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TRANSCRIPTION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES  
IN THE REPUBLIC OF VIET-NAM

Document prepared by the Government of the Republic of Viet-Nam

Compilation, the purpose of which is to collect and catalogue the geographical names of the Republic of Viet-Nam, is seriously impeded by the long-standing state of war in our country. These difficulties are compounded by another which creates delicate problems for the National Geographical Directorate: the transcription of geographical names into Viet-Namese.

This operation would seem to be very simple, since Viet-Namese is written in Roman characters, but it is complicated, firstly by the existence of diacritical marks in the written language and the particular phonemes of the language, and secondly by the presence of numerous ethnic minorities, in various parts of the territory of the Republic of Viet-Nam, who speak other languages which were until recently unwritten. Consideration must also be given to terms of foreign origin, which must be dealt with separately.

In order to explain the method of transcription which has been adopted in cartographic work in the Republic of Viet-Nam, we propose to consider:

- Purely Viet-Namese geographical names
- Geographical names deriving from ethnic minorities
- Geographical names introduced by the French
- Geographical names from other countries.

I. PURELY VIET-NAMESE GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

As a rule official names could, to a certain extent, be faithfully transcribed by copying them exactly as written in official instruments such as decrees, orders official gazettes, statistical bulletins, etc.

Names which have not been catalogued by the authorities and are therefore frequently misrepresented give rise to some difficulties of interpretation:

1. Difficulties due to diacritical marks

The existence of diacritical marks such as á, à, â, ã, ç, ê, ã etc. in written Viet-Nameese has been a great problem, not only for foreigners, but also for some Viet-Nameese.

Each diacritical mark represents a particular sound, the pronunciation ranging from high to neutral to low; this causes frequent confusion and distortion.

Thus maps previously published by the former Indo-China Geographical Service feature many geographical names on which the diacritical marks are incorrect or missing.

These errors are also found in some official documents published by the Viet-Nameese authorities; occasionally the same name is written in different ways by various governmental organs.

Example:

The name of the commune of TÂN KIÊN (province of GIA ĐỊNH) is written incorrectly as TÂN KIEN in maps previously published by the National Geographical Directorate of the Republic of Viet-Nam.

2. Difficulties due to pronunciation

The presence in written Viet-Nameese of letters which do not occur in the Roman alphabet creates confusion for foreigners which can be amusing sometimes. For example, the letter Đ, đ (barred D) is pronounced in the same way as ordinary D, d and the letter D, d (unbarred D) is pronounced in the same way as Z in Viet-Nameese.

Examples:

NÚI ĐÁT - hill without rocks (barred Đ is pronounced like D)

HÒN DỪA - island of coconut palms (unbarred D is pronounced like Z)

3. Difficulties due to spelling

Certain pairs of consonants, such as CH and TR, D and GI, X and S, which are difficult to differentiate in the popular pronunciation, are often the cause of innumerable misspellings.