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1984 socio-economic plan

The main objectives of the 1984 socio-economic plan were (i) to boost production through a “fuller exploitation” and more economic use of available resources, concentrating on improving “productivity, quality and efficiency”; (ii) to increase state control of “goods, money, markets and prices” in order to curb speculation and corruption, in which respect the plan envisaged the steady abolition of the free market for grain; (iii) to continue the renovation of economic planning and the drive to eliminate “subsidized and bureaucratic administration”; (iv) to step up “socialist transformation” in trade, industry and agriculture, with particular reference to the completion of collectivization in the Nam Bo provinces which formerly constituted South Vietnam [see below]; and (v) to co-ordinate the economy with the needs of national defence.

More specifically, product values in 1984 were expected to rise over those of 1983 by 7 per cent in agriculture, which would allow Vietnam to export surplus grain; by 9.5 per cent in industry, with priority being given to producing more consumer goods and revitalizing the centrally run industrial sectors; and by 22 per cent in exports, with emphasis being placed on continued co-operation with the Soviet Union, but also on expanded economic relations with foreign countries outside the Soviet bloc, including the development of tourism to attract foreign currency. It was planned to bring the rate of population growth down to 2 per cent in 1984 and to 1.7 per cent in 1985. Mr Vo Van Kiet subsequently announced that 120,000 people would be sent to new economic zones in 1984, so as to relieve overcrowding in urban areas and increase the area of land under cultivation.

It was reported on March 4, 1983, that collectivization in the Nam Bo provinces had been extended to 15.5 per cent of peasant households and to 11.5 per cent of the land area. [For previous figures see page 31590.]

Tighter government control over implementation of new economic policies

Problems associated with the new economic policies had reportedly been critically discussed within the CPV. In a speech delivered during the fifth plenary session of the central committee in early December 1983, Mr Le Duan, the party's secretary-general, acknowledged that there were “differing views” on the question of economic management—his attack on saboteurs, the bourgeoisie and the free market being indicative of other measures taken during 1983 both to reassure ideologues and conservative planners within the CPV such as Mr Truong Chinh, Chairman of the Council of State, and to curb the worst abuses of the policies. These measures included (i) the introduction of a new commercial tax system; (ii) an attack on the leadership of Ho Chi Minh City; and (iii) intensified ideological supervision.

Official sources admitted in late June 1983 that a flourishing free market existed which was estimated to control 70 per cent of all goods in circulation. Furthermore, an article in Communist Review, the Communist Party's theoretical journal, noted that local administrations and enterprises were exploiting the decentralization involved in the new economic policies to secure a unilateral diversion of funds and profits required by central government. A further critical article, published on June 27 in Nhan Dan, the Communist Party's official newspaper, referred to corruption among “cadres, party members and government officials”, who faced economic hardship because their work did not allow them to share the incentives and bonuses of the contract system [ibid.].

Policy revisions at the third plenum of the central committee of the CPV in December 1982 led to the introduction in March 1983 of amendments to the tax code, which aimed to restrict private trading and to increase the state's role in the retail trade.

The system of assessing taxation in the industrial sector changed from one based on the volume of production to one based on profit and...
turnover, allowing the levy of heavier taxes on those operations regarded as undesirable. Control over private economic activities was intensified by the introduction of licences for factories and traders working outside the state sector. The method of collecting agricultural taxes, which had previously been levied according to the number of people in a household, was changed to a new basis related to the area and fertility of the land.

The leadership of Ho Chi Minh City came under attack from the government in late 1982 for ideological failings, managerial deficiencies and a tendency to ignore directives from the capital, Hanoi. A series of measures introduced during 1983, like earlier campaigns [see page 31590], aimed to curb the city's flourishing black market and its alleged corruption and decadence, which was felt to be a detrimental influence on the rest of the country.

Two high-level government teams visited the city in February 1983, when Mr Mai Chi Tho, chairman of the city's people's committee and a member of the party's central committee, reportedly offered to resign after criticism of his economic policies. Particular criticism had been expressed about his alleged laxity in overseeing the export-import companies set up to regulate the flood of consumer goods being sent to families in Ho Chi Minh City from relatives abroad; by creating too many such companies, it was claimed, Mr Mai Chi Tho had encouraged competition for goods between the companies, and this had aggravated inflation which was estimated at over 20 per cent in 1983.

