

Thieu Sets Back His Saigon Opponents

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By JAMES M. MARKHAM

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 12—In a little over a week President Nguyen Van Thieu has dealt a stunning blow to his vocal but disorganized domestic opponents and has reinforced his power base in the army and the police.

Acting swiftly, the Government closed five opposition newspapers last week after purportedly discovering Communist agents on their staffs. South Vietnam, which had had a remarkably free press for a country at war, has only one opposition paper now.

As the crackdown unfolded, Mr. Thieu conferred promotions on the commander of the national police, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khai Binh; the head of the Saigon police, Brig. Gen. Trang Si Tan, and four other ranking police officers.

Then, in a move known to have chagrined members of the American mission Mr. Thieu named Lieut. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan to head the important and politically sensitive military region that surrounds Saigon. Last October Mr. Thieu, under strident opposition pressure to clean up the army, removed General Toan from his command in the Central Highlands.

The general has an established reputation for corruption. In 1972, when Mr. Thieu indicated that he was going to name General Toan to the highlands command, the American Ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker, vigorously but unsuccessfully opposed the appointment. Mr. Thieu appointed General Toan this time while the current Ambassador, Graham A. Martin, was in Washington for consultations.

The police promotions and the surprising resurrection of General Toan, who is close to the President, were seen by Saigon politicians as signals that Mr. Thieu will be leaning on the army and the police, his traditional supporters, in the difficult months that appear to lie ahead.

In particular, the choice of General Toan seemed to indicate the end of a period of concessions to the opposition, which forced a cabinet reshuffle, a change in high military commanders and a long defensive speech out of Mr. Thieu late last fall was over.

President Thieu also ended a long and inconclusive series of negotiations with the anti-Communist Hoa Hao sect in the Mekong Delta and ordered security forces to disarm its militia, which it is said, has become a haven for bandits and draft-dodgers.

Among the reasons given for Mr. Thieu's moves—no one is exclusive of the others—is that heightened North Vietnamese and Vietcong attacks, which have the avowed aim of "supporting the urban struggle" of the opposition, have given him cause for concern.

A recurrent theme of his recent pronouncements is that the "rear area"—meaning the big cities, where the politicians operate—must remain calm. He presumably does not want to detail large numbers of policemen and soldiers, as he did last fall, to put down demonstrations when the men are needed elsewhere.

Moreover, the Government is scrambling to put together a sorely needed "strategic reserve" to meet expected Communist thrusts on several fronts. Railroad security guards, military policemen, psychological-warfare personnel and other

deskbound soldiers are being formed into fighting units.

"I think the manpower situation is central," said a European diplomat who was asked to explain the latest moves. "The troops just aren't there."

Draft laws are being tightened to help replace the heavy casualties in Government units. The Hoa Hao, for example, is dominant in extremely populous areas that officials say have not contributed their share to the national defense pool.

Draft crackdowns perennially generate political unrest—another reason for "a calm rear."

A further basis for the toughened stance, in the opinion of informed diplomats and Vietnamese, is that Mr. Thieu's inter-

national position stands to suffer a severe shock if, as seems possible, the United States Congress does not grant the \$300-million in supplementary military aid requested by the Ford Administration.

"There is a lot of grumbling about his leadership," conceded a South Vietnamese officer who believes that Saigon desperately needs the money.

Though many in the opposition remain convinced that the Americans will find ways to get arms and ammunition to Saigon if they are really needed, the oppositionists have chosen this moment to try to raise their voices against the supplemental aid, which they see as a sort of referendum on American support.