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Victims v Bundy

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Memorandum



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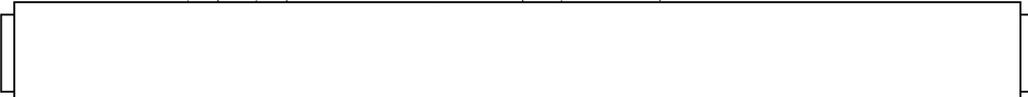
THE SITUATION IN
SOUTH VIETNAM

(Information as of 1300 EDT)

17 Sept 1963

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SC No. 09899/63

17 September 1963

THE SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

(Information as of 1300 EDT)

SUMMARY

Troops are somewhat less in evidence in Saigon, and the majority of the arrested Buddhists have probably been released from custody. Our station chief believes, however, that prisoners suspected of active plotting or of contacts with the Viet Cong will be kept in jail, and that the regime will keep substantial security forces in and near Saigon to maintain order and guard against coup attempts.

He notes that the crisis has probably made Nhu and Diem more sensitive to outside opinion, more cognizant of their dependence on the military, and aware that they can neither revert fully to the status quo ante nor rely on pure repression to deal with the domestic unrest.

There are continuing reports that Nhu may ask for the withdrawal of US advisers and seek an accommodation with Hanoi. General Khiem, chief of staff to the Joint General Staff, sought out an American source yesterday to tell him that key generals will not tolerate such a deal. He says the generals have asked for several cabinet posts.

The opposition Tuyen group, which has set several dates for coups but as yet has taken no action, now plans to assassinate Diem, Nhu, and several generals during a palace meeting on 20 September.

Madame Nhu has told the press in Belgrade that she will reach New York about 1 October, and does not expect to confer with any high officials in Washington. Her intervening travel plans are unclear, and the length of her stay in the US depends on a cross-country speaking tour and her "whim."

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~~TOP SECRET~~ [REDACTED]I. ASSESSMENTS

1. The CIA Saigon station chief expects that substantial security forces will be maintained in Saigon despite the lifting of martial law, to guard against unrest or possible coup attempts.

He believes that most of the Buddhists arrested in recent weeks now have been released, but that prisoners suspected of coup plotting or of connections with the Viet Cong will be kept in custody.

The station chief comments that Diem and Nhu probably are not as insensitive to US and world opinion as some observers think, and that they probably are aware that they can neither revert to the situation as it existed before the Buddhist disorders, nor cope with internal dissatisfaction by pure repression. He also feels the two leaders are aware of their increased dependence on the military, while military leaders at the same time are becoming aware of their ability to influence the regime.

He reports that top US officials in Saigon now consider it virtually impossible that Diem and Nhu can be separated, or that Madame Nhu can be silenced for any period of time.

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2. [REDACTED] has told Ambassador Lodge that he considers US withdrawal from South Vietnam "unthinkable," and that even the North Vietnamese would be ready to settle for less.

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[REDACTED] feels that if Hanoi can obtain a trade agreement assuring it an adequate rice supply from South Vietnam, the DRV would agree to call off the guerrilla war in exchange for assurances that it would not be attacked by the US. (Comment: North Vietnam's food situation is not so desperate that its leaders would settle for continued US presence. Such negotiations, furthermore, would provide some delicate moments for the North Vietnamese, who maintain publicly that they have no control over the Viet Cong guerrillas.)

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II. THE REGIME

1. Troops remain in evidence in key Saigon population centers such as schools and markets, but have been withdrawn from some government buildings and utilities. The US military attaché reports that one of the two airborne battalions on duty in Saigon has been pulled out. The alert for two other airborne battalions in the vicinity has been reduced from 100% to 50%, but they remain in stand-by reserve near Saigon.

2. General Khiem, chief of staff to the Joint General Staff, [redacted] on 16 September during which he stated that while general officers still are acting "within legality," they are increasingly concerned over evidence that Nhu may be negotiating for an accommodation with North Vietnam. Khiem says Nhu has told some general officers (not including Khiem) that Polish Commissioner Manelli has presented a proposal for trade between the two Vietnams which is being studied. Nhu reportedly added that both Manelli and French Ambassador Lalouette had offered their services as intermediaries.

Khiem also said the generals have asked Diem for several cabinet posts and were told they would be answered after the 27 September election. Khiem claims that if the generals are turned down they will press in "other directions," and will not go along with Nhu on any program for neutralization or accommodation with Hanoi. Khiem considers that he, General Khanh, and General "Big" Minh constitute the key officer group, and that there have been no leaks in their contacts with US officials.