In a highly critical editorial published in the Communist Review in January 1983, it was stated that because of lax economic management, socialism was in danger of losing the "struggle" with capitalism in Ho Chi Minh City. Steps were announced to reduce the city's powers by requiring its leadership to "report promptly and request the opinion of the party and Council of Ministers before taking any steps connected with general policy". Further measures taken during 1983 included (i) a reduction in the number of export-import companies—the remainder being placed under central government control—and new regulations on gift parcels and foreign currency remittances from abroad; (ii) application of the new tax system to impose taxes on traders at, reportedly, up to five times their previous tax levels; and (iii) more rapid collectivization of farmland around Ho Chi Minh City. It was announced on Oct. 18, 1983, that "land readjustments" removing land from "reactionary colonialists and landlords", prior to its collectivization, had been completed three months ahead of schedule.

Resistance by Roman Catholics and other groups to communist rule

In an article in Quan Doi Nhan Dan (the journal of the Vietnam People's Army), which was reported in Le Monde on Nov. 28, 1982, Gen. Tran Hai Phang, the army commander of Ho Chi Minh City, departed from earlier, more conciliatory definitions of political dissent by declaring that whole categories of southern Vietnam's inhabitants, including personnel of the former Saigon regime, together with Roman Catholics, Vietnamese Chinese and Buddhist monks, were "enemies... who oppose socialism"; in particular, he accused them of being responsible for trying to "sap our economy" (a reference to the private economy of Ho Chi Minh City which had defied government control—see above), and also for undermining the Army. (In this latter context, Western diplomats reported that the government had encountered problems with "draft dodgers" because of the unpopularity in southern Vietnam of the war in Kampuchea—for which see 32668 B.)

According to The Times of Feb. 14, 1984, government efforts to curb Jesuit influence in Ho Chi Minh City lay behind the trial in mid-1983 of Mr Nguyen Van Hien and 12 accomplices for inciting rebellion by creating too many such seminaries with the United States and other foreign powers. Mr Nguyen Van Hien, a former South Vietnamese Army Officer, was sentenced on July 7 to life imprisonment; Fr Nguyen Cong Doan, the Jesuit Regional Superior, received a 12-year sentence and four other Jesuits and two laymen also received prison sentences.

Cardinal Trinh Van Can, Archbishop of Hanoi, had earlier been placed under house arrest on March 12, 1983, while 130 priests were sent to re-education camps. Allegations of government repression of Catholics were made in a US State Department report to Congress on human rights which was reported in the press on Jan. 4, 1983; this claimed that Roman Catholics in central Vietnam had been forcibly relocated or required to work on government construction projects, that the church's teaching role had been restricted and that many churches and all but one seminary in southern Vietnam had been closed.

The London-based human rights organization, Amnesty International, repeated an appeal on April 20, 1983, for the release or trial of prisoners held in Vietnamese re-education camps [see page 31590]. The government's reply on May 2 continued to assert that the system of re-education was far more humane than punitive prison sentences [ibid.] and reiterated an offer made by Mr Nguyen Co Thach, the Foreign Minister, on June 13, 1982, that Vietnam would release "all" prisoners including "criminals" held in the camps, if the US would agree to take them.

The offer followed reports of differences of opinion on the issue of political prisoners at the meeting of the fifth party congress, when some party members urged that their imprisonment represented "wasted talent" which could be used to rebuild the country, while others argued that their release would constitute a security risk. Mr Walter J. Stoessel, the then US Deputy Secretary of State, said on June 19 that the USA would consider taking prisoners "case by case".

Other political developments

Two changes to the Council of Ministers were reported during 1983. [For previous full cabinet list see page 31592.] Mr Vo Dong Giang became a Minister without Portfolio on April 28, and Mr Hoang Qui was appointed Vice-Chairman of the State Commission for Planning on Oct. 28. On Jan. 24, 1984, Hanoi radio reported that Mr Nguyen Van Chinh had been appointed as Minister of Food in place of Mr La Lam Cria.

A reform of the CPV's control of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA), which provided a more direct and centralized leadership, was outlined in Quan Doi Nhan Dan on Oct. 9.

A one-commander system was instituted, with a single commanding officer aided by a military council at each echelon; the party committees were abolished at all levels of the Army, and all party and political work was assigned to the restored political organs of the VPA, headed by a general political department. All appointments to the new bodies nevertheless required the approval of the CPV politburo and of the party secretariat.

Internal security developments

Two plots to overthrow the government, allegedly supported by China and other foreign powers, were reported in 1982-83. At a press conference organized by the government on July 12, 1982, it was announced that in a written confession Mr Vo Dai Ton, a former South Vietnamese official who claimed to be the head of the Overseas Volunteer Forces for the Restoration of Vietnam (OVFRV), had admitted that he had infiltrated into central Vietnam to organize resistance groups, and that his mission had been supported by the USA, China and Thailand.

