

By Global Integrity

“Never marry a policeman,” my father always warns me. Many other young ladies in Vietnam get the same advice from their parents. Ordinary Vietnamese people are learning to dislike the police. The reason is simple. Experience from day-to-day life teaches us that the more you encounter the police, the more you have to bribe.

“You violated the traffic law. What do you want me to do?” the policeman asked me after I was caught stopping in the wrong lane on a busy street in Hanoi.

“What should I do?” I replied.

“You must know. I need to buy a cup of tea or maybe a cigarette.”

“How much?”

“I will do you a favor. Give me only 48,000 dong (US\$3). Put your money in this traffic ticket book, so no one can see it,” he said and smiled.

If I didn't accept the “favor” from that policeman, my motorbike might be confiscated for 15 days. After two weeks without means of transport, I would pay a fine of 208,000 dong (US\$13) and an extra 240,000 dong (US\$15) stocking fee, then 16,000 dong (US\$1) per day and finally go through a very complicated procedure to get back my motorbike, which would be in remarkably bad shape. The police have no room to store so many confiscated motorbikes, so they are normally left outside, exposed to the sun, rain and the generally humid weather of a tropical country. What choice do I have?

Traffic police can make a lot of money because traffic in Vietnam is terrible; people frequently violate the law. One reason is because you don't need to learn traffic law to get a driver's license. Two months ago, my nephew, Hung, turned 18 and “took” a test to get his driver's license. He passed the driver's test without knowing anything about driving law because he paid a 320,000 dong (US\$20) bribe. Almost everyone pays bribes for a driver's license. Without the bribe, it may take six months or more to obtain a license. It took Hung only two weeks.

At the end of last year, the Central Internal Board of the Communist Party carried out a Sweden-sponsored research study on corruption. The study revealed that paying bribes is now a habit of the Vietnamese; 71.2 percent of people in Hanoi and 67.4 percent of people in Ho Chi Minh City, the two biggest cities in Vietnam, are willing to bribe to get things done. Meanwhile, one third of the government workforce interviewed admits receiving bribes.

Some people may insist on never paying bribes. But while they can wait for driver's licenses, can they wait for medical or educational services?

We have a tradition of offering flowers to teachers during Teachers' Day. However, instead of flowers, we now have to give money. The amount of money, from 80,000 dong (US\$5) to 320,000 dong (US\$20), depends on whether the student

has rich or poor parents. With this small envelope of money, parents know their child will receive much better care. "Because most teachers are women, now I have to give money on International Women's Day, Vietnamese Women's Day and even New Year's Day," complained Hoa, whose 4-year-old son is attending a public kindergarten.

The prospects are even gloomier for Hoa while her child grows up. One of my friends had to pay 8 million dong (US\$500) to get her child into a good public primary school. And if that child gets good marks at a good school and is qualified to attend university or college, he might have to pay bribes, or else enter an unequal race there. My cousin is studying at National Economics University, which is the dream university of many high school students. One day, he asked his parents for money, saying, "I need money to pass this exam. I didn't do well on my last test. I'll pass if I give the teacher 208,000 dong (US\$13)."

His father was so surprised: "How do you know that your teacher will take your money?"

"Many of my friends gave the teacher money and they got good marks."

That's why I was not surprised when I recently read in the newspapers that some government officials neither went to class, nor wrote a theses, yet still received doctorates.

Going to see a doctor is a nightmare for the poor. All the big hospitals in Vietnam are public. Doctors and nurses behave as if they were government officials. One day, I went to the hospital to visit my uncle who was a patient there. I felt so ashamed when I heard a nurse shouting at a very sick, old lady from the countryside: "Get out of here!" she yelled, "You can't sit here, you filthy woman." The nurse's behavior would be very different if that had been a rich woman who was willing to pay bribes.

