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Current Support Brief

RADIOBROADCASTING IN THE VIETNAMESE PROPAGANDA WAR



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RADIOBROADCASTING
IN THE VIETNAMESE PROPAGANDA WAR

The dominant factor in the Vietnamese propaganda war is the contrast between the closed radio reception base of wired loudspeakers in North Vietnam and the free reception base of radio receivers in South Vietnam. Because of this factor, the vigorous North Vietnamese propaganda campaign to the South cannot be successfully countered by an equally vigorous propaganda effort directed to the North by South Vietnam. South Vietnam has chosen to ignore this situation, however, and has consistently emphasized the expansion of its broadcasting coverage to the North. Moreover, the effectiveness of domestic South Vietnamese broadcasts has suffered from self-inflicted restrictions on radio receivers imposed in past attempts to limit the audience for North Vietnamese broadcasts.

In recent months the government of South Vietnam has shown a more realistic approach to the problems of its domestic broadcasting. Encouraging policy changes include the appointment of an experienced man to head the broadcasting system, an accelerated program for the distribution of radio receivers, and plans for the establishment of provincial radio stations designed to attract the rural populace. Although this new emphasis on domestic broadcasting lacks the appeal of carrying the propaganda war to the North and makes considerable demands on an already inadequate broadcasting staff, it nevertheless focuses the propaganda effort on the only audience allowed a free choice, the people of South Vietnam. This attempt to secure the support of the South Vietnamese people, if energetically pursued by the government, offers considerably greater promise of success in the propaganda war than any increase in broadcasting to North Vietnam.

I. Current Status of Radiobroadcasting

A. South Vietnam

The government-owned radiobroadcasting system in South Vietnam at present consists of 12 medium-wave and 13 short-wave transmitters, as shown on the accompanying map, with an aggregate power of 274 kilowatts (kw). This transmission base, which represents a significant increase above the total transmitted power of 50 kw in 1956, provides the South Vietnamese government with the means to broadcast to all of Vietnam and to large parts of Southeast Asia.

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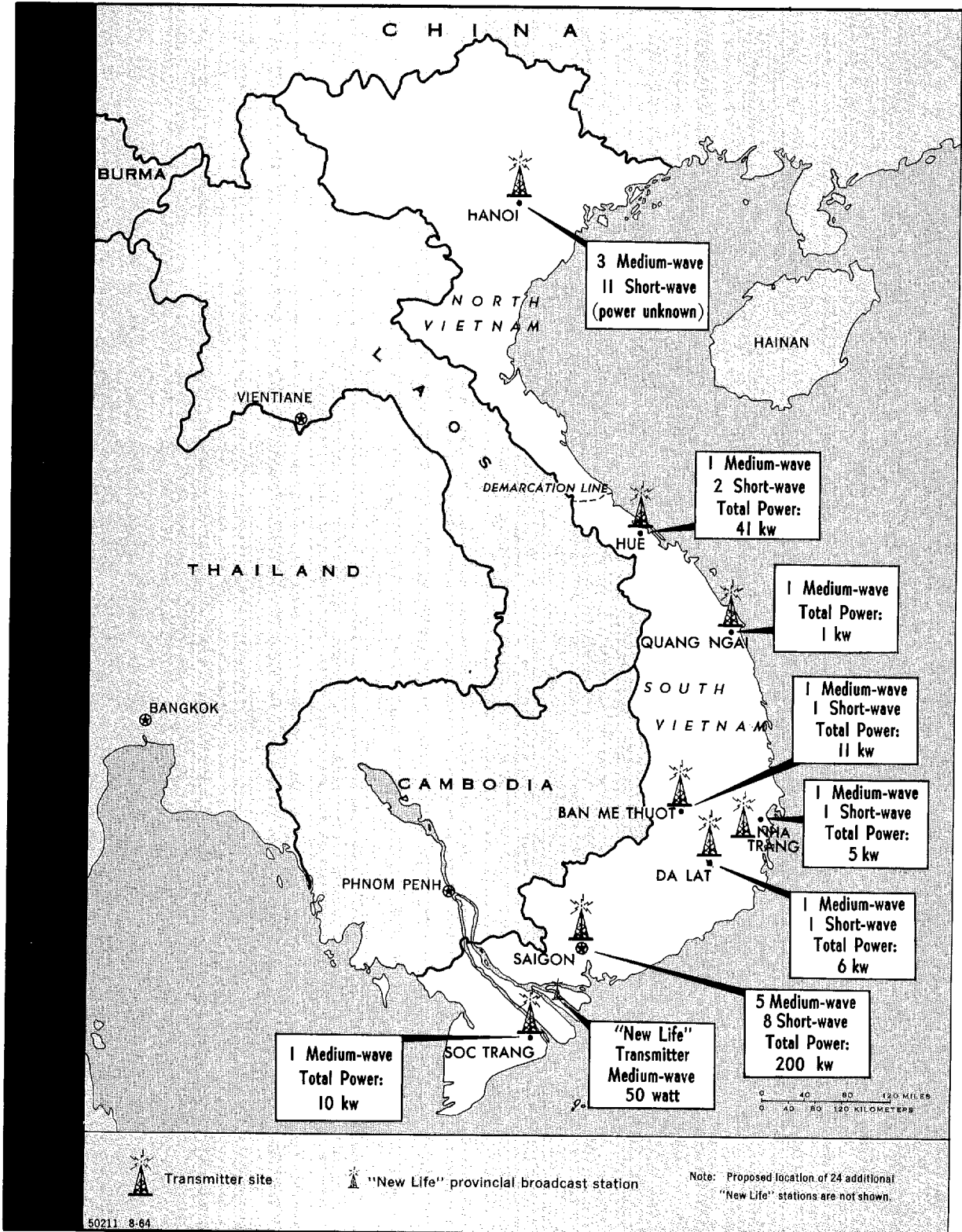
During the 8-year period in which transmission power increased more than 400 percent, there was not a comparable growth either in the number of radio receivers or in the size and quality of the broadcasting staff. The lag in the development of a broadcasting staff commensurate with the enlarged transmission facilities has been the result not so much of culpable negligence as of bureaucratic inertia and the constraints of a wartime budget. The lack of development in the radio receiver base, however, which currently totals some 500,000 receivers, has been the result of an earlier government effort to restrict the availability of receivers through the use of both import restrictions and an annual user tax. By this action the government of South Vietnam sought to limit the potential audience for the ever-increasing propaganda barrage from North Vietnam. At the same time, however, this action rendered partially sterile the expansion of domestic broadcasting coverage in South Vietnam.

