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16 December 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Assessment of the PHOENIX Program

I. SUMMARY

A. The attack on the Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI) has made encouraging progress, but has not yet produced a significant reduction of the Communists' ability to carry out essential activities. VCI operations have been disrupted in several geographic areas; an increasing Chieu Hoi rate points to morale problems -- at least among lower ranking personnel; and a noticeable attrition has resulted from a combination of losses in combat and from anti-infrastructure activities.

B. VCI attempts to revitalize and strengthen their organizations in the major cities often have been disrupted by aggressive police work. But government intelligence on the VCI and targeted operations against their activities diminish significantly as one gets further from the secure urban areas. What losses the VCI has suffered apparently have not unduly hampered its functioning. Recent moves have been made to streamline the infrastructure by reclassifying cadres according to their effectiveness and by transferring numbers of low level or inefficient cadres into military units. It seems that VCI personnel losses are not approaching the critical stage, nor do they appear likely to do so in the near future.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Communist Political Activity

1. At least since the initiation of the 1967-68 winter-spring campaign, but more noticeably since the advent of US/NVN negotiations in Paris, Communist political activity in South Vietnam has received greater emphasis. Current indications portend an

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even more intensive Communist political effort designed to give the appearance of legitimacy to their position in South Vietnam, to disrupt US/GVN pacification programs, and to undermine and displace the GVN political structure.

2. Generally speaking, Communist political activity is concentrated in four major fields:

a) The organization of Liberation Committees and councils throughout South Vietnam;

b) A re-emphasis of the major importance of the guerrilla and militia role in Peoples Revolutionary warfare, and reconstitution of guerrilla forces depleted or upgraded to regular status in support of the Tet and subsequent military offensives;

c) Improving the security and streamlining the organization of the infrastructure (VCI) from district level down; this is supported by an increasing VC espionage and counterintelligence effort directed against US/GVN operations which focus on the infrastructure plus the purge, reclassification, or transfer to military status of unreliable, ineffective, and poorly motivated political cadre; and

d) Allaying "illusions of peace" by emphasizing the proximity of victory and the need to prepare for a (decisive) 1968-69 winter-spring offensive.

B. Liberation Committees

1. Liberation Committees deserve special attention. The Communists are continuing their push to create Liberation Committees and councils throughout South Vietnam. As of 7 December 1968, 1,835 Liberation Committees had been reported by various sources. Of these, 1,069 were reported by specific location and 376 were identifiable in the COMUSMACV Hamlet Evaluation Survey (HES). Countrywide, the identified hamlets and villages reported as having Liberation Committees are rated by HES criteria as: 65 percent in VC controlled areas, 15 percent in contested, and 15 percent in relatively secure areas; unevaluated or abandoned hamlets constitute the remaining five percent.

2. Liberation Committees represent the final step in the VCI take over of villages and hamlets; they bridge the gap between covert and overt government. It is through these bodies that the Communists intend to claim control of the countryside.

C. Phung Hoang (PHOENIX) 1968 Goals

1. The three stated goals of the Phung Hoang program for 1968 were:

a) To establish permanent offices or Province Intelligence and Operations Coordination Centers (PIOCCS) in each of South Vietnam's 44 provinces (and three autonomous cities).

b) To establish 200 District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Centers (DIOCCS).

c) To neutralize 12,000 VCI members.

2. As of 5 December 1968, 41 permanent offices/PIOCCS, three CIOCCS (City Intelligence Operations Coordination Centers) and 217 DIOCCS -- 173 of the last with U.S. advisors -- had been established. Moreover, during the period 1 January - 31 October 1968 (November data is not yet available) 11,066 identified members of the VCI were neutralized. In terms of organizational goals, progress has been satisfactory. However, it cannot be determined whether the number of VC neutralized reflects an accurate picture of losses to the VCI, especially in view of the lack of data on the final disposition of those who were apprehended.

3. A significant accomplishment of the Phung Hoang program is the degree of cooperation and coordination which has been generated at all levels, often where little or none previously existed. This includes disparate GVN officials, agencies and military units, and U.S. and allied agencies and military forces. This includes also the establishment of a country-wide system of province, autonomous city and district Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Centers becoming increasingly capable of support to military and territorial security as well as to anti-VCI operations.

III. CURRENT SITUATION

A. Implementation of Phung Hoang

1. The Presidential Decree of 1 July 1968, which made explicit the GVN sanction for the attack on the VCI, gave the Phung Hoang program a much needed boost. It took approximately two months for the decree to permeate through GVN channels down to province and district operational levels, and therefore, it was not until late August that its influence began to be felt on a nation-wide basis.

