

JUSTICE WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS writes:

# INDO-CHINA NEAR DISASTER

After six years of war, the Communist forces fighting the armies of France hold the initiative and still have the peasants on their side



**D**ONG KHE is a small village of northern Indo-China, 60 miles or so northeast of Hanoi in the rich and strategic Red River delta. The Red River delta is a rice-growing region. Wherever one looks, there is wet paddy; and in August, fields of rice, rippling in the hot wind, stretch to the horizon. In the north are low hills with lines so soft and broken they seem to be relics of ancient ranges. A year ago, these hills were held by the French. Today, they are held by the Communist Viet Minh.

The village of Dong Khe, not far from these hills, has changed hands several times since Ho Chi Minh, Communist leader, unleashed his forces against Indo-China in the final months of 1946. In August, 1952, I visited it with Pham Van Binh, Governor of the Tonkin or northern area, the day after it had been freshly taken by the French. Viet Nameese troops patrolled its muddy streets. A rehabilitation unit had arrived ahead of us—examining villagers to ferret out Communists; collecting Viet Minh currency in bushel baskets; vaccinating the inhabitants against smallpox; organizing a unit for the dissemination of anti-Communist propaganda; and issuing ration cards and arranging for a distribution of food.

Dong Khe had changed hands so fast that there was a stunned and paralyzed look in the eyes of the inhabitants. Today, it was the French and Viet Nameese who were there. Yesterday, it had been the Viet Minh. Who would be their masters tomorrow?

## The Elders Are Worried

The village notables or elders—the administrative group that in Indo-China manages the commune or smallest political unit—stood together in a small square to greet the Governor. This square was 50 feet across and was lined with the low, one-story peaked huts with thatched roofs that distinguish the villages of this area. Most of the notables were dressed in white trousers, long black gowns and black skullcaps. Their faces were so serious as to be sad. Their high cheekbones were emphasized by pinched cheeks and skimpy beards. A young man dressed in white gave an address of welcome. The Governor, an energetic,

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Stunned citizens of the village of Dong Khe, just retaken from Reds, line up for food.

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**INDO-CHINA** continued

## Though they don't deserve

idealistic man in his forties, replied. And then the notables gathered around for a serious discussion.

The Communists had been there for months and had not treated the villagers harshly. But if the notables co-operated with the French, the Communists might kill them. Would the Governor leave the army at Dong Khe for protection? Would the Government defend Dong Khe in case it were attacked? "You are here now. If we are here alone tomorrow, what will happen to us?"

That question runs through the minds of most people in Indo-China and expresses their feeling of insecurity. That one question is, indeed, symptomatic of the disintegrating influences that are loose in this ancient land.

These days, everyone is on a tentative basis in Indo-China.

French Legionnaires on leave in Hanoi told me they would be out of the country in a year.

The grinning Senegalese with their wide-brimmed hats who guard the bridges north of Hanoi said the same.

The French have already announced they will leave—when it's safe to turn military affairs over to the Viet Namese.

Only one eighth of the assets of the Bank of Indo-China are in Indo-China.

Viet Namese intellectuals, tired of the French regime and not sure that Bao Dai, their Emperor, can manage the crisis, live day by day without much hope.

Many foreigners sleep on uneasy beds, mindful of the night just before Christmas, 1946, when Ho Chi Minh organized an assassination of the European residents of Hanoi. That night, some 8000 white men and women were murdered in their homes.

The miserable peasants, impressed into military service by the Viet Nam and by the Viet Minh, trampled over by the opposing armies, more often than not look north to the Viet Minh for their salvation. The Communist Ho Chi Minh is to them only a nationalist bent on liberating their homeland from French rule. They look on him as one of themselves. The point out that Ho Chi Minh does not ride in splendor nor live in luxury, but sleeps under a tree and eats the same food as they do. They emphasize that when Ho Chi Minh the commoner, occupied the Government building in Hanoi, he walked the streets alone and at noon sauntered over to the café in the Hotel Metropole, where he sat and talked with all comers.

Ho Chi Minh today is not as popular as he was in 1946 or even in 1950. Yet after six years of guerrilla warfare and with the people sick and tired of the conflict, there is little doubt that in a popularity contest he would lead the field.

