

# JOURNEY TO NORTH VIETNAM

DIANE NASH BEVEL

**W**E LEFT New York on the evening of December 15, 1966. We would fly to Paris, Moscow, Peking, Na Ning (China) and then to Hanoi. There were four of us. Mrs. Grace Mora Newman who is of Puerto Rican extraction. She is the sister of Dennis Mora, one of the "Fort Hood Three." The Fort Hood Three is a group of three American soldiers (one white, one black and one Puerto Rican) who refused to go to Vietnam. They are now serving sentences, ranging from three to five years, in the federal penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas. Mrs. Newman lives in New York City. The others on our delegation were Miss Barbara Deming who has been very active in the Peace Movement (she has taken part in a "peace walk" from the United States to Cuba and a peace mission to Saigon in order to protest the war. She is author of a book, *Prison Notes*, which describes her stay in an Albany, Ga., jail); Mrs. Patricia Griffith who is active in the peace movement at Cornell University where her husband is a professor; and myself, Diane Nash Bevel, a black American who opposes the war in Vietnam.

All four of us are American citizens and all four of us oppose the United States fighting this war. We did not represent a group or any organization. We were four individuals. Each of us had her own particular opinions about the issues and each had her own reasons for going. In fact, I might say that we disagreed on practically every other subject from child care and men, to politics and nonviolence. The only issue that I can remember all of us agreeing upon during the

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*Diane Bevel was one of the leaders of the student sit-in movement, while attending Fisk University in Nashville, in 1960. Since then she and her husband, James Bevel, have become well-known as activist leaders on many battlefronts in the war against racism here at home. Like many others from the ranks of the Negro Freedom Movement, Diane Bevel is actively involved in the Movement to End the War in Vietnam.*

entire month we were together was that we were all against the war.

Half the trip (between the U.S. and Moscow and returning from Moscow to the U.S.) was paid for from this country. The money we used was from contributions of individuals involved in the peace movement in this country. The fare from Moscow to Hanoi and returning from Hanoi to Cambodia was paid for by the Vietnamese Women's Union. Since I don't want the United States to appear like an "Iron Curtain" to the Vietnamese, I think it would be good for several Vietnamese women to visit this country so that they could see our country for themselves. If this reciprocal invitation materializes, this would be an ideal way to handle the finances. If each side paid half the cost it would not be such a heavy burden on anyone.

The invitation was extended by the Women's Union through Dave Dellinger, editor of *Liberation* magazine, who had visited Vietnam.

*Let me take this opportunity to make it very clear that any statement I make applies only to me. I cannot speak for any of the other three ladies.*

I am against the war because I am against using murder as a solution to human problems.

We arrived in Hanoi, North Vietnam, on Thursday evening, December 22. We were met at the airport by members of the Executive Committee of the Women's Union of North Vietnam. We were presented with flowers and were given a very warm welcome. The only Vietnamese non-member of the Women's Union present was the interpreter. He called himself "the minority."

The following morning, December 23, we began by being introduced to the history and natural resources of the country at the Museum of the Revolution in the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam. Then we saw a film about the life of President Ho Chi Minh, affectionately known by the Vietnamese as "Uncle Ho." The film mentions that he had visited Harlem in his youth and observed and resented the exploitation of Negroes in the United States.

That afternoon we had an interview with Colonel Ha Van Lau. He mentioned crimes that America had committed against the South Vietnamese people such as forcing them into "strategic hamlets" which are really concentration camps so that they could be more easily policed, dropping bombs on them, etc.

### ***"people to people" contact***

The next day we visited Tu Ky, a suburb of Hanoi, where American planes had bombed on December 2, 13, and 14, 1966. The villagers

made reports on the damages done in human lives, property, crops and farm animals. Several victims described their personal losses. For example, Mrs. Thai who testified that her four-year-old and 16-month-old sons had been crushed to death in the bombings.

Later that morning we visited Phuc Tan Street which is in the central district of Hanoi. There was extensive damage which destroyed about 300 dwelling houses. This is one of the most densely populated areas of Hanoi. We witnessed this damage and the fact that it was a densely populated area in the center of Hanoi with our own eyes. Here a woman eight months pregnant had her unborn child blown out of her body. The bodies of the mother and the unborn child were recovered some distance apart from each other. While we were looking at the spectacle we saw lying on the ground a section of human jawbone with teeth. Dishes, shoes, children's toys and charred household items were scattered everywhere. Another woman pregnant and obviously ready to deliver any day told us of having lost her son, 7 years old, and her daughter, 2½ years old.

