The South: Amid Ruin, a Chance to Survive

By Thomas Lippman

Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON—The South Vietnam that has emerged from a decade of continuous war bought its survival at an immeasurable price in human life, social disruption and physical devastation.

And with all that its survival may be only temporary.

If the costs of the war could be measured in statistics alone, the figures would be staggering, unreliable though they are. But the impact of the war has been deeper than any numbers can show. It will be seen and felt at least as long as the maimed, scarred victims hobble around the country, and perhaps forever.

If the cost were balanced by satisfaction, by any collective feeling that it was worth it, the burden might be easier to bear. But what the Vietnamese got for their efforts and their suffering is a poor and struggling country, run by an inept, autocratic and corrupt government, still threatened by a Communist takeover—in other words, after all this they are back where they started 10 years ago, the difference being half a million dead South Vietnamese, the extraordinary ugliness spread over the country by the American military, and, according to some sources, the irreversible erosion of the Vietnamese way of life.

Any visual assessment of the war's impact on Vietnam is deceptive. There are provinces like Quangtri or Binhlong, which have been blasted into nonexistence, like the battlefields of World War I.

Others, like Gocong or Angiang, look as if nothing unpleasant has happened there for years. Even in those areas, however, there are families divided by the war, refugees from the fighting elsewhere, people who have survived by making accommodations with the Communists instead of fighting them.

Elsewhere, there was always that strange juxtaposition of peace and war that amazed newcomers to Vietnam: peasants tilling their fields while frightful carnage was being inflicted on the next hamlet, shopkeepers going about their business while the people next door dug out after a rocket attack.

For those not directly involved, there wasn't much to do but carry on, until their turn came to flee the fighting or clear the rubble from their homes and shops. It was not that they were indifferent to the war, but non-involvement was the key to survival, if anything was.

As of Jan. 13 of this year, these were the official statistics on soldiers who have died in the war over the past 12 years: 183,528 South Vietnamese troops, 45,933 Americans, 5,225 other allies, and 924,048 North Vietnamese. That last figure is probably so inflated as to be meaningless, since it is provided by the South Vietnamese Psychological Warfare Department, but it is the only one available.

Another 800,000 people are reported to be receiving government benefits as disabled veterans, war widows and their dependents.

The number of genuine noncombatants killed or wounded in the fighting is almost impossible to determine.

The U.S. General Accounting Office, in a report early last year to the Senate Refugee subcommittee, said, "There is still no reliable information on the total number of civilian war-related casualties in South Vietnam."

Rough estimates of the numbers of wounded have been made, on the basis of hospital admissions, but accurate statistics on the number of fatalities are nonexistent.

As an American who works with South Vietnam's Ministry of Public Health put it in a recent conversation, Frankly, we don't concern ourselves too much about the ones who are killed. Much as we sympathize, there's nothing we can do for them when they're already dead. Our concern is with the living."

Based on what information is available from several sources, the subcommittee estimated last summer that 308,000 South Vietnamese civilians had been killed in the fighting and bombing since Jan. 1, 1965 and 1.25 million wounded. That report was made before the big North Vietnamese attacks in recent months in heavily populated areas of the central coast.

To the rural, ancestor-worshiping Vietnamese, whose native villages were not just clusters of huts but the spirit of life itself, the more important casualties may be those who are unhurt physically but have been driven from their homes.

More than 1 million people, of a total population of about 18 million, have become refugees since the North Vietnamese Easter offensive began last spring. For some it was the third or fourth dislocation of the war.

The total number of people who have been forced out of their homes since the beginning of the U.S. buildup in 1965 is estimated here at 5 million or more.

More than 600,000 of them are living in squalid government refugee camps, subsisting on tiny portions of rice and salt and more than their share of dirt, neglect and hopelessness.

Some have found homes with relatives, jamming into tiny houses that were already crowded. Uncounted hundreds of thousands have drifted into the cities, living on sidewalks or in wretched shanties, and making do with a hand-to-mouth existence. American officials here still like to point out that these people have fled from the Communists, but most of the people say they fled the bombing and fighting, with no thought to the politics of the situation.

Cities Overburdened

As a result of the influx of refugees the cities, especially Saigon, Danang, and Cantho, are creaking under the burdens of human waste, poverty, unemployment, pollution and inefficiency.

