

Saigon Fears Post-Cease-fire Deserter Surge

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Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, Jan. 15—Some South Vietnamese officials fear that once a cease-fire is signed the army could be so decimated by desertions it would have difficulties helping the Saigon government maintain control of the country.

Far from demobilizing, South Vietnam is planning to keep most of its armed forces intact after a cease-fire and is counting on the army to play a major role in running the country.

At the end of October, just after U.S. negotiator Henry A. Kissinger said peace was at hand, the "net desertion rate" reached almost 27,000 men per month—up from 15,000 to 20,000 a month during most of the summer, according to unofficial but well-informed sources.

The desertion rate is the number of soldiers who leave their units and do not come back, either voluntarily or in custody, and must be reached through recruitment and conscription to maintain the military at 1.1 million men.

The upsurge in the autumn desertions presumably stemmed from expectations of peace. Some Vietnamese believe the Communists actively encouraged desertion after the 1954 Geneva accords were signed and expect them to launch a similar campaign after a new cease-fire.

This is not to say the South Vietnamese army is melting away. But U.S. standards the figures are staggering, but they must be measured in the Vietnamese context. This is a tired, low-paid army of peasants with strong ties to family and home village, men to whom going home is a natural impulse.

The monthly desertion rate, which is at best an informed estimate, has been in five figures for years. But it is a phenomenon the country has so far been able to cope with.

Vietnamese, American and other Western sources agree

enough men volunteer or are drafted to keep the ranks full. all but a handful of the country's military units are at full strength, despite the pounding they took last year.

"When the war is on," one high-ranking military official said, "we have to fight against the Communists to protect our lives and property, but when the cease-fire is declared that seems less important. The soldiers' first reaction is to take a little rest."

A colonel, who was a lieutenant at the time of the 1954 cease-fire, said his men left their units, abandoned their weapons and went home to their families, and "there was no way to prevent them."

"There is no problem finding enough soldiers so long as the war goes on," one Western analyst said, "but if there is a cease-fire that is another matter."

He also said, however, that it will be difficult to make any assessment for some time because of the difficulty in getting accurate statistics. Some deserters, for example, re-enlist under assumed names in other units to obtain an enlistment bonus. Others are never reported as deserters because their commanders continue to draw their pay.

In the absence of any ideological commitment to the war, there is a permissive social attitude toward deserters and draft dodgers that complicates the government's enforcement efforts.

At the moment, the cat seems to have the upper hand in the cat and mouse game played by the military police and the reluctant warriors—a reported 40,000 deserters were seized in Saigon alone over the past year—but what would happen if the shooting stopped is another matter.

Once a cease-fire is signed, family obligations may appear more pressing than military duties—especially for conscripts assigned to units far from their homes.