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# Saigon Airport a Smugglers' Paradise

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 21—Smuggling at Tansonnhut airport here has grown to such overwhelming dimensions that “the sole function of customs at the airport seems to be to assist the smugglers to bring in their contraband without hindrance,” according to an official United States report.

The report says that a minimum of \$3.5-million in duties each month is lost to the South Vietnamese Government “solely by means of so-called accompanied baggage” passed by Vietnamese customs officials.

Gold and dangerous drugs, including heroin, that are often destined for United States soldiers in Vietnam are included in the illegal flow, the report indicates.

The report, a copy of which was obtained by The New York Times, is dated Feb. 8, 1971, and was prepared by Joseph R. Kvorciak, a United States customs adviser. It was sent to James E. Townsend, the chief of United States customs advisers in Vietnam, who forwarded it to Vietnamese customs officials last Feb. 27.

It represents the first official documentation of the extent of smuggling at Tansonnhut, long a target of American advisers who have been



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**Cargo operation at Tansonnhut international airport in Saigon, where smuggling of goods and drugs is rampant.**

urging reforms in the interest of increasing revenues for the Government. In the long run, the advisers say, the more money the Vietnamese can raise themselves, the less they will need from the United States.

“Advisers at the airport are

not looked upon as advisers but as policemen,” the report says.

Detailing some smuggling incidents during January, 1971, it tells of the use of walkie-

Continued on Page 5, Column 3

Continued From Page 1, Col. 8

purchase jobs at the airport because of the lucrative possibilities, of kickbacks to customs officials, of unauthorized airport visitors who take packages from planes as they arrive, of television monitors that are never used and of a Vietnamese woman so powerful that customs officials bend before her every command.

Mr. Kvorciak's report was substantiated by the chief advisor's letter, which said: “These observations have been reviewed by other members of the U.S. customs operations at Tansonnhut and they agree to their general accuracy.”

“Aside from the failure to collect proper import taxes on merchandise shipped as baggage,” Mr. Townsend wrote, “the conditions at Tansonnhut freely allow the smuggling of dangerous drugs and narcotics, and I cannot overstate the extreme concern of the Government of the United States in that area.”

The smuggling of narcotics has been a problem of growing concern among United States officials here because increasing numbers of American soldiers are using heroin.

During the last three years innumerable suggestions and reports have been made and meetings held with top South Vietnamese officials, including the Director General of Customs and the Minister of Finance, the report says, but “the customs operation at the airport has not only not improved but has reached a point where the customs personnel of Vietnam are little more than lackeys to the smugglers.”

The problem, the report says, is now such that the customs officials have no control whatsoever over what goods are introduced into Vietnam.”

### Abuses Said to Go On

Mr. Townsend's letter referred to improvements that, according to the chief of the passenger terminal, had been carried out by Feb. 22; they included keeping unauthorized persons from the entrances to the customs areas, providing proper security for baggage when taken to the baggage warehouse and applying correct valuations to merchandise.

Subsequent checks by the American advisers showed that the abuses were continuing.



Apparently in an attempt to tighten up on some of the contraband, Vietnamese customs officials clamped down on a Deputy in the National Assembly, Pham Chi Thien, a member of a pro-Government bloc, when he attempted to bring in 10 pounds of heroin March 18. He is being detained pending trial.

The documents state that as a result of a meeting between United States and Vietnamese customs officials, a team of inspectors from the Ministry of Finance was assigned to the airport on March 17, 1970, "to insure that the law was being fully complied with and that all legal revenue due to the Government was being collected."

"Within a matter of weeks, the inspectors began to see the light, so to speak, and although they were still physically present, they just did not see what was going on," the report says. "They were there just to lend an air of legitimacy to the goings on."

The condition at Tansonnhut is described as "worse now than it ever has been." Customs officials often assist the smugglers through the examination counters and even accompany them to taxis, the report says.

#### Request for Walkie-Talkies

On one occasion, it says, the chief of the passenger terminal asked an American adviser for some assistance in purchasing walkie-talkies so that Vietnamese customs officials could be in constant contact with the terminal.

Though the American did not oblige, he found out—after the Vietnamese had gotten the transmitters on their own—that they were being used pri-

marily to advise the customs squads that checked aircraft when American advisers were present.

The report says that even the lowliest job at the airport must be purchased for the equivalent of about \$2,000 in Vietnamese currency — for a job that pays only about \$35 a month. Payoffs are said to be so widespread that even the lowliest worker kicks back about \$20 daily.

If a man does not cooperate, the report explains, "he is soon banished to the proverbial boondocks." It adds: "One need not look too hard within the customs service to realize the absolute truth of this statement."

In one study undertaken by American advisers during November and December, 1970, it was found that only half of 1 per cent of the total import duties were collected on parcels that, if tabulated correctly, should have netted the South Vietnamese government \$143,000.

#### Disguised as Fishnets

"What is happening is that high-duty goods are being brought in by air and described as 'fishnets,' which, due to their utilitarian nature, have one of the lowest rates of duty in Vietnam," the report says. "This is collusion between the shipper, the carrier, and the importer and customs."

The report cites flights from Vientiane, Singapore and Hong Kong as the most blatant smuggling routes. It describes some cases:

"Air Vietnam flight 647 arrives from Singapore, and as soon as the plane comes to a

stop there are 40 to 50 unauthorized people swarming all over the aircraft. As soon as the doors are open and cargo and baggage unloaded, these people scurry around and grab all kinds of merchandise and make off in all directions without any hindrance by the customs officers present."

"On Jan. 21 flight 647 again arrived. There were 1140 pieces of cargo counted although there was not a single passenger arriving on this aircraft."

Arrivals from Laos, the report says, have been noteworthy for the smuggling of gold and opium. Laos has long been the primary source of raw opium in Southeast Asia.

On one flight, according to the report, the American adviser counted 400 bottles of brandy, but no duty was collected in an instance requiring a minimum duty of 100 per cent.

#### And the Corks Are Gold

"In addition to this loss of revenue," the report goes on, "bottles of brandy are a con-

venient way to smuggle gold into the country as the cork is frequently removed and replaced with a gold cork."

Air Laos arrives twice a week, the report says, and although there are only 10 to 15 passengers, there invariably are 300 to 400 pieces of baggage, most of which is never inspected.

"Cathay Pacific or China Airlines arrives from Hong Kong, and Mr. Long or Mr. Chung, who are Chinese residents of Saigon, are on the spot to claim their consignments, which in this case are cigarettes," the report says. "Up to 30 cases of cigarettes have come in on one aircraft alone, but not one piaster of

duty is ever collected."

The report describes a woman who leads a ring of smugglers as so powerful that she "bullies and pushes around the customs people as if she owns them," and when she leaves the customs area "she is like a mother duck with her brood as she leads the procession and is obediently followed by eight to 10 porters who are carrying her goods to be loaded into the waiting taxis."

Vietnamese customs officials responded to accusations in their own way last week by asserting in a Vietnamese newspaper, Doc Lap, that the United States advisers were authoritarian and considered customs officials to be "trash."