

## **In Viet Cong Country, Villagers Are the Key**

### **Active Support of Populace Is Required for NLF Forces Operating in S. Vietnam**

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Binh Phu, South Vietnam—The National Liberation Front-controlled area we visited Tuesday and Wednesday is a remarkably well-organized entity. It contains not only villages and ricefields but schools, medical facilities, cemeteries, sentry and messenger systems, and a political administration.

For Veronique Decoudu of Agence France Presse and I, both of whom had written about the NLF without firsthand knowledge, the opportunity to see it in action was gratifying as well as unexpected.

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**This the third dispatch from Leslie about his experiences in Viet Cong territory.**

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Our stay lasted 18 hours, during which time we were taken only where our hosts wanted us to go. Such a short, restricted visit provides no basis for drawing conclusions, but it does evoke impressions and answers to obvious questions.

Our trip, for instance, reinforced a notion one Vietnam expert had tried to drill into me that the government side relies on and draws strength from the populace's passivity, while the NLF requires constant activity of its supporters.

Nothing symbolizes that idea more than the difference between Highway 4, the paved government-controlled highway we left to enter the NLF zone, and the arduous military trails we walked on after arriving there. Government troops ride to battle sitting in the backs of trucks on Highway 4; NLF soldiers march on broken paths, sometimes with mud up to their thighs. Not surprisingly, the government controls territory within immediate reach of the highway; difficult terrain belongs to the NLF.

Our experience also gave us a concrete picture of how NLF troops move from one area to the next. At least in the Mekong Delta, where rice paddies are the main topographical feature, they walk single file on narrow trails between the paddies, just as we did.

Such journeys require extraordinary coordination. Guides, who may be only local villagers, must be waiting at their assigned points on the trail at the right time. Presumably, in areas where the NLF has less support, there are fewer guides, and travel is therefore a more hazardous, uncertain undertaking. This is just one way in which NLF troops require active support by the populace to function.

If our trip is any indication, villagers also provide food, shelter and protection from shellings.

Our visit raised as many questions as it answered. For example, we and several thousand Vietnamese attended a nighttime NLF “ceremony of peace” in a clearing in remote ricefield. How, we wondered, could so many people, apparently NLF sympathizers, gather in one place without South Vietnamese government authorities being aware of it? And if they were aware of it, why didn’t they fire artillery shells at the site?

Either NLF security was exceptional beyond comprehension or, more likely, the NLF had made some sort of tacit arrangement with local government military officers to prevent shelling.

Our visit proved that the NLF is alive and well in a part of Dinh Tuong province. Does that imply vast NLF strength elsewhere in South Vietnam? Again, the answer is unclear, but this does not seem to be the case. Dinh Tuong has always been a relative NLF stronghold. While NLF flags are now flying in other parts of the delta, there does not appear to be evidence that the NLF is strong everywhere.

Our talks with NLF cadres left the impression that their primary military interest is in holding onto territory where NLF flags flew the day the ceasefire started. Cadres complained bitterly of government ceasefire violations, singling out cases where government troops attacked areas to tear down NLF flags.

But in other respects it appears that a transition to political struggle already has begun. The assumption seems to be that military activity by both sides will diminish as the ceasefire gradually takes hold. During our visit we saw no weapon larger than a rifle. While it is likely that in any event heavy weapons would have been kept from our view, this corroborates other reports that the NLF recently has buried or withdrawn large weapons.

One facet of coming political activity seems to be concern with Article 11 of the Paris agreement. That says that both sides “will ensure the democratic liberties of the people,” including freedom of speech, press, organization, political activities, belief and movement.

Le Hoang Oanh, the NLF representative in Binh Phu village, said a basic tenet of the NLF ceasefire plan was to demand that the International Commission of Control and Supervision set up in the Paris agreement

enforce Article 11. Oanh said the NLF would use it to defend its right to fly liberation flags and organize politically. He seemed impatient that the ICCS had not yet begun to work in the countryside.

It was obvious that villagers were prepared for an ICCS visit. And that might even have been a factor in our easy entrance into the NLF zone. As we began walking through Binh Phu village Tuesday afternoon, a few villagers mistook us for ICCS officials and started to harangue us about money owed them for war damage to their houses.

Oanh spoke of an “NLF policy of forgiveness,” another sign of preparation for political struggle. According to the policy, Oanh said, “we consider that people working for the Saigon government were forced to do so. Therefore, there is no reason to punish them. If they come back home, we can help them to live.”