

1974 'COMMUNIST ATROCITIES'

By John Spragens, Jr.

The most recent full-scale campaign by Saigon's propaganda apparatus began in response to the March 9, 1974 tragedy at Cai Lay, a district town in the Mekong delta. The undisputed bones of what happened are: at 2:55 p.m. that day there was an explosion on the grounds of the town's elementary school. Shrapnel from the blast killed 23 pupils and injured 43 more, nine of them fatally.

Saigon's press spokesmen announced that the school had been struck by a lone Chinese-made 82mm mortar round fired by the "VC" as part of a stepped-up terror campaign against civilians in Saigon-controlled areas.

It was not surprising that Saigon should put out such a story. But a number of facts cast suspicion on its account, some immediately, others later on as the press and the International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS) investigated the incident. The truism about a good offense being the best defense had been applied frequently during the war to obscure responsibility for tragedies resulting from the carelessness, cruelty, rowdiness or greed of Saigon and U.S. troops, or for such technical failures as short rounds.

Some Vietnamese, when they heard of the Cai Lay incident, recalled one obvious coverup this year. During the Tet lunar new year holiday in January, there was an explosion on the highway from Nha Trang to Cam Ranh, which killed and wounded several passengers on a bus. It was officially denounced as a "VC" mine explosion. Soldiers from Nha Trang later said that the blast had been caused by a grenade accidentally dropped by a Saigon trooper who was running to jump on the bus.

It soon became obvious that what was happening in the Cai Lay case was more than an ordinary attempt to fix blame on the Provisional Revolutionary Government (P.R.G.). The Popular Mobilization (Dan Van) Office quickly turned out blood-red posters denouncing the "Communist Massacre" in huge letters beneath photographs showing the children's broken bodies. "Memorial services" were organized at schools across the country, more as forums to denounce the P.R.G. than to mourn the dead. The press office issued a booklet, Death in the Afternoon, in English and French, filled with official photographs of the incident captioned by quotations ranging from Reuters to Roethke.

The government spokesman, Bui Bao Truc, made one of his rare appearances at an afternoon press

. . . Just as the explosion occurred, a bus from Can Tho to Saigon stopped. On board was a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer [Nick Ut of AP] . . . He jumped off the bus and ran straight toward the place where the explosion had occurred. Before he could even get his camera up, one of the security personnel stopped him and was going to arrest him . . . They said that if he wanted to take photographs he would need permission from General Nghi, commander of the IV Corps Tactical Zone, who is famous for his phobia against the press . . . Two people stood there, one on either side, and left him only when his bus pulled away from the crossroads . . .

-- Dai Dan Toc, Saigon, March 13, 1974

conference. He was flanked by a display board with blood-stained bookbags and notebooks, and photographs of the dead and wounded children and their grieving parents. He closed his presentation of Saigon's version of the tragedy by saying that he trusted the press was now well informed and would no longer be duped by the communists.

The foreign press largely followed the line that the "VC" were responsible, though none was prepared to echo Saigon's charge that the shelling had been aimed deliberately at the school as reprisal for the town's refusal to support the P.R.G.

Press access to information about the incident was mostly through Saigon official sources. The original announcements were made by Saigon spokesmen, and press travel to Cai Lay itself was limited. At that time, telephone contact with the P.R.G. delegation to the Joint Military Commission (JMC) was possible, but the delegation itself had little information to offer. Nearly a month later, when the only P.R.G. official who actually saw the schoolyard (the P.R.G. officer with the ICCS investigating team) spoke to the press, the incident had largely lost its news value abroad.

If Cai Lay faded quickly from the foreign press, Saigon was determined to keep it alive at home. The first tack of its media campaign had been a denunciation of the "Communist massacre" and a call for an ICCS investigation. By March 15, when the ICCS met to consider Saigon's official request for an investigation, an investigation request from the P.R.G. was also in ICCS

hands. Briefly, Saigon tried to insist that no investigation was needed, since members of the Iranian and Indonesian delegations had already visited the school and seen evidence that "proved" the children had been killed by a Chinese-made mortar. In addition, Saigon insisted in JMC meetings that the P.R.G. "acknowledge its responsibility" for the deaths, and blocked all other business.

Other obstacles arose. Saigon attempted to prevent a P.R.G. liaison officer from accompanying the ICCS investigating team, while the P.R.G. demanded that the team inspect the countryside around Cai Lay for evidence of large-scale shelling by ARVN (Saigon's Army of the Republic of Vietnam) units.

