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Vietnam Countdown

Although top strategists here still disagree on the Communist timetable for the next, massive countrywide offensive against South Vietnam, the remorseless political-military warfare now being waged by Hanoi's invaders is having devastating effects with cruelly perfected new tactics.

Despite the success of these tactics, Congress is showing ever more reluctance to finance Saigon's defense, as witness the immense reduction in both military and economic aid requests from the Ford administration. When final action is completed, both will probably be slashed by close to 50 per cent.

The highly probable cutback in military aid, from \$1.4 billion to around \$700 million for the present fiscal year, means precisely what it implies—a 50 per cent "decrease in the capabilities" of South Vietnam's army.

What makes these threatened congressional cutbacks so perilous is the steadily increasing aid to Hanoi from both China and the Soviet Union. Precise, computerized figures on this prodigal assistance from Peking and Moscow are, of course, beyond the capacity of American intelligence. But experts here nevertheless know for a certainty that 1974 economic aid is "far above" the level of 1973.

That nonmilitary assistance from Peking and Moscow, if continued at present levels for the balance of the year, will exceed total American economic aid by at least two and possibly three times. The Communist economic aid to Hanoi is now estimated at \$1.2 billion-a-year rate—three times the economic aid package for South Vietnam approved on Aug. 13 by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

As for military help, U.S. officials believe that there is now enough ammunition in Communist hands to sustain an offensive at the ferocity levels of the spring 1972 Communist offensive for fully 18 straight months.

Directly matching this combat poten-

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tial is the alarming fact that Hanoi has now infiltrated 160,000 fresh combat troops into the South since the Jan. 28, 1973, cease-fire. That brings the Communist troop level to an estimated 300,000 today (including perhaps 75,000 native Vietcong troops)—and every single infiltrated North Vietnamese regular is a direct violation of the cease-fire agreement.

But it is the perfectability of Communist tactics, particularly in the peripheral areas where Saigon's control touches or overlaps areas of Communist control, that concerns the Ford administration most.

The tactics are designed to further this strategy: by terror and kidnaping, frighten new settlers sent by Saigon to populate isolated areas, thus rendering the newly settled areas vulnerable to Communist advance.

Statistics now available here tell the story. In the Sonha District of coastal Quangnai Province, 130 homes of new settlers were burned to the ground in late spring to discredit Saigon's power. The inhabitants were then "encouraged" to move westward into regions "liberated" by Hanoi where Communists suffer grievous shortages of manual labor, farm workers and pack carriers.

One month later, in the Donglo resettlement center, 200 homes were destroyed, 100 civilians killed and 15 wounded.

To the north in Quangnam Province—near the port of Danang—the invaders forcibly uprooted more than 10,000 civilians settled there two years ago and moved them west to "liberated" areas as virtual slave labor.

From several refugees who escaped this transfer of population it has been established that the Communist plan called for the abduction of no fewer than 15,000 South Vietnamese civilians, most of them farmers and artisans, from a single district in that province.

This is a repeat, but with perfect tactics, of the very strategy practiced against South Vietnam by Hanoi's invaders before and during the notorious—but unsuccessful—1972 spring offensive. Vastly aiding the Communists, of course, is the absence today of U.S. air power and the fact that Hanoi's troops are more muscular and better-trained than two years ago.

It is no wonder, then, that the U.S. officials most experienced in the long, bloody Vietnam war now give about 50-50 odds that the long-feared next general offensive will come this fall. But even the optimists—a dwindling band—believe that if the offensive doesn't come then, it will be sprung around Easter time next year.

Indeed, the slender hopes of January 1973 have all but disappeared. U.S.-Soviet detente and the dramatic diplomatic opening to China have neither isolated Vietnam from world political currents nor encouraged a political bargain between Saigon and Hanoi based on military stalemate.

To the contrary, the opposing centers of world communism seem still bent on fueling Hanoi's lustful conquest of the South, while Saigon's benefactor seems unwilling to fuel its well-established capacity to resist.