

U.S. Advisers Tell of Viet Corruption

Province Reports Also Cite Forced Shift of Villagers

Los Angeles Times, April 23, 1973

BY JACQUES LESLIE
Times Staff Writer

SAIGON— “Officials in areas of doubtful security appear to be stepping up their level of corruption and alienating the population,” an American adviser in South Vietnam’s An Xuyen province complained to his superior. “In reaction to this, the province chief has ordered complete investigations, not of those accused, but of the accusers.”

This commentary of South Vietnamese corruption is one of dozens of revealing anecdotes in monthly reports filed by province level civilian American advisers to higher-ranking officials in two regional consulates and Saigon. Reports for March from all provinces in the southern half of South Vietnam—altogether about 100 pages—were made available to the Los Angeles Times. All are unclassified, but have been unobtainable by journalists until now.

The reports cite not only instances of corruption among South Vietnamese officials, but also forced relocation of villagers into government-controlled areas from regions controlled by the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) and from contested areas, of an economic situation that in many provinces is constantly becoming more serious and of falsification of computerized evaluations of the government’s strength in the countryside.

The tone of the reports varies from determinedly optimistic to bitterly discouraged, depending on conditions in the area and the personality of

the reporter. Considered together, the reports suggest that the political and economic situation in south Vietnam is far more complicated and considerably less cheering than public pronouncements by high-ranking American officials indicate. In some areas, the reports say, the government is making progress; in others it is gradually losing ground.

The advisers who wrote the reports work under George D. Jacobson, now Special Assistant to the Ambassador for Field Operations (SAAFO). Before the ceasefire Jacobson was head of an organization called Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS). CORDS was disbanded, by the wide variety of projects which advisers discuss in the reports implies that SAAFO is the CORDS post-ceasefire incarnation. The responsibilities of men in both organizations—to help supervise the government pacification program—are the same.

The reports reflect discouragement and even cynicism about the ceasefire. Because of the high level of combat, one report refers to “the almost nonexistent ceasefire.” Another winks at a highly questionable ceasefire preparation made by a government official:

“Hoai Duc’s district chief, Lt. Col. Nguyen Van Thinh, carried out a unique program of commitment to the RVN (Republic of Vietnam) side during the month, taking the pictures of each family that doesn’t like the Communists,” approvingly wrote Robert S. McCandliss, an inter-provincial representative in Binh Tuy province 60 miles northeast of Saigon.

“The pictures are not only a check on the makeup of each family, but also provide Lt. col. Thinh readily available evidence of the sympathies of his constituents for the RVN side. His albums are already prepared to show to the ICCS (International Commission of Control and Supervision set up in the ceasefire agreement) whenever they come to Hoai Duc.”

This practice became widespread in South Vietnam after the ceasefire. Family members faced arrest or punishment for not allowing their pictures to be taken with the RVN banner, and in addition were required to pay for the photographs. This effort seems designed not only to provide proof of a family's sympathies to a peace-keeping force, but also to create difficulties for the family with the National Liberation Front. In some cases the photos are supposed to be posted outside the family's home.

The reports also document instances of tampering with the government Hamlet Evaluation System. The HES consists of assigning letters to each hamlet, based on its degree of security: An "A" hamlet is totally secure, "B," "C," "D" and "E" hamlets are progressively less so, and a "V" hamlet is controlled by the other side.

"The HES continues to be inflated with new district chiefs susceptible to meeting goals, whether logical or not," wrote inter-province representative Robert M. Traister about Ving Long province in the Mekong Delta.

Traister was even more explicit about the neighboring province of Vinh Binh:

"The HES in Vinh Binh has been rising steadily since the ceasefire," said Traister. "The improvement reflected by the HES is probably more illusory than real since great pressure has been put on Vinh Binh by M.R.-4 (authorities at the Delta regional military headquarters) to raise the HES ratings. Vinh Binh currently has not hamlet, a feat that was brought about by declaring the "V" hamlet present in the January HES as a nonpopulated area. Further inflation of the HES is expected if present pressure to increase the ratings continues."

HES was started in 1966 by the Americans, who thought they could detect trends in pacification with it. Last year the program was “Vietnamized,” and American advisers stopped taking part in the information-gathering process. Many observers believe HES scores were always somewhat inflated, but reports of tampering with the results recently have increased.

