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OCI No. 1561/63

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
3 June 1963

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Buddhist Demonstrations in South Vietnam

1. The Diem government has shown increased concern over recurrent Buddhist demonstrations in various South Vietnamese cities, but still appears unwilling to take more than limited, piecemeal steps to ease the situation. The demonstrations, in support of specific Buddhist grievances, have so far been peaceful, but serious disorders or widespread public and military disaffection, could result if they continue for a prolonged period.

2. Buddhist hostility first erupted on 8 May over regulations governing the display of flags in public religious ceremonies in the city of Hue, where at least eight deaths occurred during efforts of security forces to disperse a crowd. The severity of the outburst suggests long-simmering resentment among Buddhists over the pro-Catholic orientation of the Diem family and administration.

3. Many Buddhists, as well as other religious groups, feel that special privileges and favoritism toward Catholics, stemming from French rule, have been perpetuated by the Diem family's partiality. The vast majority of South Vietnam's population of 14 million is nominally Buddhist, even though only a small proportion have been considered active practitioners and these are loosely organized into regional congregations under Buddhist clergy. There has been no formal suppression of religious freedom in South Vietnam, but the government has successfully curbed the political influence of some religious groups, particularly the minority sects.

4. In a meeting with Diem on 15 May, a group of Buddhist leaders presented specific demands

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including the right to display their religious flag publicly (Catholics have been permitted to display the papal flag), the right to worship and propagate their faith freely, equal status with Catholics, and an end to arrests and mistreatment. They also demanded that the government acknowledge responsibility for the deaths in Hue and compensate families of the victims.

5. Diem has made limited concessions to the Buddhists, but believes full acceptance of their demands to be politically impossible. Despite the weight of evidence indicating that government cannon-fire caused the deaths in Hue, Diem insists they were due to a Viet Cong terrorist grenade. He promised assistance to the families involved, and on 1 June replaced three officials deemed partially at fault for the Hue disturbances. Diem, however, remains reluctant even to appoint a committee to negotiate with the Buddhists.

6. Buddhist spokesmen say the demonstrations will continue until all of their demands are met. A number have been held with no interference by the government, but reports now indicate renewed scuffling occurred again in Hue on 3 June. Further mass gatherings and heightened security precautions are likely to increase the danger of spontaneous or deliberately provoked riots.

7. There have been scattered reports that some army commanders, whose troops are predominantly Buddhist, are strongly reluctant to move against demonstrators and that troops might disobey such orders if issued. There was evidence in Hue on 8 May that some army troops refused to take action in the disturbances.

8. Although there has been no information to substantiate Diem's apparent suspicion that Buddhist extremists are acting on behalf of the Viet Cong, there have been reports that some Buddhist leaders hope the demonstrations will lead to the overthrow of the Diem government. The leading Buddhist priest in Hue is reported to have said that the time for reconciliation has passed and that Viet Cong support will be sought, if necessary, to achieve Buddhist demands.

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9. Communist propaganda has highlighted the Buddhist grievances, and at least one document now being clandestinely circulated may represent Viet Cong efforts to heighten tension. Various non-Communist opposition circles have also sought to publicize the affair to bring further discredit on Diem. A high official in the information service claims to be part of a group inside the government planning moves to seize control if violence should occur in Saigon. Some key military leaders are allegedly also alert to such opportunities.

10. Inept government handling has permitted a localized incident in Hue to grow into a potential political crisis. Unless Diem is able to reach a quick reconciliation with the Buddhists, the issue could have serious repercussions on governmental stability.

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