2. Although there are still some instances of obstructionism and lack of cooperation by local officials and agencies responsible for conducting the attack against the VCI, there has been an overall and continuing trend toward improved coordination within PIOCCS and DIOCCS. There also has been an increase in number and improvement in quality of operations conducted against the VCI. For example, October reports show that allied and ARVN tactical military units unilaterally accounted for 159 VCI neutralizations (11 percent of the monthly total), exceeding their previous accomplishments and attesting to their heightened awareness of the importance of attacking the Communist political organization. This favorable trend is expected to improve further as a result of strong COMUSMACV and GVN command attention to and heavy emphasis on Phung Hoang (and on Peoples Self-Defense). President Thieu in visits to III and IV Corps in early December and Interior Minister Khiem in a continuing series of visits to regions beginning late November have exhorted Corps commanders, province chiefs and senior police officers to press the attack on the VCI, recognizing especially the political challenge of the VC Liberation Committees. Khiem's trips have included inspections of DIOCCS.

B. VCI Neutralizations

1. Despite the reported neutralizations, the U.S. intelligence community estimates the current personnel strength of the VCI at roughly 82,000. Of the 11,066 VCI members reported killed, captured or rallied between 1 January and 31 October 1968, 16.5 percent were reported as serving in district or higher positions; the remaining 83.5 percent served at village or hamlet level -- most being functionaries that the VCI can easily replace. Through September, the attrition rate of the VCI ran at a fairly static 1.5 percent per month. In October the attrition rate rose to 1.8 percent.

2. A review of the reports submitted during the seven-month period April through October, shows that 583 VCI security service cadre and 1,387 finance/economy personnel were neutralized. Of these totals, 171 of the security service cadre and 177 of the

finance/economy personnel held leadership positions and cannot easily be replaced. Within the context of the entire Communist infrastructure, security cadres are considered to rank in importance behind current affairs section secretaries and deputy secretaries and thus are highly important targets. With the vital support role played by finance/economy cadre, any eliminations in this category are harmful to VCI operations. Also, in October, for the first time, VCI Liberation Committees were classified as a top priority target and 71 committeemen, including 30 in leadership positions, were neutralized.

3. Understandably, reports from the field continue to include large numbers of individuals only vaguely identified. The U.S. PHOENIX advisory staff rejects between 30 and 40 percent of the names submitted because the lack of descriptive detail does not substantiate the individual's status in the VCI. In October, for instance, 766 names were not accepted as neutralized VCI; 202 were guerrillas, 50 were VC/NVA soldiers, and 514 were classified as having provided some service for the VCI; of the latter category 228 were potential VCI, but were not so counted due to lack of detail concerning their actual duties. On the brighter side, in many instances the increased pace of anti-VCI operations has resulted also in increased contacts with VC armed elements and attrition of both VC irregulars and VC support elements not carried as VCI.

C. Defining VCI

1. A variety of problems continue to hamper anti-VCI operations. Two of the most serious are:

a) Lack of knowledge of who and what comprises the VCI organization by the majority of field personnel operating below province level; and

b) The uneven enforcement and administration of existing GVN laws covering Communist insurgent activities and personnel. GVN authorities often feel that they do not have sufficient evidence to prosecute many of the VCI suspects apprehended. And local officials in some areas are reluctant to approve operations against VCI suspects.

2. To help reduce these obstacles, U.S. officials developed a listing of VCI executive and significant cadre functions which was coordinated with the GVN on 5 December. This document will be printed bilingually and disseminated through PHOENIX/Phung Hoang channels to field elements in the near future. Besides helping to eliminate the existing confusion over who and what comprises the VCI organization, the document will provide a uniform basis for assigning priorities and selecting targets for neutralization.

3. Equally important, the list will serve as a basis for proposed procedural changes regarding the processing of civilian detainees. PHOENIX staff/CORDS legal advisors have drafted a procedural guideline for the use of the local security committees, which would provide for uniform, mandatory sentencing of an accused detainee, if he is determined to be a PRP member, holds a position in the VCI, performs a cadre function, or supports the VC. This classification guideline is being coordinated with the Ministry of Interior for instructions to the local security committees, and will be proposed to the Directorate of Military Justice, for instructions to the various military courts. It is hoped that it will improve administrative-judicial handling of civil detainees by standardizing sentencing and simplifying judicial processing.