The OVFRV, which was founded in Australia in 1980 and claimed to have over 1,000 fighters, was one of a number of groups organized by overseas Vietnamese dedicated to fomenting mass uprising in their homeland country. The largest group was reported to be the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam led by Mr Hoang Co Minh, a vice-admiral in the former South Vietnamese Navy; this group claimed to have 10,000 members, 500 of whom were organizing guerrilla activities within Vietnam. A rally attended by 2,000 émigrés was held in Washington on April 30, 1983, to appeal for world co-operation in overthrowing the Vietnamese government.

On Aug. 17, 1983, a total of 33 men were convicted of plotting a military coup near Ho Chi Minh City with the backing of China and other
countries. Death sentences were passed on two of the defendants, identified as Mr Nguyen Huan Huynh and Mr Chuon Bin Ton, both reportedly soldiers of the former South Vietnamese Army and followers of the Cao Dai religious sect (which was based mainly in the south of the country). The attempted coup was the first reported since the unification of the country in 1976 [see 27917 A].

Official reports claimed on Sept. 27, 1982, that the United Front for the Liberation of the Oppressed Races (FULRO), which organized resistance in the Central Highlands [see page 30808], was disintegrating from lack of popular support and that leading FULRO members had defected or surrendered, including the organization's first vice-president. However, unofficial sources alleged on Feb. 2, 1983, that resistance was continuing, and reported that eight VPA members had been killed by FULRO soldiers and by the forces of the more recently created National Front for the Liberation of the Central Highlands (set up in 1981 with its own provisional government, the "Dega")—see page 31594.

Relations with Soviet Union and Soviet bloc countries
It was reported on March 12, 1983, that according to US intelligence sources the port of Cam Ranh Bay in southern Vietnam had become a full-time operational base for the Soviet Pacific Fleet [see page 31594]. Up to 24 Soviet ships had allegedly been observed using the port regularly and Soviet air force and naval facilities had been enlarged, including the installation of a floating dry dock. (Mr Nguyen Co Thach had asserted on July 30, 1982, that Vietnam had no agreement with the Soviet Union allowing the establishment of military bases.)

It was reported on June 3 that Vietnam had halted its participation in the International Labour Organization because of "unfounded allegations against it from ILO member countries" in connexion with Vietnamese guest workers in the Soviet Union [see pages 31592-93]. A new accord on labour co-operation was signed between Vietnam and the Soviet Union on Dec. 26, 1983.

A press report on March 15, 1983, said that according to diplomatic sources North Vietnamese workers' favours assignments in the Soviet Union as wages were higher and they had access to more consumer goods. Of the money they earned, however, one-third was allegedly deducted to help pay for Vietnam's imports from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, while another third was withheld for repayment to the workers on their return home.

Continuing Soviet aid to Vietnam included (i) a long-term loan equivalent to US$120,000,000, agreed in mid-July 1983, with Vietnamese repayments being made from raw material exports and earnings of guest workers in the Soviet Union, and (ii) a programme for economic, scientific and technical co-operation, drawn up in late October 1983 during a visit to Hanoi by a Soviet delegation led by Mr Geidar Aliyev, a First Deputy Chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers.

The Soviet Union in both agreements called on Vietnam to make more effective use of Soviet aid; Mr Aliyev commented on Oct. 31 that resources must be better used so that they would serve "more effectively the interests of the Soviet and Vietnamese people".

A treaty of friendship and co-operation between Cuba and Vietnam was signed on Oct. 19, 1983. Aid to Vietnam from East European countries included a grant of medical supplies by East Germany on July 8.

Foreign debt - Relations with France, Australia, Japan and India
Vietnam continued to face a heavy burden of debt repayment from Western sources proved unsuccessful, although it was reported on July 21, 1982, that the Vietnamese government had successfully renegotiated the terms on its hard currency debts to Iraq, Libya and Algeria. The IMF on July 26, 1983, refused Vietnam's request for a $150,000,000 loan because of what it described as Vietnam's failure to carry out reforms to boost production and improve efficiency.

Countries outside the Soviet bloc continued to link the resumption of bilateral economic assistance programmes with the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea [see 32668 B; 31885 A]. France, however, continued to strengthen its relations with Vietnam through high-level visits.

