese oil-exploration concern operating offshore in Vietnamese water.

In the past year, Vietnam's communications and transportation networks have also been expanded. Relatives and friends can visit one another by train between Hanoi and Saigon for the first time since 1954.

Although the streets are still jammed with motor bikes, and a few blue-jean-clad youngsters, signs of the former American presence in Saigon are rapidly disappearing, according to foreign visitors, former residents and refugees recently interviewed.

Nightlife is dead, replaced by pavement stalls that sell local rum, rice wine, beer and French coffee. There are no Western-made movies and only a few books available. The Morning Star, Sporting and Rosie bars are now distribution points for rice and other commodities. There are no longer any bar girls or prostitutes. But there are still plenty of beggars.

The black market, or "thieves market," curiously still flourishes, but there are few buyers. The stalls are filled with looted American PX goods, such as cameras and radios. There are electrical appliances, television sets and furniture stolen from the dwellings of the Americans who fled Saigon.

Most of the major streets have been renamed after Vietnamese Communist heroes or events. John F. Kennedy Square is now called Peace Square. Thong-Nhat Boulevard, where the U.S. embassy building stands, is called 30 Thang 4, meaning Liberation Day, April 30, 1975.

There are still between 6,000 and 8,000 French nationals living in Saigon, and 35 to 40 Americans.

There is some speculation that the Vietnamese will not allow the Americans to leave until relations between Hanoi and the United States are normalized.

"We know most of them have exit visas and have been standing by for approval, but have not received it," said one Western diplomat.

But several Americans, who have left in recent weeks, say the visa problems are generally technical and can be worked out with the authorities.

Most observers feel it will take Vietnam at least a decade to become economically viable after reunification, which is expected some time in the next several months.

In the meantime, the North Vietnamese will have to be reckoned with as an emerging Asian power, certainly as the power that will dominate Indochina. There will be 43 million people under a united Vietnam, with the third biggest and most experienced fighting force in Asia, after China and India.
