

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

ROUTINE

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Intelligence Information Cable

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DIST 18 MARCH 1968

COUNTRY SOUTH VIETNAM

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SUBJECT

PRESIDENT THIEU'S CONCERN OVER A POSSIBLE
COUP, CONDITIONS IN THE DELTA, AND SUPPOSED
AMERICAN USE OF THE NATIONAL SALVATION FRONT
TO EFFECT A COALITION GOVERNMENT WITH THE
VIET CONG

ACQ

VIETNAM, SAIGON (18 MARCH 1968) FIELD NO. [REDACTED]

SOURCE

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SUMMARY: LIEUTENANT GENERAL KHANG, III CORPS COMMANDER, SAID THAT ON 14 MARCH 1968 PRESIDENT NGUYEN VAN THIEU EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT RUMORS OF A MILITARY COUP. KHANG REASSURED THIEU THAT IN SPITE OF THE RUMORS, HE IS NOT INVOLVED IN PLANNING A COUP. THIEU BELIEVES THAT THE NATIONAL SALVATION FRONT (NSF) WAS ORGANIZED BY THE AMERICANS TO GENERATE SUPPORT FOR A COALITION GOVERNMENT WHICH WILL INCLUDE THE NATIONAL FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF SOUTH VIETNAM. THIEU IS CONCERNED WITH THE SITUATION IN IV CORPS. KHANG EXPRESSED CONFIDENCE IN THE NEWLY APPOINTED IV CORPS COMMANDER, MAJOR GENERAL NGUYEN DUC THANG, BUT SAID THAT HE IS NOT CERTAIN THAT THANG HAS SUFFICIENT TROOPS. THIEU ASKED IF THERE WERE ANY EVIDENCE THAT THE US HAD ASSISTED THE VC DURING THE TET ATTACKS.

WHEN KHANG ASSURED HIM THERE WAS NOT, THIEU POINTED OUT

THAT THE U.S. MISSION IS NOT MONOLOTHIC IN ITS VIEWS. KHANG DOES NOT EXPECT AN ATTACK ON SAIGON IN THE NEAR FUTURE. HE TOLD THIEU HE QUESTIONS THE WISDOM OF MAKING THE CONTEMPLATED CHANGES IN THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE IN THE PROVINCES AT THIS TIME. END SUMMARY.

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1. DURING A LENGTHY PRIVATE CONVERSATION ON 14 MARCH

1968, PRESIDENT NGUYEN VAN THIEU EXPRESSED CONCERN TO LIEUTENANT GENERAL LE NGUYEN KHANG, III CORPS COMMANDER, THAT SOME MEMBERS OF THE MILITARY MIGHT TRY TO OVERTHROW THIEU'S GOVERNMENT. KHANG TOLD THIEU HE KNOWS THERE ARE MANY RUMORS THAT HE AND BRIGADIER GENERAL NGUYEN NGOC LOAN, DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE NATIONAL POLICE, ARE PLANNING A COUP, BUT THE RUMORS ARE NOT TRUE. KHANG DOES NOT KNOW HOW THESE RUMORS GOT STARTED BUT HE SUSPECTS SOME VC COMPLICITY. IN AN EFFORT TO PREVENT SUCH RUMORS, KHANG SAID HE HAS BEEN AVOIDING POLITICIANS BECAUSE MANY OF THEM ARE PRONE TO TWIST SOME REMARK HE MIGHT MAKE ABOUT HIS DISSATISFACTION WITH THE GOVERNMENT INTO ALLEGATIONS OF COUP PLOTTING. RECENTLY KHANG TWICE REFUSED TO MEET WITH SENATOR DON. KHANG SAID THE PRESIDENT SHOULD NOT INTERPRET HIS OR LOAN'S REMARKS ABOUT THE NEED FOR STRONGER AND MORE DYNAMIC GOVERNMENT AS MEANING THEY ARE PLANNING A COUP. PRESIDENT JOHNSON IS ALSO SUBJECT TO STRONG CRITICISM BY THOSE IN THE UNITED STATES WHO DISAGREE WITH HIS POLICIES. KHANG SAID THAT HE CALLS THE PRESENT PHASE

