

SAIGON'S CONTROL IN TWO PROVINCES PERILED BY REDS

NYT 11/21/63

Rice-Rich Areas in Mekong in Danger—Top U.S. Aides Report Gain in War

By DAVID HALBERSTAM

Special to The New York Times

MYTHO, South Vietnam, Nov. 20—The position of the South Vietnamese Government is critical in the rice-rich area policed by the Seventh Division. The difficulties are military, political and psychological.

Well-armed, aggressive Vietcong (Vietnamese Communist) units have capitalized on the Government's cautious military policy in the past and have seized the initiative. This seriously threatens Government control of Long An and Dinh Tuong Provinces, south of the capital.

One adviser says the situation is "desperate." In varying degrees that is true of other Seventh Division areas and of areas formerly assigned to the division, which have been made the responsibility of a new division.

[Top United States officials, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, conferred in Honolulu on strategy in South Vietnam. They issued a statement saying that the war against the Communists had taken a decided turn for the better and reaffirmed that about 1,000 of the 16,500 United States troops in South Vietnam would be withdrawn by Jan. 1.]

Rural Positions Undermined

Slowly for about a year, the Communists have undermined Government rural positions. They have reduced Saigon's influence to areas around the main highway and around district and provincial centers.

The Seventh Division, the main governmental force in this area, was more and more fighting a war on paper, in the view of its United States

advisers. It was being extremely cautious about confronting main units of the guerrillas. The result, in effect, was to give the Vietcong base areas that had become sanctuaries.

These developments have caused considerable alarm among some high-ranking Americans and many high Vietnamese officers.

Privately, some United States advisers, as well as the new Vietnamese commander, Col. Pham Van Dong, say the situation would have been out of control in three or four more months.

A realignment in the Mekong Delta has made the Seventh Division responsible for four provinces—Long An, Dinh Tuong, Kien Tuong and Kien Phong. The latter two are areas in the Plain of Reeds.

The key provinces, in the eyes of both the Government and the Vietcong guerrillas, are Long An and Dinh Tuong. Together their population is 1.5 million,

Ngo Dinh Diem early this month is reported to have put its best field commander into the area. He is said to have been given authority to engage the Communists even if that means heavy casualties.

Many observers believe that the Seventh Division's area will become a crucial test of the junta's announced intention of prosecuting the war more effectively than had the Government it overthrew.

4 Main-Force Battalions

In the last year the Vietcong guerrillas have become increasingly capable and well armed. According to Vietnamese military intelligence, in the four provinces alone there are now four strong Vietcong battalions.

Where a year ago these battalions might have included 200 to 250 men they are now said to total 450 men, with heavy-weapon units.

A year ago, according to Vietnamese estimates, about 70 per cent of the main units had machine-made weapons, but the figure is now put at 100 per cent, with most of the weapons captured American equipment.

In addition, there is a sharp increase in the number of Browning automatic rifles and light machine guns in these

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VIETNAMESE REDS PERIL 2 PROVINCES

Continued From Page 1, Col. 5

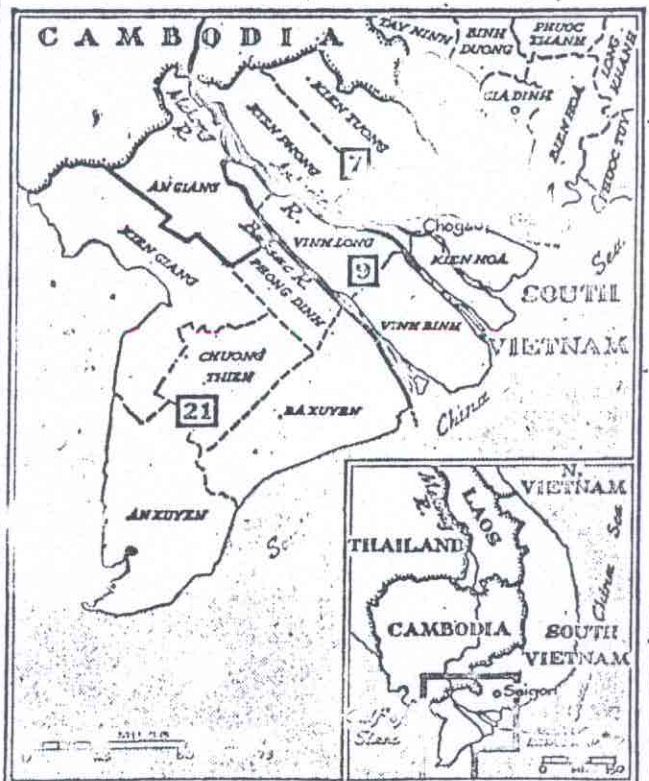
or about 10 per cent of the population of South Vietnam. The areas are extremely rich in rice, fowl, coconut and fruit.