The most lucrative business around hospitals is making change. People need small change to bribe nurses and doctors. If someone wants a less painful injection that is more carefully given, or wants to change to cleaner hospital clothes, he or she must pay 800 dong (US 50 cents). If a patient wants to be examined earlier without waiting in a very long queue of patients, the patient needs to either be a relative or acquaintance of the nurses and doctors, or pay 16,000 dong (US\$1) to 32,000 dong (US\$2). If a patient pays 48,000 dong (US\$3), the doctor will examine the patient more carefully. And the amount of bribe might reach 800,000 dong (US \$50) to 3.2 million dong (US\$200) or more if a patient has a serious disease or has to go through surgery.

Ordinary people have to bribe because they want to have better service and medical care. Virtually all government staff accept bribes because they want to earn more money. The average monthly salary for an experienced doctor at a public hospital is around 1,600,000 dong (US\$100). A nurse earns 800,000 dong (US\$50) per month.

Doctors and nurses must also pay bribes. My friend who graduated from Hanoi Medical University secretly paid 160 million dong (US\$10,000) to get a job at a big

hospital in Hanoi.

We often say, “In Vietnam, everybody has a salary but no one lives on it.” That’s why corruption is so common among officials, from low- to high-ranking ones.

At the beginning of 2006, Vietnamese people were shocked when a newspaper reported that Bui Tien Dung, executive director of Project Management Unit 18 (PMU) of the Ministry of Transportation (MOT) spent 36 billion dong (US\$2.3) million gambling on soccer. The average annual salary in Vietnam is no more than 8 million dong (US\$500) per year.

An average salary of an official like the director of PMU 18 is just 3.2 million dong (US\$200) to 4.8 million dong (US\$300) per month, or 57 million dong (US\$3,600) per year. So where did that huge amount of gambling money come from?

PMU 18 is one of 23 PMUs, which manage all transportation projects. PMU 18 is in charge of projects related to Official Development Aid (ODA), which foreign donors lent Vietnam with preferential interest rates. Last year, Vietnam received record-high ODA funding of 48 trillion dong (US\$3 billion). The majority of that money was invested in infrastructure projects including building roads and bridges. A newspaper found out that many projects managed by PMU 18 were badly done because the officials at PMU 18 skimmed off money and took kickbacks from lucrative state contracts.

This reveals the difficulties facing most businesses in Vietnam. They win few government contracts unless they offer kickbacks to government officials. According to the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 77 percent of businesses in Hanoi (highest percentage) and 12 percent of businesses in Binh Duong provinces (lowest percentage) pay “commissions” to government officials. As a matter of course, the higher the kickbacks are, the worse the quality of the completed projects is. The Vietnam Youth newspaper (Thanh Nien) (Jul. 26, 2006) quoted a Vietnamese economist, who stated, “Corruption is consuming three percent to four percent of Vietnam’s Gross Domestic Product. Without corruption, the growth rate of Vietnam would have been nine percent to ten percent.”

Recently, Politburo member Phan Dien said that corruption is a danger even for the party and the survival of political system. Dung, several other lower transport officials and the Vice Minister of Transport were detained. The Minister of Transport resigned. Some officials in Ministry of Police (MOP) were arrested on suspicion of taking bribes to protect the notorious PMU director. Even a major general in MOP, head of Vietnam’s police investigation unit, lost his job.

This is the biggest corruption scandal ever revealed in Vietnam. Newspapers have played a big role in bringing the scandal to light. This reflects a big shift because all the news media in Vietnam are owned by the government. Many newspapers, both printed and online versions, included public opinion expressing anger over this terrible corruption. Tens of millions of Vietnamese people will have to work to pay for the loan that officials have squandered. People are worried that corruption is entrenched across the whole system.

How could Dung steal that much money if he didn't have the support of, or conspire with other officials?

An anti-corruption law took effect last June: an anti-corruption agency will be established and the Prime Minister will be the head of this agency. Public opinion has already started asking who will make sure the agency itself isn't corrupt. What if the anti-corruption agency's staff is corrupt? Who will be held responsible?

Whomever I'll marry, a policeman, a doctor or an employee of a foreign company who has never had a chance to be corrupted, my parents now have a new worry. My child, their grandchild, on his or her first day in life, will bear a huge burden of debt left by the previous irresponsible generation.