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OF ENEMY STRATEGY "THE WAR OF TENSION". ONE IMPORTANT FACET OF THIS STRATEGY IS TO SOW DOUBT AND DISSENSION AMONG THE VIETNAMESE AND AMERICAN LEADERS AND PEOPLE. KHANG TOLD THIEU TO IGNORE THESE RUMORS AND DEVOTE HIS ENERGIES TO COMING TO GRIPS WITH THE MANY REAL PROBLEMS OF THE NATION. IF THIEU HAS ANY SUSPICION ABOUT KHANG'S COMPLICITY IN PLOTTING A COUP, HE NEED ONLY SAY SO AND

KHANG WILL PUT HIS SIGNED RESIGNATION ON THIEU'S DESK. THIEU EXPRESSED CONFIDENCE IN KHANG. KHANG SAID THAT SUBSEQUENTLY HE SENT HIS WIFE TO VISIT MRS. THIEU AS ANOTHER MEASURE OF REASSURANCE.

2. NEVERTHELESS, THIEU THOUGHT HE HAD GENUINE CAUSE FOR CONCERN. HE KNOWS MANY AMERICANS ARE NOT SATISFIED WITH HIS PERFORMANCE, THAT PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S DOMESTIC PROBLEMS ARE MOUNTING, AND THAT MANY VIETNAMESE ARE CALLING FOR A CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT.

3. KHANG SAID IT IS HIS IMPRESSION THAT THE U.S. GOVERNMENT IS VERY MUCH OPPOSED TO A COUP. THIEU SAID HE GOT THAT IMPRESSION FROM AMBASSADOR BUNKER BUT UNFORTUNATELY THERE ARE FOURTEEN PEOPLE WHO SPEAK FOR THE

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U.S. GOVERNMENT IN VIETNAM." KHANG SAID HE TOLD THIEU THAT HE SEES MANY PARALLELS BETWEEN 1968 AND 1954 IN VIETNAM. DURING 1954 THE FRENCH WERE WINNING MILITARILY BUT THE DEFEATIST PSYCHOLOGY OF THE FRENCH PEOPLE MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE FRENCH TO DEFEAT THE COMMUNISTS. TODAY KHANG FEELS THE U.S. FORCES ARE WINNING MILITARILY BUT THE VOICES OF DEFEATISM GET LOUDER EACH DAY. HE THOUGHT IT IMPORTANT THAT THIEU NOT BE VICTIMIZED BY RUMORS, MANY OF WHICH ARE SPREAD BY THE COMMUNISTS AND DESIGNED TO SOW SUSPICION AND DIVISIVENESS. KHANG SAID HE TOOK A PARTICULARLY STRONG POSITION ON THIS SUBJECT NOT ONLY BECAUSE HE FERVENTLY BELIEVES WHAT HE SAID, BUT BECAUSE IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT THIEU WAS PREOCCUPIED BY MANY DOUBTS.

4. THIEU FEELS THE AMERICANS USED NGUYEN XUAN OANH AND DANG DUC KHOI TO ORGANIZE THE NSF WITH THE ULTIMATE OBJECTIVE OF GENERATING POPULAR SUPPORT FOR A COALITION GOVERNMENT WHICH WILL INCLUDE THE NATIONAL FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF SOUTH VIETNAM (NFLSV). FOR THIS REASON, THE AMERICANS SELECTED SENATOR TRAN VAN DON, MAI HUU XUAN, AND OTHER FORMER GENERALS OF PRO-FRENCH, NEUTRALIST

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POSTURE TO LEAD THE NSF. THIEU SAID HE IS FOLLOWING THE TACTIC OF PAYING LIP SERVICE TO DON'S REQUESTS FOR SUPPORT FOR THE NSF WHILE TRYING TO COUNTERBALANCE IT WITH POLITICAL EFFORTS OF HIS OWN GENERATED BY NGUYEN VAN HUONG, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE PRESIDENCY, AND TRAN VAN AN.

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THIEU SAID FORTUNATELY THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT THE NSF DOES NOT HAVE THE UNQUALIFIED SUPPORT OF VICE PRESIDENT NGUYEN CAO KY'S FOLLOWERS AND CITED LOAN AS AN EXAMPLE. COMMENT:

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KHOI HAS COMPLAINED THAT LOAN HAS BEEN ATTACKING THE NSF THROUGH THE NEWSPAPER CONG CHUNG. THIEU ASKED FOR KHANG'S VIEW OF THE NSF. KHANG SAID HE COULD NOT GUESS THE NSF'S TRUE MOTIVES BUT HE SHARED THIEU'S SUSPICIONS OF

MAI HUU XUAN.