In the words of one American civilian, both provinces are in "a state of total insecurity." He added: "Our side got the people into these strategic hamlets [fortified settlements] and then we weren't able to protect them. This means the job ahead is just a little harder because the peasants will be even more cautious in dealing with us. But I don't think it is beyond recall."

In these areas the Vietcong forces used their main battalions to eliminate Government outposts, then used smaller units to harass the hamlets. They then started a piecemeal military offensive designed at psychological as well as military undermining of the Government position.

Of the 213 hamlets in Dinh Tuong Province and the 219 in Long An, United States civilians estimate that about 20 per cent are politically and militarily viable. Other sources put the figure at 10 to 20 per cent.

The military junta that overthrew the regime of President



The New York Times

Nov. 21, 1963

CRITICAL AREA IN WAR: The position of the South Vietnamese Government has worsened in Long An and Dinh Tuong Provinces (cross-hatched). Boxed numbers are those of divisions in zones enclosed by heavy lines.

units.

A year ago the regional guerrillas—smaller units that sometimes operate in company size—were estimated to be 40 per cent equipped with machine-made arms. This figure is put at 70 per cent. Some informants say these units are getting Communist-bloc carbines that have come into the country recently.

The guerrillas are considered extremely well-disciplined, highly motivated and well-led.

To some observers, the situation has never looked so serious. Guerrillas back now will be much more difficult than it might have been a year ago—and much more bloody because the Vietcong forces have captured Government arms.

Major Test Expected

One American informant believes that the fighting that may take place soon is likely to be the major test of the war. He noted that Communists had placed great emphasis on their main units, the numbered battalions.

Most of the country's rural population lives in the delta. The region contains most of South Vietnam's agricultural resources and has seen most of the fighting.

Until recently, when a third division was moved in, the delta area was roughly divided into two main segments, the Seventh Division area above the Bassac River and the 21st below it. Both areas are rich and populous.

Col. Pham Van Dong says that in Dinh Tuong and Long An, when he took over shortly after the overthrow of the Diem Government, the communists controlled about two-thirds of the rural area.

He contends that this figure is now down to 50 per cent because of his recent operations. Some observers consider this an extremely optimistic statement.

In both Long An and Dinh Tuong Provinces, the fortified hamlets were serving more and more as way stations for the Communists, with guerrillas slipping in, spending the night,

helping themselves to food and then heading on.

Vietcong squads would come into a hamlet and make the villagers dismantle the barbed-wire defenses.

In Long An, Vietcong squads would make villagers take the roofs off their huts as a sign of obedience. Slowly the confidence of the people was undermined.

In the last two months there has been a slow squeeze even on centers like Mytho, as the guerrillas have become increasingly aggressive. They are able to move to the outskirts of the city to commit sabotage, without the peasants informing the Government.

During all this time the

claims of Government victories continued. If it was known that rural areas just outside the capital itself were dominated by the Communists, that might accelerate sentiment for a neutralist solution for Vietnam.

Many Government troops remained committed to static security and frequently the Seventh Division had only three battalions ready for mobile use. Meanwhile, the guerrillas continued to raid small outposts and use them as weapons-supply stations.

