

# A Rebellion in Viet Highlands

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An armed rebellion of dissident Montagnards tribesmen has broken out in the province of Darlac and may be spreading into neighboring corners of the strategic central highlands.

If it continues to grow, the uprising, which is thought to have about 500 men under arms, could imperil the Saigon government's struggle against the Communists in the highlands.

Some people here believe that the Communists have infiltrated the nascent movement. Others argue that a government crackdown on the rebels is rapidly alienating tribesmen who are not disposed to join the insurrection and who hate the Communists.

"It's going to be very bad here," warned Jut Buon To, the dynamic, 31-year-old head of ethnic minority services in the highlands. "I don't think they can ever solve it with the military. It should be solved by the political."

"I don't want to get my people killed," he added. "They are ethnic minorities — they are going to become more minority."

Compounding the problems, a wave of brutal killings and robberies — attributed by some to the rebels, by others to bandits who justify pillage in the name of rebellion — have heightened tension between Vietnamese and the Montagnards — the generic name for the central highlands tribesmen who are not of the same racial origin as the Vietnamese.

In August, when the violence reached a peak, about 50 people, mostly Vietnamese civilians, were reportedly killed in highway ambushes and holdups in remote villages in Darlac province.

While the violence has abated, Vietnamese traders, taximen and truck drivers are still terrified to travel the lonely roads. Senior Vietnamese officials carry handguns for fear of assassination.

"There had been a certain union, and understanding, between the two communities," said a French priest who has lived in the highlands for many years. "But now a gulf has opened between them."

For their part, many Montagnards find themselves caught between mixed feelings of sympathy and fear of the rebels and nervousness about the government police reaction.

A document issued in the name of the rebels charges that from July through September, 160 tribesmen have been "lost, killed and massacred, others captured and subjected to savage torture."

Another, dispassionate source put the number of Montagnards arrested by the government at about 100. Some were reportedly taken as suspects in acts of banditry and murder, others for their presumed sympathies with the rebels.

At present, two battalions of government rangers — about 800 men — are set up in blocking positions outside Montagnard villages in Darlac province while policemen and militiamen check the papers of young highlanders.

The rangers have so far not clashed with the lightly armed rebels, who have avoided direct fighting with regular military units and have devoted most of their energies to winning over villagers and trying to stay alive.

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