

Spy Ring Furor in Saigon

New York Times

Saigon

About 100 persons have been arrested in a month-old crackdown on an alleged enemy spy ring that has reportedly penetrated deep into the South Vietnamese government, police sources said yesterday.

Arrests have doubled in the last two weeks, netting not only high-ranking government officials but also numerous functionaries.

Never before in the war have so many persons been charged with spying.

Few details about the al-

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leged spying operations of the accused have been released. As a result, the information void has been filled with rumors and speculative theories.

Some of the rumors and theories connect the government crackdown with the arrest of the eight United States Special Forces soldiers who allegedly killed a Vietnamese intelligence agent.

The South Vietnamese press, people and politicians are making the most of the situation.

A headline in a local daily screams: "International Espionage Case — Presidential Assistant Is Master Spy."

At the National Assembly, a legislator opposed to President Nguyen Van Thieu's regime tells a friend: "Thieu has surrounded himself with untrustworthy men."

Among the persons seized were Huynh Van Trong, one of Thieu's special assistants for political affairs, and three officials of the ministry that screens Viet Cong defectors.

All the accused have been charged with "liaison with the enemy" and are being held at the headquarters of the National Police. South Vietnamese law does not provide for bail during wartime.

The cases may not come to trial for weeks. Investigators are still hard at work.

The police indicated initially that a news conference would be held to tell how the alleged agents worked and how they were exposed. But as more arrests have been made and as the affair has become increasingly sensitive for both politicians and soldiers, the prospect of an immediate explanation has diminished.

From the little information that has become available

through South Vietnamese and U.S. sources, it appeared that the accused had connections not only with other enemy representatives in North and South Vietnam, but also with representatives in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and France.

Intelligence reportedly was conveyed via courier, coded radio messages, documents written in invisible ink and microfilm. Police say they hold a suitcase filled with microfilm and miscellaneous papers but they refused to discuss the content of the material.

Some sources said the accused men were less interested in stealing secret information than in trying to nudge the Saigon regime toward positions favorable to the enemy.

As one of Thieu's top advisers, Trong would have been in a particularly good position to influence government processes.

For example, at one point Thieu reportedly sent him to Paris on a mission that involved the peace talks. On another occasion, he reportedly made a trip to the U.S. to assess the political situation and to contact aides of Richard M. Nixon, who was then campaigning for the Presidency.

Thieu's political opponents have made a strong effort to keep the arrests in the limelight.

There is talk that security agents close to Premier Tran Van Huong, whom Thieu reportedly would like oust, purposely broke open the spy case. The agents reportedly had been watching the ring for more than a year.

Another theory holds that the tip on the ring came from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The agency has refused all comment, even on rumors that it once employed some of the accused.