

Behind Rumors of a Tet Drive

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 3—American officials, in a reversal of a 10-year-old policy, appear to be going to extraordinary lengths to spread bad news about the war in Vietnam.

In both Saigon and Washington the official word for three months has been that the Communists are planning a major offensive in the Central Highlands and below the demilitarized zone.

The most recent pronouncement came Monday, when the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, said so at a news conference after a week's visit.

Yet the allied intelligence apparatus has seldom been prescient—and especially not at this time in 1968, when the Communists launched a countrywide offensive during Tet, the Lunar New Year, that caught General Westmoreland, then the commander here, and his 500,000 troops by surprise. It also instigated widespread disillusionment with the war in the United States, though it fell short of victory on the battlefield.

Now there is what amounts to a steady stream of statements and leaked intelligence reports from official American quarters, all pointing to a new offensive between now and Feb. 15, which is a week before President Nixon makes his trip to China.

Reports Spur Apprehension

The reports, far from easing the apprehension Vietnamese and Americans have felt Tet since the fateful 1968 action, are encouraging it, as if to prepare people for the worst or to lay the groundwork for claims of success if nothing happens.

Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, who left Tuesday for consultations in Washington, has foreseen "major fighting" in the weeks to come. Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird has warned that the enemy might attempt "some spectaculars" and administer temporary reverses to the South Vietnamese forces. In private sessions with reporters, American generals in Saigon have described the enemy build-up in the Central Highlands as being of "historic proportions."

But in the field, especially in the highlands outposts of Benhet, Pleiku and Kontum, which are reported to be the targets of the much-heralded offensive, the concern is less apparent. Military commanders are ready for an attack if it comes, but some have expressed surprise at the publicity build-up.

It seems unlikely that senior officials would deliberately cast doubt on the programs of Vietnamization and American troop withdrawals, the core of American policy in the Nixon Administration. Indeed, the withdrawals are continuing at the rate of 23,000 a month during the period when the attack is said to be most expected.

Another view was expressed by Thomas J. Barnes, the senior American pacification official in the Central Highlands.

"I think whatever they plan to do—and I'm reasonably convinced that they'll do something—it will have little to do with Nixon's trip," he said.

"I have a more instinctive

A Flurry of Reports by U.S. Set Scene for Any Outcome

feeling that something will happen, but it won't accomplish much," Mr. Barnes added. "But it's conceivable the whole thing could be a sham to make people think they are 10 feet tall."

There is excellent reason to think the Communists will launch attacks in the Central Highlands soon: They do so every year at this time, and usually they are reported to have the same objectives—the ranger camps at Benhet or Dakseang, the mountaintop artillery posts at Fire Bases 5 and 6 a few miles to the south, and the provincial capital of Kontum, 35 miles to the southeast.

They attack now because it is the dry season in the highlands and they can move with greater ease. Last April they overran Fire Base 6 and hit a small district headquarters, Phunhon, 80 miles to the south. After a few weeks of heavy fighting and intense B-52 attacks they were driven back into their jungle stronghold across the Laotian border known as Base Area 609.

Troop Movement Reported

What is apparently giving rise to expressions of greater concern this year is intelligence reports that North Vietnam's 320th Division, which normally operates below the demilitarized zone and has 3,700 men, is on its way south toward the highlands.

According to the reports—which so far have not been sufficiently substantiated to cause the South Vietnamese command to move an airborne division into Pleiku, as it is ready to do if necessary—the 320th would either reinforce the three enemy regiments in the area or try to make its way through the countryside to the coastal city of Quinhon to attack population centers.

If the North Vietnamese win any major battles it will not be because the South Vietnamese are unprepared. In Quinhon all Vietnamese soldiers and the Americans who advise and supply them are under orders to wear flak jackets and steel helmets whenever they venture off base.

It looks slightly ridiculous since Quinhon has seldom been so outwardly calm and secure, but the orders came from the II Corps headquarters of Maj. Gen. Ngo Dzu in Pleiku. "Anybody who has to wear that thing on his head knows there might be an emergency and will be ready for it," Mr. Barnes remarked.

Quinhon is in one of the least pacified of all Vietnamese provinces, Binh Dinh, where, in addition to long-established Vietcong main-force units there are two North Vietnamese regiments in the north and a third that is believed to have infiltrated into the central part of the province from Quangnai. These are unprepared. In Quinhon

At the Vietnamese station hospital on the seacoast a few miles outside town, about 40 wounded soldiers of the regional forces have been coming in every day from scattered battles and ambushes. There is atmosphere of crisis though the level of enemy activity is up somewhat since the end of 1971.

So far, Mr. Barnes said,

"there's no unusual sign of tension and we haven't had any significant road ambushes on the principal highways."

Another American adviser in Quinhon said: "They're telling people they're going to have armed attacks and a general uprising any time between now and the 20th of February. If they don't do it this time, I think they may lose face, because they said they'd do it at the time of the lower house elections (Aug. 29) and the presidential elections (Oct. 3) and nothing happened then. They've got to do something this year."

On Jan. 24 the Vietcong radio broadcast a call for popular uprisings against the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu and the Americans. "There is no choice but to single-mindedly unite, millions as one, in an uprising to overthrow the land-grabbing and country-selling regime of the U. S. imperialists and the traitorous puppet Thieu clique in order to save the country," the broadcast, which was repeated several times, said, according to an official American translation.

Later Date Held Possible

The broadcast mentioned no date and American advisers in Quinhon said that some of their intelligence reports did not say the big offensive would come this month but, perhaps, at the end of the year.

By that time most American ground troops will be gone and the only significant American power will be in the air.

Most American observers, official and unofficial, are convinced that the North Vietnamese want to settle the war on the battlefield, not at the negotiating table. They have considerably stepped up their challenge to American planes bombing the infiltration trails through southern Laos, both with MIG-21 fighter planes and with anti-aircraft artillery and missiles, which, a United States military spokesman said today, were double what they were last year along the trail.

The United States command has announced 11 retaliatory bombing raids in North Vietnam since Jan. 31 in response to such challenges—more than in some months last year.

It is possible that the official talk about a coming offensive and President Nixon's disclosure last week that the Communists had ignored secret peace proposals could be aimed at justifying an increased American involvement such as a residual combat force or periodic sustained bombing of military targets in North Vietnam.

It is also possible that the speculation could end up justifying increased and perhaps even total American withdrawal if it turns out that there is no Tet offensive and Vietnamization is proclaimed a final success.

But the goals of those who are encouraging the speculation are as obscure as are the goals of the North Vietnamese, who can be expected to do the unexpected.

"What happens here will be important particularly in the way it is presented to the public by the news media," an American colonel in Quinhon said. "If there's an attack the most important thing will be how the Vietnamese do in handling it, not in any temporary successes the enemy may have, and I'm confident the Vietnamese can handle it."