

Killings of Vietnamese Baffle California Police

By KATHERINE BISHOP, Special to the New York Times
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SAN FRANCISCO, Aug. 24— Six years of efforts to solve a series of killings and arson fires involving Vietnamese refugees have had one main result: frustration for the law-enforcement authorities here.

A key to the puzzle, officials say, is discovering the identity of a group that says it was meting out "punishment" of the victims for pro-Communist acts.

Since the killing here in 1981 of a social worker with leftist sympathies, a group calling itself the Vietnamese Party to Exterminate Communists and Restore the Nation has taken responsibility for killings and arsons its communiques say are aimed at eradicating "agents of the Vietnamese communists" and contributing to "the overthrow of the barbarous and inhumane regime" in Vietnam. Motives and Membership Obscure

The authorities in several cities in California say they are not certain that the organization really exists, and if it does, how many people belong to it.

"There is a lot of speculation as to who they might be," said Anthony R. Crittenden, a criminal intelligence specialist with the Asian gangs and organized crime section of the California Department of Justice. "No one seems to really know."

The officials cannot even be sure that if the group exists, it is motivated by politics, operating as it does against the backdrop of a community plagued with extortion plots, personal vendettas and organized gangs.

In this environment, even an act as seemingly political as labeling someone a Communist can lie outside politics; among the strongly anti-Communist refugees, such a label can instead be a simple and powerful tool of blackmail and extortion, police officials say. 'It's a Serious Problem'

Based on the sketchy evidence of the group's communiques and a handful of witnesses to the crimes, investigators are now less skeptical than they once were about the likelihood that an organized group is committing the crimes, though the motives are still obscure.

"At one time we suspected the letters were bogus, but no longer," Mr. Crittenden said. "It's a serious problem."

Lieut. John A. Woods of the Police Department in Garden Grove, a Los Angeles suburb where a Vietnamese magazine editor was killed earlier this month, said the appearance and style of the group's communiques "is very, very consistent."

"It appears to be an underground group," he said, but added, "it would be nice if someone would come forward and say something." 'People Were Glad He Was Dead'

Detectives investigating the crimes said the character of the refugee community has presented them with obstacles they would not ordinarily face.

In one case, for example, the killing a Vietnamese social worker was never prosecuted because a district attorney felt that Caucasian witnesses would have difficulty identifying

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Asian suspects, according to Inspector Napoleon Hendrix of the San Francisco Police Department's homicide unit.

And investigators looking into the case received little cooperation from the Vietnamese community because, Inspector Hendrix said, "The victim supported the North Vietnamese and the people were glad he was dead."

In the latest action for which the group has taken responsibility, the Vietnamese language magazine editor in Garden Grove, Tap Van Pham, died Aug. 9 when a fire swept through the magazine's small office where he also lived. Officials said a flammable liquid, probably gasoline, had been spread about and ignited by hand. Canadian Companies a Target

In a letter mailed from San Jose, 50 miles south of here, and received by two Vietnamese newspapers in Garden Grove, the group said it had burned the building to punish Mr. Pham for accepting advertising from Canadian companies that send money and goods from refugees to relatives in Vietnam. Such companies are seen by many in the community as aiding the Communist Government.

The group emerged on June 4, 1981, when it sent a letter taking the responsibility for a fire that destroyed a company involved in transporting gifts from refugees in America to Vietnam.

Its second communique came after the shooting on July 2, 1981, of a Vietnamese social worker outside his San Francisco apartment by a young Asian man wearing a white windbreaker.

The social worker, Lam Trong Duong, put out a small newspaper that reprinted articles from the Vietnamese Communist Party newspaper, and he collected the poetry of Ho Chi Minh. 'Death Penalty' Declared

After his killing, which has never been solved, a letter was received at a Vietnamese newspaper in Garden Grove announcing that the organization had decided to "declare the death penalty" against Mr. Lam and that the killing had been carried out by a member of the group in San Francisco.

The case was complicated by the fact that another group calling itself the Anti-Communist Viets Organisation also took the responsibility for the slaying, asserting it was punishing Mr. Lam for "odious crimes against Vietnamese people."

Nine months later, the police arrested a young Vietnamese refugee whom Mr. Lam had befriended and given a job. The refugee was charged with murdering Mr. Lam, but the case was dropped on the day of trial after defense lawyers learned that a key eyewitness changed his mind about the identification of the gunman. Accusations and Punishment

The organization also said it carried out the shooting of a 72-year-old restaurant owner and his wife, who had willed their estate to the Government of Vietnam "to heal wounds and to rebuild the country."

The restaurateur, Nguyen Van Luy, said he and his wife were shot by a young Asian man who stepped out from behind a tree in front of his San Francisco home and said in Vietnamese, "You came home early today." Mr. Luy's wife, Pham Thi Luu, was killed, and the crime remains unsolved.

In a communique postmarked Las Vegas, the Party to Exterminate Communists and Restore the Nation said it had decided to "punish Nguyen Van Luy by bullets" and accused him of collecting foreign currency from Vietnamese refugees and sending it to the Vietnamese Government.

The group also said it had been responsible for shooting Tran Khanh Van, a former South Vietnamese official, who was killed March 20, 1986. Mr. Van was shot in Westminster, a Los Angeles suburb. He had received a threatening letter, a copy of which was also sent to a San Jose Vietnamese language newspaper.

Douglas K. Zwemke, an officer with the intelligence unit of the San Jose Police Department, said Vietnamese refugees have developed more willingness to tell the police what they know about crimes in their community.

"But they are afraid of retribution," Officer Zwemke said. "My information comes from people with a sense of trust and confidence and they are extremely afraid."

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