

FROM: CIA Saigon

24 September 1963

TO: CIA

NR: DA IN 108950

SUBJECT: TRAN KIM TUYEN PREDICTS DIRE PROSPECTS FOR THE DIEM REGIME IN SOUTH VIETNAM

1. Summary. Tran Kim Tuyen, exiled without his family to a consulate post in Cairo, claimed on 17 September 1963 that if the Diem Regime in South Vietnam continued for six more months, all would be lost; then not even a coup d'etat could save Vietnam. If a new Regime is installed fairly soon, however, it might have a fighting chance, but with Ngo Dinh Nhu's skillful divide and conquer tactics fragmenting the opposition, it is unlikely. Tuyen claimed that Nhu is now trying to delude American Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., into believing that the Regime plans real reforms and that its faults have been exaggerated by its enemies among the American officials in Saigon. Tuyen's friends, such as Lieutenant Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, inspector of strategic hamlets attached to the Presidency, are in danger as suspected subversives. Pressure meanwhile is mounting among young Buddhists, students, and junior army officers; General Tran Van Don and several colleagues realize they played into Ngo Dinh Nhu's hands but are now helpless. As the situation deteriorates, extremists fearing the considerable risks of a coup attempt, will turn to assassination plots in desperation. This would lead to retaliation by loyalists against Americans and to hopeless civil war.

2. Up to the time of Dr. Tuyen's hurried departure on 12 September, the Government of Vietnam (GVN) was trying to restore appearances of normalcy and to portray itself as laboring under difficulty of Communist plots among students and Buddhists. Under Ngo Trong Hieu, known now among the Saigon populace as "The Pope of the False Bonzes", the GVN has played docile Buddhist priests and monks in all pagodas. His talk of releasing arrested students and lifting martial law however impressed many Westerners. The lifting of martial law is purely nominal; many of the allegedly "Communist student plotters" manhandled and arrested were younger brothers and sons of prominent government officials and military officers; GVN repression and brutality has actually driven many embittered students who were not Communists to flee to the countryside to seek the Communists as the lesser of two evils; most Buddhists repudiate the GVN's bonzes, and attendance at pagodas has dwindled. With the closing of Tudu, ordinary Vietnamese no longer trust the press or radio Saigon; those who can do so listen to the Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts.

3. Nhu has decided to flatter Ambassador Lodge by making grudging concessions supposedly as a result of the Ambassador's negotiating pressure (sending Madame Nhu overseas, ostensible ending martial law, restoring schools and temples.) Nhu has tried to blame American-GVN difficulties on American CIA plots against the Regime, personal hatred of journalists and incumbent American officials of Nhu and the family, and American misunderstanding of the Communist and anti-regime subversive uses of the Buddhists and students. Nhu's charges of American plotting were set with derision by Vietnamese but Americans have lost much face with many sincere Nationalists because they take these accusations and yet are not guilty of blame when many Vietnamese wish they were.

4. The Vietnamese army has suffered most from the current stalemate, both in morale and in reputation. The generals who succumbed to Nhu's wily schemes for a sham military takeover are now helpless and discredited. General Tran Van Don, Commander in Chief, sarcastically related on two occasions recently his young son's derisive comment that Don is Commander in Chief of everything but can command nothing. Only Major General Doung Van Minh and Brigadier General Nguyen Khanh retain any

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prestige; those hoping for a military-dictated change of policy as some stopgap salvation do not trust the army leaders any more. The VOA announcement that the army was not responsible for ordering the 21 August attacks on the pagodas temporarily saved the army's reputation but General Dinh's immediate denial squelched this. Fortunately for Nhu, Duong Van Minh however discontent still abides by his officer's oath of loyalty and shuns politics. He does so not out of stupidity, as Nhu often charged in denigrating him. (Field comment. Tuyen recalled bitterly his own past support of Nhu in publicizing this picture of Minh.) Nguyen Khanh, the man whom Tuyen considers next to himself as most able to plan a successful coup, is hampered as is Tuyen by distrust as a provocateur arising chiefly from vigorous support both gave the Regime in 1960. Nhu's agents have furthered this image of Khanh and Tuyen among other suspect malcontents to present any coalition against the regime.

5. The Regime has the ability to keep the army in line by threats of Communist advantage by constant surveillance of suspect elements and limitation of their command authority and by ruining the reputation of his enemies and of well-meaning compromisers like Don. There is nevertheless a strong current under the surface in the Armed Services, civilian bureaucracy, police, and professional classes, people less known than the top figures suspected by the GVN's spies under Le Quang Tung and Duong Van Hieu. These persons hope for a coup within the next few months as Vietnam's only salvation. Not all of them are willing to risk it, though they would welcome it; the big problem is unity and trust of each other in an atmosphere abounding with provocateurs and rumor mongers. If the stalemate continues another six months, the Regime will last as long as Vietnam does, but that will not be long since no one will have the will to fight. If a well-planned coup comes soon, it might succeed and under tremendous handicaps could still save Vietnam. Its survival potential decreases as time goes by. Nhu knows that his main strength is the reluctance of his patriotic opponents and of the Americans to give the VC a sudden advantage by precipitous action against the Regime which might evolve into a protracted conflict. He is skillfully playing against that and turning one enemy against another.

6. This policy may frustrate a coup. There is a growing number of junior officers, especially majors and captains, who will not count the cost of desperate action if their superiors do not move. Even they may turn away from the increasing high risks of a coup to the relatively simple desperation move of assassination. Nhu has already made it clear through the Saigon underground where provocateurs and plotters meet that the Regime is prepared to retaliate with counter assassinations of numerous personnel already earmarked by Colonel Tung for such a dire eventuality, including Americans, on whom any assassination plot will be blamed. The only further result would be a hopeless three-cornered civil war. Nhu thus hopes to forestall such attempts, but is increasingly worried even about the Presidential Guard and even some officers of Tung's special forces.

7. Tuyen stated that the only real hope, and even it is risky, would be firm American indication that it will help the Vietnamese people (with specific omission of mentioning the Regime) in their struggle, and American efforts by every gesture possible to help rebuild the army's reputation and to distinguish between it and the Regime.

8. Field disseminated.

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