

Saturday, January 15, 1966

Life's Many Sides

NEWSPRINT AGAIN

By TON THAT THIEN

Since I wrote my piece on newsprint, the problem has remained in neutral gear, so to speak. Once more we have to decide between cutting down the number of our pages or reducing our circulation, and, once more, the staff have voted in favour of the readers, that is of giving them a full meal everyday – and tighten our own belts. So, the customer is always right. But only in regard to the SDN.

We, at the SDN, and surely many other papers, too, are customers, but customers who are always wrong. We are after a special kind of commodity called freedom of expression – without which we cannot prepare that delicious dish called democracy! But the commodity we need is so scarce around us, and it is becoming scarcer every day, for all the ads that we read on the posters spread across the streets and sung (somewhat out of tune to democratically sharp ears) on the radio.

As I have said, no newsprint, no newspapers, and no newspapers, no information and criticism, that is no democracy, to those who think democracy worthwhile, and the SDN thinks that democracy is really worthwhile. Otherwise, how do we justify the overthrow of the Diem regime?

But since we rang the alarm bell nearly three weeks ago, there has been practically no improvement. Our bikini-like hope that somehow the situation would improve soon has turned out to be one with straps that snap at the first motion of the wearer...

The Ministry of Information has explained to us that it has no responsibility for the supply of newsprint but only for its allocation. The Ministry of Economics has said nothing so far.

But whatever one agency or another may say, the principal problem remains how to get newsprint here quickly. By the way, the harbour authority seems to have no responsibility either. The director of the harbour explained to us two weeks ago that the shortage of newsprint could not be blamed on the harbour authority.

How could newsprint be got here quickly? And how to insure that no newspaper which has received a coupon from the Ministry of Information goes without the stuff? (Just like receiving a cheque without (over at the bank!))

In the long run, the problem can be solved by allowing the papers to register with each of the two newsprint distributors, we would be required to reserve the quantity of newsprint allotted to the paper every quarter, instead of selling the paper left and right in a chaotic fashion and feeding black market. The distributor would naturally be granted the necessary foreign exchange (less than 50,000 dollars a quarter, that is quite a cheap price to pay for democracy, and besides it is nothing compared to the 10 million dollars spent on TV!)

In the short run, we would like to recall the idea put out by General Key some time ago when charcoal was short: he wanted to bring charcoal from Ca Mau to Saigon by air. So why not send the planes on to Singapore and bring back enough newsprint to relieve the editions of

immediate worries? The problem would thus be solved in ONE SINGLE MORNING that is if the Government wants it solved. Formalities, blue forms, green forms, red forms, bank drafts and all the rest be damned! Further, 1st Logistic Command, which can carry anything, anywhere, anytime could perhaps lend a hand here. How about that, MAC-V? For your boys are dying to those who have already died to learn posthumously, so to speak, that they have not died in vain.