

Cease-Fire and Survival In a Vietnamese Hamlet

By Thomas W. Lippman
Washington Post Service

Ba Ha, South Vietnam

The struggle for control of this cheerless hamlet is a grim and vengeful feud that has been going on with sporadic violence for more than a decade. As in so many of South Vietnam's rural backwaters, the conflict seems unlikely to be ended by any international agreement.

It resembles a vendetta of mountain clans more than a war and has created a bitterness likely to linger long after the mechanized divisions have fought their last big battle.

Analysis and Opinion

"I personally must fight against the Viet Cong till death," one of the hamlet's prominent residents said. "And as for the VC, if they capture me, they will kill me."

Life has been like that for a long time in Ba Ha, one of the seven hamlets of Ninh Diem village, an isolated fishing and salt-producing community nestled against the coast of the South China Sea 25 miles north of Nha Trang.

CONTROL

The entire village, which has 6630 residents, was under Viet Cong control in the early 1960s. Saigon troops fought their way in in 1965, but the local government and security set up at gunpoint still appear to be tenuous at best.

The rough road that links Ninh Diem to the district capital of Ninh Hoa and the rest of Khanh Hoa province intersects Highway 1, the country's main north-south

road, about five miles inland. At that intersection is the headquarters of South Korea's Tiger division, whose troops occupy bases throughout the district.

It was a Korean unit that captured a document ten months ago that caught the eyes of U.S. officials.

NAMES

It bore the names of 81 Ninh Diem residents identified as "puppet government and army officials." It listed each of them by name, age, place of birth, occupation, social class, present position in the government, "criminal" acts committed, and "measures proposed."

Twenty two of the names were from Ba Ha. For 20 of them the entry under "measures proposed" was, "to be killed." For the other two, it was, "to be submitted to long-term thought reform."

No argument in Vietnam is more threadbare than that over whether there would or would not be mass executions if the Viet Cong took over, and the bottomless well of "captured enemy documents" is often scorned as a source of worthwhile information.

ISSUE

For the people whose names are on the Ba Ha list, however, or at least for those who could be found for interviews, those questions are irrelevant. The issue for them is one of survival, of an unending struggle with "them," devoid of ideology but no less threatening to themselves and their families.

The Saigon government has its own lists, and thousands of persons have been rounded up on the merest suspicion of disloyalty. In a place like Ba Ha, where nei-

ther side is strong enough to achieve complete domination, the continuing struggle breeds fear and resentment on both sides.

The first name on the Viet Cong's Ba Ha list was that of Nguyen Tot, who was hamlet chief for several years. He was slain last March. The man who now holds that post is Nguyen Bon, a sad-eyed man of 36 whose name was fourth on the list. A former Viet Cong member, he was deputy hamlet chief for security from 1967 to 1971.

DEADLINE

The district chief of Ninh Hoa, a tennis-playing lieutenant colonel named Do Huu Nhan, said Ba Ha was one of the places the Viet Cong were planning to seize when they were operating under an October 31 deadline for a cease-fire last year.

"What I think is going to happen if there's a cease-fire," said one American familiar with the area, "is that there will be a night of the long knives," a phrase that is heard often in Saigon these days. "It will be very brief, and I think the Saigon government will win."

What will happen if the period of bloodshed is not brief, or if the Saigon government does not win, is far from clear. Authoritative U.S. sources in Saigon have made clear that the U.S. is prepared to tolerate occasional assassinations of hamlet officials after a cease-fire, but it is not known how the U.S. will react if it goes beyond that — or how North Vietnam will react if Saigon's forces try to move against the Viet Cong.

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