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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

North Vietnam's Food Supply Situation

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
December 1972

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

NORTH VIETNAM'S FOOD SUPPLY SITUATION

Summary

1. Resumption of the bombing and escalation of military hostilities had virtually no immediate effect on North Vietnam's agricultural economy this year, and total production will probably be average or above. Because of the lingering effects of the 1971 floods the spring crop in all likelihood fell short of the previous year's record level; however, the autumn crop should be a good one, perhaps even above average. Nevertheless, North Vietnam continues to be a long way from agricultural self-sufficiency, and, before the spring 1973 harvest, food imports of some 500,000 metric tons may be needed.

Discussion

Background

2. Agriculture, the mainstay of North Vietnam's economy, employs 70% of the labor force and accounts for around 50% of national product. Only 12% of North Vietnam's land area is cultivable, and three-fourths of that is in the Red River delta. About 70% of cultivated acreage is in rice; 20% in secondary crops, mostly corn, sweet potatoes, and manioc; and 10% in industrial and miscellaneous crops such as cotton, tobacco, sugar, and oilseeds. The spring harvest, which depends heavily on irrigation, accounts for about one-third of the yearly rice crop and for practically all other crops. The larger rice crop is harvested in the autumn. Over the longer term, the regime looks to the agricultural sector not only for self-sufficiency in food but also as a source of labor and capital for furthering North Vietnam's industrialization. For the present, agriculture provides only 85%-90% of national subsistence food requirements.

Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Economic Research and coordinated within the Directorate of Intelligence.

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3. Food production increased during the first few years of Communist rule and peaked at close to 3.9 million tons of milled rice and rice equivalents in 1959 (see the table). Average production declined to a level roughly 10% below the 1959 record in 1960-65 and fell another 5 % by 1968. Imports of some 400,000-600,000 tons annually of rice, wheat flour, and corn - almost entirely from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the USSR - were needed merely to keep pace with population growth. By 1969, however, rice production had begun to recover as a result of increases in both acreage and yield. This recovery can be attributed in part to the introduction of high-yield rice varieties. These strains accounted for a rapidly growing share of the spring crop, from only 17% of planted acreage in 1969 to about two-thirds in 1972.

Production of Food Crops in North Vietnam

Million Metric Tons			
Year	Total	Rice ^a	Secondary Crops ^b
1959	3.9	3.5	0.4
1960	3.2	2.8	0.4
1961	3.7	3.1	0.6
1962	3.6	3.0	0.6
1963	3.5	2.9	0.6
1964	3.7	3.0	0.7
1965	3.8	3.1	0.7
1966	3.5	2.8	0.7
1967	3.6	2.8	0.8
1968	3.3	2.6	0.7
1969	3.4	2.7	0.7
1970	3.6	3.0	0.6
1971	3.0-3.1	2.4-2.5	0.6
1972	3.6	3.0	0.6

a. Milled or polished rice.

b. Corn, sweet potatoes, and manioc expressed in rice equivalents.

4. The mediocre performance of North Vietnamese agriculture during the past decade has stemmed partly from adverse weather conditions - generally unfavorable weather prevailed during seven of the last ten years and nullified a large part of North Vietnam's increased investment in water control facilities and mechanization as well as its promotion of better agricultural management and technology. Significant flooding occurred in 1968, 1969, and again last year. The destructive floods

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in the late summer of 1971 dealt agriculture a particularly severe setback. About 35%-45% of the autumn rice crop was lost and total production of milled rice for that year dropped to the range of 2.4 million to 2.5 million tons, the lowest since 1955.

5. The degrading effects of years of war have effectively halted agricultural development since at least the mid-1960s. More specifically, the war has forced concentration of efforts on cultivation of food crops at the expense of industrial and export crops, fishing, and opening up of new lands. Similarly, the war's competition for resources has limited opportunities for increased mechanization, fertilizer usage, and irrigation in agriculture. Although agricultural labor is under-utilized, the withdrawal of men for military service and related support activities has led to a shortage of trained cadre and the replacement of male labor with women and children.

The Situation in 1972

Production

6. Continued repair of the pervasive damage to water control facilities caused by the 1971 floods was the most immediate problem confronting North Vietnam as the spring rice growing season approached. At the end of 1971, Premier Pham Van Dong had admitted disappointing progress in rehabilitating the long stretches of cut irrigation canals, washed out pumping stations, and silted drainage ditches. Moreover, the prolonged inundation during the floods probably caused subtle undermining that did not show until facilities were put to use on the spring crop.

7. Although North Vietnam probably experienced a reasonably good spring rice crop, the government's claim of a crop equal that of 1971, which has been estimated to be a record 1.3 million tons milled, is undoubtedly overstated. In spite of about two-thirds of the crop being planted with high-yield varieties, the residual effects of the flood damage to fields and irrigation facilities and the heavy burdens placed on a peasantry charged not only with normal cultivation tasks but also with supplying most of the manpower for flood repairs certainly limited output. Secondary crops, most of which are harvested in the spring, were likely reduced by the same factors. It is significant, however, that during the course of the spring season there were no public warnings of impending crop difficulties or possible food shortages, despite increased military activity and curtailed imports.