D. Judicial Processing

1. Judicial processing is one of the weakest links in the overall attack on the VCI. This is highlighted by the number of persons under detention who have not been judicially processed, estimated to be as high as 21,000. It is apparent that numbers of innocent persons, or at least persons also have been forced to perform tasks for the VC, have been arrested and held, sometimes for extensive periods, without a hearing. Justifiably concerned, the Office of the Prime Minister established special screening committees throughout the country to review the cases of a large number of civil detainees, and many have been released. On the other hand, real VCI and VC supporters are being released as a result of insufficiently severe sentences, usually on the grounds of lack of sufficient evidence.

2. Although some VC civil defendants are brought to trial before the military or military field courts, the vast majority are judicially processed by the provincial security committees,

which are the responsibility of province chiefs and are under the overall supervision of the Minister of Interior. The latter has ordered these committees to meet weekly, rather than biweekly, to speed up the hearing of new cases and reduce the backlog of pending cases. Improved procedures and programmed increases in the numbers of trained special police interrogators and investigators should further enhance the efficiency of the provincial security committees.

E. Detention Facilities

1. Interrogation and detention facilities are inadequate in many areas. At the end of November 1968, there were a total of 38,700 civilian confinement spaces in Vietnam, and the total incarcerated population was reported by GVN officials to be 37,689. These figures, based on the best data available, are considered to be accurate only for the national prison system which holds 32,689 prisoners and detainees. The remaining 5,000 said to be held in national police detention facilities is an unverifiable estimate. There are four national prisons, 37 provincial prisons and 50 existing or planned detention centers. Although these figures indicate that there are sufficient confinement spaces on a nation-wide basis, overcrowding still exists in some provinces and poor prisoner accounting procedures are universal.

2. A large number of VCI suspects who were detained during a recent operation in Quang Duc Province were allowed to commingle with other prisoners because of the poor detention facilities in Gia Nghia. Less excusable, the same thing happened when the prisoners were transferred to Ban Me Thuot, Darlac Province, where adequate facilities do exist. Before proper interrogation could be conducted, the suspects had changed their stories, and little valid evidence could be garnered to establish their true VCI positions or to prepare a good case for the courts or province security committees.

3. The National Police and Minister of Interior are cognizant of these problems. The Director of Corrections has been authorized to transfer sentenced prisoners from one institution to another; this authority had been reserved to province chiefs. Space available at Con Son Island is being expanded, and sentenced VCI and other VC political prisoners with more than one year to serve can be moved there from mainland jails. The criterion may be reduced to more than six months to serve. These

measures permit more efficient use of facilities.

F. Prisoner Accounting System

1. Another problem area is the lack of an effective accounting and control procedure for keeping track of detainees and prisoners from arrest, through trial, sentencing, detention and release. The need for developing a control system is recognized, and work on the solution to this problem is underway.

2. In most cases the final disposition of captured VCI is not known. During the first ten months of 1968, there were 8,275 VCI captured (of the total 11,066 neutralized). There is no way to determine which of those were brought to trial, which were released or sentenced, or the place of detention of those who were sentenced. On 24 October, a list was obtained of 127 VCI, district level or higher, who were apprehended during August and September, and an investigation was launched by the GVN to determine their location. As of early December, only five had been located, and those, apparently, by accident. The monthly neutralization reports include, at best, the last reported location of the captured VCI. A recent analysis of the monthly Phung Hoang neutralization reports only, on a country-wide basis, showed that as of the time the reports were prepared the last known place of detention of apprehended VCI was in the following facilities: 29 percent in Provincial Interrogation Centers, 24 percent held by National Police, 15 percent in provincial prisons, 13 percent in sector (military) facilities, eight percent in sub-sector facilities, and four percent in military POW facilities. The location of the remaining seven percent was undeterminable.

3. Other prisoners and detainees have been granted amnesty on various religious and national holidays. For example, on National Day, President Thieu reduced the sentences of 783 prisoners, many of whom were being held for political action. There is no evidence that VCI cadres have been released in this manner; however, there is justifiable concern that inadequate investigation or slipshod screening may allow important VCI figures to slip back into operation.

4. There are also indications that VCI cadres with sufficient influence can prevent local officials from taking action against them, avoid apprehension, or gain easy release after capture. In Vinh Binh Province, local authorities prohibited a planned operation against some important VCI suspects because

of the latter's supposed connections at high GVN levels; similar problems are reported in other areas.

5. Both U.S. and GVN agencies have submitted reports on VCI suspects who are caught more than once, having somehow slipped back into freedom. Needless to say, the government security forces operating against the VCI are somewhat shy of taking risks to capture VCI suspects alive, especially for the second time. They have expressed their concern directly to the Minister of Interior.

