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10 February 1968

MEMORANDUM**SUBJECT: RVNAF Performance During the VC Tet Offensive**

1. Reporting on the performance and morale of GVN military and security forces since the start of the enemy's Tet offensive has been fragmentary. In general, it reflects a mixed bag, with GVN forces reacting aggressively and courageously in some areas, but ineffectively and with malfeasance in others. No clearcut geographic patterns are evident, except that most reports of ineffective performance come from IV Corps. In general, however, the reaction of GVN forces seems to have varied in direct relation to the professional competence and performance of their leaders.

2. Leadership at the national and Corps levels apparently has been effective. General Vien himself has reportedly been steady and dedicated, and the Commanders of the Rangers and National Police have effectively led their forces in the Saigon fighting. The III Corps Commander, General Khang, reportedly has done well, but the I Corps Commander, General Lam, has been implicitly criticized for an overly defensive posture in I Corps. The 22d and 23d Division Commanders in II Corps reportedly had their troops on alert during Tet, and had restricted Tet leaves; there are indications, however, that this alert was not fully honored in at least one province (Khanh Hoa).

3. At lower levels, the Commander of the 24th Special Sector (Kontum) reportedly performed very poorly, drawing criticism for his preoccupation with his personal safety and for the destruction caused by his heavy reliance on armor. The Province Chief in Ba Xuyen reportedly became hysterical and lost control, and the Chief of Quang Tri Province was ineffective. The Kien Hoa Province Chief, however, reportedly performed creditably even after receiving news that his family had been murdered by the Viet Cong in Saigon. In Dinh Thuan, the Province Chief and his Police Chief squabbled and blamed each other for deficiencies in security before the attack. The Kontum Province Chief reacted quickly and effectively, demonstrating excellent leadership. The Thua Thien Province Chief was forced to hide for several days when the Viet Cong

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occupied his house. The Quang Nam Chief has been quite effective in organizing and directing his forces and in attempting to maintain civil morale. No specific reports have been received on other officials at that level.

4. The alert posture of RVNAF elements varied, but seems to have been generally adequate, considering their normal standards observed during the Tet holidays. Major deficiencies were noted in Chau Doc Province, where defenses seem to have been totally relaxed for Tet. Quang Ngai forces, on the other hand, reportedly were not granted Tet leave.

5. The initial reaction of RVNAF and other security elements to the Viet Cong attacks were generally described as fair to good with the notable exception of the forces in Vinh Long, Chau Doc, and Sa Dec Provinces. There was no organized resistance to the attack in Chau Doc, and Rangers in Vinh Long were slow in reacting and unaggressive afterwards. In Sa Dec, provincial authorities initially "refused to operate." Considerable confusion was reported in the early defense of Vinh Long. ARVN units in Ba Xuyen were reported ineffective. In Phong Dinh, the reaction was slow but once the troops rallied, they displayed exceptional bravery and esprit. Outstanding defensive performances were recorded by ARVN units in An Xuyen, Khanh Hoa, Dinh Tuong, and Kien Hoa. A lack of planning and organization was reported, however, in Kien Hoa.

6. ARVN's performance, after the initial enemy attacks were repelled and the cities were secured, seems generally to have lacked aggressiveness. In only a few Provinces (Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Dinh Tuong) have there been indications of reasonably aggressive pursuit and a determination to maintain pressure on the enemy. In Quang Tri, ARVN units reacted slowly to attacks on district towns near the province capital, and their tactics tended to maximize property damage. "Overreaction" or excessive destruction was reported in other areas, including Kontum, Vinh Long, and Chau Doc. In IV Corps, ARVN forces were generally described as passive, unaggressive, and preoccupied with defensive -- rather than offensive -- operations, except in those areas where U.S. troops were brought in to assist in clearing the provincial capitals. In those instances, the presence of U.S. forces was described as "electrifying" in its impact on ARVN. The ARVN 7th Division (collocated with a brigade of the U.S. 9th Division in My Tho), however, has had its troops out on operations during the past few days.

7. There have been few reports of desertions or defections. Elements of the ARVN 45th Regiment in Ban Me Thuot may have joined the Viet Cong; troops in ARVN uniforms and in vehicles of that unit fired on a U.S. civilian compound, and the Communists claim the defection of parts of that unit. We have no information to confirm Communist claims of defections of elements of the 1st Division in Hue, or of troops in Ba Xuyen Province; however,

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the nature of the situation in Hue precludes confidence that the absence of reporting should be construed as negative confirmation. Various GVN officials have mentioned defections by individual officers assigned to headquarters and support units in the Saigon area, but details on identifications and circumstances are lacking. In two instances, troops on leave for Tet were reported returning to their units; in one case (Go Cong) they were formed into a provisional reaction company. In Sa Dec Province, however, the Viet Cong reportedly occupied a number of outposts (presumably RF and PF) in rural areas, and Liberation Front flags were reported flying over them. Also in that province, RD cadres reportedly "melted away." In Chau Doc, some military officials reportedly doffed their uniforms when the Viet Cong entered the city, but put them back on after the enemy was driven off. There is almost no information available on the status of RVNAF elements at the district, village, and hamlet level, where the Viet Cong have been active in several provinces, nor on the status of RVNAF elements on leave in rural areas during Tet. These elements would seem to be vulnerable to local VC propaganda claims of success.

