SOCIAL WELFARE ACTIVITIES IN VIET NAM.

I thank you for the invitation to address the American Friends of Viet Nam on the subject of Social Welfare Activities in Viet Nam. It is a privilege and I am grateful for this opportunity.

I shall approach the subject from the point of view afforded me as a member and former Chairman of ICVARV, the International Committee of Voluntary Agencies in the Republic of Viet Nam. My horizon on this topic was extended by my work in Social Welfare and travels in some parts of the Republic.

The International Committee of Voluntary Agencies is, as the name implies international in composition and a Committee of VOLUNTARY Agencies. It was organized at the end of 1954 in the period of the great Exodus of Refugees from North Viet Nam. The Committee's objectives were and remain the coordination of the work by Voluntary Agencies and the sharing of all helpful information and experiences.

Among the Charter Members were the American Red Cross, the International Red Cross, Church World Services, the International Rescue Committee, the American Women's Association of Saigon, Catholic Relief Services. During the intervening years some projects have merged, others closed, while some new organizations came into the field. Thus, when I left a year ago ICVARV had as members: the Asia Foundation, Catholic Relief Services CARE, the Mennonite Central Committee, Saigon's Seventh Day Adventist Hospital, the International Voluntary Services, Foster Parents' Plan, the International Red Cross, the American Women's Association
Regularly invited and in attendance were also representatives of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Committee, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund, the French Red Cross and a Liaison Officer of the United States Operations Mission.

The memory of such meetings remains with me as a most happy experience. There was always an eloquent expression of dedication to noble tasks, of subordination of personal considerations to the work in hand. There was evident a sympathetic understanding of the aspiration of the Vietnamese people, their trials and suffering. There was an appreciation of obstacles to be surmounted; there was sound, disciplined thinking on possible solutions and at times pooled actions. I shall cite one example which - I believe - dramatizes the spirit which animated that group:

A Social Worker of Foster Parents' Plan had discovered among the cases a father in an advanced stage of tuberculosis and highly infectious. The mother also suffered from T.B. to a minor degree. There were seven children in the family ranging in age from two months to fourteen years. The medical chief of the Adventist Hospital believed the parents to be curable, the father requiring hospitalization over several months. The doctor examined the children at cost and found three of them infected. A plan was formulated for their cure and for assistance.

Thanks to the World Health Organization's officer on the Committee an introduction was obtained to the most cooperative Chief of the Vietnamese T.B. Hospital, who made a bed available within a week. The Hospital Committee's Chairman of the American Women's Association promptly offered to personally pay the family's
rent for four months. The representative of the Mennonite Central Committee pledged to send the family four monthly batches of food, i.e. flour, cornmeal, cheese, dry milk, cans of beef and lard.

Foster Parents' Plan had previously arranged for the "adoption" of one of the children and the Social Worker had also seen to it that the fourteen year old boy would continue to carry on the father's work of making wooden trunks, thus maintaining his business contacts. All those arrangements were made with the aim of reducing financial worries to a minimum during the first four crucial months of the family's rehabilitation. Here is an example of pooled resources and of ready cooperation by people of goodwill.

The largest agency among the Committee's members is Catholic Relief Services. Its work in the refugee movement and in mass relief during 1954-55 earned the highest praise. The organization is the principal distributing agency of U.S. Surplus Food Products and by means of its 50 trucks, its trained personnel and coordinated church organization the work is done smoothly and efficiently. Catholic Relief Services is supporting a hospital, leprosaria, several mission schools. It took a leading part in the establishing of fishing cooperatives. Two sand-block machines have produced building materials for several churches, schools, reading halls and other public buildings. The statistics of the organization's accomplishments are impressive.
Foster Parents' Plan Inc. specializes in Casework in the Child Welfare field. It began its activities in April 1957. The aim of Foster Parents' Plan's work is to help a child of a family struck by unforeseen tragic circumstances. The thus dissolution of the family is prevented. After thorough investigations a dossier is prepared with the child's photo. It is mailed to the international headquarters in New York which will interest persons of goodwill in the sponsoring of the case, the "adoption" of the child. However, the child remains in the family circle and it will send its benefactor monthly letters which are translated in the Saigon office. Such letters may describe life at home, in school, events on special feast days etc. Letters from foster-parents are handed with translations into Vietnamese to the child. In this manner bonds of a true person to person relationship are woven across the Pacific.

The major project of the Mennonite Central Committee is the Leperosarium at Ban Me Thuot, about 240 miles northeast of Saigon, a town where former kings used to stage their tiger hunts. The Committee is also maintaining a mobile clinic in that area and it initiated the building of a bakery for Saigon orphanages. In addition it helped in student exchanges and student work-camps.

CARE had a program of stimulating self-help projects in villages through gifts of agricultural tools. Its large food parcel program, which played a significant part in the refugee movement, was discontinued in 1958.