G. GVN Intelligence Capability

1. The effectiveness of the attack on the VCI is further hampered by the limited professional capability of many GVN personnel. Personnel in those agencies tasked with gathering intelligence on the VCI and running operations against it, such as the Police Special Branch and Military Security Service, simply have not had the training and background for sophisticated intelligence work. This is especially true at the district level and below where the responsible GVN personnel may barely be able to read and write. Many have difficulty understanding the requirements sent down to them, let alone fulfilling them.

2. Although the Phung Hoang program is geared primarily to the district level, most of the talent, intelligence information and reaction capability is at present found at province level. Information available at province level is often not fully disseminated down to the districts, moreover most of the districts are still in the process of developing the data base needed to operate effectively against the VCI. For this reason, to a great extent, operations targeted against specific individuals are not yet too common. Most VCI personnel are picked up in sweeps, cordon and search operations, or in ambushes on likely communication routes.

H. Blacklists

1. Specific targeting is the ideal goal of the anti-VCI campaign, and fruitful results have been obtained from a number of cordon and search operations using blacklists for identification. However, specific information is usually difficult to obtain from areas of poor security; therefore, there is often insufficient intelligence to target against an individual. Also, security conditions in many areas simply do not permit small operations

against a specific individual. VCI cadres, particularly important ones, often live in isolated regions or in base camps which have strong guerrilla or regular force protection, and large military operations are the only feasible method of attacking them.

2. A possible drawback to the large dragnets is the unreliability of some of the blacklists. It must be assumed that the lists do not include many key VCI figures, and at the same time inadvertently involve innocent people. Therefore other means are used, such as Hoi Chanh, when possible, for on-the-spot identification.

IV. FUTURE OUTLOOK

A. Special Phung Hoang Campaign

1. A special national Phung Hoang campaign (Phung Hoang Dong Tien) was launched on 20 October to run through 15 February 1969. Quotas have been established for each province, and all agencies connected with the campaign have been directed to turn their full attention to eliminating the VCI. Military commanders are instructed to give anti-VCI operations support equal to that given to other combat operations. Quick reaction forces are to be made more readily available.

2. An example of the cooperation of tactical forces in anti-VCI operations is shown in Operation MEADE RIVER, the largest operation of this type conducted to date, which commenced on 20 November in Quang Nam Province, I Corps. A 15 mile cordon was set up by six USMC battalions, three ARVN battalions, and elements of the National Police Field Force (NPFF) and a battalion of ROK Marines. When the cordon was secure, a sweep was undertaken by ARVN and NPFF forces. Residents within the cordon area were taken to a collection point for screening. The committee at the collection point included representatives from Chieu Hoi Psyops, Armed Propaganda Teams, Civil Affairs, Static Census Grievance, Revolutionary Development, Public Health, Provincial Reconnaissance Unit, NPFF and Special Police, as well as province and district officials, province and district Phung Hoang representatives and U.S. advisors. As of 1 December the results of this operation were 71 VCI and 34 VC captured and 334 enemy killed, including many North Vietnamese troops and some known significant members of the VCI.

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3. Considering that the special campaign did not begin until 20 October, it is encouraging to note that six provinces fulfilled or exceeded their monthly quotas within the last ten days of the month. Overall, nearly one third more VCI were neutralized in October (1,459) than in September (1,121).

4. The outlook for November, based on reports from the provinces, is brighter. To date reports have been received from 35 provinces plus Saigon and Danang City. Audited, they show an increase of about 64 percent over October. If this trend is maintained by the thirteen provinces not yet heard from, the total real VCI neutralizations rate for November should exceed 2,000, or about two thirds of the deliberately high monthly goal (3,000) set forth in the special campaign plan.

5. According to tentative pacification planning for 1969, the special campaign goals for Phung Hoang will be extended throughout the year. If the monthly goal of 3,000 can be attained and sustained, together with the upward trend toward neutralization of a great proportion of key leaders and cadres, and if other, concomitant pacification and people-oriented programs, such as self-defense, also move ahead energetically, then the VCI will be hurt, and its political efforts blunted.

6. The setting of goals and quotas is not the whole answer, however, for there must necessarily be an upgrading of GVN intelligence and reaction forces both in number and quality. Significant improvements are being carried out in training of the Special Police, National Police Field forces and PRU, for example, emphasizing intelligence and leadership skills. A 10,000-man proposed augmentation to the National Police (especially to the Special Police) awaits National Assembly approval. Where National Police resources are limited, province and district chiefs are being told to use other, available assets (RF-PF) or to call upon help from RVNAF, U.S. or other free world military forces. Far greater exploitation is required, too, of allied psychological operations resources at all levels in support of Phung Hoang.

