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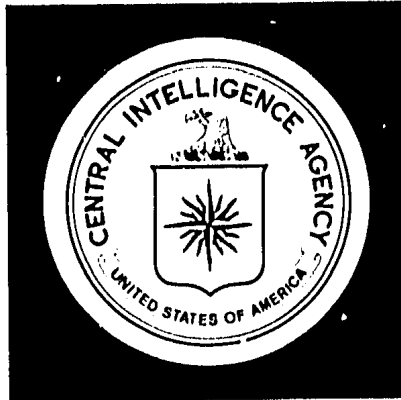
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DIRECTORATE OF
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Developments in Indochina

FEPAC DIV
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State Dept. review completed

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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA*(Information as of 1500)*Page

SOUTH VIETNAM

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The Communists are maintaining pressure against a government Ranger camp in Tay Ninh Province. The special session of the Senate that is scheduled to debate the decree on political parties may produce some sharp criticism of President Thieu. The Lower House chairman is supporting the Democracy Party--one of the first prominent political figures with some degree of independence to do so.

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LAOS

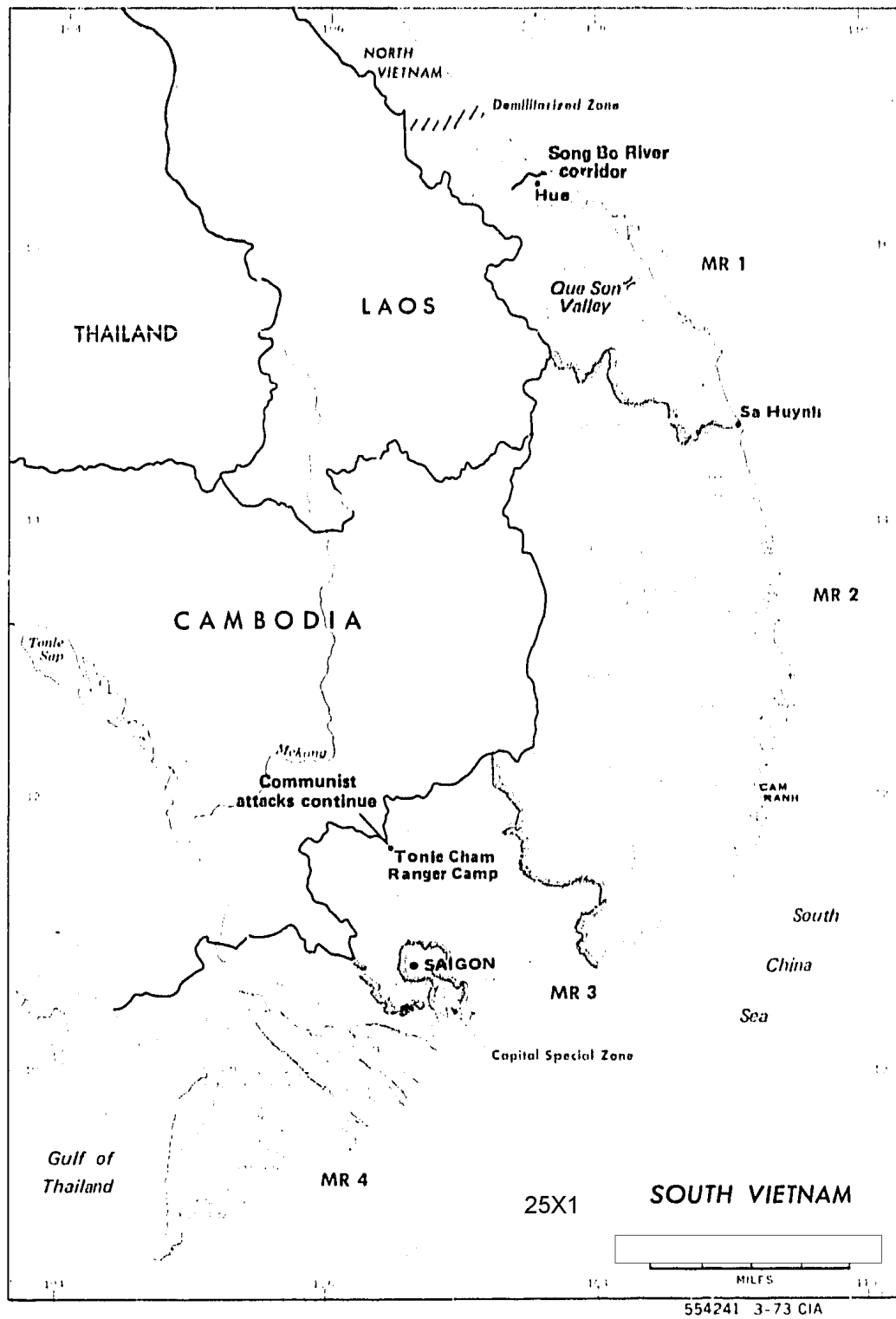
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Skirmishing continues along Route 13. The official negotiators are still making no progress--the deadline is now only three days away. Vang Pao is doing some post-war planning for his Meos.

CAMBODIA

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The government now controls about ten miles of the Mekong south of Neak Luong.



