WHAT I SAW AND HEARD IN NORTH VIETNAM

by RAMSEY CLARK

I do not know what targets the U.S. bombers sought to hit, nor do I know what targets were hit that I did not see. What I personally saw during my two-week visit to North Vietnam was damage or destruction in five villages, areas of five cities, six dikes, two sluices, six schools, four hospitals and four churches. This was within six provinces in the northern part of the country and constitutes a minor part of the damage even there. By far the heaviest damage from air bombardment has occurred in the southern part of the nation.

North Vietnam is a poor rural nation, with 95% of the population, I am told, living outside the cities. The chief of the economic section of a West European mission said that North Vietnam had barely entered the 19th century industrially. In his view, it has now been bombed back into the 17th century.

Officials in Haiphong told me that between April 16, 1972—when President Nixon resumed the bombing after three and a half years—and Aug. 4, after I had arrived in North Vietnam, the city was subjected to 101 bombing attacks. They claimed that 2,208 demolition or blast bombs were dropped and 250 "mother bombs," each containing hundreds of deadly penetrating or antipersonnel bomblets. An antipersonnel bomb does not badly damage buildings; it has one purpose: to kill people. As I climbed over the ruins in Haiphong on Aug. 5, the head of civil defense said that 25 people were killed and 47 wounded in the July 31 raid.

For an urban people, and for my generation which experienced World War II, the destruction of cities is most easily understood. I had seen the effect of bombing on Hamburg and London. The damage in Haiphong and Hanoi was reminiscent.

The villages are more difficult for Americans to comprehend, but most life in Vietnam is village life. In South Vietnam, American bombing drove the people from the villages to the cities, and in North Vietnam, it drove the people from the cities to the villages. Even high officials have sent their children and often their wives to the countryside—not together but separately, because they know that the villages, too, are bombed, and do not want to risk losing an entire family to one bomb. The villages, though, are a major reason bombing cannot subdue the country. There are too many villages, too scattered and too small to carpet-bomb.

For me the destruction of cities was bearable, if horrible. I had seen it before. To see the survivors of bombed villages was almost unbearable. I have seen stunned people in war and peace, but the incomprehension of the simple villager is of another dimension in human suffering. I spent a day and a night in the village of Thienminh. The hut I stayed in was the main living quarters for four generations of a family that had lived there for as long as they knew. From the 93-year-old great-grandfather to the youngest baby, four months old, not one had ever before seen a foreigner (not even a Laotian, they said). Few in the village had traveled the 150 kilometers to Hanoi. At 3 a.m. on April 13, I was told, bombs had hit their neighbors three kilometers away, killing 23, including 11 children under 15, and wounding 33, one of whom later died. I visited that bombed hamlet—Zanai in the village of Thieuhoa. I also visited the village of Phucloc, near Haiphong, which had been virtually demolished by U.S. bombs on April 16.

I saw what remains of the hospital at Thanhhoa. Nobel Prize winner George Wald had visited there some six months before the renewal of the bombing. It was then a large, sprawling facility. There were a number of new buildings, with two large buildings nearing completion. The nearest habitation was kilometers away across fields and paddies. On April 27, at 8:50 a.m., 36 bombs were dropped on the Thanhhoa hospital, the head of the hospital told me. Six buildings were completely destroyed. The others were all intensively damaged. When I arrived, the place was completely abandoned, in ruins and in the water and mud from the monsoons. Eleven people were killed, they said—seven members of the medical staff and four patients. Were soldiers bivouacked there on April 27? The debris I saw was rubble, medical equipment, hospital beds and patients' records. Were SAMs standing among the buildings? Was it a mistake, an accident? The effect is the same. I am an American. I do not want to believe we deliberately bombed a hospital. I will ask the Department of Defense whether planes operated in this area at 8:50 on the morning of April 27 and, if they bombed, what were their targets?

Schools are special places for me. I still believe education can save us from ourselves. I inspected six schools that were heavily damaged. Perhaps the most poignant was in the village of Vuban, Thaibinh province. It was a small school. Six of the 15 teachers talked to me. They said that on July 31 their school was bombed, along with three churches and a nearby leper colony. I saw all in ruins. The children were not at school because of summer vacations, but two teachers were injured by shrapnel from four bombs. The shells remained. In the classrooms, painted on the walls, were some of the aphorisms these people love so well: *kinh thay*—"we must respect our teacher"; *cham hoc*—"we must study well"; *giay tot, hoc tot*—"teach well, learn well."

A dike is just a pile of dirt to me. To the people of the Red River Delta it is the foundation of their civilization. They sense the imprint of the hands of their most ancient ancestors on sides of the dikes. They know that if the dikes do not hold, thousands can drown, rice crops will be lost, and that if seawater enters, the land will be unusable for six or eight growing seasons, for more than two years. They know their society depends on the dikes. If water cannot be retained for the rice in the dry season, crops will be lost. The Lan Sluice is a key water-control facility servicing 48,000 acres of land, according to the minister of water conservancy, and some 600,000 people live in the area affected by its operation. When I saw it on Aug. 3, it was ringed by bomb craters on the dry-land sides. The concrete was heavily pocked. The superstructure and its steel frames, engine houses, lifts and cables were demolished. No repairs were under way.

When we met on Aug. 11, Pham Van Dong, the prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, told me, through an interpreter: "Of course it is a war of genocide. Of course there is deliberate intention of bombing dikes." I believe in our basic goodness. We will not tolerate this policy if it is true. I believe our government has the highest duty to demonstrate the truth of its answer to this charge. The accumulation of evidence from geographers, demographers and engineers will provide substantial circumstantial-factual data later. But intention can be determined only from the intenders and the circumstances.

Our bombs destroy churches, hospitals, schools, dikes. They kill old men, women, babies. We withdraw our men, we say we are winding down the war, and yet we bomb. We pit technology against life. But we cannot bomb people into submission. We should not if we could. We must stop or we will destroy ourselves. ■

In a home in Thienminh village, where he stayed for a day and a night, Ramsey Clark drinks tea with local people. American planes bombed a neighboring village, he was told, and 23 of the inhabitants died.

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