5. IN DISCUSSING THE IV CORPS AREA, THIEU SAID HE IS CONCERNED THAT THE VIET KONG (VC) WILL BE ABLE TO CONSOLIDATE THEIR PRESENT CONTROL OF THE COUNTRYSIDE. THIEU SAID THAT

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HE HAS BEEN SOMEWHAT SKEPTICAL OF PACIFICATION RESULTS CLAIMED IN THE DELTA BECAUSE HE FEELS THAT SOME OF THE EFFORT HAS BEEN SUPERFICIAL. HE SAID IT IS UNQUESTIONABLY TRUE THAT THE SITUATION IN THE COUNTRYSIDE IN IV CORPS HAS WORSEMED MARKEDLY SINCE THE ENEMY'S TET OFFENSIVE. THIEU EXPRESSED CONCERN OVER THE NUMBER OF OUTPOSTS WHICH HAVE BEEN OVERRUN, AND SAID THE VC ARE EVEN ACTIVE POLITICALLY IN SOME AREAS AND APPARENTLY ARE RECEIVING SOME POPULAR SUPPORT. HE ASKED IF KHANG HAD ANY COMMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS ON THE IV CORPS SITUATION.

S. KHANG SAID THAT MAJOR GENERAL NGUYEN DUC THANG, NEWLY APPOINTED IV CORPS COMMANDER, HAS A VERY DIFFICULT ASSIGNMENT, AND HE (KHANG) IS NOT CERTAIN THAT THANG HAS SUFFICIENT TROOPS TO DO THE JOB. KHANG FEELS ONE STEP THAT COULD BE TAKEN TO LESSEN THANG'S SECURITY PROBLEM WOULD BE A WELL-PLANNED CONSOLIDATION OF HAMLETS. SUCH A CONSOLIDATION WOULD INCREASE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STATIC DEFENSE AND POSSIBLY RELEASE FORCES FOR THE ALL-IMPORTANT STRIKES ON ENEMY BASES. EQUALLY IMPORTANT, IT WOULD FACILITATE THE CREATION OF INTERNAL CONTROL MECHANISMS.

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IN THE HAMLETS. AT PRESENT, KHANG ARGUED, THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH SECURITY FORCES TO PROTECT THE SCATTERED HAMLETS OR ENOUGH MANPOWER TO SET UP INTERNAL CONTROL MECHANISMS TO CONTROL THE MOVEMENT OF VC AMONG THE MANY HAMLETS. WHILE THANG FACES A SERIOUS CHALLENGE AND LIKE ALL THE CORPS COMMANDERS, COULD USE MORE TROOPS, KHANG FEELS THAT THANG WILL BE ABLE TO GAIN THE UPPER HAND MILITARILY. HOWEVER, IT IS IMPORTANT THAT STRONG AND HONEST GOVERNMENT BE BROUGHT TO THE DELTA, AND THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S MESSAGE GETS THROUGH TO THE PEASANTS. THE GOVERNMENT'S INFORMATION PROGRAM IS VERY IMPORTANT. THIEU REPLIED THAT HE HAD ASKED GENERAL W.C. WESTMORELAND TO SUPPORT AN INCREASE OF 130,000 TROOPS FOR THE VIETNAMESE ARMY (ARVN) AND THIS ADDITION, IF SUPPORTED BY THE AMERICANS, SHOULD GIVE THE CORPS COMMANDERS THE ADDED TROOPS THEY NEED.

7. THIEU ASKED IF THERE WERE ANY EVIDENCE IN III CORPS THAT THE AMERICANS HAD ASSISTED THE VC DURING THE TET ATTACKS. KHANG SAID ON THE CONTRARY THE REACTION OF U.S. ARMORED ELEMENTS IN THE EARLY HOURS WAS ALL THAT PREVENTED THE ENEMY FROM OVERRUNNING TAN SON NHUT AIR