SOUTH VIETNAMThe Military Situation

The Tonle Cham Ranger Camp in northern Tay Ninh Province remains under heavy enemy pressure. The Communists are still directing artillery and mortar fire against the camp, and reportedly have constructed trenches within 1,000 meters of its perimeter. Conditions at the camp reportedly are worsening. Heavy Communist AAA fire in the vicinity has prevented any resupply for the fifteenth consecutive day. The Communist delegates on the Four Power Joint Military Commission still refuse to allow the ICCS truce team to make an on-site investigation, despite further US and South Vietnamese appeals.

In the northern provinces, fighting is still going on west of Hue along the Song Bo River corridor and around several government fire support bases. Farther south, moderate fighting is reported in the Que Son Valley on the Quang Nam/Quang Tin province border. Prisoners claim that the Communists have reinforced their units with heavy artillery. In Quang Ngai Province, [redacted]

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[redacted] the Communists are preparing new attacks against the coastal village of Sa Huynh. There are indications that the enemy's 2nd Division has completed a reconnaissance of the area and installed mines around the government's water storage and purification facilities near the village. [redacted]

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Senate to Debate Decree on Parties

South Vietnam's Senate will hold a special session on 21 March to debate the political situation and the controversial presidential decree on political parties. The session probably will produce some

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sharp criticism of President Thieu, since many opposition senators remain bitter over the decree. There is little likelihood, however, that the Senate will take any action to revise the decree. Its stiff requirements for the country's existing parties are supposed to take effect next week, and may put some of them out of business, or drive them underground.

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Democracy Party

One of the most prominent leaders of the labor based Farmer-Worker Party (FWP) has switched to the government's Democracy Party. Nguyen Ba Can, respected chairman of the Lower House, told US Embassy officers this week that he considered it impossible for a political force to "stand in the middle" between the Communists and the administration. Can said he had concluded that the FWP's attempt to form an effective political coalition would fail, partly because the party depends on government favors in order to operate. He estimated that more than half of the FWP's cadre had already joined the Democracy Party, as had many of his allies in the Lower House.

Can said he was joining the Democracy Party despite its shortcomings. By way of example, he claimed that the party has many corrupt elements, but added that President Thieu would "clean up" its ranks after concentrating first on organizing the largest possible potential vote for any future elections.

Can's recruitment is a significant plus for the Democracy Party. Although he had often cooperated closely with the government, the Lower House chairman is one of the first prominent political figures with some degree of independence to make a commitment to the Democracy Party. A number of other strongly anti-Communist independent figures may

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share his attitude, however, and some of these may also see the practical necessity of joining the government in its political struggle with the Viet Cong.

The Democracy Party has now held public inaugural ceremonies in 38 of the country's 56 provinces and autonomous cities. At the inauguration of the party's Saigon chapter last weekend, it was announced that the party will hold a national convention of representatives of the provincial chapters in about a week. [REDACTED]

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LAOS

The Military Situation

The only significant combat on 19 March occurred in the south, where government and Communist troops continued to skirmish along Route 13 southeast of Thakhek and in the Sedone Valley northeast of Khong Sedone. Lao T-28s flew bombing missions in support of government units in the south and in retaliation for an isolated shelling incident near Luang Prabang.

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Negotiations - No Progress

The official negotiators in Vientiane are still making little progress toward meeting the deadline of 23 March for implementation of the peace agreement. Government representatives at the regular Tuesday session presented draft protocols for both political and military matters, but the Communists refused to consider them because of procedural problems. Both sides had agreed to submit draft military protocols at subcommittee meetings scheduled for 19 March. When these meetings were canceled at the last minute, the government unexpectedly submitted its drafts at the plenary session the following day, apparently in hope of speeding things up.

The real impediment to progress is the continued absence of senior Communist negotiator Phoumi Vongvichit. Following the meeting on Tuesday, a Pathet Lao spokesman claimed that Phoumi would not return to Vientiane until the subcommittees had made some progress.

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Vang Pao Faces the Future

With the fighting near the Plaine des Jarres for the most part over, leaders of the Meo tribe--which for years bore the main burden of combat--have begun to plan for peace. General Vang Pao has apparently abandoned his idea of moving his fellow Meo tribesmen west to the remote hills of Sayaboury Province, and instead is lobbying for economic development projects. In remarks that he knew would reach US officials, Vang Pao recently claimed to be working on a planning paper that would cover land allocation, schools, hospitals, and other projects. He hopes in particular for the completion of a US-sponsored road connecting Long Tieng to the main route to Vientiane. Cher Pao Mua, Vang Pao's father-in-law and commander of the isolated Bouam Long stronghold north of the Plaine, said that he and his people will remain in their enclave and expect US help in building a livestock herd. They apparently want help in several other projects. Cher Pao Mua maintained that his people would not export opium, but admitted some might be grown for "home use."

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CAMBODIA

The Military Situation

Government troops, with naval and air support, continue to make headway in their attempts to secure both banks of the Mekong River south of Neak Luong. About ten miles of the river south of the town are now under government control, and the regular Mekong convoy arrived in Phnom Penh on 20 March without incident. Insurgents along the river, however, are still capable of harassing shipping.

Elsewhere, military activity has been light. Government forces attempting to reopen Route 2 between Phnom Penh and Takeo reported no progress on 19 March. Government positions south of Takeo and along the South Vietnamese border continue to come under attack. [REDACTED]

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