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DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

*Research Memorandum*

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To : The Secretary  
 Through: S/S  
 From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *Thomas L. Hughes*  
 Subject: Southern Regroupees and Northerners in the Communist Military Force in South Vietnam

In some future negotiating situation, the question of distinctions to be made between ethnic northern and ethnic southern infiltrators into South Vietnam may become of some importance. In this memorandum we have examined the problem of estimating at any given time the numbers of these two types of infiltrators.

ABSTRACT

Our infiltration figures provide us with a simple, if not entirely reliable, guide to the total number of ethnic Southerners and Northerners who have been infiltrated into South Vietnam. According to our statistics, infiltrators up to the end of 1963 totalled more than 31,000. Our evidence suggests that these infiltrators were almost all ethnic Southerners drawn from the Viet Minh troops and supporters regrouped to the North in 1954. Beginning in 1964, however, the infiltrators became predominantly North Vietnamese, although possibly another 4,000 regroupees entered during that year. The remainder entering in 1964 and those entering thereafter, totalling more than 32,000, are believed to have been essentially ethnic Northerners.

To proceed from these figures, however, to an effort to estimate the relative number of regroupee and ethnic northern infiltrators within the total Communist forces at any given time is to enter an area where gaps and uncertainties

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abound and reliable information is virtually non-existent. This is particularly the case with respect to the southern regroupees. These have been so widely dispersed at all levels of the Viet Cong military main force and its political, administrative, and logistic framework that it is impossible to use overall casualty figures effectively to deduce the number of regroupees eliminated from the original total of 35,000 by death, capture, or other factors. However, even on the highly unlikely assumption that the regroupee element has suffered no attrition, it could not make up more than 28% of the total present Viet Cong main military and political force estimated at 125,000.

Despite all sorts of intelligence deficiencies, we are on somewhat firmer ground in attempting to estimate the total number of North Vietnamese presently in South Vietnam. These infiltrators, in contrast to their ethnic southern counterparts, have not only entered South Vietnam in large units, but have also retained an identifiable unit structure once in place. Accordingly, MACV's order of battle holdings for individual units provide a relatively, although not wholly, reliable guide to the number of ethnic Northerners in the total Communist force. MACV's current estimate is that there are about 45,000 troops in NVA units in South Vietnam as compared with the estimated infiltration of more than 82,000 North Vietnamese since 1964. This indication that the North Vietnamese component of the Communist force in South Vietnam has suffered particularly heavy casualties is reinforced by corroborating data and by the fact that there have been few known withdrawals.

Given our assumptions that the North Vietnamese can and will continue to reinforce their forces in the South and have few remaining regroupees from which to draw, one can conclude that the ethnic northern element in the Communist force in South Vietnam will remain large and growing even in the face of heavy casualties, and that the size of the regroupee element will decline absolutely and relatively.

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Communist Infiltration

It is not certain at what point after the Indochina ceasefire in 1954 Hanoi began infiltrating personnel into South Vietnam. Despite the absence of complete statistics on infiltration during this early period, it is clear from the available intelligence that infiltration was occurring as early as 1957-58, although it was on a very small scale and was limited to individual political agents and military cadres. As shown below, infiltration began to increase in 1959-60, the first period for which complete statistics are available,

	<u>Confirmed</u>	<u>Unconfirmed</u>	<u>Total</u>
1959-60	4,556	26	4,582
1961	4,118	2,117	6,235
1962	5,362	7,495	12,857
1963	4,726	3,180	7,906
1964	<u>9,316</u>	3,108	<u>12,424</u>
1965	21,473	5,073	26,546
1966 (Sept. 30)	<u>22,467</u>	<u>23,995</u>	<u>46,462</u>
Totals	72,018	44,994	117,012

Until 1964, virtually all of the infiltrators were ethnic Southerners who had served with the Viet Minh armed forces in the south during the Indochina hostilities. In accordance with the 1954 ceasefire agreement, some 130,000 Vietnamese were regrouped to the North. In North Vietnam, a large number of the regroupees were retained in military or security units or were retrained in guerrilla warfare and subversive tactics. Until 1961 the infiltrators, whether political or military cadres, tended to move south as individuals or in small groups. From 1961 to 1964, however, an increasing number of regroupee infiltrators entered in large groups, sometimes exceeding 500 men. Although the vast majority of these infiltrators were military personnel there continued to be political agents among them.

Once in South Vietnam, the regroupee infiltrators were generally broken down into smaller groups and used as replacements in regular or mainforce combat units, to form new units, or to expand existing military and political units, frequently in their original home provinces. Most of the infiltrators arriving after 1960-61 apparently were assigned to the northern and central provinces, or roughly the area presently comprising the GVN Corps I and II.

The pattern of Communist infiltration changed drastically by the latter part of 1964. For the first time, ethnic North Vietnamese began infiltrating into South Vietnam, and in October 1964 MACV estimated that about 75% of the

\* The original estimate on the number of persons repatriated comes from the French who were told by DRV officials that about 87,000 Viet Minh troops and 43,000 civilians and dependents were withdrawn from south of the 17th parallel.

infiltrators thus far that year were ethnic Northerners recently drafted into the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). More recent information indicates that 75% to 90% of the infiltrators in 1964 were North Vietnamese.

