

Saigon Units Likely to Get Bigger Combat Role Soon

By JAMES P. STERBA JUN 11 1970

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, June 10—South Vietnamese and American military planners are expected to give the South Vietnamese Army a greatly expanded role in fighting

the North Vietnamese main force in the next few months.

Partly as a result of the South Vietnamese Army's generally favorable performance in Cambodia, the planners reportedly believe that Saigon's regular forces are ready to replace several major American units that have had the role of fending off North Vietnamese Army units along the southern half of South Vietnam's sparsely populated frontiers.

U.S. Troop Cut Due

The gradual deployment of South Vietnamese Army units out of populated areas and into peripheral defensive positions has been under way for some time, but United States troops have continued to man the front-line screens against the North Vietnamese in critical areas.

Now, with 50,000 more American servicemen due to be withdrawn by Oct. 15, the planners believe South Vietnamese troops can take over their front-line roles in some areas without having to spread the 384,000 remaining American troops more thinly to in-

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sure security in the outer belts of confrontation.

"The crunch has got to come sometime soon, and this is as good a time as any to get on with it," said one senior American planner. He and others interviewed recently offered several reasons:

¶The regular South Vietnamese Army units have performed well in an offensive role in Cambodia and have gained much-needed confidence and experience in planning and carrying out operations. Even though some units have par-

ticipated in no serious combat, many others fought well-planned and executed battles and emerged victorious. For those that did not, the operation, as a major field exercise, was considered "priceless."

¶Perhaps more important, regional and local units left to defend their provinces and villages against local Vietcong units in South Vietnam in the absence of main forces have in general carried out their assignments better than expected. In at least three provinces—Tay Ninh, Haungai and Low-san—some instances have been reported of regional and popular forces' saying in effect, "we can handle this thing."

¶It will take some time for the Communists to replace the supplies they have lost and re-establish the disrupted communication and supply networks. During that time, both regular and local South Vietnamese units are expected to be able to adjust to their new responsibilities gradually.

'Enormous Shot in the Arm'

Speaking of the improvement in the South Vietnamese forces since the Cambodian operation began six weeks ago, Lieut. Gen. Michael S. Davison, top American commander of that operation, said the experience had clearly "been an enormous shot in the arm" for them.

While Cambodia has offered the South Vietnamese regulars a rare chance to go on the offensive—a morale-building experience for military forces, as the North Vietnamese have shown for some time—one of the imponderables is how well the regulars will perform once they return to their usual defensive roles.

Col. Andrew Gatsis, the senior American adviser to the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division, believes there is bound to be some carryover effect in both morale and experience. In the recent past, the division has dealt consistently with the same enemy units, generally in a defensive posture—in which morale is not easy to maintain and in which experience is difficult to attain.

"Now, advisers on the ground say they can't recall when morale and spirit was as high," Colonel Gatsis said. He noted that the 25th, in the past one of Saigon's worst divisions, had gone through a year

of intensified training and upgrading.

Speaking in general of the operation in Cambodia by South Vietnamese troops one evaluation said:

"We thought they could handle it, but we really didn't know until they did it. They have shown they can run some rather large-scale operations, they can run them on extended supply lines, they can run task force operations using diverse elements like navy, air force and army together, and they can do some very good planning."

Nearly a Million Soldiers

This man contends that as a result of slow improvement over the last year, the best South Vietnamese unit, with the limited help of American advisors, now could beat the best North Vietnamese unit, and so on down the line to the worst of both forces.

Such a comparison would have been unthinkable a year ago, when Americans here believed that Saigon's forces would be able to hold their own only when the North Vietnamese pulled out of South Vietnam.

Currently 1,352,000 South

Vietnamese are armed and have received varying degrees of combat training. Nearly one million of these are full-time soldiers.

The regular army, navy, air force and marines consist of 466,000 men who will gradually take over the main combat role against the North Vietnamese from the Americans. In addition, there are 486,000 men in the regional and popular forces — full-time soldiers assigned to protect their provinces and villages. Their role will increase in importance as regular units gradually move into American positions.

Serving part-time as local militiamen in villages and towns are 3,219,000 unpaid men, women and children, some as young as 7 years old. Of these 1,332,000 men and women have received some weapons training and nearly 400,000 small arms have been distributed.

Optimism in Washington

By WILLIAM BEECHER

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 10—Senior military planners here, surprised and elated by the performance of South Vietnamese

military units in Cambodia, say that it may bring about a shift in the strategy for conducting the war once most American soldiers leave Vietnam.

The shift would involve staging a strong and aggressive defense along border areas instead of falling back to positions in the interior as previously planned.

In addition, some high-level generals here are guardedly suggesting that a newly aggressive South Vietnamese Army, which has shown that it can conduct coordinated ground-air operations far from its own territory, might one day raise concern in Hanoi that it might "bring the war north" unless a political settlement is achieved.

New Bargaining Position Seen

But the planners concede that their optimism might well be dashed if the South Vietnamese units, once they return home to a more defensive, reactive war, resume their previous unaggressive, lackluster ways.

One general said that it might have seemed "a totally ridiculous notion" as little as two months ago that Saigon's troops could ever pose an independent threat to North Viet-

nam. But now, he said, this would appear to be attainable in two or three years, and it "could change the entire complexion of the war for Hanoi's leaders."

"Up to now," he said, "they have not felt compelled to negotiate because they really believed they would take over once the Americans got out. But if Saigon develops a genuine capability to bring the war north, by itself, it would be a new ball game."

This idea is the more surprising in that it is being voiced by some of the previously most conservative military planners in Washington.

Some officers are still skeptical. "A halfback always looks good running through air," commented one of the skeptics. He pointed out that since the enemy forces had not expected a ground attack in Cambodia, they had not extensively mined or booby-trapped roads and trails, had established few defensive positions and did more running than fighting.

But the prevailing view of senior military men is one of amazement and joy over the South Vietnamese performance.