

About the Dikes in North Vietnam [second article]

*"The issue will be employed by Hanoi"*

By NGUYEN TIEN HUNG

WASHINGTON—Not only is November the month for the U.S. election, but more important to North Vietnam, it is the time for harvesting the most important crop of the year. The dike issue will therefore be employed by Hanoi for dual purposes: to influence public opinion abroad and to justify poor agricultural performance at home.

The people of Vietnam are grouped around the deltas of two great rivers, the Red River in the North and the Mekong River in the South. While the latter is like the Nile in Egypt, flowing through the South as an irrigator of adjoining lands, the former, in Pierre Gourou's words, "crosses the (Tonkinese) delta as a fearful stranger." It is so strange and fearful that for centuries it has never ceased to be a source of greatest anxiety to the peasants and their rulers for while the Red River supplies water for paddy sowing, transplanting and growth, it can also destroy crops by flooding.

The violence and swiftness of the Red River flow is well known. Heavy

rains are often accompanied by great winds which turn into typhoons with winds reaching speeds as high as 101 miles per hour. When they come, the Red River may suddenly break loose, threatening man and his entire rice crop since most of the delta is no more than ten feet above sea level, and some of it is three feet above or less.

Under the Communist regime, state expenditures on hydraulic works accounted for over 70 per cent of total annual spending on agriculture. In spite of these efforts the prospect of completely defending the dikes appears to be as remote now as ever before.

The history of the Red River dikes is one of dike breakings. Between 1890 and 1926 the Tonkin delta suffered sixteen major dike breakings. Between 1927 and 1945, in spite of new, more modern works constructed under the French, the dikes broke seven times. Since the 1954 partition, North Vietnam has not had much luck in controlling seasonal floods. Perhaps with the exception of 1956, 1959, 1964, 1965 and 1967, most of the other

years have been classified as bad years, during which typhoons, floods and drought dominated. Natural calamities were climaxed by the devastating flood of last year. On Sept. 2, 1971, Premier Pham van Dong publicly declared: "Flood waters from upstream have caused the water in the entire system of the Red River and Thaibinh River to rise to an unprecedented level, while heavy downpours in the delta caused added difficulties for the defense of the dike system."

The impact of last year's flood is still being felt in North Vietnam. In spite of substantial relief aid from Communist allies, the food shortage situation remains acute. This year, the summer crop was harvested (during May and June) at the time when the whole population was mobilized to support the current military offensive.

It appears probable that North Vietnam will suffer another calamity this year. At least some major portion of the dikes, especially those which were damaged by last year's flood, will be broken when typhoons strike from now through November.

In the past, North Vietnam's population could turn to the South for food relief in times of crisis. In 1945 when floods ravaged the Tonkin delta and the flow of Southern paddy was cut off because of war, starvation claimed the lives of over one million persons. Since the 1954 partition, North Vietnam has turned for assistance to the Communist bloc to partially substitute for the traditional Southern rice. Relief for last year's flood was provided by China, Russia, North Korea and East Germany.

North Vietnam must understand, however, that the vulnerability of its economy to the Red River and the dike system will render the prospect for permanently solving the food problem extremely remote. On the other hand, it cannot count on foreign assistance for lasting relief, especially in view of the Sino-Soviet dispute and its effect on the Communist bloc.

Presumably North Vietnam has looked back toward the South for a solution. It is also highly possible that the devastating flood of last September was a determining factor behind Hanoi's decision to go on toward its goal to conquer the South in the spring offensive. In any case, the food crisis of last year certainly helped strengthen the hand of the hawk faction in North Vietnam.

The Red River, the dikes and the vulnerability of North Vietnam's agricultural sector are critically important in explaining Hanoi's determination in the current conflict.

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