The war profiteers and corrupt civil servants are even more visible in the cities because of the contrast with the wretchedness of the refugees and the unemployed. They drive big Citroens and Peugeots, send their children to private schools and send their money to banks abroad. On the filthy, rat-ridden sidewalks, they step carefully around the lepers and amputees and deformed children who push their greasy hats out to ask for a few coins.

"The only thing that will solve the problems of the cities now," a Vietnamese social planner said in a recent conversation, "is to get some of the people out of there. And you can only get the people to leave the cities if you provide some of the cities' facilities out in the country, like electricity and running water and high schools, but because of the war, we have only been working on temporary problems, like refugee relief. There is no planning for peace."

The critical question, she said, was "what are we going to do with the demobilizing people? They'll all just flood into the cities unless we give them something to do in their own villages."

Defense spending consumes more than 60 per cent of South Vietnam's deficit-ridden budget, and it is assumed that the country will be anxious to reduce this burden as soon as it can. But the fear that large numbers of the 1.1 million men in South Vietnam's army and militia will suddenly be dumped onto the job market—and that finding no jobs they will then make trouble—is widespread.

"They can't keep a million-man army and navy going," an experienced American said. "What's going to happen to these people? How can they shift to a peacetime economy?

So gloomy are the prospects that the tottering civilian economy can absorb demobilization that some professional economic planners have recommended that the soldiers be kept on duty instead of released, despite the burden on the government's budget. This view is shared by some officials in the U.S. AID organization here.

A report prepared by the Postwar Planning Group of David E. Lilienthal's Development and Resources Corp. said that "demobilization of any significant number of troops will have to be approached with caution in view of its potentially disruptive effect on the economy. The great majority of military personnel are unskilled in civilian occupations and should be prepared as realistically as possible to perform usefully and productively as citizens before they are released."

In the meantime, the report suggested, "the armed forces, when not actively engaged in security operations, should be used for economically productive purposes . . ."

The prospect of further burdens being placed on South Vietnam's urban economy, particularly in Saigon and Danang, is not cheering. Before the war South Vietnam was a predominantly rural society. The people of the tiny hamlets sometimes went to their village center and occasionally to district administrative towns, but the countryside remained their home. Today perhaps half of South Vietnam's people live in the cities, more than 3 million in the Saigon area alone.

Food production, naturally, has declined, to the point that South Vietnam is heavily dependent on U.S. rice, when it was once an exporter.

Thousands upon thousands of Vietnamese who found jobs with the Americans are no longer making money. Women can be seen on the streets of Saigon and Danang trying to sell used American paperback books to a dwindling market.

In Danang, men who once had enough money to buy imported motorbikes now use the bikes to block the way of pedestrians, hoping to force the passersby to ride with them and pay a few piastres. Late evening strollers in Saigon are accosted by pimps and prostitutes, also on motorbikes, which, imported in vast numbers, have become the chief means of transportation in South Vietnam.

Taste of the Good Life

Laundresses and "hootch maids," clerks and interpreters, bar girls and mechanics who worked for the huge U.S. establishment here are now scrambling for money. The taste they have had of the good life makes it unlikely they will ever go back to their native villages.

A recent help-wanted notice in a Saigon newspaper, advertising for a part-time interpreter brought 60 replies, all from men who had worked for the U.S. government, the U.S. Army or the huge RMK-BRJ construction combine. Some of them had advanced university degrees, Some of them spoke three or four languages. They had no work.

Other young men still in military service have been trained to operate construction or communications equipment, repair airplanes and radios and drive trucks (which they do like children with new toys). The fate that awaits them on the shaky civilian economy is almost as uncertain as that of the unskilled foot soldier, though the optimists see them as a reservoir of employable talent that would be an inducement to foreign investors.

More than a third of the projected revenue in the proposed billion-dollar South Vietnamese budget for 1973 is to be "borrowed from the National Bank"—that is, printed, almost a guarantee that inflation will continue. The Saigon retail price index, compiled by American officials, is already nine and a half times what it was when the war began.

The combination of weak economy, unemployment, continuing inflation and memories of easy money a few years ago has affected the Vietnamese in ways they are not proud of.

Theft and burglary are commonplace. The most routine government service must be bought with a bribe. Civility on the crowded streets is in short supply. The elbow is the most useful tool in getting to the head of any line. In the cities social indiscipline outruns the government's feeble attempts to keep up with the problems.