"Since I had no work this month due to my late pregnancy, I had brought my two children from the place to which they had been evacuated so that I could enjoy having them home with me. On that day (Dec. 13, 1966) my street was bombed while I was making my prenatal visit at the medical center. My son's body was found under the rubble. My girl was blown to bits. The only part of her body we could find was a piece of her head and hair. This is a deep hurt against the aggressors. It is too much suffering for me."

We then left and visited another bombed section in Hanoi, Nguyen Thiep Street. Again this was a densely populated street in the center of Hanoi.

Hanoi is divided into four districts. Bombing had taken place in all four.

That evening we visited Hanoi hospital. We met with the doctors and staff. Dr. Fut gave a report of attacks by the United States on the medical facilities of North Vietnam.

His main points were (quoting from his remarks on that occasion):

"The U.S. has good reconnaissance and has deliberately and systematically attacked medical institutions in North Vietnam in order to paralyze the medical proceedings of the country and to demoralize the people.

"Eighty hospitals and health centers have been bombed. Over 200 patients have been killed in their hospital beds. Some hospi-

tals have been bombed as many as 10 times and the leper hospital was bombed 39 times. . . .

"Quynh Lap Leper Hospital is the largest center for research and treatment of leprosy in the country. It is a well equipped, modern institution of which the country is proud. It was completed in 1959 and has the capacity to treat 2,600 lepers. Out of 4,000 lepers treated here in the last five years, 1,000 have been cured and have returned to normal lives with their families. It is in a remote area far from military targets or anything else due to the nature of the disease. (Leprosy is contagious.) On June 12, 1965 hundreds of bombs were dropped on the center and it was strafed. International protests were made in which it was made clear what kind of institution it was that had been attacked. It was bombed again. Again protests were broadcast internationally by the Ministry of Public Health. But the attacks continued. We evacuated the lepers to another temporary headquarters. We were bombed there. Then we moved them to caves at the foot of the mountain for protection. We were pursued to the caves and bombed. One hundred and thirty-nine patients were killed. One hundred others were wounded. Nearly 2,000 of the lepers who survived have suffered intensified attacks of their diseases. Many also have new sufferings to endure from wounds inflicted in the bombardment."

"This single institution," declared Dr. Fut, "was attacked 39 times. These attacks could not have been mistakes. They were deliberately designed to strike at the morale of the country in order to encourage us to surrender which we will never do. This viciousness only makes us more determined."

One afternoon we visited Friendship Hospital near Hanoi where South Vietnamese victims were being treated. We saw a man who was a victim of napalm, and two women who had been tortured in Diem's\* prisons. One 29-year-old woman's reproductive system was damaged so severely by torture that although she has been under treatment for seven years doctors have been unable to stop her continuous vaginal bleeding.

We visited the town of Phu Ly. The main thing that was clear to me there was the fact that the village had been *entirely* destroyed. *Every* building had been demolished and most were razed to the ground.

There were no military targets in evidence except perhaps a railroad

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\* The Diem Family ruled South Vietnam from 1954-63.

track, but it extends the length of the country, so if the planes had bombed a mile down the track they would have been able to avoid the town. Almost one thousand bombs were dropped there, we were told.

### *Christmas day in Nam Dinh*

Nam Dinh, the third largest city in Vietnam, is a textile city 60 miles south of Hanoi.

We met the mayor, Thein Thi Dian (a woman) who gave us a report on the damage done to the city.

The air raid alarm went off that afternoon and we took shelter. A reconnaissance plane was shot down in the area. The Vietnamese felt this to be a violation of the spirit of the Christmas truce. They felt the truce was to allow the holiday to have an atmosphere of peace, but they felt this was defeated if enemy aircraft was in the sky.

Later in the afternoon we heard victims describe what had happened to them in the bombings. We spent the entire day in Nam Dinh.

The next day we had another meeting with Colonel Lau, whom I mentioned earlier. He said that the chemicals that the American government says are used to defoliate the jungle are actually used to destroy the rice crops of the villagers to compel them to surrender. He made some further observations about the war and said that the Vietnamese people make a careful distinction between the American people and the American government. They do not believe that most of the American people would be in favor of the vicious things done to the Vietnamese people. They (i.e., the Vietnamese) read the Associated Press and the United Press International releases and feel there is good evidence that the American people do not approve of the war in the fact that the Pentagon and White House so often lie to the American public about what is actually happening. For example, they have misrepresented the truth about the kinds of targets, types of chemicals and gases that have been used, etc. Among his main points were that:

“Vietnam is one country as is specified in the Geneva Agreements to which the United States agreed;

“America’s real reason for fighting in Vietnam is that they want to make Vietnam an American colony which is to say that they want to control the economics of the country;

“The Americans want to use the country to build airfields, harbors and highways to serve American military purposes.”

