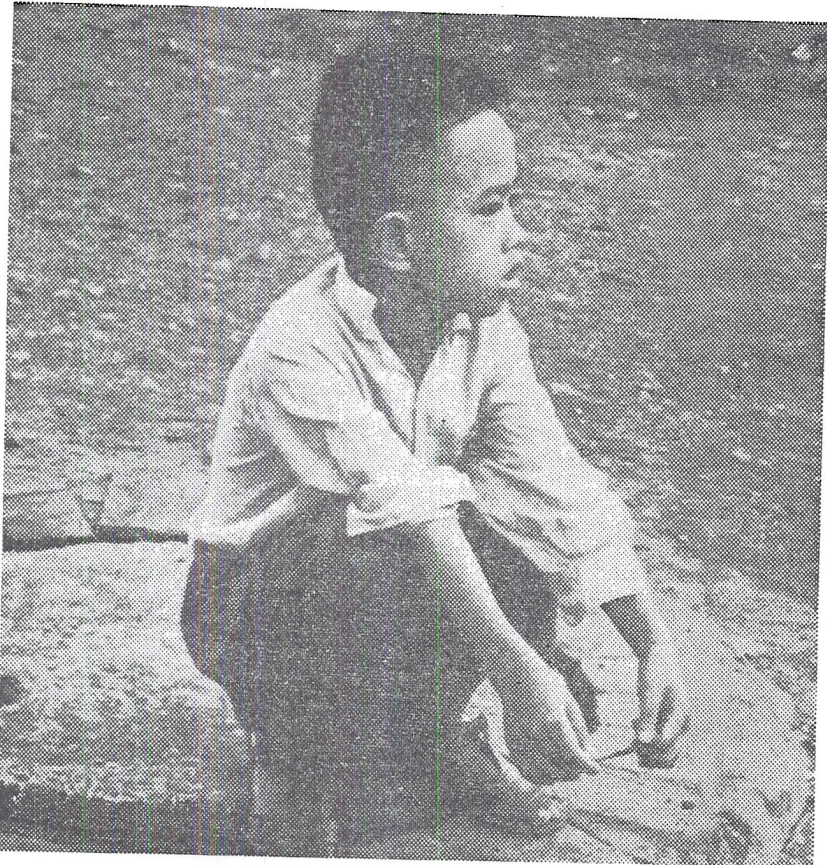


Bombs Fail to Dent Hanoi



Marc Riboud

By JACQUES DECORNOY

PARIS—The November 21 bombings were not a surprise in Hanoi. The commotion aroused in Washington by the downing of an American plane on the 13th had given the impression that something serious was in the offing.

I was led to understand that even before the 21st, increased defensive measures had been taken, south of the 19th parallel. But the capital and several provinces that I visited at that time were at rest then and stayed that way.

The high command's first communique mentioned the attacks in provinces north of the 19th parallel in the first paragraph although these raids were less violent and appear to have been at least in part a diversion to cover the helicopter commando operation.

There is every indication that Hanoi was seeking—politically and diplomatically—a return to a situation like that of April, 1968, when President Johnson stopped all raids north of the 19th parallel, rather than October 1968, when the raids on North Vietnam were completely halted. But this is only a personal interpretation, because the Vietnamese themselves are very tight-lipped on the matter.

I had the impression that they

were being cautious not only because of the commando operation, still shrouded in much mystery, but because they intended to let Washington trap itself in its own contradictions. It was easy to let American officials say that there had been no strikes in the region of Hanoi and then to show newsmen, of which I was one, that "Shrike" rockets had been fired only a few kilometers from the center of the capital.

In the zones that I visited, I could see that anti-aircraft guns had been shifted or been brought in. Today a similar operation would be more difficult for the Americans. The shelters that had been left in disuse have been fixed up again. However, a violent surprise attack on population centers (and what region is not populated in the North?) would doubtless cause widespread casualties among the civilian population.

Whoever went through the worst hours of the raids on North Vietnam knows how calm the populations were. So it is not surprising that they met the November 21 "alert" placidly, all the more so because material conditions have unmistakably improved since two years ago.

Life is hard, the country is poor, but it is still holding up and has done much toward reconstruction. Under these circumstances one cannot see

what favorable results Washington could obtain by renewing the bombing.

It is worth mentioning that the North is in no way "out of breath." In the past, American planes have been attacking what was essentially a rural society, whereas they acted as if bombing the Ruhr or Pittsburgh. Though the Vietnamese do not deny that the raids against the lines of communication toward the south caused difficulties, they were able to set up and carry out the Tet offensive after years of bombing of these lines.

Internationally, the Nov. 21 raids as well as Washington's desire to bring the prisoner question up separately have increased the "credibility gap."

After speaking with Vietnamese and interviewing Premier Pham Van Dong, it seemed to me that in their eyes this was not the time to examine questions in detail but to get back to the fundamentals of the Vietnamese problem. To the North Vietnamese, both the operation against Cambodia and the resumption of bombing appear to be attempts by the Americans to protect a Vietnamization policy doomed to failure.

The Premier confirmed this viewpoint in an interview. For the North Vietnamese the problem is in the south, in Saigon, and it is in Saigon that it must be solved. For the Premier, it is a waste of time to try to find out what Mr. Nixon was possibly trying to convey between the lines in his October 7th speech. What is essential is neither the speech nor the raids against the north, but the political evolution in the cities of the south. The Premier underlined the importance of this evolution which, in his view, concurs with the political analysis made by the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

It shows, according to the Premier, that it is impossible to set up a Pro-American government even in the zones that are not under the control of the National Liberation Front.

The Premier's level reaction surprised me more than anything else, because the air raids had just taken place and I was expecting a lengthy condemnation of them. It is true that this is a typically Vietnamese reaction: an unimaginative military "retaliation" prompted a very calm, cold, even self-assured political analysis which seeks to draw attention to the crux of the matter, independently of such historical vicissitudes as raids. And in Hanoi, it is thought that Washington is further than ever from a political victory in Saigon.

Jacques Decornoy is a specialist in Southeast Asia for *Le Monde*. He has just returned to Paris from Hanoi.