3. The assistant army attaché has been told by a source near Danang that students and faculty at the ARVN artillery school nearby are "very disturbed," claiming that the regime has lost touch with the people. Personnel at the school are reported to be listening to VOA and BBC as the only available sources of valid news about South Vietnam.

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4. Nhu has told []

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[] that after he has "stabilized current
difficulties" he will get rid of US advisers.
[]

Nhu and Madame Nhu have been making public state-
ments for some months that there are too many
civilian American advisors in the provinces, and
that some of them should be pulled back to train-
ing roles or sent home.

5. Madame Nhu, according to press reports,
expects to arrive in New York about 1 October;
her plans meanwhile are unclear but apparently in-
clude Paris and Morocco. She reportedly plans to
stay in New York about a week and then embark on a
cross-country speaking tour. She told reporters
in Belgrade that she does not expect to confer with
the President or any other top officials in Wash-
ington, and that the length of her US visit "de-
pends on my whim."

III. THE OPPOSITION

The group associated with former presiden-
tial security chief Tran Kim Tuyen now is reported to
be planning to assassinate Diem, Nhu, and several
ranking generals during a palace meeting on 20
September. A member of the group who is on the
palace staff has demolition equipment.

We cannot judge the capability of this
group to carry out such plans, but note that it has
repeatedly set dates for coup action which never
materialized. The most recent coup date was to
have been 13 September, when Tuyen himself was
exiled with an assignment as consul general in
Cairo. A source later explained this date had been
postponed because Nhu left unexpectedly for the
provinces.

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IV. MILITARY SITUATION

1. Viet Cong, apparently in battalion strength of about 400 men, last night attacked four hamlets in the delta, according to press reports. The hamlets called in air support for attacks on guerrilla assembly points and withstood the assault, although two were reported still under attack at daybreak. Press reports said an estimated 100 Viet Cong had been killed, but did not indicate how the defenders could have made a body count.

2. [REDACTED]

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V. OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

1. Commenting on Pravda's 15 September editorial on South Vietnam, the US Embassy in Moscow notes that there are some "interesting omissions" in comparison with earlier Soviet pronouncements concerning a peaceful solution in Vietnam. Neither Moscow's statement last May nor the current Pravda article called for immediate withdrawal of US forces, but the Pravda piece omits earlier references to provisions in the 1954 Geneva agreements for unification of Vietnam through general elections, and to a possible neutral zone in Southeast Asia including South Vietnam.

The embassy believes Moscow may wish to dissuade Hanoi, Peiping, or the Viet Cong's Liberation Front from steps which might upset what the USSR probably regards as a favorably developing situation. Moscow may also have little taste at present for policies or moves which could increase Chinese Communist influence in the area.

2. South Vietnam's disaffected Foreign Minister Vu Van Mau left India for Switzerland on 15 September. He and his family have been given US visas.

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3. South Vietnam's ranking military officer, General Le Van Ty, who has been under treatment for cancer of the lung at Walter Reed Hospital, will leave for Saigon on 24 September. His condition is reported to be worsening, and it is not clear whether he will resume his position as armed forces chief of staff.

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ANNEX: CIA Reporting on the Political Situation in South Vietnam, 1 June 62 - 21 August 63

1. For several years prior to the outbreak of the Buddhist crisis in May 1963 CIA had believed, and regularly reported to the highest levels of government, that the Diem regime in South Vietnam had serious political liabilities, that it was autocratic, inefficient and increasingly unpopular, and that the potential for its overthrow existed.

2. The DCI, returning from a visit to Southeast Asia in June 1962, reported to the Special Group as follows:

Apparently, dissatisfaction with the Diem regime continues as evidenced by Diem's own serious concern over a coup. Diem family rule, his recent restrictive legislation and concern over security all are creating dissatisfaction and are contributing factors. A coup attempt, whether successful or not, would probably adversely affect the anti-Viet Cong effort.

3. Since June 1962, the basic judgment that military success was being seriously hampered, if not precluded, by counterproductive GVN political practices has been repeatedly spelled out in the many assessments of South Vietnam CIA has produced. The following paragraphs present the key judgments of the principal such assessments.