Proposals to release the French line of concessional credit, worth F 200,000,000, which had been agreed on Dec. 23, 1981 [see page 31593], but which had not been implemented because of delays in rescheduling Vietnam's foreign debt, were discussed during visits by M. Claude Cheysson, the French Foreign Minister, to Hanoi on March 27, 1983, and by Mr Nguyen Co Thach to Paris on Oct. 13, but no decision was reached. Meanwhile, on Sept. 22 the French government donated 5,110 tonnes of wheat flour in aid.

Mr William (Bill) Hayden, the Australian Foreign Minister, also visited Hanoi (on April 27, 1983) and said that his government would consider resuming financial aid to Vietnam in the future. Japan granted emergency aid to Vietnam worth $100,000 following typhoons in November 1983, which caused extensive damage to crops and property. An agreement to establish a joint commission to promote economic, scientific and technical co-operation was signed by Mr P. V. Narasima Rao, the Indian Minister of External Affairs, and Mr Nguyen Co Thach during the latter's visit to India on Feb. 16-19, 1982, and on Dec. 11, 1982, a trade protocol between India and Vietnam for the exchange of goods worth $6,000,000 was successfully concluded.

Relations with the United States
The Vietnamese government announced on July 7, 1982, that the estimated 8,000 Amerasian children (children fathered by US servicemen or US government personnel stationed in Vietnam prior to 1975) would be allowed to join their fathers in the USA.

Between September 1982 and January 1983 four groups, totalling 118 children, were flown to the USA in a resettlement programme organized by US voluntary agencies (Vietnam and the USA having no official diplomatic relations). Following pressure from these agencies and the Vietnamese government, US legislation came into force on Jan. 1, 1983, simplifying immigration regulations to facilitate the transfer of the children.

Prior to June 1982, only 23 Amerasian children had been allowed to leave Vietnam. The Vietnamese government denied that the Amerasian children were a problem, terming them "our" children despite the fact that 2,000 had appealed for permission to emigrate to the USA from Vietnam, where many alleged that they were subject to adverse discrimination. Stringent immigration requirements in the USA, which demanded proof of entitlement to US citizenship, had constituted a further obstacle. The new legislation asked only for minimum proof, but it aroused controversy over a "child only" clause, whereby mothers and guardians were required to waive their custody rights to their children and were thus prevented from entering the USA with them.

The US government and private groups continued to press for further searches for US servicemen who had gone missing in action during the Vietnam war (MIAs) and for the return of MIA remains.

There were visits to Hanoi by a private US mission on Sept. 23, 1982, and by two delegations of US officials on March 9 and June 1, 1983. With co-operation from the Vietnamese government the remains of a total of 34 MIAs and the material evidence of six others were released on Oct. 14, 1982, and June 3, 1983.

In a speech on Jan. 28, 1983, to the National League of Families of US Prisoners and Soldiers Missing in South-East Asia, President Reagan...
said that a full accounting for missing servicemen had "the highest national priority" and that "full resources" would be given to the task. On June 28, Mr George Shultz, the Secretary of State, was reported as saying that Vietnam was still withholding the remains of MIAs. Mr Nguyen Co Thach on Aug. 16 described this as a "slanderous allegation", reiterating assertions that all US citizens captured during the Vietnam war had been returned [ibid] and calling on the USA to abandon its hostility towards Vietnam so as to create a favourable atmosphere in which to continue the search for MIA remains. (Earlier in the year relations between Vietnam and the USA had been strained over two private missions by US mercenaries led by Lt.-Col. James "Bo" Gritz into Lao territory, allegedly to rescue US servicemen being held in prisoner-of-war camps—see 32637 A.)

Relations with China

The tensions on the border between Vietnam and China continued, with repeated allegations of incursions and provocations being made by both sides. The fighting escalated in April 1983, when the Chinese launched a major shelling campaign allegedly in retaliation after Vietnamese artillery attacks. It was reported as being the most significant confrontation between the two countries since May 1981 [see 31146 C], but the Chinese asserted that the shelling was conducted by local frontier guards and not by regular army units.

The Chinese government issued a note to the Vietnamese on April 10, warning of "grave consequences" unless Vietnam put a stop to cross-border incursions, which were interrupting spring ploughing and threatening the lives of peasants. On April 16 Chinese soldiers in Guanxi Zhuang autonomous region shelled Vietnamese border positions; artillery bombardments intensified the following day, with clashes reportedly spreading to a second region on the border of Yunnan province. There were renewed exchanges on April 19 and 20, allegedly inflicting heavy casualties on the Vietnamese and forcing 3,000 Chinese to flee for safety.