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BASE. KHANG SAID BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER THE ATTACK HIS COOPERATION FROM LIEUTENANT GENERAL WEYAND, CHIEF, II FIELD FORCE, LEFT NO DOUBT IN HIS MIND OF THE AMERICAN COMMITMENT. KHANG ADDED THAT PRME MINISTER NGUYEN VAN LOC WAS PRESENT AT KHANG'S HOUSE DURING THE FIRST DAY OF THE ATTACKS AND WAS AWARE OF WEYAND'S COMPLETE COOPERATION. THIEU SAID IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE U.S. MILITARY IS FULLY OPPOSED TO THE VC BUT THAT CERTAIN OTHER ELEMENTS OF THE U.S. MISSION MAY NOT BE. HE REITERATED HIS OPINION THAT THE U.S. MISSION IS NOT MONOLITHIC IN ITS VIEWS. KHANG SAID THAT WHILE THIEU DID NOT SAY HE BELIEVES THE RUMORS CONCERNING U.S. COMPLICITY, IT IS POSSIBLE THAT HE FEELS IT IS WITHIN THE REALM OF THE POSSIBLE. THIEU SEEMS VERY CONCERNED THAT THE U.S. GOVERNMENT MIGHT REACH AN UNDERSTANDING WITH THE NFLSV WITHOUT CONSULTING HIM AND THAT THERE MAY BE CERTAIN SECRET CHANNELS TO THE VC OF WHICH THIEU IS UNAWARE. THUS, DESPITE THIEU'S OBVIOUS RESPECT FOR AND DEPENDENCE ON THE AMERICANS, HE

RETAINS A LATENT SUSPICION OF AMERICAN MOTIVES.

8. THIEU ASKED IF KHANG EXPECTS THE ENEMY TO ATTEMPT

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TO ATTACK SAIGON IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE. KHANG REPLIED THAT HE DID NOT. THIEU SAID KHANG WAS ONE OF THE VERY FEW VIETNAMESE MILITARY MEN WHO HAD, FROM THE EARLIEST DAYS OF THE FIRST ATTACK, GONE ON RECORD AGAINST A SECOND WAVE GROUND ASSAULT. KHANG SAID HE BASED HIS OPINION ON DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE THAT THE ENEMY HAD BEEN HURT BADLY DURING THE FIRST ASSAULT AND NEEDS TIME TO REGROUP. KHANG SAID HE EXPECTS GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP TO TRY SOMETHING SPECTACULAR JUST BEFORE THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION AND JUST BEFORE THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. KHANG OPINED THAT GIAP IS A MASTER AT WAGING POLITICAL WARFARE AND HIS PRESENT TIMETABLE IS ATTUNED TO POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE U.S.

9. KHANG ADVISED THIEU TO MEET MORE FREQUENTLY WITH HIS VIETNAMESE MILITARY COMMANDERS. HE SAID MOST OF THE SENIOR GENERALS FEEL THAT THIEU HAS BEEN IGNORING THEM SINCE HE BECAME PRESIDENT. KHANG SAID THAT HE HAD BEEN CRITICAL OF THE PRESIDENT AND THE GOVERNMENT BUT HAD SAID NOTHING TO ANYONE THAT HE WOULD NOT SAY TO THIEU, AND BELIEVES THAT THE SAME IS TRUE OF MOST OTHER SENIOR GENERALS.

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THIEU SAID HE FINDS HIS EXCHANGE OF IDEAS WITH KHANG HELPFUL AND HE HOPES THEY WILL CONTINUE TO BE FRANK AND OPEN FRIENDS. THIEU ASKED IF KHANG HAD ANY OTHER SUGGESTIONS. KHANG TOLD THIEU HE QUESTIONS THE WISDOM OF MAKING SWEEPING CHANGES IN THE CORPS AREAS AT THIS TIME SUCH AS THE CONTEMPLATED CHANGES CONCERNING GOVERNMENTAL DELEGATES AND PROVINCE CHIEFS. HOWEVER, IF THIEU FEELS HE MUST MAKE THESE CHANGES NOW HE CAN DEPEND ON KHANG'S SUPPORT. THIEU SAID HE REALIZES THERE ARE TWO SIDES THE CONTEMPLATED CHANGES AND PROMISED TO GIVE THE PROBLEM MORE CONSIDERATION.

10. FIELD DISSEM: STATE (AMBASSADOR BUNKER, POLITICAL COUNSELOR) USMACV (GENERAL WESTMORELAND, GENERAL ABRAMS, AMBASSADOR KOMER, CHIEF OF STAFF, J-2) 7TH AIR FORCE (GENERAL MOMYER) CINCPAC PACFLT ARPAC PACAF
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