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18 October 1963

SUBJECT : Government of Vietnam Acting Foreign
Minister Cuu's Comments to Ambassador
Lodge on the Buddhist Issue and Alleged
American Involvement

REFERENCES: A. Saigon EMBTEL 724, dated 17 October 1963
B. Saigon EMBTEL 717, dated 17 October 1963

1. The GVN strongly resents United States refusal to turn over Tri Quang to GVN jurisdiction. The GVN considers Tri Quang as the primary instigator and leader of a revolutionary effort to overthrow the government. As long as the question of Tri Quang's sanctuary in the American Embassy remains unresolved we will continue to have strained relations with the GVN. Under present circumstances, we can expect the GVN to strike back by accusing American officials of complicity in causing and aggravating the Buddhist crisis.

2. Aside from the problem of Tri Quang's sanctuary in the American Embassy, the GVN has other reasons for suspecting American officials of illegitimate activities in cooperation with the Buddhist leadership. During the heat of the Buddhist crisis and prior to the declaration of martial law on 21 August 1963, about ten or eleven American officials were visiting Xa Loi pagoda weekly to debrief Buddhist leaders on their plans and reactions. These officials represented J-2, CIC, other intelligence components of the American mission, the Embassy security Office and the USOM Public Safety Division. The Saigon Station had two or three representatives in direct touch at one time or another with the Buddhist leadership in Xa Loi. We surfaced this fact together with the names of our officers to Ngo Dinh Nhu, State Secretary Thuan and to Interior Minister Luong. We pointed out that the purpose of our relationship was to obtain a correct estimate of the situation, to avoid reliance on exaggerated foreign press reports, and to urge moderation on the Buddhist leadership. Both Thuan and Luong seemed to accept our statement and to concur in the Station's relationship with the Buddhist leadership. As time went on, Ambassador Nolting became disturbed at the considerable number of American officials visiting the Buddhist leadership at Xa Loi. He thought that the size and frequency of American representation at Xa Loi could be misconstrued by the Buddhist leadership and by the GVN as constituting

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encouragement of the Buddhist movement. Nolting finally cancelled all United States official visits to Xa Loi with the exception of Station liaison. The Station reduced the frequency of its visits to about twice a week and finally began to use only one officer for liaison with the Buddhists.

3. Cuu's charge that Tri Quang ordered the self-cremation of the bonze on 5 October in cooperation with American representatives is without foundation in actual fact. To the best of my knowledge, Tri Quang is under continual guard; he has access to no telephone; and there appears to be no way for him to establish communication with outsiders. When Cuu speaks of the United States conducting an operation of this kind through another Embassy, I have no basis for speculation as to which Embassy he has in mind. The GVN is probably piecing together odds and ends of gossip, rumor, and malicious deception information, and it may believe that it has a case. On the other hand, the GVN may simply be striking back at the United States over the sanctuary question, knowing that its information is fabricated. I assume that Thich Thin Khiet's appeal to the Embassy that Tri Quang be turned over to Khiet's religious custody resulted from pressure on Khiet by the GVN to make an appeal of this nature.

4. With respect to Cuu's charges against John Helble, Consul in Hue, I feel that Cuu is greatly exaggerating. To the best of my knowledge neither Helble nor other American officials in Hue had any part in organizing the original Buddhist incident or in keeping the issue alive. Helble had many contacts in Hue among professors, students, other intellectuals, and probably with a number of politically dissident elements. As the Buddhist situation developed, certain of these contacts were detained or arrested. The Buddhist crisis and ensuing GVN repression had, I believe, a strong impact on Helble, who probably spoke out among Vietnamese friends and contacts with candid and firm expressions of disapproval over the way the GVN was handling the Buddhist problem. Regardless of the inaccuracies or exaggerations of the GVN case against Helble, it is probable that the GVN feels Helble constitutes a critical and antagonistic element in Hue. Personally, I regard Helble as an able and dedicated officer.

5. The USIS Chief, John Mecklin, has led one of the most effective USIS programs that I have seen anywhere. Apart from programmatic progress, however, Mecklin and his deputy, David Sheppard, have perhaps become increasingly critical with respect to the GVN. In this respect, they are not much different from a large number of the civilian officials representing components of the United States mission in Vietnam. I reject completely Cuu's charges that Mecklin

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bribed reporters or paid out money for photographs of burning bonzes. The Australian correspondent, Dennis Warner, stayed at Mecklin's home in Saigon during part of his visit to South Vietnam. However, there was no complicity between Mecklin and Warner in the appearance of a copy of Warner's manuscript at the Xa Loi pagoda. The more plausible story as we have heard it is that this manuscript was being worked on by Warner while he was staying either at Mecklin's home or at the Caravelle hotel. This manuscript story was entitled something like "The Decline and Fall of the Diem Regime" and represented a partially finished draft of a contemplated newspaper or magazine article. The manuscript was stolen from Warner's lodging and was, we believe, planted in the Xa Loi pagoda by the GVN, itself, in order to discredit Warner and, as it now turns out, Mecklin as well.

6. I do not doubt that the GVN will bitterly resent contact by the UNGA delegation and Tri Quang in the Embassy. On the other hand, I am inclined to skepticism at the thought that the GVN will attempt to delay or prevent the arrival of the UNGA delegation at this late date. Nor do I believe that there is much real possibility of a GVN-instigated invasion of the Embassy to seize Tri Quang.

7. On the question of declaring United States officials persona non grata, my impression is that the GVN would be reluctant to take this step. Ngo Dinh Nhu and, I believe, Cuu as well have expressed the hope that the United States mission would "put its own house in order". Nevertheless, the continued presence of Tri Quang in the Embassy and the intensification of other strains in United States-GVN relations may overcome GVN reservations about declaring one or more of the American officials in Saigon persona non grata.

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