### Catholics Affected

The anxiety and uncertainty that hang over the land have even affected the Catholics, whose anti-Communist record the world over is outstanding. The Catholics number nearly two million. Their roots are deep in the nation. A Catholic priest was indeed France's first emissary to this land. It was the persecution of the Catholics that Napoleon III sent an expedition against Saigon in 1859. That was the beginning of military measures which before the end of the 19th century brought all of the country under French control.

Over the years, each bishop organized his own police to protect the property in his diocese. When the Communist trouble broke loose those militia were a stabilizing

Donald Heath, U. S. Ambassador, here honoring courageous native, is with





## nch are hated, distrusted

ree, especially in the Red River Delta. In spite of that fact, Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, the brilliant French officer who rallied Indo-China against the Viet Minh in the winter of 1950-51, abolished them. He acted in an impetuous moment. When his son was killed in battle in 1951, de Lattre suspected some militiamen of complicity. With lightning speed that was characteristic of the man, he abolished those armies of the bishops. Today, the bishops have no militia. Their towns are therefore open for Communist infiltration.

An incident at Phat Diem in the North Tonkin area illustrates the painful decision confronting the bishops. Since there were no longer any militia to guard Phat Diem, the Viet Minh in 1952 came in and took over. The villagers, fearful of the Communists, fled to the cathedral for protection. But the Viet Minh did not molest them. They did not pillage nor rape nor murder. They left the villagers alone. Shortly thereafter, the Viet Nam came and drove out the Viet Minh; and when they occupied Phat Diem, they ravaged the place. As a result of this and other episodes, the prestige of the Viet Minh has remained high. To date, all Catholic bishops have been treated well by the Viet Minh. Their church properties have not been molested; they have been left alone to preach their faith and minister to the needs of their people.

Perhaps for that reason, perhaps for the sake of their own survival, the Catholic bishops in the Tonkin area do not inveigh against the Viet Minh; nor do they rally their people, at least publicly, against Ho Chi Minh. And the simple peasant, noticing the respect that Ho Chi Minh shows all churches and all clergy and not knowing the fate which all religion suffers at the

hands of the Communists, doubts if the Viet Minh leader is as evil as the Government says.

The main forces that work for disintegration in Indo-China are three: (1) opposition to the French; (2) the miserable state of the peasant and the promises of reform by Ho Chi Minh; and (3) the military power of the Viet Minh.

The attitude of the people toward the French undercuts all others. The measure of the popularity of a man in Government or out is the degree of his independence from the French. Those who do not thoroughly hate the French distrust them. Based on their present performance, the French do not deserve that condemnation. They are no longer the cruel rulers and exploiters they once were. They have admitted the three states of Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos into the French Union and granted them their independence; and they remain behind merely to fight a war.

### Casualties Are High

The military effort of the French in this struggle reaches heroic proportions. The war to date has cost the French 160,000 casualties. Each year, they are losing as many officers as they graduate from their military academy. Each year, it costs the French \$1½ billion (of which America indirectly pays about one third) to prosecute this war.

These things, however, do not count with the Viet Name. For decades, French colonial policy in Indo-China was marked by cruelty and exploitation. The Viet Name only remember those decades of grievances. French motives are suspect even on such basic issues as the grant of independence to the Viet Nam.

"How can you doubt the sincerity of the French on that score?" I would ask the Viet Name.

"The High Commissioner still occupies the big house, doesn't he? Doesn't he also outrank our President?"

### Viet Name View

The High Commissioner does reside in the "White House" of Saigon. Even Emperor Bao Dai has a smaller one. To many Viet Name, that is proof positive that the French have lingering imperialistic designs. The Viet Minh radio at Baken (near the China border) and the whispers of the underground constantly remind the people of it.

I did not meet Bao Dai, the Emperor, for he was in France. He is not the playboy that he has often been depicted. He does get \$350,000 a month; he spends much time in hunting and little time being Emperor. He has a cabinet that runs the country and he leaves them pretty much alone. To a degree, Bao Dai is a cohesive force, since he is a symbol of the past. That is an important symbol in Indo-China. Even Ho Chi Minh thought so, for when he ruled northern

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INDO-CHINA continued

## Native rulers opposing Reds have barred democracy



While proprietor cooks an

Indo-China at the end of World War II he kept Bao Dai as his Chief Adviser. But Bao Dai, patriotic as he is, has not proved to be a leader who can compete with Ho Chi Minh for support of the peasants.