A related practice being carried out in the Mekong Delta is the forced relocation of villagers into government-controlled areas. Traister wrote about Vinh Long province:

“The forced movement of people from one location to another in order to better control them for security purposes continues. American aid has now been requested to assist these people. The major objective of the program appears to be achievement of the HES goals assigned by Saigon.”

Another Traister report explained how the relocation is handled: once forced to move, the villagers are classified as “war victims” and then become eligible for social welfare. But in this case the system broke down: “The M.R-4 military commanders plan to resettle people out of insecure areas into areas of G.V.N. (Government of Vietnam) control received a setback in Vinh Binh this month when the Ministry of Social Welfare refused to grant war victims status to the 115 families (who were moved). These people are now ineligible for social welfare service relief and must be supported by other means.”

Although in January some observers thought after the ceasefire the government would let villagers return to their abandoned homes, even if they were in contested or NLF-controlled areas, these reports indicate that in the Delta, if anything, the contrary is happening.

One exception is in Phong Dinh province in the delta, where Consul General Thomas J. Barnes reported that plans are being drawn up to return peasants to abandoned lands, but he added that “total resettlement and cultivation will probably not occur during this year.”

Not all the relocation has been in the government’s favor. Writing about the southernmost province in Vietnam, An Xuyen, inter-province representative Jaime E. Concepcion said, “Reports of 1,000 people in Thoi Binh district and nearly 2,000 people in northern Quan Long district indicate a significant resettlement program in progress—but on the wrong side. Viet cong propaganda in these areas has been effective and little countering measures are evident. Should this situation persist, long-range effects will include increased population under Viet Cong control and a subsequently broadened tax base.

“Reasons for this alarming movement of people to non-GVN areas includew persuasive promises by the Communists of land, tax breaks, security, and freedom from military obligations by the Viet Cong, aggravated by general disgust with the maladministration by government officials.”

A convincing example of the government’s maladministration was given by Norman L. Garner, inter-provincial representative for Binh Long and Binh Duong provices north of Saigon.

“There were reports that the 1,305 Montagnards who were resettled at Nha Bich along Route 13 in Chon Thanh district were starving and forced to eat banana stalks,” Garner wrote. “These people were resettled after the end of the rainy season (in December) and have been unable to produce their own food.”

Montagnards are mountain tribesmen, ethnically separate from the Vietnamese, who often mistreat them. They are usually the last to receive government services.

One development noted in many reports is the impact of the organization of President Nguyen Van Thieu's New Democracy Party. The reports verify that government officials can lose their jobs if they refuse to join the party.

Overshadowing the government's other problems is what appears to be an increasingly serious economic situation. In Bien Hoa, a province hard hit because of its former economic dependence on American military bases, inter-province representative Clifford C. Nunn Jr. wrote:

"Prices are still rising and the government has made no discernible effort to stabilize the economy. The situation is becoming serious and the people need some demonstrated evidence that action is being taken. Flowery speeches in Saigon will not help. This matter is of more concern to the people than any element of the present military-political situation."

Inter-province representative Nunn wrote about Bien Hoa, "(Government information) cadre are finding it difficult to sell the (ceasefire) agreement as a big victory for the RVN (which is the RVN line) rather than the compromise it is, and they are flustered when asked questions for which they have not been programmed."

The officials document many cases of corruption. Writing about Chuong Thien province in the lower Mekong Delta, inter-province representative Warren E. Parker said, "Further evidence of major attempts and successes at corruption are being seen and heard every day in Chuong Thien's social welfare program, and state resurveys have been ordered in Kine Hung district on old return-to-village payments,

certain province officials can already be seen planning new private investments. The entire social welfare program here should be scrapped immediately... Corruption is remaining at a dangerously high (level) and in every portion of the province government.

In Tay Ninh province northwest of Saigon, province representative Bird cited another instance of foul play: "The road-paving project between Hieu Thien and Khiem Hanh districts has been halted because of corruption. The province Pacification Development Council claims that the contractor, who supplied the gravel, mixed it with at least 40% sand... Progress on the road has been stopped pending further investigation."