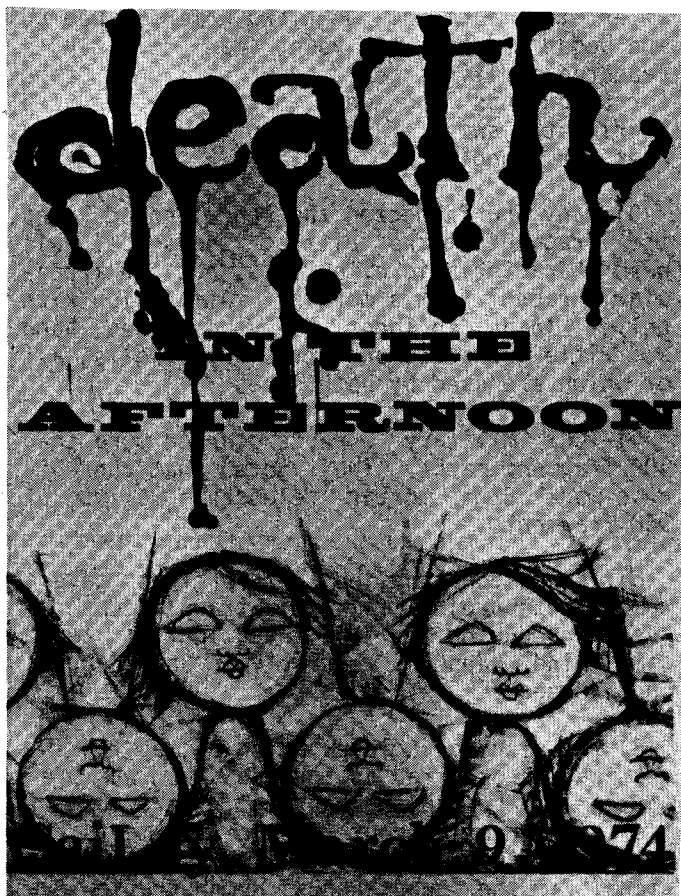
Finally, at the end of March an ICCS team went to the school, where they made a careful examination of the evidence still left at the site. As they left the school, the ICCS delegation was attacked and stoned in what Saigon called an expression of "popular outrage" against the Hungarian and Polish delegations for their supposed attempt to obstruct ICCS investigation of the incident.

The investigation was suspended at that point and has not been completed. The chances for a definitive determination of responsibility are slight, stale as the evidence now is. But as matters have developed, the propaganda campaign and the uses to which it has been put overshadow the deaths of the school children.

SAIGON'S CAMPAIGN TO PARALYZE PEACEKEEPING BODIES

Indeed, to some observers, Vietnamese and foreign alike, it seemed that the Cai Lay incident had simply come at a convenient time to be used for a predetermined goal -- the total incapacitation of the already near-paralyzed peacekeeping organs set up by the Paris Agreement. Such suspicions were reinforced by Saigon's choice of the unspectacular April 12 loss of Tong Le Chan, a tiny, isolated Ranger base northwest of Saigon, as the second focus of its campaign against the ICCS and JMC. The third pick for incident-of-the-month was a "VC mortar attack" which killed eight school children and wounded 31 more in the Mekong delta village of Song Phu.

The Cai Lay incident was used not only to attack the P.R.G., but also to denounce the Polish and Hungarian delegations to the ICCS for alleged partisanship and obstruction of the investigation requests. Saigon seized the fall of Tong Le Chan as an excuse to boycott the two-sided talks on political matters at La Celle St. Cloud, near



ONE OF SAIGON'S English-language propaganda pamphlets on the Cai Lay incident, laying the blame for the children's deaths on "Vietcong gunners."

The Song Phu incident of May 4 was said by Saigon to have resulted from eight mortar rounds falling on the school. They produced a Chinese-made 82mm mortar shell which was, Saigon said, a dud from the barrage. The P.R.G. responded that the district where Song Phu is located is totally under the control of the Saigon administration. This was confirmed by independent sources in Saigon, who point out that the district is populated by followers of the Hoa Hao sect which, while not enthusiastic about Saigon, is even less friendly toward the P.R.G. Later, the P.R.G.'s Liberation Radio broadcast a report from its correspondent in the area. The report contended that a number of ARVN officers had been partying that morning to celebrate the promotion of one of the group. Drunk, they began firing their guns and throwing hand grenades around. Some of the grenades fell in the schoolyard, across the street from their camp, and others damaged a military dependents' housing area next to the school.



ON GUIDED TOUR OF CAI LAY schoolyard, Iranian and Indonesian ICCS members view tail fin of a Chinese-made 82mm mortar shell which Saigon claims rested precisely "where it landed." (Official Saigon government photo.)

Paris, and to isolate the P.R.G. delegation in Saigon by cutting its telephone lines, shutting off its Saturday morning press conferences, and canceling all liaison flights to Loc Ninh, a P.R.G. administrative center. Also during this wave of the propaganda assault, Mr. Thieu declared that those who style themselves members of the third force are traitors, and that the third force itself is nothing but a creation of the "North Vietnamese Communists."

