

# A Report on Vietnamization: Aides in Saigon

1, OCTOBER 9, 1970

## Feel Allies Have Never Been Stronger

### But They Doubt Public Is Aware of Progress

In his address Wednesday night on Indochina, President Nixon declared that his new peace initiative had been made possible in large part by "the remarkable success of the Vietnamization program over the past 18 months." Following is a report from Saigon on Vietnamization and how it has been working:

By JAMES P. STERBA  
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Oct. 8—United States and South Vietnamese officials here believe that as Vietnamization has progressed, security has improved in large parts of the country and the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese Army has increased.

These officials feel that opinion in America has been polarized for so long that it has not kept up with the realities of Vietnam—that it is about two years behind current events.

According to their own measurements, the allies have never been stronger and the enemy never weaker. South Vietnam is a country, they contend, in which the allies control most of the inhabited areas and the enemy controls mostly the jungle. This situation, which has come about since the Communists' Lunar New Year offensive of 1968, would make a cease-fire in place favorable to the allies.

But with American combat strength now reduced by nearly half from a peak of 10 combat divisions in 1969 and with the last American combat soldiers due to leave sometime next year, there is still great uncertainty about how the South Vietnamese will perform on their own and about what Hanoi will do once the American combat forces are gone.

#### Reluctant to Voice Optimism

Officials here are reluctant to express their new optimism openly—it having been so harshly discredited in earlier years. And they share a distrust of their own measurements of progress, having recognized that charts, graphs, statistics and computers can and have proved misleading.

This reluctance persists in the face of some examples that two years ago might have caused victory parades.

As a statistical example, in 1968, the Vietcong controlled huge areas in the 11 provinces around Saigon that form Military Region III. They also controlled, governed and administered to the majority of the people in this region.

Today, according to allied measurements, the Vietcong do not control a single one of the 3,475 hamlets in the region.

#### Ride Through Countryside

Long An province, just south of Saigon, was under Vietcong control in 1968. A month ago, President Nguyen Van Thieu invited eight ambassadors, including Elsworth Bunker of the United States, several ministers and other officials to a claylong ride through the countryside. The route covered side roads and back country where,

even a year ago, armed companies of soldiers feared to go. Mr. Thieu and Mr. Bunker stopped for an outdoor lunch and drank beer in a hamlet that six months before had been contested.

Yet, because of the timidity and uncertainty, little beyond quiet cocktail-party conversation has been said about either of the above examples.

According to American Statistics, at the end of 1968, only 3 of 10 South Vietnamese people lived in hamlets rated A or B relatively free of violence. Today, 8 of 10 people live in these hamlets. How has this happened?

The view in Saigon is that Hanoi miscalculated and that the allied strategy under Gen. Creighton W. Abrams the United States Commander, became increasingly effective. The North Vietnamese Army under Gen. Nguyen Vo Giap launched steadily diminishing attacks, in terms of both quantity and quality, against allied troops and population centers.

American troops gradually pushed Hanoi's main forces—in many areas—away from population centers and deep into jungle and mountain-base areas. Behind the Americans, the South Vietnamese Army served as a buffer, while be-

ginning a concerted upgrading process sponsored by the Americans.

#### Saigon's Forces Increased

Meanwhile, South Vietnam's Regional and Popular Forces were increased in strength to half a million, equipped with modern weapons and assigned the task of guarding their own districts and villages against intrusions by local Vietcong groups.

Next, emphasis was placed on recruiting and training unpaid hamlet militia groups, called the People's Self-Defense Force. Their role was to serve as a neighborhood intelligence network, to alert officials to any Vietcong intrusions, and, until help arrived, to fight.

The idea of the Vietnamization program now is to improve all these units to the point where each can assume a bigger role. The South Vietnamese Army would take over the front line defense against North Vietnam's main forces. The Regional and Popular Forces would serve as the buffer, fighting guerrillas in the countryside, and the local militia would protect their villages and hamlets.

The key question now as seen here, are: How strong is the system? Does Hanoi have the ability to disrupt it? How will Hanoi choose to disrupt it?

There are no clear answers.

American officials here say that the Saigon Government's grip on the countryside is getting stronger and that its army is getting better. There are vast differences of opinion on this subject, however.

No one is sure that the South Vietnamese Army can replace the combat role of the American Army, although nearly everyone notes a vast improvement in its over-all quality.

Another question has entered the picture as emphasis centered on the Vietnamization program: How good are the Americans?

And the answer heard most often is that they have improved greatly in their ability to wage counter insurgency warfare, but they still have a long way to go.

At this stage in the war, American military officials are stuck with some persistent problems — some of them self-imposed, according to some articulate participants in its effort here.

There is, in particular, a serious problem of motivation throughout the ranks of American military units here, especially in the lower ranks.

#### Most Are Draftees

Nine out of 10 American infantry riflemen now fighting in the mountains and jungles are draftees, according to Pentagon figures. Very few career officers and noncommissioned officers are out fighting with them.

As a sequence, one top-ranking general said recently, there is a growing tendency to try to avoid fighting, to avoid seeking out the enemy. This tendency is reinforced somewhat at higher levels by a policy of attempting to avoid casualties.

The foot soldiers, or grunts as they call themselves, are the first to acknowledge their flagging spirits and aggressiveness. They have a word for it: flakey.

In short, the allies in Vietnam — the Americans who are leaving and the South Vietnamese who are staying — believe that they have come a long way along the path toward their goal of preventing Communist domination of South Vietnam. But neither the Americans, who are tired and slowly ending their part in the struggle, nor the South Vietnamese, who are exhausted and just beginning a new phase of the struggle, know how far the path extends.