In recent months the government of South Vietnam, in a more realistic attempt to meet the problems of a propaganda war, has initiated a number of changes in its broadcasting policy, including the lifting of import restrictions on receivers. Under present arrangements the Agency for International Development (AID) will be permitted to sponsor a receiver distribution program that will deliver about 100,000 radio receivers into the hands of the South Vietnamese by the end of 1964. This stands in sharp contrast to the 26,000 receivers that AID distributed in the 1956-63 period.

An encouraging note has been the recent appointment of an experienced broadcaster, Nguyen dinh Linh, as head of the broadcasting system. Of equal importance has been the recent emphasis on audience-oriented programming as evidenced by the ambitious plan for the construction of 25 low-power (50-watt) provincial radiobroadcasting stations that will originate and broadcast local programs. The demonstrated effectiveness of three such provincial stations, activated on an experimental basis in early 1964, has led AID to undertake the financing of the program. Although this plan for provincial stations carries with it no explicit paramilitary objectives, these stations will be able to provide information on insurgent activities to populated points not now associated with the military warning system.

The encouraging changes in broadcast policy that have emerged to date are by no means a complete answer to the demands of the current situation. Personnel ceilings and rigid salary scales still appear

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to hamper the development of an adequate broadcast staff. Moreover, South Vietnam retains its enigmatic desire to expand its propaganda effort to a North Vietnamese audience largely deafened by totalitarian receiver control.

B. North Vietnam

The North Vietnamese government operates 11 short-wave and 3 medium-wave transmitters of unknown power in its domestic and international radiobroadcasting service. The increase of more than 300 percent in the number of hours broadcast in Vietnamese since May 1956 demonstrates that substantial growth has taken place. Programming in other languages also has been expanded in recent years and now includes eight major languages and four dialects of Southeast Asia.

In addition to overt broadcasts from Hanoi, the Liberation News Agency (LNA) -- a separately organized, clandestine broadcasting agency -- directs approximately 33 hours per week of broadcasts in the Vietnamese language against the "US imperialists and their lackeys." Although the location of the LNA transmitting facilities is not known, it is likely that Radio Hanoi provides programming support and even that its transmitters are being used. The influence and direction of the government of North Vietnam are not acknowledged, however, in order to preserve the impression that the LNA is a spontaneous effort by the South Vietnamese to rid themselves of "oppression." The overt broadcasts of the "Voice of Vietnam" from Hanoi quote the LNA almost daily as a source of information, both to give it publicity and to add credence to its ostensibly independent organization.

The domestic reception base in North Vietnam is made up, for the most part, of a closed network of wired loudspeakers located in private homes, factories, offices, and public places. Radio receivers capable of unrestricted broadcast reception are available only in limited numbers, and ownership is tightly controlled by the government. The extensiveness of the wired network of loudspeakers can only be inferred from a statement by Radio Hanoi that the domestic broadcasting service reaches an audience of 3 million North Vietnamese. Making allowances for the probable preponderance of mass-audience loudspeakers, this statement is not indicative of a very extensive wired network for a nation with a population of 17 million people. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the main thrust in developing a radiobroadcasting reception base in

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North Vietnam has been, and will continue to be, directed toward a government-controlled wired network that is impervious to foreign broadcasts.

2. Comparison and Prospects

Although the radiobroadcasting systems of North and South Vietnam vary somewhat in their transmitting capabilities, each provides extensive coverage to the whole of Vietnam. The most significant difference between the two broadcasting systems lies in the composition of their respective reception bases. North Vietnam's decision to develop a closed reception base of wired loudspeakers has placed it in the enviable position of being able to control the broadcasts available to its people and to direct propaganda to South Vietnam without fear of reprisal in kind. The free reception base of radio receivers in South Vietnam, however, has presented the government with the dilemma of providing an expanding audience for North Vietnam broadcasts with each addition to its own audience.

South Vietnam's past reaction to this dilemma has been to increase the number and power of its transmitters and to restrict simultaneously the growth of its reception base. The recent change in South Vietnam's policy on the distribution of radio receivers and the program of constructing provincial radio stations reflect the growing realization that the propaganda war cannot be won by reducing the audience potential for North Vietnamese broadcasts, and that a more active propaganda campaign must be conducted for the allegiance of its own people. With continued implementation of these policy changes, along with additional steps needed to expand and improve the broadcasting staff, there is a greater chance than before that the domestic propaganda effort in South Vietnam will meet with some measure of success. It is unlikely, however, that the present or even an expanded propaganda effort directed against North Vietnam, with its greatly restricted audience potential, will have more than a marginal degree of effectiveness. As the free listeners of South Vietnam represent the only audience allowed any choice of programs, the competitive propaganda effort by North and South Vietnam must focus on them.

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