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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Office of Current Intelligence  
12 March 1965

## INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Balance of Forces in South Vietnam

1. Official US estimates of the respective strengths of the total South Vietnamese Government and Viet Cong military establishments in South Vietnam show a ratio less than 5:1 as contrasted with the accepted ratio of at least 10:1 required for a force to defeat guerrilla insurgency. The ratio is even less favorable to the government, using unofficial estimates which show Viet Cong regular and irregular strength to be substantially above the official figures. The real picture is even grimmer, when other factors such as relative strength per unit, mission and deployment, command, growth rate, and morale are taken into account. These factors tend to offset the government's superiority in terms of air power and artillery.

2. Government force strength on 15 February totaled 567,000 including 245,000 regulars. MACV's latest Viet Cong Order of Battle holdings, on 6 March 1965, show a confirmed strength of 37,000 in regular, identified units. MACV has tentative evidence of as many as 43,000 Viet Cong regulars, and ARVN J-2 holdings, considered realistic by many US observers, put Viet Cong regular strength at between 50,000 and 60,000. In addition, the Viet Cong are variously estimated to have between 80,000 and 120,000 irregular forces.

3. Government force strength has been expanded substantially since late 1961 when US assistance was dramatically increased. Despite a continued high desertion rate government strength has been rising monthly for about the past nine months, after showing signs of serious attrition in early 1964. Training and performance have also improved.

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4. Viet Cong regular force strength has shown a steady growth during the same period, and has risen by more than a third since a year ago, according to MACV's holdings. This sharp increase results in part from MACV's confirmation during the year of units already in place in late 1963. There is an average time lag of about 13 months between the first reports of a new unit and its acceptance for OB purposes. Some other units newly accepted in MACV's latest OB holdings were formed largely by infiltrators who entered during the first eight months of 1964.

5. MACV's OB holdings are based on positive unit identification by at least two Viet Cong prisoners or two captured documents, and are considered extremely conservative. The current OB includes five regimental headquarters, 50 battalions (an increase of eight since a year ago), 145 separate companies, and 35 separate platoons. (ARVN, by comparison, has a total of 214 battalions.) Taking into account the reports of still unconfirmed Viet Cong battalions, actual contact in combat and ARVN's own OB holdings at corps level, there may be now be some 20 Viet Cong battalions in place in addition to the 50 confirmed by MACV. A recent ARVN J-2 study uncovered at least 21,000 in-country Viet Cong recruits during a four-month period from July to November 1964. Projecting for the entire year, there may have been more than 60,000 troops recruited within South Vietnam in 1964, more than enough to offset losses and--together with infiltrated elements--to permit the creation of these unconfirmed battalions.

6. Moreover, there is evidence of five or six Viet Cong regimental headquarters in addition to the five already confirmed. These include possibly two more in the northern provinces and three or four south of Saigon where no regiments are yet confirmed but where some regimental-type operations have been encountered.

7. Since about mid-1963, there has been evidence of a fleshing out of Viet Cong units. The average strength of a Viet Cong regiment in the field is now about 2,000 to 2,500 as compared with the average strength of an ARVN regiment of about 1,000 to 1,500. A Viet Cong battalion now averages about 600 to 800, compared to an average ARVN battalion in the field of about 300. Thus, on a unit for unit basis, ARVN is often outmanned.

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8. A substantial number of Viet Cong regular battalions, particularly those known or believed assigned to regiments, appear to be equipped with the new 7.62-mm. family of automatic and semi-automatic weapons. If possession of these weapons is now as widespread as feared, the Viet Cong would have a firepower superiority over ARVN units, which use primarily equipment of World War II design. Use of new bloc equipment also suggests Viet Cong confidence in an outside supply system, since the ammunition is not available from in-country capture. In any event, for nearly two years Viet Cong battalions have appeared to hold adequate firepower in terms of mortars and recoilless rifles; mortar fire against a variety of government targets including hamlets is now frequent.

9. The growth in Viet Cong military capabilities, in terms of both strength and combat potential, is reflected in Viet Cong activities over the past year. The number of Viet Cong - initiated incidents in 1964 was about 60 percent higher than in 1963; emphasis was on terrorist, harassing, and sabotage activity, but the number of battalion size or larger attacks doubled over 1963. Erosion of government control in the northern provinces, particularly along the populated coastal areas, is giving the VC increased access to manpower. This Communist encroachment seems to be accelerating in 1965.

10. Throughout the northern provinces, government forces are now clearly on the defensive, and in several provinces have virtually withdrawn into the district and provincial capitals, thereby largely abandoning the countryside to the Communists. Viet Cong interdiction of both the north-south coastal railroad and the main highway, Route 1, have been increasingly successful in isolating the north. Lateral roads in the north, running toward Laos and northern Cambodia, have been interdicted or subject to frequent harassment. Government pacification efforts in many of the northern provinces have been abandoned in order to concentrate on defenses, and pacification throughout most of the country is stalled. Even the Hop Tac area around Saigon is being affected, with one battalion already diverted elsewhere and one regiment still suffering command changes in the aftermath of the latest coup attempt.

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11. Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam are believed capable of mounting up to ten regimental-size attacks almost simultaneously. ARVN forces are capable of meeting most of these attacks with a regimental-size force, either from locally available forces or from the general reserve. Unfortunately, because of the size and firepower of Viet Cong units, ARVN is often unable to react with sufficient forces to insure defeat of attacking Viet Cong forces. This has been demonstrated repeatedly in engagements during the past half year in all four corps areas.

12. The ARVN general reserve totals 11 marine and airborne battalions, plus a possible five to nine infantry battalions in the corps areas. However, these reserves are almost continually committed in one area or another. Their withdrawal from one commitment and deployment to another reflects a condition of "robbing Peter to pay Paul."

13. The Viet Cong have virtually achieved a balance of strategic forces. Although they have far fewer battalions than ARVN, their manner of deployment gives the greater flexibility. ARVN has greater mobility in the sense of flexible deployment (air transportation, etc.), but the Viet Cong are able to achieve a kind of strategic mobility by posing successive threats in widely separated areas of the country, thus whipsawing the ARVN general reserves.

14. Moreover, most ARVN battalions are now committed either to security or pacification operations and thus are not engaged with the Viet Cong main force units. Neither the government's Regional Forces nor Popular Forces have the capability to relieve ARVN on a full-time basis for commitment against the Viet Cong regulars. Many of these paramilitary units are already on static security duties, and other lack the morale or strength to move in and maintain security in an area that has been cleared or is being held by ARVN.

15. The Viet Cong, whether engaged in large-scale attacks or smaller-scale harassment against

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government outposts, hamlets, and communications, are exercising the initiative. It is the Viet Cong who normally fix the time and place of attack. ARVN for the most part is merely reacting to Viet Cong moves.

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