

INFORMATION

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Thursday, December 14, 1967
10:30 a. m.

Pres file

Mr. President:

Herewith Amb. Bunker's latest
weekly, with key passages marked.

W. W. Rostow

Saigon 13288

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WWRostow:rln

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FOR THE PRESIDENT FROM BUNKER (Saigon 13288)

Herewith my thirty-first weekly telegram:

A. General

The past week has been marked by an intensification of military activity throughout the country; by progress of both Houses of the Assembly in organization, the Senate having completed approval of its rules; by apprehension and sensitivity on the part of the public press and officials concerning the U. S. attitude and intentions toward the National Liberation Front; and by continued progress in the Vietnamese Government priority programs.

The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and Free World Forces have given a good account of themselves and the Communists have suffered a series of heavy military setbacks in the past week. Performance of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces has been a further encouraging demonstration of the improvement in the quality of these forces. They have more than held up their end.

The Senate, having completed approval of its rules and regulations, is expected to elect officers this week, to proceed with the formation of committees, and should soon get down to serious work. The House has lagged behind but is making steady though slower progress.

Sensitivity about U. S. relations with the National Liberation Front were heightened by the report of the arrest of a National Liberation Front emissary, by the false newspaper accounts that high officials of the Embassy had been in contact with National Liberation Front representatives in Saigon, and by reports on the possibility of National Liberation Front representatives coming to New York. In my talk with President Thieu on December 6, I called his attention to these unfounded and false statements in the press, to widespread editorial comment based on false assumptions and my very definite feeling that some Vietnamese Government officials were in part responsible for the rumors. I added that I knew it was not necessary to assure him that no consultations would be undertaken with the National Liberation Front without full consultation with his government. I said that I thought that a statement by the Vietnamese Government to allay these false reports, which could only be damaging to our relations, would be in order. Forthright statements by Prime Minister Loc and Foreign Minister Do on the next day, December 7, and the helpful statement made by the spokesman of the Department of State on December 8 have helped to abate these suspicions. I held a press reception for Vietnamese editors on December 7, at which I made the same point, with beneficial effects in

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the Vietnamese language press the next day. The statement by the department spokesman on our view of the situation at the U. N. and a future political structure in the south also helped to clear the air. The Vietnamese, however, continue to be highly sensitive about the National Liberation Front and our attitude toward it.

The situation, of course, is not helped by such things as the article in the forthcoming issue of Newsweek alleging that there have been increasing numbers of contacts between American and Viet Cong representatives. The substance of the story has already appeared in the Saigon newspapers. I told Thieu there was no truth in these reports and I had no idea of the sources of the allegations.

We have virtually completed coordination of the Christmas stand-down question with the Government of Vietnam, with agreement reached on a 24-hour ceasefire at Christmas and in principle, on 24- and 48-hour ceasefires, respectively, at New Year's and Tet holidays, provided the Christmas stand-down is carried out satisfactorily. I expect that this will be fully resolved in a few days. Foreign Minister Tran Van Do expects that the announcement can be made this week, when coordination with our other allies is completed.

General Westmoreland told me on December 11 that during a meeting between him and Minister of Defense Vy on December 9, the latter had said that President Thieu and General Cao Van Vien had agreed that Vietnamese Government forces, in "hot pursuit" of enemy forces near the Cambodian border, should be permitted to pursue them across the border. Vietnamese Government forces would not remain in Cambodia but would withdraw as soon as contact was broken or the enemy forces defeated. I discussed the matter with President Thieu on December 12, pointing out the difficult problems that the proposed Government of Vietnam policy would raise for us. I recommended to him that he hold in abeyance any final decisions on this policy and make no further public statements on the subject until our positions have been clarified, saying that we hoped that we might have some influence on Sihanouk and that we wanted at least to make an effort with him. Thieu said he understood our concern and agreed with what I proposed.

I took Senator Percy to call on President Thieu December 12. The Senator said he wished to make clear to Thieu that no responsible people in either the Democratic or the Republican party favored U. S. withdrawal from Vietnam. He asked Thieu what he thought the prospects were for negotiations. Thieu replied that he felt he knew the political thinking of Hanoi pretty well and that he saw no chance of meaningful negotiations before the U. S. elections. He thought the enemy would keep up military pressures against us and try to achieve some victories which would have an impact on American opinion.