In Pleiku, a grim, sad market opens on the downtown sidewalks each evening. The goods for sale are appliances and stereo equipment looted by South Vietnamese soldiers from deserted houses in Kontum, left behind when their owners fled.

In Nhatrang one recent evening, two young men who probably should have been in the army robbed an American soldier on the main street, in full view of perhaps 100 passersby. The witnesses made no attempt to stop the two youths as they fled, pursued by a solitary policeman firing ineffectually into the air.

Young men like those two thieves, a Vietnamese social analyst said, "know that there is easy money. But if the war ends they will have to change."

Bringing about that change, however, could be difficult, she said, because "prices are so high the parents must hold extra jobs, must have what we call the 'profession of the left hand,' to make enough money. They do not have the time to spend with their children."

The disruption of social customs and tradition is by no means total. In fact, it is less than might be expected in some areas of the country, and optimists here believe enough remains to enable the country to survive all its problems. But the social crises are not the only byproduct of the war.

South Vietnam is by nature a beautiful and well-endowed country, but sheer depressing ugliness has overtaken much of it. In the areas of heavy fighting, like Bongson and Kontum, there has been widespread destruction.

The army's reliance on air power has brought devastation to uncounted scores of hamlets and villages because it was easier to call in the bombers than to fight the Vietcong on the ground. In places like Quangtri City and Anloc, nothing remains.

Little of this is visible in the country's populated areas and there is disagreement on the long-range ecological effects of the defoliation and bombing. In Longkhanh and Binhthuy provinces, corn is already growing prolifically amid the hulks of the trees that were denuded by U.S. chemical sprays. Nevertheless, the general effect is one of devastation where there once was fertile beauty.

It is in the cities, near the former big U.S. bases and along the U.S.-built highways that the environmental impact of the war is felt most immediately.

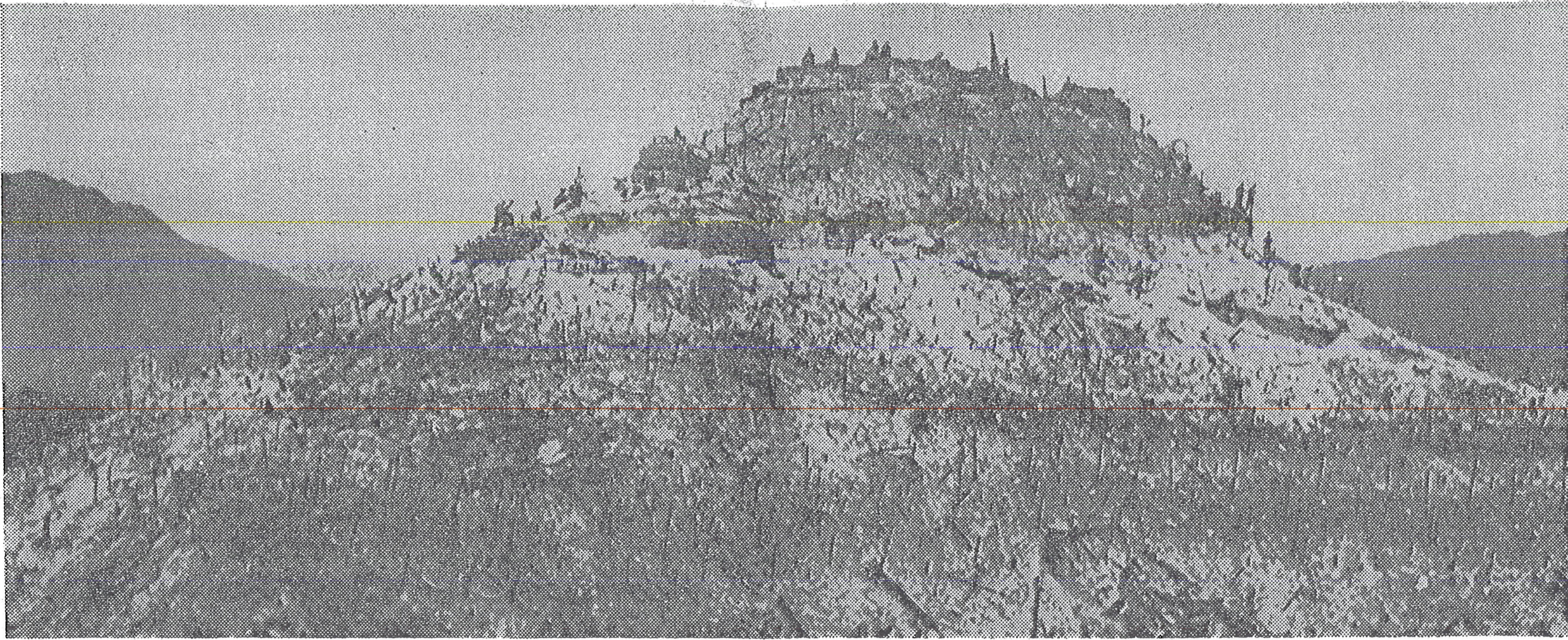
Whenever the Americans were, at places a generation of U.S. soldiers called home for their brief tours here—Cuchi, Chulai, Camranh Bay, Laikhe Poubai — there were the Vietnamese who came to provide them with what they wanted.