The International Voluntary Services had two agricultural rehabilitation teams, one in the Mekong Delta and another in the plateau region of Central Viet Nam. Improvement in poultry raising
and in cattle breeding were their major programs.

The Asia Foundation's interest lies in the field of education and its program will be lucidly explained by Mr. Edgar Pike, the organization's able representative in Viet Nam.

The American Women's Association has a long list of accomplishments. It takes up nine pages of the House Sub-Committee Report on the Far East. If it is true that for the lack of a nail a battle is lost, then the supplying of nails has contributed to the winning of many battles against starvation, sickness and suffering.

The representatives of the International Red Cross visited prisons and re-education centers to see that international humanitarian standards, stipulated in international agreements, are observed. They may also advise people of their rights under international agreements.

The functions of UNESCO, of UNICEF and of WHO are undoubtedly well known and their officers covered many strategic points in an advisory capacity. This brief summary affords, therefore, a bird's eye view of activities of International Voluntary Agencies in Viet Nam, which touched upon many phases of social life and conditions: transportation of refugees, relief, resettlement, rehabilitation, aid to victims of fires, accidents, to the orphans, the blind, the deaf and mute, the sick. In the Republic with its 13 million people the agencies' contribution is a small but significant part, significant because its work introduced and expanded the spirit which animates Voluntary Agencies' effort: "I am my brother's keeper even beyond the family circle."
In many parts of the world which suffered severe war damages and displacement of population U.N. agencies stepped in to relieve hardships. They provided also the administrative framework for the Voluntary Agencies which shouldered much of the work which remained upon the withdrawal of U.N. agencies. Such experience and benefits did not accrue to Viet Nam.

Of course, social welfare activities must arise out of and be adapted to the needs and social problems of the environment. Conditions in Viet Nam offered their own particular challenges.

A dominant feature of Viet Nam is the place the village occupies in the social, administrative and political structure. From antiquity to the present the Vietnamese village has been the economic basic administrative/unit. The village embodies something more, namely an "emotional cement" which binds every member to the community. People may settle elsewhere, they may even be born in other places, but they "belong to" a certain village. Their thoughts invariable turn to the village of their ancestors. It was this village community with its close neighbors and relatives over generations which provided the social security to its members. Such spirit is still alive and strong.

Case records of Foster Parents' Plan showed many heart-warming instances in which members of the village community provided money for funerals, food for destitute families, shelter to victims of fires, aid to individuals who suffered the results of accidents and illnesses.

Today, under the impact of industry, expanded commerce, of improved means of transportation and communication a great strain is being placed on such bonds. The German sociologist Ferdinand Toennies describes this change as one from Gemeinschaft
to Gesellschaft, from a community to a society. This change is creating problems not only for individuals but also for the government structures of Asian countries.

Mr. Hugh F. Keenleyside, Director-General of the Technical Assistance Administration, United Nations, writes in the Foreword of a book titled "The Role of Groups in World Reconstruction"

by Charles E. Hendry:

"The healthy development of democratic ideas and institutions and the nourishing of their survival capacity in the present world scene depend in large measure on the opportunity of the average citizen to participate responsibly in group life.

Democracy, like religion, must be taught as well as "caught." It is a discipline in human relations as well as an enlivening faith in the capacity of all persons to become responsible for their own destiny and the welfare of their fellows. This is a discipline taught effectively in the give-and-take of organized group life.

In youth associations, community-serving agencies, workers' organizations, church groups, women's organizations, to mention only a few examples, the rank-and-file citizen associates with his fellows to further the common welfare as he sees it, and in doing so, develops his own stature as a human being."

I read the Plan of Action for the year 1959-60 drawn up by the Ministry of Welfare. I was pleased to read that recognition is given to the skills of the profession of Social Work. The French Red Cross had conducted a School for Social Work for about fifteen years. The French Red Cross closed its activities last year and handed the school-responsibilities over to the Sisters of St. Paul. I am noting that the Ministry of Welfare in its report urges the creation of two government schools of Social Work "one in Saigon and one at Hue endowed with modern installations and with selected teaching personnel, part of whom might be foreigners at the beginning."
One chapter of the Plan for Action is given over to the proposed establishment of a Center for the Education of what is called - Abnormal Children. A blueprint is set up dividing the "Abnormal Children" into three main groups: The Mentally Retarded, the Deaf and Mute and the Blind. There are subdivisions. I may explain that such services are currently rendered on a limited scale by various Orders of Roman Catholic Church, the Government furnishing a partial subsidy in most instances. In view of all the circumstances attending the evolution of a modern State, such approach was undoubtedly a sound and practical one. As you may well know, here in New York we are following the same plan. The City Government contracts with established, specialized, private agencies for the services to be given needy citizens, thus avoiding duplications.