National Intelligence Estimates

4. NIE 53-63:

a. The question of GVN (Government of Vietnam) political problems was a key issue in debate last winter and spring in the intelligence community's production of NIE 53-63 ("Prospects in South Vietnam"). As part of a special procedure employed at that time to solicit the views of the chief interested US officials, a senior CIA officer was sent to Saigon to review the draft estimate on the scene. His team concluded (in a report disseminated to White House Staff) that:

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We also are concerned over the longer-run prospect for Vietnamese self-dependence. However, we also believe that the difficulties imposed by the Diem regime are over-stressed when considered in the context of the current situation and we doubt that these problems can be re-dressed at this time without risking a possibly fatal setback to the entire effort in South Vietnam. ...

The present government has increased its efficiency and, in any case, is probably no worse and may be better than most of our counter-insurgency list. This is not to say that it's a good government by our standards--it is to say that if we expect to get involved in counter-insurgency situations in fact as well as theory, we must learn how to win with the type of governments likely to be found in these countries with such improvements as we can gradually provide.

b. The final NIE, approved by USIB on 17 April--prior to the outbreak of the Buddhist controversy--stressed that the situation was "fragile":

...It can, of course, be argued that only a highly centralized regime, single-mindedly dedicated to independence, and placing a heavy emphasis on personal loyalty, can cope with the problems of guerrilla warfare. However, we believe that a greater willingness on the part of the regime to enlist the active support of those who have become disaffected or discouraged in the face of Diem's techniques of government would considerably speed the reduction of the Viet Cong insurgency...

But the government must be both willing and able to expand its efforts to bring social, political, and economic improvements to the countryside if the peasant is to recognize a stake in the survival of the government and to be fortified against Communist blandishments. Effective action in this and other fields, particularly with the removal of a substantial US presence at all levels of the government, would almost certainly require

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a wider participation in the development and implementation of policy and a considerable reduction in the tight, personal control of the bureaucracy.

On the basis of its past performance, the ability of the Diem regime to move willingly and effectively in these directions is questionable, and may become even more so should military victory come within sight...

5. SNIE 53-2-63 ("The Situation in South Vietnam," 10 July 1963) focused explicitly on the questions of the GVN's political stability and viability, and of US-GVN relationships. The USIB-agreed SNIE warned in particular that GVN handling of the Buddhist issue to date had already provided a focal point for public discontent, and that the GVN would probably proceed to handle the Buddhist issue in a manner which would produce a major political crisis.

6. Additionally, O/NE Memoranda for the Director (of 4 October 1962 and of 17 May 1963) were disseminated to the White House Staff.

a. The October memo concluded that "until the GVN enlists much more active public support of its cause than now exists, we believe that the VC threat cannot be reduced to a point which will permit the bulk of US personnel now committed in South Vietnam to be withdrawn."

b. The May memorandum signaled the sharp rise in GVN sensitivity concerning the growing US presence throughout South Vietnam, stated that Nhu had gained key influence in GVN affairs and was the chief source of hostility to the US, and concluded that the prospects were not bright for restoring close US-GVN relationships at all levels.

Current Intelligence Reporting

7. These views of the South Vietnamese government were also implicit in CIA's current intelligence reporting. Until the Buddhist crisis, however, political vulnerabilities of the regime remained largely potential, new developments were few, and changes in the political atmosphere were amorphous. Under these

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circumstances, the volume of current reporting on Vietnamese domestic politics was relatively small. (Military aspects of the situation were fully reported throughout this period). Once events began to move rapidly as a result of the regime's mishandling of the incidents in Hué, there was a large volume of current reporting.

8. CIA current publications were stating in strong terms the seriousness of the Buddhist crisis, and the threat it posed to the Diem regime by early June. They continued through the summer to report on this subject.

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[Redacted] CIA publications stressed

the following themes:

- a. Diem's unwillingness to come to terms with the Buddhists.
- b. Increasing popular opposition to this policy.
- c. Growing political orientation of the Buddhists.
- d. The disruptive influence of the Nhu's.
- e. Military plotting against the regime.

