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---FEATURES

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Vietnam Tour Spotlights
Severe Plight of Vietnamese

By Mrs. R.L. Mathis
For the Baptist Press

SAIGON (BP)--The war had ended just a few weeks before I arrived in Saigon. I planned the trip because it appeared no Vietnamese woman could leave her country to come to the continental conference of the Asian Baptist Women's Union in Singapore.

My visit to Vietnam therefore would report the conference to them and also permit me to talk with them about women's organizations in the churches. There was no woman's organization in any Baptist church in South Vietnam.

It turned out that immigration officials changed their minds at the last minute, and three Vietnamese women did come to Singapore--the first time that country had ever been represented at an Asian Baptist Women's Union meeting.

I went on to Saigon, however, and I'm glad I did. The trip showed me first hand the desperate plight of the Vietnamese people and their personal fight to bring life back to normalcy.

It spotlighted for me --and I hope for others--the need for all of us to increase assistance to these heroic people through the Baptist relief channels such as the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and the Baptist World Alliance.

The day after I arrived, I flew from Saigon to Hue, where Southern Baptist missionaries transported me, relay fashion, on an 11-day trip from one city to another where I had engagements in churches. During the long trip, which led from Hue back to Saigon, we rode in what looked like a cross between a passenger car and a truck.

We were never out of the sight of villages, teeming with people and rice fields. Later I learned the people were working frantically in the rice fields hoping to get a crop in and harvest it before war struck again.

I was surprised at how often we took a turn around a mountain and came upon the most beautiful beaches I've ever seen on the South China Sea. I had expected to see villages and jungles, the rice fields with people working in them and the water buffalo--but not mountains and beaches.

We arrived in Danang barely in time for the first afternoon session beginning about 4:30. Of about 70 women waiting in that church, one was the wife on the vice-consul from America, a Catholic. She showed especial interest in the talk about organization of a Woman's Missionary Union.

The next day we picked up our journey beginning at 6 a.m. in Danang in another car van, and the missionary's wife reminded me that it would be an 11 hour non-stop ride until we arrived at the meeting in Nhatrang.

As we went through one village, a missionary told us it contained 20 home churches and that he went there as often as he could to teach their 20 leaders a Bible lesson. He translated it for them and they, in turn, taught it to the groups which gathered weekly. No national Baptist pastor works there.

As we drove along Highway 1, called by the South Vietnamese "The Street Without Joy," we could understand the meaning of its name. There's not a single bridge on it which hasn't been bombed out--not one. We counted 265 bombed out bridges between Hue and Saigon.

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I learned the military usually destroyed the bridges by floating bombs down the river, timed to explode at exactly the right place.

At every bridge crossing, we saw sandbags and soldiers with guns defending the bridges. They were still watching for floating bombs.

The American Army, before leaving, had to keep Highway 1 in as good repair as possible because they transported soldiers and equipment over it.

You're never out of sight of trucks carrying materials to rebuild the cities. Traffic literally filled the highway and we often had to wait 15, 20, and one time more than 30 minutes to cross a bridge.

It was a rocky rough, road, and we would have been more than weary except for the fact that in all the villages we saw people rebuilding their homes.

They rebuilt them out of the ammunition boxes left behind by the Army, and the word "ammunition" was clearly printed on every box. The missionaries said this was the best wood that the Vietnamese could find.

Only once did we hear the sounds of the firing of the large rocket guns. I realized the sound was coming from the right and finally, after hearing about the third or fourth shot, I asked the missionary what he thought the firing was.

Look around on your left, he said, and you will see the shots hitting the hill. I looked and sure enough the dust was flying high as the shots, coming right over the top of our car, hit the hill. It was too close for comfort.

Noting the intense way the people worked in the rice fields, I asked a Vietnamese soldier, who had come in his jungle uniform to pick up his wife at one of the churches, what he thought about the war and the current situation.

He said, "We are very, very tired but the North Vietnamese are also tired. Therefore, we can only hope that we will all have time to get rested and get in the rice crop before the war begins again."

This seemed to be the attitude of the Vietnamese people. I found them warm and sensitive and tender hearted, and I also found that they love Americans very much.

During the drive on the last day from Camrahn, the road improved the nearer we got to Saigon. We saw power plants, built by the American Army and left behind for the Vietnamese. We also saw barracks and stores of guns and ammunition the Americans had left for them to defend themselves.

The last meeting in Vietnam was in a Saigon Baptist church. The pastor of that church had died the Sunday before we got there.

He was an older pastor--one of only five national Baptist pastors in all of South Vietnam. A younger pastor also died, leaving only three. So Vietnam has a great need for national pastors.

There's also a great need for relief work to aid people in our churches and outside the churches, and I'm hoping the Baptist World Alliance can help supplement what Southern Baptists and others are doing.

Even if they are small; such gifts will give status to the Baptists in Vietnam. They can say a world organization of Baptists wants to help them in their terrible need.

Mrs. Mathis is president of both the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union and the Women's Department of the Baptist World Alliance.

"Home" Film Wins Another Award
For SBC Radio-TV Commission

MONTREAL, Canada (BP)--Home, a Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission film on ecology, won first place in the short film category at the First International Film Festival on Human Environment here.

Previously Home captured the 1972 blue ribbon (first place) in the American Film Festival competition and a silver medal in the 15th International Film and TV Festival, both in New York.

In the Canadian festival, connected with the Canadian Film Board, Home competed with entries from numerous countries on such topics as biological conservation, natural disasters, the challenge of urbanization and the new technologies of man and the dangers involved.

The film, one of the segments of 30-minute color documentaries and dramas in the Radio-TV Commission's The Human Dimension series, depicts the ecological crisis through scenes of modern pollution presented in contrast with an Indian chief's heartfelt love for his natural environment.

It was originally shown on the ABC-TV network's Directions series in March, 1972.