The report summarizes - and most realistically, the principal obstacles to the program of Social Work:

1) Increasing demands for services,
2) Lack of competent personnel,
3) Budgetary difficulties.

Those problems have a familiar ring. They are precisely the same right here, whether seen from the point of view of the executive of a Private Agency, the Welfare Commissioner of a City of of the Federal Government.

However, we have realized that the Government cannot do it all. A large and significant part of Social Work is being carried here by the people themselves - and may I stress voluntarily.
Last year I read in Viet Nam some speeches on "The Doctrine of Personalism". As I understood it, the theme aimed at the active participation of citizens in phases of group activities and community development. The doctrine was being imposed by well-meaning exhortations from without. However, the creative spirit of Social Work must come from the heart of a people sensitive and free to act, free to act according to the call of their heart and conscience. It must come from within.

Mr. Charles E. Hendry, Director of Toronto's School of Social Work writes in "The Role of Groups in World Reconstruction":

"Whether the system be ruthless or paternalistic, whether it feeds on fear or on hand-outs, the consequences in terms of the individual personality are the same. Personality can wilt under protective indulgence quite as well as under thought-control."

Early in 1957 when it became known in Viet Nam that a Child Welfare Agency was selecting children of destitute families, many people of goodwill came forth, bringing to the agency's attention some needy cases in their neighborhood. Such people were teachers, doctors, nurses, village chiefs, Catholic Brothers and Sisters, some government officials, priests etc. However, such wells of goodwill dried up as soon as government notices went out that all requests had to be channeled through the Welfare Ministry. The spontaneity was gone, the wish to help one's neighbor was rationalized and finally discarded in view of the procedures set up which included police investigations.

Regulations called for the creation of government-directed welfare committees in the provinces and districts of the cities. I am quoting now the concluding sentence of the Plan of Action for the year 1959-60:
"Those committees should act under the direction of a National Committee for Social Welfare, each according to its means, with a view of realizing the vast Welfare Program spelled out (elaboré) by the Government."

The point I am attempting to make is not directed against the Social Welfare Program. There is a great need for it.

I want to call attention to the philosophy and spirit in which it is approached. In our democracy we have often searched for ways and means to accomplish aims of that nature. Over the years we have learned to divide the functions between the government (requirements imposed by law) and private agencies, the many detailed services rendered on a casework basis. The government encourages individual initiative to participate in Social Work by granting tax deductions in respect of contributions made.

Every government has a right to fashion its own services, no doubt about that, but how much is lost if people are not allowed to act in the spirit of charity, according to the dictates of their heart and soul? How much is lost to the freedom of the individual? I searched among the writings of our great judges and champions of freedom, whose minds had wrestled with that question. I found this passage in the speech on "Liberty", delivered by Justice Learned Hand at Yale University on May 10, 1941.

"My thesis is that any organization of society which depresses free and spontaneous meddling is on the decline, however showy its immediate spoils; I maintain that in such a society Liberty is gone, little as its members may know it; that the Nirvana of the individual is too high a price for a collective Paradise. I maintain this primarily as an authentically demand of the spirit and I maintain it too as practical sagacity. Because, once you get people believing that there is an authoritative well of wisdom to which they can turn for absolutes, you have dried up the springs on which they must in the end draw even for the things of this world.

As soon as we cease to pry about at random, we shall come to rely upon accredited bodies of authoritative dogma; and as soon as we come to rely upon accredited bodies of
authoritative dogma, not only are the days of Liberty over but we have lost the password that has hitherto opened to us the gates of success as well."

Ladies and Gentlemen: This is a gathering of the American Friends of Viet Nam. The definition of a friend, which I like best is: a person before whom I can think aloud. I have done so.

I have many pleasant memories of Viet Nam: a song by children wishing a Happy New Year, a group singing "God bless America" in a Vietnamese version. I am happiest about the gleam of pride I perceived in the eyes of aged farmers, male and female, whom we had taught to write their own names.

Those people had suffered wars and revolutions, several of them during the last two decades. In the words of our Vice President Nixon: "They deserve our sympathetic interest and help."

However, facts and more facts are needed to dramatize the need and to measure the progress. The establishing of a Bureau of Statistics last year was an encouraging and necessary beginning in that direction. Given the facts America's friendly heart will readily respond - and no doubt about that.

Let me conclude with the words by Mr. Hugh Keenleyside, U.N's Director General of Technical Assistance:

"The struggle to achieve a peaceful democratic order depends to a large extent on our ability to help nations raise the standard of living of their people AND to assist them in developing democratic institutions through an informed, responsible citizenry. The strategic importance of the part played by indigenous VOLUNTARY groups in this latter task is increasingly important, although frequently overlooked."

And I add: Let us build in true person to person and group to group relationships in freedom - from the heart out.