8. Unquestionably, the greatest concern after the spring harvest was that the upcoming rainy season precipitation could lead to a repeat of the disastrous 1971 floods with severe damage to the important autumn rice crop. The North Vietnamese press stated explicitly in July that the dikes

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were completely repaired and could withstand a flood of last year's magnitude. Apparently, however, Hanoi was still unsure of the quality of repairs or US intentions and seized on events to launch a propaganda campaign accusing the United States of deliberately bombing the country's dike system. Allegations of damage to all types of water control facilities grew in intensity as the rainy season progressed. At the end of July, Hanoi claimed about 170 instances of cumulative dike damage, and this number had grown to 206 by the end of August.*

9. The fear that US bombing of the dike system or poor quality repairs would combine with rains to cause widespread flooding was not borne out. Rainfall was only moderate, and river levels were well below the heights reached during last year's floods. Minor flooding – to the extent that paddy levies were intermittently submerged – was noted in several areas of the delta, but this condition is an annual occurrence caused mainly by localized rainfall and poor drainage. Available photography indicates that none of the flooding could be attributed to bomb damage.

10. The autumn harvest is now substantially completed and should be good. There have been no indications that the bombing caused any labor shortages. The non-agricultural manpower displaced by the bombing was probably made available for agricultural work, in addition to transport, communications, and bomb damage repair. Field preparation, planting, and transplanting took place on schedule, and few problems with insects and disease developed. Alternatively, however, no pronouncements touted greatly expanded planted area, higher than normal yields, or expectations of unusually high production. On the basis of analogy with past conditions, indirect evidence, and judgment, this year's total food production – both spring and autumn harvests – appears comparable with that of 1970, a year considered to be "normal" – that is, production will probably amount to some 3.6 million tons of rice equivalents.

Food Availabilities

11. From all signs, food supply to the consumer has been adequate this year. Rice available for food use from the spring harvest was apparently sufficient for consumption up to the autumn harvest. The average grain ration – 13.5 kilograms monthly – was unchanged, although at one point the non-rice share of the ration was temporarily increased from 30% to 50%. Markets in general remained well stocked throughout the year. [redacted]

[redacted] reported sporadic shortages of particular foods, but these shortages were attributed to distribution problems rather than lack of domestic stocks.

* Since the resumption of the bombing, photography has confirmed damage to water control facilities in some 60 instances and repair of damage in at least 26 of these [redacted]

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12. One solid reason for the satisfactory distribution situation has been a tightening of government control over harvested rice. The government traditionally has maintained centralized state reserves and also has stored at the cooperatives the food collected from them as the quota due to the state. After the bombing resumed, Hanoi reacted quickly to funnel as much rice as possible from the spring crop into government-controlled distribution channels. In the cooperatives, adherence to individual ration levels was stressed, and patriotic appeals urged that surpluses beyond the normal production obligations be sold to the state. Debt collection in the form of grains owed the government was stepped up and warnings were continuously issued against excessive consumption, profiteering, or abuses of the rationing system.

13. The amount of foodstuffs available from domestic supplies for both consumption and stock maintenance has also been augmented through very large imports this past year, despite the US interdiction program. In the six months or so prior to the mining, North Vietnam imported record amounts of grain from the USSR and the PRC. Since the mining, a little more than 100,000 tons of foodstuffs, mostly grains, may have been delivered, using mainly road and rail routes from China. Some sea shipments offloaded to lighters at anchorages along the North Vietnamese panhandle were also in evidence.

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Outlook

14. Agriculture has suffered no significant physical damage from the bombing and, hence, will not require a period of reconstruction, as is the prospect for other sectors of the economy. The most important immediate requirement will be for food imports to carry over to the next harvest, a requirement that, as in the past, is likely to be adequately filled by the USSR and the PRC. Food availabilities from the autumn crop should be sufficient for about five month's consumption; some 400,000-500,000 tons of imports will be needed before the next spring harvest, but this amount is not unusually large. If the current rate of imports continues through the winter, the required level can be easily reached.

15. Attainment of Hanoi's long-term objective in achieving self-sufficiency in food production will depend mainly on more intensive cultivation of relatively fixed arable acreage. This, in turn, will require further considerable investment in mechanization, fertilizer manufacture, and water control facilities and, above all, a sustained period of good weather. A return to more normal trade patterns in the future will provide

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an opportunity for greater imports of goods needed for agricultural development. At the outset, these imports will likely consist of chemical fertilizers, and possibly insecticides, that will be needed to maximize the output of the high-yield rice strains which will certainly be a major part of the 1973 spring crop. Domestic chemical fertilizer production has no doubt declined since last May, and identified imports this year have been running at about one-sixth of last year's level.

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