Bao Dai in June, 1952, appointed a new cabinet headed by Nguyen Van Tam. Tam, a slight, middle-aged man, is an able executive who works quietly and unobtrusively. He is a "strong" man whom the people fear because of his record as head of the police. Tam's government advertises a broad program of reform: (1) pacification of the country; (2) elimination of graft; (3) increased productivity; (4) land reform; (5) free labor unions; and (6) an elected assembly.

To date, only a small start on that program has been made. Up to 1952, all labor unions were illegal. They have now been legalized by decree and the beginnings of a small trade-union movement are under way. But the first reform that the country wants is a parlia-

ment. That was the main complaint against the Viet Nam, that I hear as I traveled Indo-China. "Give us the right to vote and we will elect a parliament that will make the laws for the country." I heard that plea over and over. From peasants to intellectuals, the reason was the same. "When we have a parliament, we will get our land reform and all the other reforms we need."

On September 1, 1952, Tam gave the people an assembly—an "appointed" one that will have advisory powers. Hand-picked by Tam, it is made up mostly of conservative men who have a long record of collaboration with the French. Tam is off to a poor start in the contest for the hearts and minds of the Viet Nameese.

There are crying needs in Viet Nam that Ho Chi Minh exploits. There are land holdings as large as 150,000 acres. By the law, rent is restricted to 30 per cent of the crop; but in practice, 50 per cent or more is collected. The money

At feeding station, a mother feeds rice to her child with chopsticks. Those receiving rations bring their own charcoal to cook food handed out on







Outside, his newsstand displays papers; but censorship distorts news.

orders are usually Chinese; and air interest charges to farmers as high as 400 per cent a year. Schools are woefully inadequate. Hospitals are few even by peace standards; and they are overcrowded these days. I visited one refugee camp where there were 960 patients and only 240 beds. Four patients to each bed! Each had six hours a day in the bed. There were always three on the floor waiting their turns.

For years, Ho Chi Minh campaigned against these conditions. He kept communism out of his propaganda. He played the role of a nationalist, bent on independence and reform. He called for extinction of the French, relief from oppressive taxation and from usury, abolition of absentee landlordism and free schools for all the people.

There are good men in the Viet Nam government who feel the same way. One of the best is Cung Dinh Quy, Minister of Agriculture. He is a fervent advocate of land reform.

With land reform, we can get 80 per cent of the people away from the Viet Minh," he told me. But the powers-that-be represent the vested interests. Real land reform under Bao Dai is possible only in remote villages. There are not enough men like Cung Dinh Quy in power; there is no legislature to make reform a battle cry that will be heard in every village. Yet without reform, it will appear to the peasants that Ho Chi Minh is their only hope.

#### Reds Hold Initiative

Today, Ho Chi Minh's armies are stand-off to the French and the Viet Namese. This winter (1952) they hold the initiative. They are strong even though they have no tanks or planes and only a few trucks. But they have a bountiful supply of carbines, machine guns, submachine guns, artillery and mortar—much of it American material originally given Nationalist China.

Red China is the main staging ground for their operations. Red China furnishes Ho Chi Minh with

3000 tons of ammunition a month. Red China has military training schools for his troops. Russia has sent instructors from Czechoslovakia. In lieu of trucks, Ho Chi Minh has slave labor that moves his ammunition and supplies over hundreds of miles of mountains. In one recent operation, he mustered 600,000 coolies as transport. The central core of his army is composed of 50,000 seasoned troops. Ho Chi Minh carefully conserves them. He has indeed committed them to battle only twice. He holds them in reserve, using guerrilla warfare and tactics of infiltration to wear down the opposition.

#### Enemy Uses Disguise

Some of these infiltrations are startling. Hue, a town of 200,000, is 250 miles south of Hanoi and over 300 miles south of the Viet Minh stronghold in the north. On August 26, 1952, the day before I visited Hue, a regiment of Viet Minh troops (about 3000) suddenly appeared below Hue. These troops sifted down from the north in a matter of days, traveling at night or going in disguise as peasants during the day. In spite of the vast territory covered and the number of people who were involved, the first the French knew of the episode was when the regiment moved into action.

As this account is being written, the news is full of these episodes. Unless one reads carefully, the impression is sometimes created that the French had a resounding victory. The truth is that the French positions are constantly infiltrated; most of the French "victories" are engagements with the enemy far in the rear of French lines.

