

Nguyen Cao Ky: On the Sinking Boat



Detail of photograph by David Douglas Duncan from his book "War Without Heroes"

By NGUYEN CAO KY

SAIGON, South Vietnam—South Vietnam is like a sinking boat, with a deceptively good coat of paint outside, and a helmsman who is unfaithful, disloyal, and dishonest. A whirl of wind and the boat will sink to the bottom.

It is clear that the people have lost faith in the Government. The old have become weary and disillusioned, and the young are disoriented. Unless we take urgent and radical measures, to redress the situation, I am afraid the danger will become more and more serious.

Corruption is rampaging. It is so widespread that corrupt officials have a price list for every transaction, big or small, requiring their services. Jung law rules in all government

echelons. Corruption has become public, open, and as it were, an incurable disease.

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Today, not only are the people writhing under social injustices, but they are also becoming more and more miserable because of the harsh economic measures decreed in the name of national necessity, for the sake of so-called efforts toward self-sufficiency. But that is not defensible in a situation of continued injustices with the people being required to accept restrictions to the point of being miserable and near starvation, while powerful and rich people continue to evade taxes and corruption continues to spread.

Although we are in a democratic society within which there is no class division, a new class of profiteers has

emerged, made up of those in positions of power and authority. They are everywhere and they would seize on any opportunities to unscrupulously grab money, even if they had to tread underfoot the sacrifices the combatants have made in blood and bones. These people have been able to achieve for themselves a life of luxury, while other people are living in misery.

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In the meantime, our soldiers, who are directly contributing to the national struggle by sacrificing their lives to maintain security for the people living in the rear, are being given the lowest standard of living. Their salaries are not enough for them and many have to try to scrape up additional money by working part time as janitors or drivers. Many a tragic and heart-breaking incident has happened to the families of those soldiers who have died for the fatherland, as for example to war widows who have had to take up indecent professions to live.

The civil servants do not have a better lot than the soldiers. We have seen that the more honest, the more diligent they are, the poorer and more underprivileged they become. Their miserable situation makes us think that honest civil servants are a forgotten class.

The peasantry, which makes up the greater part of our society, is supposed to be given special help through our land reform program, but in reality they are still being exploited by intermediaries. With the support of some people in power, rice dealers are free to exploit both peasants and consumers, so much so that a high Government official has had to admit recently the incapacity of the Government to put an end to this situation.

We can see by these things that the poorer classes and those who are directly sacrificing in the struggle for national defense, and contributing to the work of national reconstruction, are being forgotten while a minority of irresponsible people in positions of power think only of grabbing money and consolidating their power to continue to exploit the people.

This situation leads to more social injustices and to many a case of corruption. Since this class of profiteers must protect their own interests, they are ready to tolerate all illegal acts. It is not surprising that the poor are still paying more taxes than the rich, as shown in national budget documents.

Nguyen Cao Ky is the Vice President of South Vietnam. This article is excerpted from a speech he made at the School of Social Welfare in Saigon. The speech was translated from Vietnamese by the Saigon Bureau of The New York Times.