

TRADE WITH REDS

Troop Corruption Seen Alienating S. Viet Populace

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SAIGON—While the South Vietnamese army has made a creditable showing against Communist troops since the Vietnam ceasefire began, behavior by its soldiers continues to alienate the civilian population, U.S. classified documents show.

The documents, which are labeled “confidential,” cite instances of government soldiers extorting money and goods from civilians, demanding tribute payments for passage on rural roads, and engaging in trade with Communist forces.

More than 60 pages of daily ceasefire “situation reports” prepared by U.S. Embassy officials here as well as related unclassified documents usually unavailable to journalists were recently obtained by the Los Angeles times. The classified reports cover part of May.

While the incidents of bad behavior cited in the reports are too fragmentary to provide a comprehensive picture, they suggest that little has changed since a National Security Council study prepared for President Nixon in 1969 concluded: “The Republic of Vietnam armed forces as presently constituted will only continue to widen the gap which exists between the government and the rural population.”

Most of the reported incidents occurred in South Vietnam’s northernmost five provinces (I Corps), where life is relatively harsh and the war has been fought with particular bitterness.

A May 14 report said that in Quang Ngai province some troops were “engaging in extortion and intimidation. Popular Force personnel (which along with Regional Forces constitute South Vietnam’s militia units) in the vicinity of Quang Ngai city have been accused of using the presence of nighttime security checks to force entry into private homes in order to demand money or take goods to be sold.”

The same document cited a U.S. official as saying that “part of the trade with the VC is carried on by Regional and Popular Force personnel, as well as by people in the contested areas where these personnel are stationed. Either on their own initiative or as agents of civilian traders, the Regional Force and Popular Force appear to be taking advantage of resupply trips to outposts to carry contraband commodities. Both troops and their unit commanders intimidate police checkpoints attempting to control this military trafficking.”

Such trade is part of the "shadow supply system" which for years have provided Communist troops with goods.

Strain between the military and civilians is reflected in an unclassified report covering April by a U.S. official in the I Corps province of Quang Nam:

"The local crime rate is rising in not too surprising proportions, and the majority of incidents, we suspect, are ones characterized by troops and police involvement."

A classified situation report said that travelers on a dangerous road in Phu Yen province (in the 2nd Military Region) "not only have to brave tenuous security situation on road, but must also pay tribute for passage to GVN (government) troops along route."

And an unclassified April report dealing with reconstruction and resettlement programs in I Corps concluded:

"The lower echelons of the military and civil service are rife with minor corruption. It is difficult to say whether or not there is an increase. It has always been there. However, it begins to make more difference now. This, along with a reported increase of troop misbehavior towards the civilian population, does not assist in improving the reconstruction-resettlement situation."

With South Vietnam's economy sagging, pressure to join the armed forces has increased. An unclassified report from I Corps said that in the last three months 800 had volunteered to join the Regional and Popular Forces, compared to 200 the previous three months.

"Lack of employment, fear of pickup by police and enforcement into ARVN, the passing of Tet (Vietnam's biggest holiday), and rising prices which have forced families to seek one more breadwinner are all stimulants," the report said.

Such negative motivations may partially explain the poor discipline of some militia troops.

The GVN has continued to resettle villagers by force since the ceasefire began. This violates the ceasefire and breeds resentment. While such resentment usually does not become explosive, in the long run it may work against the government's interests.