8. There are few reports indicative of current RVNAF combat effectiveness. In Quang Tri, concern has been expressed about dwindling ammunition, gasoline, and other supplies and the absence of resupply movements from the beleaguered 1st Division headquarters in Hue. Reports on casualties in individual units have been rare. In two instances ARVN units are reported at considerably reduced strength; one battalion reinforcing Vinh Long reportedly had only 90 men, while another battalion in Chau Doc reportedly had only 200 men present for duty of an assigned strength of 600. It can be assumed that many units are considerably below strength because of the apparently widespread disruption of communications and transportation facilities which probably has delayed the return of troops from Tet leave. Moreover, the psychological impact of the Viet Cong offensive may add to the normally high AWOL and desertion rates associated with Tet.

9. We have virtually no reports specifically describing RVNAF morale as other than fair to good. Other indicators -- lack of aggressiveness, indiscipline in the form of looting and pilfering -- suggest that morale has been shaken to some extent. Moreover, some officers have expressed concern at the lack of U. S. military support in certain areas, and others have repeated rumors prevalent among the civil populace alleging U. S. collusion in various forms with the Viet Cong. Vietnamese Marines fighting in Saigon have expressed dissatisfaction with the U. S. M-16 rifle, alleging it is inferior to the AK-47 automatic rifle with which the Viet Cong are equipped. This concern has not been reported elsewhere, but other RVNAF elements, not so well-equipped as the Marines, may be once again apprehensive over their relatively limited firepower as they were when they first encountered enemy units armed with the new family of 7.62 mm small arms in 1964-65. The Vietnamese Marines have also reflected concern with the

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apparently plentiful supply of B-40 and B-41 rocket launchers in the hands of Viet Cong units in Saigon; they have also been used extensively in other areas and may have adversely impressed other RVNAF elements.

10. Popular reactions to ARVN performance have been mixed. In two instances (Quang Tri and Khanh Hoa), the populace reportedly has indicated gratitude or appreciation for ARVN's performance. In most areas, the people are reported to be confused, frightened, traditionally passive or non-committal, while in other areas (Quang Tri, Phan Thiet, Long Khanh, Vinh Binh, Vinh Long, Ba Xuyen, and Chau Doc) the popular reaction has been generally unfavorable to RVNAF. A mixture of these reactions has been reported in the Saigon - Gia Dinh area. Criticism of the RVNAF ranges from complaints about the lack of security to bitterness at the allegedly wanton destruction of property. In several areas (Vinh Long, Ba Xuyen, and Saigon) looting and pilfering by ARVN and police elements has been charged.

11. In sum, it is difficult to generalize, with confidence, from the fragmentary information available. It does appear that most ARVN units -- and National Police and other paramilitary elements -- reacted reasonably well to the initial attacks. Subsequently, there seems generally to have been a lack of aggressiveness and some breakdowns in discipline have been reported. It seems likely that morale and confidence have been shaken to some degree, but morale does not appear to have collapsed. It would also seem likely that most units are at least temporarily well below normal strength. Because of the disruption of communications, RVNAF units may not be well-informed of the situation, and thus susceptible to the same rumors that seem to be upsetting the civil populace. Their vulnerability to Viet Cong propaganda is thus also probably greater than usual. On balance, some ARVN elements would seem to be ill-prepared for sustained or renewed pressure without a respite of several weeks. While many units can still be expected to perform well and give good account of themselves, some of those in isolated areas and operating without close U. S. support might disintegrate. We would expect RF and PF elements to be generally more shaky than ARVN, particularly those in relatively isolated rural areas.

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Mr. K. T. Johnson

Attached is our contribution to the assessment of RVNAF effectiveness. It is based on our field reporting, as requested. It has not been fully coordinated within the Agency, because of the late production time. We would hope to be able to review your draft, if your product is to be construed as jointly agreed.

GEORGE W. ALLEN
Vietnamese Affairs Staff

Attachment

cc: Director
DDI
DDP/FE
SAYA/Chrono
VAS/RAC