Both the Tong Le Chan and Song Phu incidents were used for continued attacks against the Poles and Hungarians. Tong Le Chan was heralded in press conferences and on banners strung across the streets as the opening wave of the long-promised "North Vietnamese general offensive." And double-size wall posters about the Song Phu deaths recalled Cai Lay, suggesting that the P.R.G. was engaged in a full-scale campaign of terror. As Saigon's chief representative to the JMC put it, "You know that from now on, children will be trembling every time they go to school because they are afraid you may kill them."

Faced by Saigon's withdrawal from the political talks in France and refusal to restore normal working conditions for its delegation to the JMC in Saigon, the P.R.G. finally suspended participation in both sets of talks -- a move it hesitated to take, since it hoped for serious discus-

sion of detailed proposals it had made on March 22. With the JMC shut down, there was virtually nothing the ICCS could do. Finally, North Vietnam joined the P.R.G. at the end of May in walking out of a meeting of the Four-Party Joint Military Team, effectively shutting down the last body set up by the Paris Agreement to enforce the peace. This last development was especially disturbing to the United States since it is through the

Third force figures reported that residents of Cai Lay told them the deaths at the school were caused by a short round from Saigon artillery. No definite proof of this was found, but evidence uncovered was not kind to Saigon's version.

1) Saigon's primary evidence was the tail fin of a Chinese-made 82mm mortar, shown to the Iranians and Indonesians "where it landed" in the middle of a depression said to be that caused by the explosion. Battle-experienced correspondents scoffed at the idea the fins would even have survived, much less landed so neatly in the blast site.

2) Philip McCombs of the Washington Post was interviewing a young ARVN sergeant at Cai Lay after the incident when two women rushed up and began berating the young man for ARVN's repeated shellings of their village. Other correspondents who went to the town reported hearing the swish of artillery rounds flying over the school.

3) Many who inspected the school noted that the fragment marks pitting the school wall were characteristic of pellets, not the irregular shrapnel from a mortar. (Ammunition with pellet loads includes U.S.-made mines, hand and rifle grenades, and artillery shells, all of which are used by both sides.)

4) ICCS military experts counted more than 400 fragment marks. They noted that the Chinese-made 82mm mortar releases a maximum of 360 fragments.

5) The Saigon-supplied interpreters gave a number of prejudicial mis-translations of questions during the ICCS investigation. (The same thing happens regularly in Saigon press conferences.)

6) The stoning incident which halted the investigation occurred as the ICCS team was preparing to go to the hospital, where some of the children were about to have fragments removed from their wounds. ICCS members said the signal for the "spontaneous" demonstration was given by the principal of the school, who lay down in the road to block the ICCS cars.

Liberation Radio's account of the Song Phu incident reminded Vietnamese of what happened in Bac Lieu province, where a grenade explosion at the communal meeting house in early April claimed dozens of victims. Saigon labeled it Viet Cong terror, but local residents said that it was a drunken fight between the sons of the village and hamlet chiefs, who had been gambling. The village chief's son had a bigger gang, so the hamlet chief's son got a grenade to even the odds. He was arrested by security officers, but after a bribe in the 100,000 piaster (\$165) range he was released, and the incident became a "VC atrocity." It was not, however, selected to be part of the major press-poster-banner campaign.

Four-Party Joint Military Team that the U.S. can look for its MIAs.

When the fragile peacekeeping machinery was shut down, heavy fighting erupted within 25 miles of Saigon, in the "Iron Triangle." Correspondents were allowed to travel to the battle area the first few days but were unable to determine how the fighting started. Later Saigon kept them away, reportedly because Saigon forces were taking heavy casualties. The situation seemed similar to those earlier this year when Saigon launched large-scale attacks against long-time revolutionary base areas in Kontum, Cu Chi, and the Plain of Reeds, but were severely battered in the process.

On June 6 Saigon, surely under pressure from the U.S. government, restored communication and liaison facilities to the Saigon-based P.R.G. delegation to the Two-Party JMC.

Some speculated that this Saigon move, like the release of veteran political prisoner Tran Ngoc Chau on the same day, was designed to placate critics of the Saigon regime in the U.S. Congress as the vote on aid to Saigon came to a head. The same day that Saigon restored the P.R.G.'s diplomatic privileges, Thieu, angry and desperate after recent congressional votes against supplemental aid, asked rhetorically in an address to teachers, "Does the U.S. keep its responsibilities?" Clearly there was a developing gap between what Thieu expected from Washington and what Nixon and Kissinger were capable of providing.

The Cai Lay "massacre," the North Vietnamese "general offensive," the shutdown then restora-

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tion of peacekeeping bodies tell of a regime unwilling to read the handwriting on the wall. On that wall are written in both Vietnamese and English the articles of the Paris Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam.

CHILDREN/MEN

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Photo by Richard Kalvar

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