That meant canned beer, stolen from the PX, soft drinks, car washes, laundries, "massage parlors," tailoring shops, restaurants with English-language menus, women. These establishments had names like "Hollywood" or "Mandat Tan" or "James Bond." But the ersatz glamour they may once have had is gone with the American troops.

These rows of shops are ghost towns and their proprietors and employees have drifted on, to other hustles, to their home villages, to the streets of Danang. The bases they served have been abandoned or turned over to the South Vietnamese, who don't begin to fill them.

The result is that the landscape is pockmarked by sprawling, ugly, barren, decaying military establishments, never beautiful, now little more than eyesores. There is talk of turning the U.S. headquarters base at Longbinh into an industrial park, but at the moment it is a wasteland that provides the most dramatic evidence that the Americans have indeed gone home.

Some of the military gear they brought with them, however, has found its way irretrievably onto the local scene, to South Vietnam's scenic detriment.



Associated Press

The spoiled land: Firebase Kathryn denudes a mountaintop where once there was fertile beauty.

Barbed wire has become the standard fencing material in South Vietnam. Old American packing cases and ammunition boxes are popular building materials, as are the embossed sheets of aluminum seconds from U.S. canning plants.

On main roads throughout Vietnam, —which were widened and repaved by the Americans—drivers of motorbikes wear face masks and goggles to guard against the filth spewed out by the trucks' exhausts. In the cities, it is the cumulative exhaust from the motorbikes that turns the air blue-gray with fumes.

The few remaining traces of the gracious cities built during the French colonial days are fast succumbing to the sudden urbanization of Vietnamese society. A patron at a Saigon sidewalk cafe would surely find himself overwhelmed by grime, spit and insults, as well as besieged by beggars. The sidewalk cafe, like the French regime, is a thing of the past.

Projects Left Undone

The impact of the war can also be measured in the things that have not happened, in the development programs and industrial projects that have fallen by the wayside.

There are no food processing plants in the highlands to can and export those delicious pineapples; there are no international oil companies drilling off the South Vietnamese coast; there is no flourishing tourist industry along the beaches near Nhatrang.

That is not to say that it can never happen. There is a group of international businessmen here, including American bankers and industrialists, who believe that a period of stability could bring an economic boom to South Vietnam.

Trade with Japan—South Vietnamese lumber and shrimp in exchange for Japanese appliances and other manufactured goods—is considered a bright prospect, once the Japanese are convinced that the market here is a safe investment. The question is whether South Vietnam will be able to provide the climate of stability and prosperity that will encourage economic development, which in turn will help alleviate the domestic economic woes.

There is a surprisingly broad base to build on, even after all that has hap-

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pened. At any given moment, even during the most intense periods of fighting, the large majority of South Vietnam's people were going about their daily business as usual, and they have somehow managed to keep much of it, and themselves, intact. The railroad that it took the French almost 40 years to build has been destroyed, but it was never important to Vietnamese commercial transport.

Manpower—the soldiers trained to operate modern equipment and the U.S.-trained civilian workers, as well as cheap unskilled labor—is an attractive inducement to potential investors. Agricultural raw materials are plentiful, and there still remains an abundance of fertile open land.