9. Excerpts from this reporting are attached as an appendix.

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APPENDIX

17 September 1963

Excerpts from Current Intelligence Reporting

1. Before the incidents in Hue, 8 May 1963.

a. The Current Intelligence Weekly Review (CIWR), 22 June-62: "Oppositionists in Saigon and in Paris are plotting Diem's overthrow. While such maneuvering, without South Vietnamese army backing, poses little direct threat to Diem, military officers remain dissatisfied with the President."

b. Current Intelligence Memorandum, 19 July 62: "While individual Vietnamese officials are strongly pro-American, the government is nationalistic and feels little kinship with democratic practices. A vocal intellectual group has scored Diem's autocratic and highly centralized rule, and even government officials have voiced concern that interference in military command and inadequate administration have contributed to growing Viet Cong success. A constant possibility is the assassination or overthrow of Diem by non-Communist opponents or by such groups in cooperation with the Viet Cong. To be successful a coup probably requires military backing. There is, however, no apparent popular or strong alternative leader to Diem on the horizon."

c. The Central Intelligence Bulletin (CIB), 3 November 62: "A number of top South Vietnamese military figures apparently still believe that the security situation requires drastic political changes. One of the country's three area commanders, General Dinh, stated that the public had lost confidence in President Diem and his brother Nhu because of their continued toleration of corruption in high circles."

d. CIWR, 25 January 63: "The overall effectiveness of the counterinsurgency effort continues to be blunted by the government's political methods. Control measures designed to guard against disloyalty have hobbled the combat effectiveness of the military forces. In some areas inept administration of counterinsurgency programs has antagonized the peasantry. The regime's internal image

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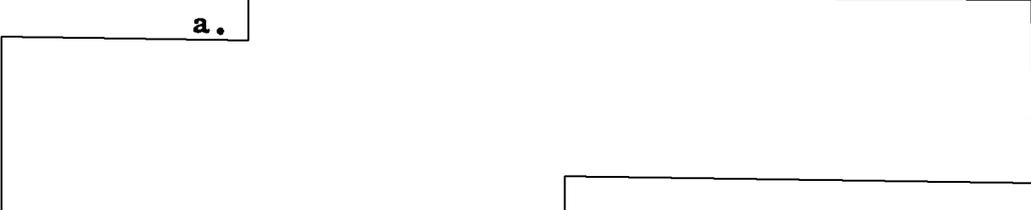
has also been damaged by its insensitivity to real or fancied popular grievances or to issues of public concern such as corruption."

e. CIB, 11 March 63: "The anti-American feelings of Ngo Dinh Nhu, President Diem's brother and chief political adviser, appear to be sharpening."

f. Briefing of the House Armed Services Committee, 27 March 63: "With US help, SVN probably stands a good chance to contain the Communists militarily. However, the Diem government's methods of operating have reduced its effectiveness, politically and militarily. The Diem government has alienated many educated Vietnamese, and failed to win positive loyalty from its people. It is unlikely that US involvement can be substantially curtailed or a lasting reduction in the Communist threat achieved so long as present political conditions persist."

2. After 8 May

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a. 

b. CIB, 11 May 63: "An outbreak of government sentiment among Buddhists in the major northern city of Hue on 8 May could have serious repercussions."

c. CIB, 21 May 63: The Diem government's handling of the Buddhist problem so far has been inept, and there is danger of disaffection within the security forces."

d. CIWR, 24 May 63: "The Diem government has aroused the hostility of Buddhists, who comprise the bulk of the population...."

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g. CIB, 10 Jun 63: "There are signs that the Diem government intends to follow a firm policy toward Buddhist agitators despite a tentative agreement of both sides to end provocations...."

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i. CIB, 1 Jul 63: "Dissension appears to be spreading within the South Vietnamese government. An American observer who recently talked with Nhu received the impression that he would move against Diem if he feels that the regime has become 'servile' to the US."

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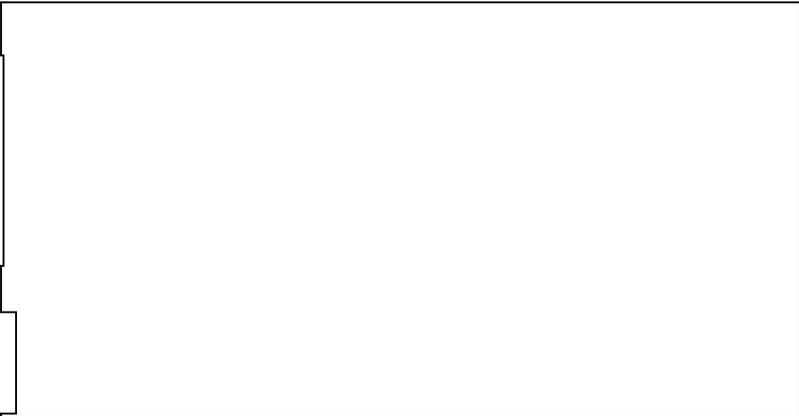
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