Long Artillery Attacks

Often the antiguerrilla operations meant artillery attacks of an hour or more before the infantry went in, and often escape routes were left open for the Vietcong men.

The division's commander, Col. Bui Dinh Dam, frequently had to consult with his corps commander, Gen. Huynh Van Cao, who might be in another city, for permission to release his reserve and make an assault.

Last July President Ngo Dinh Diem demanded a victory, specifying the Chogao area north-east of Saigon.

The operation was begun and a Vietcong unit was trapped. The Government inflicted heavy casualties.

The bodies of about 70 Communists were left behind. Despite the pleas of the United States advisers, however, an escape gap was left open for the guerrillas.

Several weeks later, at Gocong the Government won another victory. This time the Communists attacked an outpost, then set up an ambush for the rescue force. But the Government responded quickly with armored personnel carriers.

They caught the Vietcong ambush party in open and inflicted heavy casualties. But according to an American adviser, with the battle still on and the guerrillas fleeing, the divisional commander called off the operation and said to the American advisers, "Now bring your Ambassador and your reporters."

Rangers Wiped Out

For a time after the United States military aid build-up began in 1961 there was a string of successes in the Seventh Division area in the early and middle part of 1962. About 100 Communists were killed in each battle.

Then, last October the Seventh Division launched an operation west of Mytho. A Vietcong unit was dug in. It saw a Government Ranger unit move in. The Communists held their fire until the Rangers were about 150

feet away, then opened fire. An entire Ranger platoon was wiped out.

The next morning, Huynh Van Cao, who as a colonel was then the divisional commander, was called to the Presidential Palace and told to be more prudent about casualties.

For the rest of 1962 the division was extremely cautious. On last Jan. 1 Huynh Van Cao became corps commander of the delta region and Col. Bui Dinh Dam became divisional commander.

On Jan. 2 a large Government force attacked the Communists at Appac. It was mauled by a dug-in Communist battalion. The Government was not able to take the position until the following morning.

Later, a report made by the Vietcong commander was captured. It said in effect: It is better to stand and die than run and be slaughtered.

After that, many advisers believe, the Seventh Division was never really effective. Its operations were unwieldy, it left escape routes for the guerrillas and too often, according to the advisers, it did not follow up its intelligence.

U. S. Aides Report Gain

Special to The New York Times

HONOLULU, Nov. 20—The Administration's top military and diplomatic officials decided today that the war against Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam had taken a decided turn for the better since the coup d'état that overthrew the Ngo Dinh Diem regime Nov. 1.

Defense and State Depart-

ment spokesmen reported tonight an "encouraging outlook." They said the United States had already established "excellent working relations" with the new Vietnamese Government.

These were the assessments emerging tonight from the Administration's first full-scale review of the Vietnamese situation since the military coup in which President Ngo Dinh Diem was killed.

About 60 key officials, headed by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, met in seclusion here today at Pacific Military Headquarters overlooking historic Pearl Harbor.

They made an intensive study of the war effort in South Vietnam and of "United States and Vietnamese plans and policies in the political, military, economic and information fields," according to a statement issued at the end of the conference.

1,000 Troops to Return

The statement, read to news-

men by Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur Sylvester, reaffirmed the United States plan to bring home about 1,000 of its 16,500 troops from South Vietnam by Jan. 1. The first contingent of about 300 men will leave Saigon Dec. 3.

The decision to remove these troops was made in October after a mission to South Vietnam by Secretary McNamara and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who also attended today's conference.

Officials indicated that although there were no basic changes in United States policies and commitments to South Vietnam, the conference would probably recommend some modifications in American aid programs in an effort to intensify the campaign against the Vietcong guerrillas.

These spokesmen declined, however, to disclose any recommended changes until Secretary McNamara and Ambassador Lodge have an opportunity to report to President Kennedy later this week. Mr. McNamara left Hawaii tonight for Washington. Ambassador Lodge will fly to the mainland tomorrow.

Secretary Rusk will leave Hawaii Friday to head a United States Cabinet delegation going to Japan for an economic conference.