There are also forces at work that could hold the country together in the forthcoming period while the political situation works itself out. There is disagreement here over whether these forces are strong enough to resist the inevitable pressure that will come as Communist cadres try to take advantage of the power vacuum in Saigon. A substantial body of opinion believes that they will, despite the defeatist attitude of many noncommunist Vietnamese.

One such force is Vietnamese tradition and religious belief, which has managed to survive among large parts of the population. Another is the chief unifying force in Vietnamese life, the family. Refugees seek out their relatives. Families flee their villages together. Soldiers who desert often do so out of concern for their families.

"These things have been forgotten in the cities," a sociology professor said. "But they are still strong in the countryside."

There are also noncommunist religious organizations and other groups that are not forthrightly political that nevertheless continue to exert strong influence over sizeable segments of the South Vietnamese population.

Among these are the Hoahao sect of Buddhists, the Caodai religion and the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor. These and similar sociopolitical groups have been excluded from sharing in political power in Sagion since the time of Diem, but may expect to be heard from now.

Sociologist Gerald C. Hickey wrote in a paper published by the Rand Corp. two years ago that "most of these groups are not pro-NLF, but neither are they committed to the government. They represent nationalist interests, and they are against domination by the Communists or the U.S.

In a recent interview, Hickey said he believes it is too late for the Saigon government to attempt to bring these groups together now in an attempt to stave off a Communist takeover.

A Vietnamese businessman with broad political contacts said that in his opinion these groups, plus the northern Catholic refugees who came south in 1954, provide a strong enough reservoir of anticommunist sentiment to preclude the establishment of an outright Communist government in the south.

It is possible, at least in the beginning, that the apportionment of political power will amount to a geographic distribution, with the Communists in control of their traditional areas of strength such as Binhdinh and Quangngai, the Hoahao dominant in Angiang and Chaudoc, and so on. But this arrangement could only be temporary.

Most Vietnamese appear to share President Thieu's opinion that any form of coalition government means an eventual Communist takeover, especially if the U.S. withdraws its economic and military aid. A feeling of defeatism and inferiority, and a grudging respect for what they view as Communist discipline and efficiency, is common.

The one constant in the shifting political and military scene here over the past decade has been corruption at all levels of government, from the traffic policeman who demands 100 piastres to ignore a violation to the generals who were selling military supplies to the Communists.

"They learned it from the French," a Vietnamese-speaking American diplomat said. "They learned that the French came out here to get rich on the colonial service and they saw the same opportunity for themselves."

Now all that may come back to work against the government. "If the Communists take over any ministries," a knowledgeable Vietnamese journalist said, "they will set an example. They will insist or working a 10-hour day. They will not take anything for themselves. This will make people support them."

Far from uniting the various factions of South Vietnam in an anticommunist front in the period following a cease-fire, the government may have to deal with other internal forces that can only weaken its collective strength. Saigon is full of politicians—and the army is believed to be full of generals—who have been supporting Thieu only so long as there was a threat of outright military defeat by Hanoi.

That is why, a doleful South Vietnamese intellectual said the other day, "People believe there is only one strong force that can win—the Communists." □

Horst Faas—Associated Press

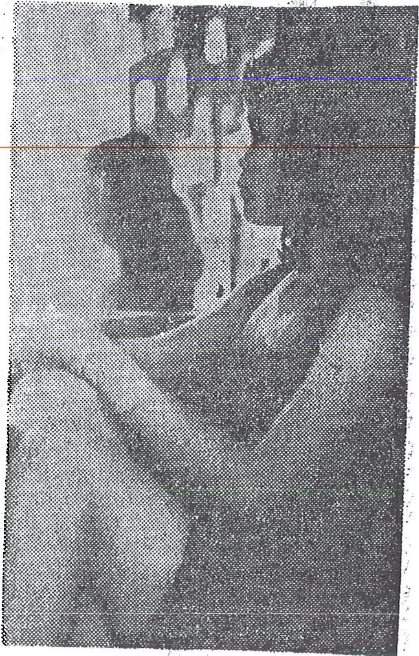
Crossfire: A father confronts Rang ers with his child killed in battle.

By Nick Ut—Associated Press

Napalm accident: Terrified children flee after firebomb strike burned their clothes and bodies.

