

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Memorandum



THE SITUATION IN
SOUTH VIETNAM

~~(Information as of 1200 EST)~~

(Information as of 1000 EDT)

16 Sept 63

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MANDATORY REVIEW

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16 September 1963

THE SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

(Information as of 1000 EDT)

SUMMARY

The lifting of martial law and other regime moves to demonstrate that the crisis is over have given an appearance of reduced tension to South Vietnam, but in fact there has been little relaxation of security measures. Censorship of news dispatches from Saigon appears to have been halted.

The Diem regime apparently intends to retain some military units in Saigon indefinitely on security assignments. Diem reportedly agreed only reluctantly to the recommendation of South Vietnamese generals that martial law be terminated.

Neither our field station nor the South Vietnamese Central Intelligence Organization is able to cite any hard evidence of significant Viet Cong control or penetration of the Buddhist or student movements. Both consider some Viet Cong influence probable, however. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] considers Buddhist monk Tri Quang, now in asylum in the US Embassy, a pro-Communist and extremist, with devious political objectives going beyond the overthrow of the Diem regime.

There has been no significant military activity over the weekend. Reports that "75-calibre" artillery has been captured from the Viet Cong probably refer to a 75-mm. recoilless rifle. The Viet Cong recently have been making increased use of recoilless rifles and heavy mortars in engagements north and south of Saigon, and increased numbers of weapons of Bloc origin have been captured.

North Vietnamese has stepped up its propaganda effort to focus attention on the Buddhist problem in South Vietnam, and Pravda in Moscow has printed a supporting editorial. The editorial accuses US forces of waging war against the Vietnamese people.

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I. GENERAL

1. The Diem regime is attempting to demonstrate that the political crisis is over by lifting martial law and rescheduling the postponed elections for the National Assembly, but there has in fact been little relaxation of security precautions.

2. A CBS correspondent today described his report as "uncensored." A government announcement said censorship had been lifted.

3. Security troops were still much in evidence in Saigon following the termination of martial law at noon today. Paratroopers were still mounting heavy guard near Saigon's central market, according to press reports, and marines were still stationed around high schools in the suburbs. General Khiem, chief of staff of the Joint General Staff, reportedly has stated that some military units will remain on security duty at Saigon schools.

II. THE REGIME

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1. [REDACTED] the Vietnamese generals recommended the lifting of martial law, and [REDACTED] Diem agreed with some reluctance.

2. The decree setting 27 September as the new date for national elections contains a provision that if elections cannot be held on this date in any electoral district because of "an insurmountable problem," the local authorities will hold elections as soon as possible thereafter. (Comment: This suggests that elections will not be attempted in some areas.)

3. The Diem government is reshuffling its secret police organization, known as SEPES, which has recently been criticized in the world press. SEPES has been undergoing changes for many months. Reports on the latest changes vary, but it appears that the organization has been placed under the command of Colonel Pham Thu Duong, chief of military cabinet to Ngo Dinh Nhu. (The former SEPES director, Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, was another Nhu protege, but fell into disfavor and has been ordered to Cairo as consul general.)

Colonel Duong reportedly intends sweeping reforms to improve the poor performance record of

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SEPES. The organization apparently will become a service with responsibility only for internal political activity. External operations, including those jointly run with the Chinese Nationalists, reportedly are to be transferred to the Central Intelligence Organization, which has hitherto concentrated on Viet Cong matters.

4. Professor Buu Hoi, South Vietnamese Ambassador to a number of African countries, is to head the Vietnamese UN delegation. He has asked to be heard if the General Assembly, convening Tuesday, decides to debate the treatment of Buddhists in South Vietnam. Buu Hoi is himself a Buddhist; his mother is a Buddhist nun and reportedly was considering burning herself to death in the series of self-immolations earlier this summer.

III. OPPOSITION

1. The CIA station in Saigon says there is no hard evidence of significant Viet Cong penetration or control of Buddhist or student movements in South Vietnam.