We were to hear similar charges of this kind, later from prominent Vietnamese Catholics such as Mr. Hoa, who said:

“Many Americans bought land in South Vietnam during our war with France. Their intent is to conquer the country. They live in the best buildings in South Vietnam. They despise and ill-treat the Vietnamese people in South Vietnam. They cannot consider themselves protecting the Vietnamese people. One may ask the question, ‘Are children and Catholics who are being killed in large numbers Communists?’ ”

We had several sessions with the National Liberation Front in which we heard reports on its nature, history, philosophy, methods, and purposes. We met victims of the war who were from South Vietnam. We heard a report from a woman who had been in one of Diem's prisons for ten years and who had been badly tortured. We saw some NLF films on American war crimes. We received a report on South Vietnamese women and the part they have played.

We visited Phu Xa village. We heard reports of the bombings there, and visited the museum set up to exhibit what had happened in that village. *This village had been completely rebuilt.* We visited a kindergarten there.

On one of the following days that remained in December, we received a report from the Minister of Education who talked about the history of education in the country and the present state of the educational system. He mentioned that they had managed to virtually wipe out illiteracy in North Vietnam. This report was interrupted by an air raid alarm. After it was over we resumed the meeting.

We talked to a representative of the Ministry of Defense in order to make our request to see American pilots.

We were granted this request and had interviews with two American pilots who had been captured. They were from Minnesota and from East Orange, New Jersey. One asked us not to use his name and I don't remember which one so I feel obliged not to mention either. They said they were well treated and in good health, and they looked as though they were. They sent letters home by us and about twenty other captured pilots did the same although we only got to see two.

We heard a report about the North Vietnamese women presented by the Women's Union.

One night we visited evening classes for adults. This is called complementary school. This was in a remote area in the countryside.

The Director of the school gave us a report, and we visited another larger complementary school in a less remote place.

We heard from the youth organizations; representatives reported on the role of youth in the life of the country.

We received a report from the Women's Union of South Vietnam and from the South Vietnamese Youth for Liberation. They described the nonviolent attempts used in South Vietnam by the liberation forces.

A Dr. Nguyen gave us a report on the use by the U.S. government of toxic chemicals and gases. He was a victim himself. It has caused blindness and had affected the nervous system. Pregnant women invariably abort.

After having seen bombed Catholic Churches in a number of towns and villages in North Vietnam, the delegation became interested in a sampling of Roman Catholic opinion in North Vietnam.

The interview took place on December 31, 1966 with the following three Catholic persons: a priest, a newspaper editor and an activist.

*Father Ho Thanh Bien* is a Catholic priest, the pastor of a church in Hanoi. He has been a priest for more than 40 years. He was born in South Vietnam, spent nine years in the Resistance War (against France) and is now a member of the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam.

*Mr. Vu Thai Hoa*—chief editor of the Catholic newspaper *Justica*, has been a Catholic all of his life and has a younger brother who is a priest in Hanoi.

*Mr. Nguyen Van Dong*—member of a prominent Catholic family from South Vietnam. He has a sister who is a nun and his eldest brother is a member of the Catholic hierarchy in Can Tho Province, South Vietnam. Mr. Dong is also a member of the National Assembly.

In our interview we were seeking answers to such questions as:

Is there any threat to religious freedom in the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam? Do Catholics enjoy freedom of belief in North Vietnam?

What is the attitude of Catholics toward the Geneva agreements?

What is the attitude of Catholics toward the war and America's actions in it?

Their reply to these and other questions are summarized here:

"You also asked about two million Catholics having fled North Vietnam in 1954 to go to South Vietnam and whether this was due to a threat of destruction of religion in North Vietnam. I would first like to say that there are not two million Catholics in North Viet-

nam and South Vietnam combined.

"French forces slandered by persuading people that if they went to the South they would have much more land and more wealth; you see, the people at that time were just from under colonialism and were very poor. The colonialists put some priests up to saying that 'Jesus and Mary have gone to South Vietnam.' So that many people as faithful Catholics did as these priests said and followed God and Mary to South Vietnam.

"In Thanh Hoa Province a thirteen-year-old boy was put up to telling the people that Jesus and Mary had gone to South Vietnam. He said that a miracle had taken place and that he spoke with the voice of the Virgin Mary. The Catholic people later discovered the plot.

"At that time Cardinal Spellman and Tom Dooley\* encouraged as many Catholics as possible to go to South Vietnam. Many Catholic churches in North Vietnam were left without priests. Many Catholic families were separated. These crimes against Catholics in North Vietnam are things which we will never forget.

"About freedom of belief in our country—the government of North Vietnam always respects the freedom of belief of the Catholic people and has never occupied our churches. But French forces occupied the churches during the War of Resistance. Bell towers were used for gun positions.