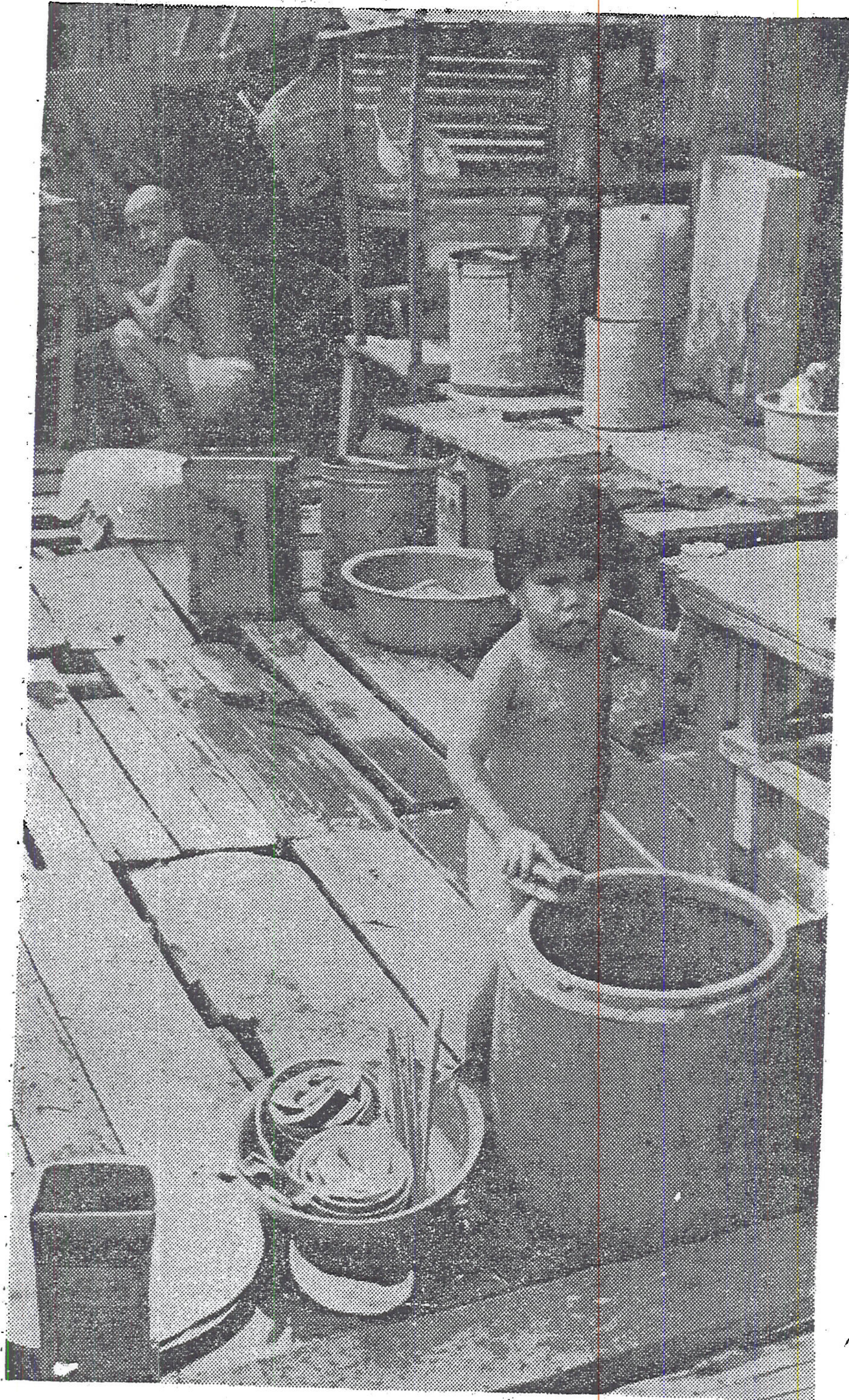
Associated Press

United Press International



Chicago Daily News

Wartime economy: A boom in artificial limbs, black market goods and prostitution.



United Press International

Home: Child plays outside his hut in a refugee camp.

By Charles Benoit

Dumping ground: Vietnamese scavengers await a new truckload of trash at American dump outside Danang.

1966 Pulitzer Prize photo by Kyoichi Sawada, United Press International

Survival: A mother and her children desperately flee across a river in search of safety.

By Nick Ut—Associated Press

Napalm accident: Terrified children flee after firebomb strike burned their clothes and bodies.