

IRS/AF
Memorandum
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North Viet-Nam's Agricultural Failures Create Serious Food Problem

North Viet-Nam's failure to achieve any significant advances in agricultural production over the past three years -- in the face of its rapidly expanding population -- has created serious food problems which Hanoi obviously views with concern. Figures released by the DRV in late December and early January indicated clearly that the DRV's agriculture fell behind both planned norms and the population growth in North Viet-Nam. While the DRV claimed that the gross value of agricultural production in 1962 increased 4.3 percent (as against 8.9 percent in 1961), the increase in the amount of food available to the population was considerably less.

The Viet-Nam News Agency (VNA), for example, reported that the total production of paddy rice for 1962 was 5,600,000 metric tons; only 70,000 more than last year, a percentage increase of about 1.2 percent. This increase is slight compared to the DRV's population growth of 2-3 percent a year.

Recent Hanoi birth control pleas ~~through~~ the media have reflected the DRV food problem. On January 10, 1963, the daily Thoi Moi called for greater efforts in birth control during 1963, and made it clear that some efforts had already been exerted in this direction. The article referred to talks by medical cadres on methods for preventing conception, "experimental units" where birth control has been carried out, and courses conducted by labor unions. It then argued against the largeness of the family by stressing the plight of young widows with several children, numerous work hours lost because of children's illnesses or confinements, and the general burden of maintaining a large family. It failed, naturally, to mention the primary reason for the increased interest in birth control -- the disproportionate increase of population over agricultural production.

In the same vein, the Communist party organ Nhan Dan admitted a year ago that even if the rice target of the five year plan were met, the DRV could not produce enough rice to meet the needs of its rising population. Then, on January 21, 1963, this same paper again stressed DRV concern over the expanding population and revealed that measures taken to date were inadequate. It noted:

In five years of agricultural development, 1961-1965, the North will, it is planned, clear 550,000 additional hectares of land. Because of our rapid increase in population -- it is estimated that the northern population will reach 19 million persons by the end of 1965 -- we will be able to maintain the 1961 average per capita acreage only if we achieve the above norm of land clearance.

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The article then stated that of the 220,000 hectares that were to have been cleared in the first two years of the plan, only 160,000 were cleared. Thus the DRV fell behind the 1961 per capita average.

The recent demotion of the Minister of Agriculture, Nghiem Xuan Yem, to the position of Minister of State Farms, also reflected the poor performance of this segment of North Viet-Nam's economy in 1962. This change and Yem's replacement was announced at a January 7 meeting of the National Assembly's Standing Committee. The Minister had been a high ranking DRV official in the agricultural ministry since 1947 and held the ministerial portfolio since 1954. His demotion at this time, together with other shifts in agricultural leadership, undoubtedly reflect top-level displeasure at the poor showing of DRV agriculture during the last few years.

In a radio broadcast in December 1962, then Minister Yem explained at length how well the people of the North had done in the field of agriculture in spite of the many natural calamities which struck during the year. Though the severe droughts and typhoons during 1962 were a major factor in holding back agricultural production, his remarks, viewed in light of his demotion, appeared to be an attempt to draw attention away from human failings, including his own.

In February, this year, Hanoi also revealed that a worsening drought has already caused crop damage in many areas. In a strongly worded order on anti-drought measures broadcast from the Communist party secretariat on February 1, authorities in a "number of localities" were charged with administrative and leadership failures as a result of having "fallen into passivity when the drought dragged on seriously". The statement further revealed that peasants in "a number of areas" had become so discouraged over persistent drought conditions that they had given up the struggle and left the farms for other employment.

Whether caused by weather or managerial bungling, another poor crop would not only add to food problems but would further exacerbate existing peasant dissatisfaction with the rural cooperatives. It is quite apparent that in a country not well suited for agricultural production, the expansion of agriculture beyond the efficiently arable land and capacity of the people has been plagued by the law of diminishing returns.

These agricultural failures in North Viet-Nam as well as similar failures in Communist China should continue to serve as a lesson to the primarily agricultural oriented developing areas that the so called "efficient" and "systematic" Communist methods are not always successful nor worthy of emulation.