

## U.S. Advisers Voicing Doubts on Saigon's Desire to Push Operation Phoenix

SFCronicle

Special to The New York Times

OCT 26 1971

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Oct. 25 — Many American advisers in the provinces are voicing doubt about the willingness of Vietnamese officials to carry out the controversial program known as Operation Phoenix, whose purpose is to weed out Vietcong political leaders.

"In this province the Government will not allocate even a pencil, paperclip or piece of paper on a regular basis to the program," according to Russell L. Meerdink, senior American adviser in Phuyen, on the central coast.

"It would seem that the problem is common," he said in a confidential report on pacification in Military Region II, a coastal and highland area north of Saigon.

"The low quality of personnel assigned to the program must also be considered something other than 'coincidental,'" he added.

### Who Is Being Fooled?

He said it was the prerogative of the Government in Saigon to withhold support from the Phoenix Program, but, he added, "certainly the United States Government should not give the Government of South Vietnam the satisfaction of thinking it is 'fooling' the Americans."

The Phoenix Program, conceived by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1967, was turned over to the South Vietnamese in principle the following year. Americans have since pushed the program, providing advisers and funds as a primary means of seeking out the Vietcong.

Since South Vietnam has not given the program the emphasis some American officials feel it should have, they are considering a reorganization of it program and its basic concepts in the hopes of salvaging it.

Lack of interest in or distaste for the program is not limited to Vietnamese in Military Region II.

### Lag Traced to Saigon

"There seems to be a decrease in the interest and emphasis in the program," wrote the senior American advisor in Quangnam Province, which is in the northernmost military region of South Vietnam. He traced the declining interest to Saigon, where the failure to stress the program's importance has resulted in the removal of many Vietnamese once vitally involved in it. Men trained exclusively for the program are being removed with-

out replacement, the report on Quangnam said.

The senior province official in Bac Lieu Province, on the southern coast, reported that the Phoenix program was effective against low-level Vietcong but "ineffective against the hard core" of the leadership.

### Experimental Rewards

Last August, in an attempt to bolster the program, the United States and the South Vietnamese Government decided to begin experimental cash rewards in four provinces, paying up to the equivalent of \$11,000 for certain key leaders. It is doubtful that the rewards are effective.

Last May the senior American adviser in Binh Tuy Province, 75 miles west of Saigon, said the primary reason for the lack of success was "the inherent distaste" of people for inducing relatives, friends of people with political connections.

### Quota for Each Province

Under the Phoenix operating plan, each province receives a quota of Vietcong to be "neutralized" each month, which can mean arresting a man, taking him into the Open Arms program, which accepts defectors, or killing him.

The quota system led to criticisms here and in Congressional hearings in Washington.

"Volume rather than quality neutralization" became the pattern, a senior adviser wrote, discussing the quotas. "Much of this can be attributed to U.S. guidance and influence and quotas," he added.

Testimony in Washington disclosed that American aid to the program from 1968 to May 1971, amounted to \$732-million. Current contributions have not been disclosed.