

# Taylor's Briefing of Key Officials On Situation in November, '64

*Excerpts from prepared briefing by Ambassador Taylor, "The Current Situation in South Vietnam—November, 1964," delivered to the "principals"—the senior officials to whom the Southeast Asia working group reported—at a Washington meeting on Nov. 27, 1964.*

After a year of changing and ineffective government, the counter-insurgency program country-wide is bogged down and will require heroic treatment to assure revival. Even in the Saigon area, in spite of the planning and the special treatment accorded the Hop Tac plan, this area also is lagging. The northern provinces of South Viet-Nam which a year ago were considered almost free of Viet-Cong are now in deep trouble. In the Quang Ngai-Binh Dinh area, the gains of the Viet-Cong have been so serious that once more we are threatened with a partition of the country by a Viet-Cong salient driven to the sea. The pressure on this area has been accompanied by continuous sabotage of the railroad and of Highway 1 which in combination threaten an economic strangulation of northern provinces.

This deterioration of the pacification program has taken place in spite of the very heavy losses inflicted almost daily on the Viet-Cong and the increase in strength and professional competence of the Armed Forces of South Viet-Nam. Not only have the Viet-Cong apparently made good their losses, but of late, have demonstrated three new or newly expanded tactics: the use of stand-off mortar fire against important targets, as in the attack on the Bien Hoa airfield; economic strangulation on limited areas; finally, the stepped-up infiltration of DRV military personnel moving from the north. These new or improved tactics employed against the background of general deterioration offer a serious threat to the pacification program in general and to the safety of important bases and installations in particular.

Perhaps more serious than the downward trend in the pacification situation, because it is the prime cause, is the continued weakness of the central government. Although the Huong government has been installed after executing faithfully and successfully the program laid out by the Khanh government for its own replacement, the chances for the long life and effective performance of the new line-up appear small. Indeed, in view of the factionalism existing in Saigon and elsewhere throughout the country it is impossible to foresee a stable and effective government under any name in anything like the near future. Nonetheless, we do draw some

encouragement from the character and seriousness of purpose of Prime Minister Huong and his cabinet and the apparent intention of General Khanh to keep the Army out of politics, at least for the time being.

As our programs plod along or mark time, we sense the mounting feeling of war weariness and hopelessness which pervade South Viet-Nam, particu-

larly in the urban areas. Although the provinces for the most part appear steadfast, undoubtedly there is chronic discouragement there as well as in the cities. Although the military leaders have not talked recently with much conviction about the need for "marching North," assuredly many of them are convinced that some new and drastic action must be taken to reverse the present trends and to offer hope of ending the insurgency in some finite time.

The causes for the present unsatisfactory situation are not hard to find. It stems from two primary causes, both already mentioned above, the continued ineffectiveness of the central government, and the other, the increasing strength and effectiveness of the Viet-Cong and their ability to replace losses.

While, in view of the historical record of South Viet-Nam, it is not surprising to have these governmental difficulties, this chronic weakness is a critical liability to future plans. Without an effective central government with which to mesh the U.S. effort the latter is a spinning wheel unable to transmit impulsion to the machinery of the GVN. While the most critical governmental weaknesses are in Saigon, they are duplicated to a degree in the provinces. It is most difficult to find adequate provincial chiefs and supporting administrative personnel to carry forward the complex programs which are required in the field for successful pacification. It is true that when one regards the limited background of the provincial chiefs and their associates, one should perhaps be surprised by the results which they have accomplished, but unfortunately, these results are generally not adequate for the complex task at hand or for the time schedule which we would like to establish.

As the past history of this country shows, there seems to be a national attribute which makes for factionalism and limits the development of a truly national spirit. Whether this tendency is innate or a development growing out of the conditions of political suppression under which successive generations have lived is hard to determine. But it is an inescapable fact that there is no national tendency toward team play or mutual loyalty to be found among many of the leaders and political groups within South Viet-Nam. Given time, many of these [words illegible] undoubtedly change for the better, but we are unfortunately pressed for time and unhappily perceive no short term solution for the establishment of stable and sound government.