The border clashes coincided with a renewed Vietnamese offensive in Kampuchea [see 32668 B; 31885 A], and Vietnam alleged that they were orchestrated to tie its troops down on the border. The Chinese side, however, claimed that the provocations were being used to prevent China from aiding forces in Kampuchea opposed to the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime [ibid.].

Both before and after the fighting in April, Vietnam had adopted a conciliatory attitude towards China, apparently in response to pressure from the Soviet Union, which was engaged in moves aimed at normalizing its relations with China [see 32523 A].

Consultations between China and the Soviet Union in late 1982 caused concern in the Vietnamese government, since China sought to make improvements in Sino-Soviet relations conditional inter alia on a withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Kampuchea. This was reportedly discussed during a visit to Moscow in early October 1982 by Mr Truong Chinh, Chairman of the Vietnamese Council of State, when it was agreed that Sino-Soviet relations would not be improved at the expense of "third countries". Vietnam and the Soviet Union issued a joint call on Oct. 5 for the normalization of relations with China which was repeated by Mr Nguyen Co Thach on Nov. 22, 1982, and by Mr Aliyev on Oct. 31, 1983, during his visit to Hanoi [see above]. During 1983 the Vietnamese government's references to China in many of its policy statements were noticeably muted. In attempts to ease tensions on the border, Vietnam announced that it would observe unilaterally two ceasefires, one on Feb. 5-19 (over the Lunar New Year), and one from Aug. 30 to Oct. 8 to celebrate the period of the two countries' national day anniversaries. Furthermore, it was reported on Feb. 7, 1983, that 50 prisoners had been exchanged.

According to military sources in Hanoi in late 1983, there had been troop withdrawals by both countries from the border region, with China allegedly transferring several divisions to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province. In late December 1983, Mr Nguyen Co Thach was reported as saying that China had "recently refrained from armed provocation on the border" and that Vietnam's proposals for the normalization of relations were still under review in Peking. However, there were further border incidents on Jan. 14 and 16, 1984, in which two Chinese peasants and seven Vietnamese soldiers were killed.

Decline in refugee numbers

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported on Dec. 21, 1983, that the number of "boat people" fleeing from Vietnam by sea had declined to its lowest level in 1983, when only 30,000 had made the journey successfully to countries of first asylum compared with 202,000 in 1979 [see 30075 A] and over 40,000 in 1982. This fall was attributed to three causes: (i) the growing number of people leaving the country legally through the Orderly Departure Programme [see 31691 A], under which 20,000 were allowed to leave in 1983 compared with 2,000 in 1979; (ii) increased security measures against those departing illegally; and (iii) moves by Western nations to cut back their intake of refugees, thus discouraging people from leaving Vietnam.

Following the government's campaign to strengthen its coastal security, the VPA opened fire on a trawler on Aug. 15, 1983, killing two boat people. Two days earlier a man had been sentenced to death and another to 20 years' imprisonment for organizing the illegal departure of a group of refugees.

The UNHCR reported increasing difficulties in finding places for resettlement for refugees arriving from Vietnam. It said that during 1983 the monthly average number of refugees arriving in countries of first asylum exceeded by 600 the number leaving for countries of ultimate settlement, mainly because of a reduction in the intake of refugees by Western nations such as the USA, Canada, Australia, France and the United Kingdom (which were facing recession, unemployment and what the UNHCR termed "compassion fatigue"). The British government on Feb. 17 announced that it would end its aid to refugees in 1984. In Hong Kong, a hardening of attitude was apparent in proposals discussed in early 1983 for the compulsory repatriation to Vietnam of unplaced refugees in the closed camps [see also page 32628].

The Anti-Piracy Programme set up by the UNHCR in co-operation with Thailand in 1981 [see 31691 A] claimed some success in that the number of people killed as a result of attacks fell from 235 in 1981 to 72 in 1982, the programme's first year of operation. It was agreed on June 23, 1983, to extend the programme for a second 12-month period at an estimated cost of $2,600,000. However, there were reports during 1983 of an increasing number of assaults on boat people involving robbery, rape and murder. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that ships, which were unwilling to pick up refugees because of likely difficulties in respect of their temporary or permanent settlement, were deliberately avoiding the sea lanes used by the boat people.

An official enquiry began in Thailand on Feb. 1, 1984, after Mr Poul Hartling, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, expressed concern over reports of three incidents in which Thai authorities had allegedly caused the deaths of a large number of Vietnamese refugees by towing their boats back out to sea, despite the official policy of giving refuge to boat people. Capt. Prasan Suchinda, the Secretary to the Navy, asserted that the action, taken by the marine police, was in accordance with the government's policy of deterring refugees in seaworthy boats from landing in Thailand.