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Vietnam—an inexpensive form of help

RECENTLY Dr Alastair Hay, a nutritional biochemist who has written frequently in our news pages over the past few years, went on a visit to Vietnam with financial support from *Nature*. The first of his three reports on postwar Vietnam appears in this issue. It comes at a time when Vietnam finds itself yet again involved in conflict, this time with its neighbour Kampuchea (Cambodia) over borders, although there is as yet no clear indication that the skirmishes will have a serious effect on redevelopment within the war-weary nation.

The scientific tradition has not been particularly strong in the past in this part of Asia; certainly not as strong, say, as in the Indian sub-continent or China. True, no country has ever had so much sophisticated technology dropped on it or so many large-scale and sinister 'experiments' performed in it, such as weather modification, the automated battleground, and defoliation. But all of this is of little value in postwar days and if Vietnam is to emerge as a healthy nation it will have to use its relatively few scientists intelligently and to give science a high priority in development plans. This it seems to be doing quite well.

But there are pitfalls along the way. The view has been expressed that since the army of a relatively small country was able to contain all the fury of the United States so might Vietnam's small band of scientists do remarkable things on their own. This is not, it should be said, a view expressed by the scientists themselves. But it has a certain superficial appeal and could do a lot to harm the development of good science within Vietnam. For there are already forces at work trying to make Vietnam stand on its own

feet economically—the USSR, the largest supplier of aid to Vietnam and also the country with the largest influence, is cutting back its aid in a drive to make the country more self-sufficient. If scientists, too, sense that they are being required to go it alone they could face grave difficulties.

For what Vietnamese scientists clearly need more than anything else—more even than gifts of expensive equipment, more than expressions of appreciation from politicians—is normal scientific relations with the rest of the world. This would mean a much greater flow of books and journals into the desperately under-equipped libraries and, even more, a flow of people into and out of Vietnam. And it is particularly important that Vietnamese scientists should not feel constrained to establish good relationships only with those in the West whose political position on the war was a matter of public knowledge. For sure, a small number of such scientists have done a lot of good for Vietnamese science, and have helped to raise Western awareness of the Vietnamese plight, but now the net has to be cast much broader to take in anyone who might make a significant contribution, whether or not they are politically committed.

The largest obstacle to the development of science in Vietnam is an information barrier—not deliberately erected but just a natural consequence of war and isolation. It needs a concerted effort by all scientists of good-will to dismantle it. In Britain the Ministry of Overseas Development, the British Council and the Royal Society are all in a position to make a contribution to this relatively low-cost way of stimulating science. □

Holiday diary

January 7. To the misnamed Science Museum at South Kensington with the children. After the tide of irrationality and anti-science of the past decade, good to see the place filled with youngsters still interested in logical ways of thinking. Sure, most of them will remember the place mainly for the knobs to press and the handles to turn, but even so something probably rubs off on them of fascination for machinery and orderliness. 'Please keep off the moon', says the lunar exhibit. Lasers all the rage these days; one on the roof of the Royal Academy, of all places, to advertise a show there; one used at Covent Garden in Tippett's new opera; so off to top floor to see Science Museum's own Laser exhibition, even though pricey to go in (75p). Quaint

and dubious distinction between 'laser light' and 'ordinary light' on a display. Lots of good honest mundane uses of lasers—communication, pipe laying, surveying, cutting cloth and so on. Striking Russian holograms of museum-pieces. Children a bit bored because not many buttons to press. Quite a surprise to get to the end of the show so quickly, though children clearly mildly relieved as they can get back to the working models. Holograms on sale at the exit, for £12.50 each. But what do they portray? 'That's Paul Revere', says man at desk. 'Who?', says my neighbour. 'Haven't you anything else?', he asks, 'Yes—we have all the astrological signs too'. Rapid exit to the irrational world. □