B. Communist Reaction

1. The VCI definitely is beset by serious problems. Most of these are related to the pressures of the war. However, an encouragingly increasing number of them can be attributed directly to the anti-VCI effort. A notebook recently captured in Thua Thien Province in I Corps described the considerable losses among both

guerrillas and infrastructure personnel caused by ARVN and allied sweep operations. Similarly, the CMD continues to be a difficult operational area for the VCI. The strong security situation makes traveling dangerous for VCI personnel, who must move about lightly guarded to avoid attention, leaving them more vulnerable. A captured report from VC Sub-Region 4 dated 29 June, complained about the shortage of personnel -- stating that more than one third of the hamlets in the sub-region had no party members, while the quality of existing party chapters was below par. The chapters were described as weakened by factionalism and lack of determination. A source in Binh Chanh District in Gia Dinh reported in early October that a VC guerrilla platoon had been brought in, broken down, and assigned to four villages to help rebuild the infrastructure. There has also been a series of captured documents which label the PHOENIX operation as a cunning, wicked plot and exhort all Liberation Armed Forces to be wary of and strive to wipe out the "cruel die-hard agents of aggression."

2. Perhaps more telling is the increasing amount of broadcast time Radio Hanoi and Liberation Radio devote to denouncement of the allied accelerated pacification campaign. (APC). A Liberation Radio commentary of 3 December called for the implementation of the Peoples Liberation Armed Force (PLAF) command's order to "crush the head of the venomous snake PHOENIX." The Communists have ordered all Peoples Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) "to resolutely smash the U.S.-puppet rural pacification scheme, annihilate and completely disintegrate enemy pacification teams and to annihilate PHOENIX teams," which are composed of spies and intelligence agents.

3. VC concern is further evidenced in an order for a guerrilla and terrorist campaign to "seek out, eliminate and utterly destroy" South Vietnamese central, district and local officials, American-South Vietnamese pacification teams working in rural and village areas, and allied search-and-destroy units. Even the 27 November 1968 issue of Red Star has picked up the theme noting that accelerated pacification is actually an American escalation of the war.

C. VCI Residual Capability

1. Nonetheless, the VCI continue to exercise control of varying degrees of effectiveness over large segments of the population and to use this control to marshal support for their

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combat and political operations. Their traditional activities of tax collecting, proselyting and propaganda, intelligence, and guerrilla and labor force recruitment are continuing at acceptable levels, and they have undertaken a widespread aggressive campaign to establish Liberation Committees and councils.

2. The Communists place a high priority on reconstituting their infrastructure losses and appear able to do so -- at least to the point that thus far their problems are not approaching the critical stage. Nor at this time does this seem likely to occur in the near future. For, despite the number of lower-level VCI neutralized, the hard core command cadres remain largely unhurt and inadequately identified for effective action against them.

V. CONCLUSION

A. Are there, then, steps which can be taken to improve our combined effort to destroy or neutralize the VCI. The answer is "yes," and of course some of these already are under way.

1. We must continue the present strategy of combined, coordinated action to destroy or drive back VC/NVA Main Forces, to extend and consolidate territorial security and pacification, and to destroy or neutralize the VCI. These actions are interdependent.

2. We need still further GVN command emphasis on Phung Hoang operations, particularly to insure the assignment and allocation of top-flight personnel and reaction forces to exploit intelligence against selected targets.

3. Concurrently with increased emphasis on targeted operations (as opposed to programming, organization and facilities), the GVN must, with our assistance, provide stepped-up training and indoctrination of personnel earmarked for Phung Hoang roles.

4. Concurrently, we must somehow see to it that both civilian and military U.S. personnel designated as PHOENIX advisors are qualified intelligence officers with backgrounds in counterintelligence, positive intelligence collection, or police intelligence investigation operations. A maximum number of these individuals should be trained in the Vietnamese language.

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The absence of language ability, particularly at the DIOCC level, is the greatest single bar to effectiveness.

5. We must give greater heed to providing necessary, flexible support to operations at district and province level, in terms of temporary or short-term detention facilities adjacent to DIOCCS or district police offices; of intelligence and support contingency funds; of assignment of additional intelligence NCOS in priority areas of heaviest operational activity; and of additional helicopter support for sustained operations.

6. We must take and are taking urgent measures to instruct and orient Vietnamese, U.S. and other free world personnel in the identification and modus operandi of the VCI, and in the roles which our various forces and agencies can best play, and in the techniques found by current experience to be most productive in VCI neutralizations.

7. Finally, and possibly most important, the lessons learned by all GVN agencies participating in the Phung Hoang program now may serve as the glue to hold them together when they are forced to fight the political machinations of the VCI in the post hostilities period.

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