These tactics of infiltration are possible only when the enemy has the support of the great mass of the people of the country. In Indo-China, it is often said that the country is Viet Nam by day and Viet Minh by night. Though that is an exaggeration, it contains a large measure of truth. At night, the Viet Minh move troops rather freely. At night, food-collecting units of the Viet Minh go about

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Author watches training of newly recruited members of so-called police force. They will be assigned to day-and-night watch in the rice fields.

INDO-CHINA continued

## Red leader wins support for making French look silly

...ing supplies. The country-  
is so dangerous that most  
have curfews. At Hanoi, the  
curfew is 1 a.m.; but the suburbs  
out of bounds after sunset.  
The Viet Minh has such wide  
popular sympathy that it seems to  
be everywhere. Terrorists show up  
in points where they are not sup-  
posed to be. They keep an eye on  
bridges, airports and other critical  
points.

The airport at Hue is 9 miles  
from town. When I arrived in the  
morning, the road into town had  
to be cleared of land mines.  
Every night, new ones are laid.  
The innocent-looking peasant  
works by day in the rice  
fields and goes about his assigned job  
at night. The Viet Minh at night. The  
men who carry bundles of bam-  
boo wood on either end of long  
poles that rest on their shoulders,  
are likely than not have hol-  
died out some of the sticks and  
sealed hand grenades in them.  
Porters, coolies, farmers, civil  
servants make up a vast network  
of intelligence for the Viet Minh.  
Though the Viet Minh is every-  
where, it often seems to be no-  
where. In late August, 1952, the  
French moved 10,000 troops into  
the heart of Viet Minh country in  
a full-out drive against a supposed  
stronghold. They used tanks, artil-  
lery, mortar and planes. This  
element struck with force and  
moved and for 24 hours drove a  
large deep into Viet Minh terri-  
tory. But the French struck at a  
point. No Viet Minh were cap-  
tured, no Viet Minh troops were  
killed. One native was killed by  
friendly fire; but whether he was  
a Viet Minh soldier no one knows.

### A Phantom Army

The Viet Minh gave way before  
the assault, proving again that they  
are a phantom army. They showed  
the natives that the French can-  
not trap them. They showed the

peasants up and down the land  
that French troops, American ar-  
mor and all the skill of modern war  
are futile against them. When that  
happens, the native—whether he is  
a Communist or not—smiles to  
himself and boasts to his wife. He  
is secretly proud of Ho Chi Minh,  
the underdog, who can make the  
French look silly.

His phantom army uses the tac-  
tics that Mao Tse-tung used in  
China. The Viet Minh never at-  
tacks until it has vastly superior  
forces in the field. It gives way be-  
fore overwhelming power, its army  
becoming peasants working in rice  
fields. Until the strategic hour to  
strike arises, it harasses the oppo-  
sition, infiltrates his rear, keeps  
him constantly off balance and  
takes a heavy toll of his men.

### U. S. Aid Arrives

But for General de Lattre and  
the arrival of American military  
aid, there can be no doubt that  
Indo-China would have fallen to  
the Viet Minh in the winter of  
1950.

If Indo-China fell, all Southeast  
Asia would be imperiled. The  
prize is attractive, for Indo-China,  
Thailand and Burma make up the  
famous rice bowl of Asia. Rice  
means power. China is hungry for  
rice. Japan imports 20 per cent of  
her food and is heavily dependent  
on rice. If the Communist forces  
have command of the food supplies  
of Asia, they would soon have the  
food-deficit countries at their  
mercy.

Red China, like the China of old,  
seems to have imperialistic dreams.  
Red China in her present mood  
might turn to adventure in Indo-  
China if the pressure in Korea  
were lifted. If Indo-China fell, the  
dark days would be upon us.

At one time—perhaps even in  
1946—Ho Chi Minh, who was Mos-  
cow-trained, may have been more  
of a nationalist than a Communist.

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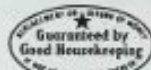
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Governor of Viet Nam, one of the three Indo-China states, drinks a toast with Douglas at a meeting in which author got Government side of picture.

INDO-CHINA continued

## "The year of disaster," says Douglas, "may be at hand"

Southeast Asia thinks that if his liberation movement had been recognized at the end of World War II, Indo-China would today be passionately nationalistic and aligned with Burma in the democratic-socialist group. The answer to that question will never be known.

