VIETNAM

EYEWITNESS VIEW
FROM HANOI

"If we do not feel the chain
when it works another's pain,
are we not base slaves indeed
slaves unworthy to be freed . . . ."

W.E.B. DuBois

On August 28, 1965 I received an invitation to a demonstration in support of the Negroes in Watts in their struggle against racism and police brutality. This may not seem strange to you, but at that time I was in Hanoi, North Vietnam. When the black people in Watts fired at helicopters overhead the symbolism became complete. The helicopter, piloted by a white man, represented in Watts what it represents in Southeast Asia: the insensitive and arrogant defense of the status quo. Myself and Mike Myers, both members of the W.E.B. DuBois Clubs of America; Christopher Koch, program Director of radio station WBAL-FM; and Richard Ward, an American writer who lives in Paris have just completed a two week visit to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam).

We were invited to view the country on a fact-finding mission by the Vietnam Youth Federation. We are the only Americans to view this country since it has undergone extensive bombings by U.S. planes. We made several requests upon our arrival as to what we would like to see and each request was granted. This included a one hour interview with DRV Premier Pham Van Dong; visited wounded civilians; saw bombed hospitals, factories, farms; held meetings with workers, peasants and students. In addition to this we had an opportunity to interview a captured American pilot.

In order to insure our safety the majority of the trip was confined to the Hanoi area but we were able to travel to Thanh Hoa, about 75 miles south, an area that encountered daily raids by jet fighters from the U.S. Seventh Fleet.

Several observations were clear from the beginning of the trip. One is that the duration of the war is up to the U.S. The Vietnamese indicated that the Johnson Administration continues to escalate the fighting and that the North Vietnamese intend to meet the U.S. at every stage. They are prepared for the war to last 20 years if that is how long it takes for final victory. And it must be made clear that the Vietnamese will win. The only question is how many lives the Americans will destroy in going down to defeat.

The country appears as one giant silt trench interspersed with air raid shelters. Everyone seemed to have a rifle and appeared to have a full knowledge of how to use the weapon against attacking planes. Apparently the population was frightened when the first air attacks began so the government issued rifles to the people and organized the country into self defense units. The people were instructed to fire at the jets as they came in overhead. When the people began to see planes falling they regained their confidence and displayed no fear of the fast moving jets. While we were in Thanh Hoa province the government announced that the 500th American plane had been shot down. This figure is in sharp contrast to the 100 planes the U.S. claims have been downed.

Racism is a salient norm in our society.