The station, however, believes it probable that a few Buddhist and student leaders may be Viet Cong, are accepting guidance or support from the Viet Cong, or are at least Viet Cong- or Hanoi-oriented. There are reports that the Viet Cong have been trying to exploit Buddhist and student unrest, and the station considers it likely that some opportunistic opposition leaders would accept any help obtainable.

A 17 August report [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] noted that "confiscated Viet Cong documents do not mention the role of the Viet Cong as instigator of any occurrences, but spoke only of their plans to take advantage of any opportunity when events caused by the US or opposition might occur."

On 15 September [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] a station officer [REDACTED] had no specific evidence of a Viet Cong hand in the disturbances, [REDACTED]

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2.

[REDACTED] Tri Quang, the chief Buddhist critic of the Diem regime, currently in asylum in the US Embassy, is neutralist-oriented and probably pro-Communist.

[REDACTED] Tri Quang was completely political in his purpose and was the acknowledged leader of extremist elements. The source considers Tri Quang's political objectives devious and not limited simply to overthrow of the Diem regime.

[REDACTED]

3. North Vietnam is trying to exploit the current world outcry over the situation of the Buddhists in South Vietnam. On 14 September, it broadcast a letter from South Vietnam's Liberation Front--the Viet Cong political arm--to the UN General Assembly, reiterating the Front's demands that the US withdraw from South Vietnam, and that the parties concerned in South Vietnam stop the war, settle their differences among themselves, and set up a neutral, coalition government. The same theme was contained in a note sent by North Vietnam to the fourteen countries sponsoring discussion of the South Vietnam question in the UN.

4. TASS, on 14 September, broadcast in English to Europe a Pravda editorial strongly associating the USSR with "the struggle of the South Vietnamese people against the repressive Diem regime." The article accuses the armed forces of the US of conducting active military operations against the South Vietnamese people. It also mentions the Liberation Front's demand for an immediate end to "foreign military aggression" in South Vietnam as prerequisite to a peaceful solution of the Vietnamese problem.

The Pravda editorial states that the Soviet people "cannot look with indifference upon the sufferings of the peace-loving peoples of South Vietnam," and quotes Ho Chi Minh on the inevitability of victory for the liberation movement in South Vietnam.

~~TOP SECRET~~ [REDACTED]

IV. MILITARY SITUATION

1. No significant military developments have been reported since the previous Vietnamese Situation Report at 1000 Saturday.

2. In recent engagements just north and to the south of Saigon, government forces have noted increased enemy use of recoilless rifles and mortars. They have also captured increased quantities of equipment of Bloc origin in this area, including infantry weapons, foodstuffs, and printed matter. (One Chinese Communist periodical found last week was dated June 1963.)

Secretary Thuan last week told Ambassador Lodge that the first ".75-calibre artillery piece," apparently introduced by raft from North Vietnam, has just been found in the delta. This is not confirmed by MACV, which instead reported the capture last week of at least one 75-mm. recoilless rifle. MACV has identified this as a weapon of Chinese manufacture.

Thuan's stress on the serious situation in the delta, which he considers the key to control of South Vietnam, appears to reflect his recent general pessimism. He pointed out that in the delta there is unlimited food and manpower. Thuan stated that the government had made very little progress in the delta, and that it was unlikely that it could.

V. OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

1. The Ceylon delegate at the UN claims that the 14 Afro-Asian nations sponsoring debate on the South Vietnamese question are determined to press for priority treatment during general debate in plenary, and will oppose allocation to committee. Ambassador Stevenson comments that allocation to plenary might make it easier to keep debate brief and perhaps less contentious.

2. The Cambodian Press Agency, on 14 September, reports an appeal by the Association of Vietnamese Buddhists in the US for Cambodia's assistance against the Saigon Government's repression of Buddhists.

~~TOP SECRET~~ [REDACTED]