Today, the Viet Minh movement is definitely Communist. The vast majority of the Viet Minh probably do not know enough about Marxist doctrine to make a choice. They are caught up in a patriotic liberation movement. But the high command, numbering perhaps 600, are dyed-in-the-wool Communists. They have full command of the movement to such an extent that some Viet Nameese say that even Ho Chi Minh is their prisoner. However that may be, the Communists control the key posts in the Viet Minh government. And I learned from some who had deserted the Viet Minh that it has organized every village in its domain along Soviet lines.

One has to travel Indo-China to sense that the year of disaster may be close at hand. There is difficulty in appraising the situation from the outside because of the distortion of news as a result of the censorship. For example, this summer two Viet Nameese companies were wiped out by the Communists. Correspondents wrote the story that way. It was rewritten by the censor to say that a large number of Viet Nameese troops had escaped a Viet Minh trap. A correspondent, a friend of mine, was indignant at the censor. He demanded to know if he had been inaccurate. "No," snapped the censor. "But you're too damned objective."

### Disaster Impends

The true story of Indo-China is one of impending disaster.

The ideal solution would be for the French to leave the country immediately, turning all civil and military matters over to the Viet Nameese. But that move would be catastrophic. There is no Viet Nameese army to take over the de-

fense. Viet Nameese troops fight with the French number 130,000. But there are only 1000 Viet Nameese officers. A vigorous officer training program is under way. If it will take another four or five years to train enough officers, assume full responsibility for the defense of the country. Meanwhile the French must hang on.

That necessity, however, creates the dilemma. The presence of the French gives the Viet Minh a powerful platform.

The appeal of the Communists could be counteracted by sweeping reforms. A counterrevolution could rally all the people against communism. Any government bent on reform could give the Viet Minh real political opposition.

### Status Quo Is Rule

But the influence of the French has always been on the side of the landlords and the other vested interests. The influence of the Viet Nam Government is on the same side. There are good men in the present Government. Cung Di Quy, Minister of Agriculture, and Pham Van Binh, Governor of Tonkin, are notable examples. But the weight of the Government and influence of the Emperor are on the side of the status quo. And the status quo is second only to the French as the cause and the inspiration of the Viet Minh.

One day, I called on the Queen Mother at Hue. Though elderly, she is well preserved. She is dressed in white silk trousers and a long yellow gown that came below the knees. Her teeth were black with lacquer and her voice was so low as to be almost a whisper. We talked for a half hour over cups of green tea. The Queen Mother is a power in the land. The story is that she recently had a governor discharged because he would not pay her gambling debts. Knowing that she was influential in political matters, I turned my questions in that direction.

"The villagers seem to want the elected assembly more than a s-

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## Douglas says Indo-China's salvation lies within herself



Young girl, holding baby brother while mother works, knows poverty too well, but she can still smile.

thing else," I said. "When will they get one?"

Her eyes lighted up and she spoke with emphasis. "This is no time to speak of elections. It will be time to consider that when we crush the Viet Minh."

It was a dismal day; and my thoughts were dismal too. As I left Hue, it seemed that I had been witness to some of the same forces that had caused the downfall of China. Here, as in China, the holocaust could be prevented only by revolutionary measures. But those measures seem to be grudgingly withheld.

Indo-China may yet be saved. The Viet Namese are strongly anti-Chinese; and the domination of the Viet Minh by Red China will not be popular. Heroic measures can still swing public opinion behind the Viet Nam Government. The voice of our Ambassador, Donald R. Heath, and his group of able men is strong on the side of reform. We have been lavish with military equipment. We have thrown our influence behind a political program which, if adopted, would create the counterrevolution that

would save Indo-China from communism.

The bald truth is that the force that can save Indo-China must come from within. The Viet Minh is on a fanatical crusade. Communist forces have the first zealots. But there is no reason why the Viet Nam cannot outdo them if the powers-that-be rather than stifle the democratic forces of revolution.

Viet Namese and Americans were discussing this question one afternoon at Hanoi. We sat in the lounge of the Hotel Metropole, drinking black tea out of her white cups. A Viet Namese, in politics and close to the top of the nation, leaned over and in a whisper, "If our people so desired, they could get rid of the Viet Minh in a week."

That is the tragedy of Indo-China. Her house is divided against itself. If the democratic south has the zeal of the Communist north, the south would easily win. But will take far more than guns, francs and dollars to produce victory.

Village elders of Dong Khe make up commune—the smallest political unit in Indo-China. Their fear: Communists may kill them if they help France.



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