

# Saigon Army Desertions Up Nearly 50% in Spring

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, July 26—Desertions from the South Vietnamese Army increased drastically in the last few months, averaging nearly 50 per cent higher than the rate last year, according to informed South Vietnamese sources.

The desertion rate, attributed mostly to South Vietnam's spiraling rate of inflation, has officials in both Saigon and Washington worried. It has become an unusually touchy subject with the United States military command here.

The figures, according to both American and South Vietnamese military spokesmen, are classified. However, figures made available by unofficial American and South Vietnamese sources show that from an average monthly desertion of about 8,000 in 1969, the number of deserters rose to more than 11,000 in May and nearly 12,000 in June.

## Black Market Rate Used

This rate is expected to continue rising as long as prices keep going up. On his current basic monthly salary, a private in the South Vietnamese Army can buy little more than one and a half packs of cigarettes.

A private with seven dependents, on the other hand, makes 9,000 piasters a month. At the official rate of exchange—118 piasters to the dollar—this amounts to \$75. At the black market rate—about 400 piasters to the dollar—his salary is \$22. All marketplace prices in South Vietnam reflect the black market rate.

Desertions have plagued the South Vietnamese Army for years. However, the term is somewhat misleading since many soldiers drafted into South Vietnam's 387,000-man regular army leave their units and return to their native villages, where they join local militia units called Popular and Regional Forces. Many others are caught by military and civilian policemen and returned to their original units.

Still others simply leave the army, take jobs for several months and then return to their units once they have their feet back on the ground financially.

turned. They argue that a great many so-called deserters fit that category, but they would not provide any figures to support this argument.

What the Americans do not usually say is that a great many South Vietnamese commanders do not report soldiers as deserters after 15 days' absence. At the commander's discretion, an absent soldier may be reported as a deserter only after several months have elapsed. Thus, informants say if strict reporting procedures were adhered to, the monthly rate would be much higher.

In the past, American military officials openly discussed the desertion problem—especially when the rate was going down—along with their recommendations and South Vietnamese efforts to deal with it. Recently, however, they have declined all comment.

Lieut. Col. S. K. Fisk, an official spokesman for the United States command, said, for example, that the command had no comment on the subject. He added that no figures could be discussed, not even in general terms or in background discussions in which sources are not revealed. Any specific questions on the subject, he said, would have to be put in writing.

## Two Battalions Down

Perhaps one reason for the current sensitivity is that both American and South Vietnamese military officials have drawn attention to the morale-building effects of recent operations in Cambodia. But, according to informed South Vietnamese sources, two paratrooper battalions in Cambodia last month were operating with only 65 per cent of their manpower—the rest having deserted.

South Vietnamese field commanders have attempted to solve this problem by regularly rotating units operating in Cambodia, but they admit that there is little they can do to solve the financial problems of their soldiers. The Government promised those soldiers fighting in Cambodia that they would receive 50 piasters a day extra. Some have received it and some have not.

With prices threatening to continue rising at a rate of 50 per cent this year—compared with 30 per cent last year—soldiers are going to need a pay increase of at least 40 per cent just to stay somewhere near even, according to Pham Kim Ngoc, the Minister of Economics.

That would require hundreds of millions of dollars in additional American aid funds, which the Americans have been withholding in an effort to press the Saigon Government into some economic reforms, such as devaluing the piaster.

## Different Classifications

American military men argue that South Vietnamese soldiers are classified as "deserters" after they have been absent without leave for more than 15 days, while American soldiers must be absent more than 30 days to be so classified. Thus, the Americans argue, if a South Vietnamese soldier simply takes a three-week vacation and then returns, his desertion is counted for statistical purposes even though he has re-