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E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4

NEJ 94-276

Saigon 2869, August 11, 1967

By 48, NARA, Date 11-2-94

*Pres file*

1. Dong Ha incident. Full account of Quang Tri Dong Ha affair and developments flowing from it have been reported in course of past few days. Texts of candidates communique contained Saigon 2767; candidates August 8 letter, Saigon 2885; Government of Viet Nam's August 11 letter, Saigon 2868. Reports of Ambassador's conversations with Thieu and Ky on subject transmitted Saigon 2886 and 2867. In brief, it appears incident arose chiefly from unfortunate circumstances which led to misunderstandings between candidates and Government of Viet Nam. Despite many allegations and charges, it does not seem mix-up was a premeditated Government of Viet Nam act to humiliate candidates as latter allege but was rather contributions of bad weather and poor planning, execution and judgment by certain Government of Viet Nam officials, combined with impatience and suspicion on part of candidates who have subsequently decided exploit issue for obvious political purposes. Neither side has acted in way designed to resolve issue easily and permit resumption official campaign but it does not appear at this time that it will lead to withdrawal of candidates from race. Both Thieu and Ky expressed confidence today that matter would be worked out, but Tuong letter does not seem to afford likely basis for satisfying candidates desires. We have counseled moderation on both sides and urged that this affair not be allowed to block campaign effort and ultimate free and fair elections. Private campaigning by several candidates or their representatives is continuing. In short, your characterization of Dong Ha incident is accurate in so far as we know the facts. It might be added that General Thieu in his August 8 press conference specifically said that any request from the candidates for assistance in transportation and facilities would be met. He said that if there were errors in the government handling of campaign arrangements would accept the blame, and he stated his willingness to work with the other candidates to make the campaign a success.
2. Ky comments re military coup. Ky has explained to Ambassador that he was misquoted and that what he said was that he was convinced Vietnamese people would not accept an illegal or fraudulently elected government and that he would not either. We believe conclusion stated reference telegram that Thieu and Ky have indicated they will accept election results is warranted from number of statements they have both made to Ambassador in recent conversations. Ambassador has specifically told Ky that we cannot countenance any coups and Ky stated that there will not be any coups.
3. Report on alleged "military affairs committee." We agree that allegations have no significant basis in fact so far as can be ascertained. Thieu and Ky have both said this to Ambassador. Constitution does provide for armed forces council to operate in military arena but this is presumably not the council referred to. As interpreted by Ky today in conversation with

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Ambassador, group is presumably the military members of the Directorate who meet regularly to consider matters relating to reorganization and improvement to Republic of Viet Nam Armed Forces, pacification and related subjects. Ky stated there is no inner group which will seek to control government after elections as called and said this story could be flatly denied.

4. Conduct of elections. Following is requested summary statement of our views on government conduct in respect to free elections. Both General Thieu and General Ky are on the public record with pledges to conduct free and fair elections, and they have made similar statements to Ambassador. They have both called on all officials concerned to make sure that the elections are indeed fair and free. Ky in particular took advantage of several meetings of provincial officials involved with the elections to make this point. Press censorship has been lifted, and Vietnamese journalists have not hesitated to print articles that are very critical of the government and quite favorable to some of the civilian candidates. TV and radio arrangements have been very good and completely free. The candidates got what they asked for, and there have been no complaints. The government has also assisted the candidates by giving them a large sum of money which they are free to spend as they see fit on their campaign. These arrangements are most unusual in any country, and they certainly go well beyond anything that the American government has ever considered doing for opposition candidates. It must be admitted that in the pre-campaign period, Ky did a number of things that suggested the election would be unfair and unequal. The reaction to these efforts was very strong, and was engaged in an effort to prove that he would not take unfair advantage when the merger of the Thieu and Ky slates took place. Since that time, the Government record has been good in general. We do not feel that the evidence to date suggests that the government has treated the other candidates unfairly or that Thieu-Ky are determined to win the election by fair means or foul. Certainly they do want to win, and they are making full use of the normal advantages of the incumbent -- such things as non-political inspection trips and ceremonies, and gestures to various segments of the population, are taking place. But we find it hard, for example, to criticize Ky for presiding at ceremonies where land titles are handed out to peasants as part of the land reform program, and we think that few honest critics would do so. That is about the worst that he has done since the formal campaign began. There are also charges of secret orders to province chiefs and military commanders to insure that the votes go to the Thieu-Ky ticket. These are very difficult to evaluate. To our knowledge there is no hard evidence of such orders. In large part it appears to be more a matter of influence and the natural tendency here to try to placate the authorities. This tendency will certainly help the Thieu-Ky ticket, but Thieu-Ky can hardly be blamed for it. It is a legacy of centuries of authoritarian rule and will not be banished overnight by any regime.

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5. Ambassador Bunker concurs in substance of foregoing.

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