"From the beginning our Constitution provided for freedom of belief for the people and gave us the right to choose our religion. There is no force used upon us. In 1955 President Ho Chi Minh issued a decree on freedom of belief to the National Assembly."

They continued:

"About the nature of the war, we consider the war waged by the United States administration against our country as a war of aggression because it is that they come from a far country about 10,000 kilometers away. First they came with a few hundred troops. Then they continually increased their numbers to 400,000. They escalated. With air raids and bombings they kill many Vietnamese people with their well-equipped forces and modern weapons. We consider this aggression.

"We Catholics along with the entire Vietnamese people have a duty to defend the country. We are compelled by aggressors to take

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\* Dr. Tom Dooley, American physician who set up a hospital and clinic in Vietnam before his death in 1981.

up arms to defend our homeland. This fight cannot in any way be considered as against our religion; it is a just fight. . . ." I asked specifically:

How do Catholics feel about Communism as it relates to the Catholic Church?

Father Ho Thanh Bien replied:

"Communists do not interfere with us, or prevent us going to church. They insure us freedom of belief. We are of different philosophies, but we do have one thing in common; we are fighting together against aggression. This is not a war between religious people and non-religious people. We do not fight each other. It is a war against aggression. In this country communists are taking the lead in building the economics and culture of the country and in fighting against aggression. We admire them and cooperate with them."

*Mr. Dong:* "Let me add—Catholic people in Vietnam already have witnessed when the country was not independent. We lost everything and were poor. But when the revolution led by Communists was carried out successfully Catholic people have more of everything, including freedom of belief.

"When the French returned again they killed Catholic people, destroyed and occupied our churches. But when the French were driven away, the communist-led government helped Catholics rebuild our churches and build a happy life so between Catholics and other people there exists no problem.

"In this new system of society we not only have happier lives but also freedom of belief. Many Catholics with talents were put into important social and political positions. Hundreds of them take part in the Administration on various levels; the Front, the National Assembly, the People's Council, etc. We live quite happily and have freedom of belief. We resent those who call themselves Christians and send bombs to destroy our churches and kill our priests and kill our people.

"We cannot stand such savage crimes of the United States government in bombings against our children and old people. That is why we Vietnamese Catholics resolutely join other Vietnamese people in fighting against aggression. We want peace, but we must have justice."

Then we were given a list of Catholic Churches that have been destroyed by U.S. bombings (125 in all).

<i>Province</i>	<i>Number of Catholic Churches Destroyed</i>
Quang Binh	20
Ha Tinh	29
Nghe An	34
Thanh Hoa	12
Ninh Binh	10
Nam Ha	10
Phu Tho	2
Ha Tinh	1
Yen Bai	1
Bac Thai	1
Tuyen Quang	1
Quang Ninh	2
Hanoi	1
Vinh Linh	1

The following are specific cases cited by our hosts as casualties of U.S. bombing raids.

On November 13, 1965 in Quy Hoa parish Ha Tinh Province, Father Joseph Truong Van Loc was killed by a bomb at noon while he was saying Mass.

Vu Duy Khiem, director of the Catholic seminary, was killed along with many seminarians including one who was 71 years old. Many students at the seminary were killed and wounded that day which was May 5, 1966 in Nghe An Province.

Father Gregory Nguyen Van Ngoc was killed on September 20, 1966 at Ha Tinh Province; fourteen other Catholics were killed or wounded at that time.

In Chieu Ung parish the United States bombs rendered seven nuns homeless when the convent was completely destroyed. This took place September 27, 1966.

In Ha Thac parish, Phu Tho Province, one priest was killed and one hundred Catholics were killed or wounded in two raids, March 4, 1966 and October 17, 1966.

Mass is often interrupted by air raids to the extent that Mass is now generally said at night.

Many churches have been bombed on Sunday. For example, the Thu Trung Church was bombed immediately after Mass while the people were still congregated. In that bombing on April 24, 1966, over one hundred Catholics were killed or wounded; this includes

a number of children and pregnant women. One Catholic family of nine members had only two survive this bombing and one of them, an eighteen-year-old girl, had one hand cut off.

Quite recently, just before Christmas 1966, when Ninh Binh Province was bombed, the Catholic Church there was destroyed. This was December 23, 1966 at 7 p.m.

Finally, on January 2 we had an hour-long discussion with President Ho Chi Minh. He seems to be a very gentle man. He is 76 years old but is very alert and shows no signs of becoming senile. He is determined that Vietnam be reunified and independent. He expressed regret that so many American youth were dying on Vietnamese soil, but said, "If they came to teach or to help us build we would welcome them, but they come to our country to kill us, so we have no other choice but to kill them." He said, "In this war we are at home. We want peace, but we insist on peace with independence."

We departed Vietnam the next day.