The ability of the Viet-Cong con-

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tinuously to rebuild their units and to make good their losses is one of the mysteries of this guerrilla war. We are aware of the recruiting methods by which local boys are induced or compelled to join the Viet-Cong ranks and have some general appreciation of the amount of infiltration personnel from the outside. Yet taking both of these sources into account, we still find no plausible explanation of the continued strength of the Viet-Cong if our data on Viet-Cong losses are even approximately correct. Not only do the Viet-Cong units have the recuperative powers of the phoenix, but they have an amazing ability to maintain morale. Only in rare cases have we found evidences of bad morale among Viet-Cong prisoners or recorded in captured Viet-Cong documents.

Undoubtedly one cause for the growing strength of the Viet-Cong is the increased direction and support of their campaign by the government of North Viet-Nam. This direction and support take the form of endless radioed orders and instructions, and the continuous dispatch to South Viet-Nam of trained cadre and military equipment over infiltration routes by land and by water. While in the aggregate, this contribution to the guerrilla campaign over the years must represent a serious drain on the resources of the DRV, that government shows no sign of relaxing its support of the Viet-Cong. In fact, the evidence points to an increased contribution over the last year, a plausible development, since one would expect the DRV to press hard to exploit the obvious internal weaknesses in the south.

If, as the evidence shows, we are playing a losing game in South Viet-Nam, it is high time we change and find a better way. To change the situation, it is quite clear that we need to do three things: first, establish an adequate government in SVN; second, improve the conduct of the counterinsurgency campaign; and finally, persuade or force the DRV to stop its aid to the Viet-Cong and to use its directive powers to make the Viet-Cong desist from their efforts to overthrow the government of South Viet-Nam. . . .

In bringing military pressure to bear on North Viet-Nam, there are a number of variations which are possible. At the bottom of the ladder of escalation, we have the initiation of intensified covert operations, anti-infiltration attacks in Laos, and reprisal bombings mentioned above as a means for stif-

fening South Vietnamese morale. From this level of operations, we could begin to escalate progressively by attacking appropriate targets in North Viet-Nam. If we justified our action primarily upon the need to reduce infiltration, it would be natural to direct these attacks on infiltration—related targets such as staging areas, training facilities, communications centers and the like. The tempo and weight of the attacks could be varied according to the effects sought. In its final forms, this kind of attack could extend to the destruction of all important fixed targets in North Viet-Nam and to the interdiction of movement on all lines of communication.

. . . We reach the point where a decision must be taken as to what course or courses of action we should undertake to change the tide which is running against us. It seems perfectly clear that we must work to the maximum to make something out of the present Huong government or any successor thereto. While doing so, we must be thinking constantly of what we would do if our efforts are unsuccessful and the government collapses. Concurrently, we should stay on the present in-country program, intensifying it as possible in proportion to the current capabilities of the government. To bolster the local morale and restrain the Viet-Cong during this period, we should step up the 34-A operations, engage in bombing attacks and armed reconnaissance in the Laotian corridor and undertake reprisal bombing as required. It will be important that United States forces take part in the Laotian operations in order to demonstrate to South Viet-Nam our willingness to share in the risks of attacking the North.

If this course of action is inadequate, and the government falls then we must start over again or try a new approach. At this moment, it is premature to say exactly what these new measures should be. In any case, we should be prepared for emergency military action against the North if only to shore up a collapsing situation.

If, on the other hand as we hope, the government maintains and proves itself, then we should be prepared to embark on a methodical program of mounting air attacks in order to accomplish our pressure objectives vis-a-vis the DRV and at the same time do our best to improve in-country pacification program. We will leave negotiation initiatives to Hanoi. Throughout this period, our guard must be up in the Western Pacific, ready for any reaction by the DRV or of Red China. Annex I suggests the train of events which we might set in motion. . . .