The introduction of ethnic Northerners, coupled with the fact that many of the infiltrated Southerners captured in late 1963 and early 1964 were (or reported other infiltrators to be) in their late 30s or early 40s, suggested that Hanoi had exhausted its available pool of regroupees. Although some Southerners continue to come south, the vast majority of the infiltrators since 1964 have been Northerners. Moreover, while some still infiltrate as cadres or in small groups, the great bulk of them have entered as organized NVA units up to regimental size, as in the case of the 324B NVA Division which entered directly across the Demilitarized Zone this summer. Unlike the southern regroupees, the NVA units have remained intact. As of September 1966, approximately 35,000 ethnic Southerners\* and approximately 82,000 ethnic Northerners are believed to have infiltrated into South Vietnam since 1959, as shown below in rounded figures:

	<u>Confirmed</u>	<u>Unconfirmed</u>	<u>Total</u>
Southerners	20,000-21,000	13,000-14,000	33,000-35,000
Northerners	50,000-51,000	29,000-31,000	79,000-82,000
Totals	70,000-72,000	42,000-45,000	112,000-117,000

Communist Military and Political Strength

The strength of the Communist military and political apparatus in South Vietnam is estimated at about 290,000. Of this number, some 170,000 constitute the organized, hard-core military-political force. This force includes a military mainforce of combat regulars estimated at over 100,000 (45,000 North Vietnamese and 55,000 Viet Cong,) and organized into 7 divisions, 33 regiments, and 342 additional independent battalions, companies, and platoons. The principal mission of the mainforce is to engage the Vietnamese Army (ARVN) and US and other foreign combat forces. An additional 40,000 political-military cadres provide the political leadership for the Communist mainforce while some 20,000 more are organized as administrative and logistic support forces. Finally, there is an unknown number of Communist party members who operate outside the organized military mainforce and direct the covert party apparatus in urban and many rural areas.

Below this elite military-political force there is a large force of armed irregulars who are recruited locally and carry out a variety of armed and political functions at the village-hamlet level. As they develop sufficient experience, they are drawn up to reinforce or expand the military and political

\* This credits about 25% of the estimated 1964 infiltrators to the southern regroupee element.

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structure at the top. MACV order of battle has carried this force at an estimated 120,000 for some years. There is considerable evidence, however, based in part on captured documents, that the size of this Communist base is greatly underestimated. A detailed CIA analysis recently concluded that the Communist irregular force may well number 200,000-300,000.

Although we have no basis for concluding that any substantial numbers of regroupee infiltrators are included in the armed irregular force, they have been spread throughout the Viet Cong military mainforce and also throughout the Viet Cong political and administrative apparatus. Because of this wide dispersal of the regroupee infiltrator element and because our casualty count does not enable us to discriminate among various types of casualties (i.e. main force versus regulars, combat force versus impressed civilian porters etc.) we have no reliable basis for estimating what proportion of the approximately 35,000 regroupee infiltrators have been lost to the Communist force through death, capture, desertions, or other causes. One can speculate that, based on an analysis of losses proportionate to order of battle, it is possible that the regroupees have suffered a total of about 6,000 casualties thus far. Given the uncertainties in all of our figures, this is at best a guess. In any case, even if it is assumed that the 35,000-man regroupee force has not suffered any fatalities, it would still constitute a maximum of only 28% of the Viet Cong main military and political force of 125,000. This supports intelligence that the great bulk of this force is recruited within South Vietnam. In terms of the total Viet Cong force of 245,000, i.e., the main body of 125,000 and the 120,000 irregulars, the southern regroupee element would constitute about 14%.

Because of the nature of the NVA deployment, order of battle and casualty statistics can be applied more readily than is the case with the southern regroupees to the problem of estimating the number of ethnic Northerners in the Communist forces in South Vietnam at any given time. In arriving at its estimates of the size of North Vietnamese (as well as main force Viet Cong) units, MACV continuously makes numerical adjustments on the basis of information derived from prisoner of war interrogations, captured documents, and other intelligence sources. MACV's current estimate is that there are about 45,000 troops in NVA units in South Vietnam as compared with the estimated infiltration of more than 82,000 North Vietnamese since 1964. This of course, suggests that there have been 37,000 North Vietnamese casualties of one kind or another. To be sure the statistics are open to a wide range of error resulting from inadequate intelligence, time lags, and other factors. In addition there are problems created by what appears to be a growing tendency to mix VC both as individuals and as units with NVA forces. For example, during Operation Irving in Binh Dinh province last month, MACV reported that the engaged NVA force, the 12th Regiment of the 610th Division, had suffered more than 600

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fatalities which decreased its combat strength by 40-50%. However, there is evidence that most of the casualties allocated to this NVA regiment were actually incurred by Viet Cong forces who were deployed in a rear guard action to protect the regiment's withdrawal.

Despite intelligence deficiencies, however, there is good reason to believe that the North Vietnamese forces have suffered relatively heavy casualties. For example, they have tended to engage in large formations, making them vulnerable to concentrated air or artillery bombardment. In addition, MACV has frequently reported that the rate of loss due to sickness among NVA forces is also unusually high, primarily because of their deployment to the disease-infested highlands area and also because of the debilitating effect on those who have come through Laos of the long and arduous trek through the infiltration routes. Thus MACV recently reported that in one NVA unit, the 195th AAA Battalion, losses due to sickness may have exceeded 25% of the unit's personnel.

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