

Mr. Buu Has the Answer

Give Viet Peasant Food and Tools Before Doctrine

By JOHN HERLING

Tran Quec Buu is the tribune of the Vietnamese people. He has come to this country to explain in terms of his countrymen's struggle and hopes what the war in South Viet Nam is truly all about.

In his own modest, compact, emphatic person (he is 5-foot-3 and the father of 10), he brings home to us the kind of people who are committed to the struggle, not only in South Viet Nam, but in all South East Asia. As Mr. Buu tells us the story of his people, distances are no longer so great. Slogans turn into reality and hope turns into confidence.

For him and the 14 million people of Viet Nam, the hand-to-hand encounter with communism must be motivated by the will to live in freedom, sustain it and particularly to give practical substance to the idea of liberty.

Great Service

By his visit he has rendered a great service to us here by crystalizing the significance of the American presence in South Viet Nam: Why Americans are there, why we give Viet Nam so much of our treasure, and why, if you please, Ambassador Henry Lodge has made his country's mission to South Viet Nam his first responsibility.

Mr. Buu came to Washington carrying the credential of the people's organization in South Viet Nam, the Confederation of Vietnamese Workers. He has addressed the AFL-CIO Executive Council, was received by President Johnson, and has met with other leaders of American life.

Mr. Buu was trained as a school teacher, and—as so often happens in once colonial countries—he received his major education in the long bitter struggle for independence.

Jailed

When he was 13, he was man enough to take a conspicuous part in student demonstrations against the French regime. He managed to complete his education and taught high school for six years.

But revolution remained his true vocation. Then a French military court sent him to jail for 10 years on Poulo Condere, the kind of island prison with

which the French empire once dotted the world.

After liberation in 1945, Mr. Buu fought with the guerilla forces. He gave this up when he became convinced the communists were seeking to dominate the independence movement. He was convinced of something else—that unless the Vietnamese workers organized themselves economically, the liberation and independence would lack complete meaning.

To Mr. Buu and his friends, free, strong labor organization was the only effective answer either to fight the communist or to build a society which was meaningful to the Vietnamese workers, peasant or city worker. It was and is a heartbreaking task in any country.

Federation

Within a few years, Mr. Buu and his friends had built up a labor organization of nearly 500,000 members, half of them in the affiliated peasants federation, which Mr. Buu also headed. Its growth and effectiveness excited first the interest and then the hostility of the Diem regime when Mr. Buu refused to surrender the free labor organization to governmental control. Then the Diem regime set up a rival peasants federation, began to harass the union officials,

and took over the distribution of seeds, fertilizer and other forms of agricultural support.

Mr. Buu's organization was scattered and driven underground. Its main objective then was to survive.

With the fall of the Diem regime in November, 1963, the problem became how to rebuild labor organization. Mr. Buu went to work. Despite a five-year interval of organizational paralysis, he and his union friends had maintained their contacts in the villages, carried on limited educational activities, and worked to train leadership groups at the local level.

'Exile'

In this period of "exile" in their own country, the Vietnamese labor leadership used the time to develop strong rapport with various anti-communist religious sects: their priests and holy men welcomed the CTV representatives then and now. Preoccupied with spiritual activities,

the religious groups were incapable of resolving the difficult problems of living which beset the peasants and tenant farmers of South Viet Nam. Despite the handicaps, the labor groups won the respect and confidence of tenant farmer groups by protecting them against usury and obtaining for them the necessary feeds and fertilizer.

Quite clearly, now the tasks of the CTV and Mr. Buu must respond to their own special conditions. Their form of trade union organization must reflect their own economic and social needs. At the same time, they must develop their economic livelihood and protect themselves against the Viet Cong, and the communist infiltrators.

Mr. Buu continually emphasizes the point that the only way to win the support of the peasants of Viet Nam (88 per cent of the population) is to give them a stake in the struggle now going on. For the battle today is not only against communist domination, but against indifference and apathy.

If a proper internal program is carried out — and this requires the support of the CTV — the peasants will actively side with the regime of Gen. Khanh who presides over South Viet Nam. And, says Mr. Buu, this will include the 30 per cent of the peasant population which now is considered under communist Viet Cong influence.

Challenge

The central challenge, Mr. Buu says, lies in the development of co-operatives under his union's auspices for marketing rice, and fertilizer distribution and for all the necessities of farm and village life. Before you talk doctrine, he says, you have to put food in the mouths of peasants and things in their hands. This gives them not only the practical means of livelihood, but it lays the foundation of the way of life which they would understand and defend.

In laying plans for the organization of total village life, the CTV has created, with government support and United States aid, two pilot villages. Land was cleared, and villages of 1000 to 1200 people were built up from scratch. These autonomous, self-supporting communities have schools, religious centers, agricultural training centers, and good crops.

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