Senator Percy discussed foreign support for the Government of Vietnam and commented that there is a feeling in the U. S. that if other Asian nations also thought Vietnam was important, we would like to see a greater degree of support from them. Thieu mentioned the planned increase in Thai, Australian and New Zealand forces. Senator Percy suggested that nations such as Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Japan might do more. Thieu reviewed Japan's contribution on the non-military side and commented that the Government of Vietnam would welcome any additional Asian aid that might be offered.

The afternoon of December 12, Senator and Mrs. Percy and their party at the Senator's insistence flew up to Dak Son in Phuoc Long Province near the Cambodian border, the unfortunate village which the Communists attacked December 5, killing a large number of civilians with grenades and flame throwers. While visiting there, the Viet Cong fired several mortar rounds at the town. The Percy party was unhurt, though the Senator was scratched when he dove for cover. Even though the Senator insisted on visiting Dak Son, I think we should not have permitted him to go and we are tightening up our procedures. I'm sure he doesn't have to be told that those Communists out there are not "peaceful agrarian reformers", as some of our critics would have us believe.

B. Priority Programs

1. Mobilization measures -- The new partial mobilization decree discussed in last week's message is in line with the steps recommended to the Government of Vietnam by the Mission Council.

In general, the Regular Forces requirement for the first quarter of 1968 should run 20-24,000 men. It is expected that one-half of this requirement will be met through volunteers, leaving 10-20,000 to be conscripted. The Director of Mobilization indicates that he expects to meet his requirement for conscripts through draft-dodger roundups, by calling men in the 20 year old age group, and by calling those former students 20 years old and above who will lose their educational deferments on January 1, 1968. Therefore, the number in the age group 21 to 33 in the labor force will be called during the first quarter of the calendar year should be minimal. The subject of calling the 18 and 19 year age group has been discussed at some length with the Director of Mobilization. There appears to be strong political opposition to this proposal, and it appears that the Government of Vietnam must move slowly on this.

We shall discuss with the Government of Vietnam ministries a list of the essential occupational skills within their areas of interest. These essential skills should be listed in order of priority and submitted to the Minister of Defense as positions to be considered for the "mobilization in place" provision of the decree law. Continued refinement of this list can be accomplished as a joint U. S. /Government of Vietnam

effort. We hope that the Ministry of Defense will delay the conscription or recall of such persons until a final refinement can be made.

2. Reorganization of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces -- Logistic improvement in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces is expected in a plan presently underway. This will streamline Army of the Republic of Vietnam Infantry Divisions support capability by consolidation by various direct support companies into a functionalized support battalion. This should bring improvement in command and control, increased general response, and most important, inculcation of a forward moving concept of support.

An example of the continued improvement of the Vietnamese Armed Forces was the brilliant performance of the 21st Army of the Republic of Vietnam Division in Chuong Thien Province in the Delta. A search and destroy operation, Dan Chi III 15C, was launched in the early morning hours of December 8 about 9 kilometers northwest of Vi Thanh. The battle began when friendly elements were helicopter lifted into the area of operations to form an encirclement of enemy forces. The 43rd Ranger, 44th Ranger, two companies of the 31st Infantry and 2 companies from the 43rd Rangers were lifted to the south and southeast of the Kinh O Mon Canal. One company from the 42nd Rangers, one company from the 31st infantry and the 31st Infantry were helicopter lifted into blocking positions, encircling and trapping the enemy. By mid-afternoon, the cavalry troops maneuvered up the east side of the canal and all elements began to tighten the noose. Heavy contact was made and maintained throughout daylight hours of the 8th. During the night of the 8th, sporadic fires were exchanged and on the 9th, friendly elements continued the attack by sweeping the enemy positions from two directions. Heavy fighting continued all day on the 9th. As of daylight on the 10th, sporadic contact continued. Cumulative results of this operation so far show 439 enemy killed and 31 detained. Friendly casualties are 67 killed and 109 wounded, six of the wounded are U. S.

3. Reorganization of civilian administration -- A welcome development has been the plans of the new Minister of Transport and Communications, Luong The Sieu, to overhaul the organization and management of air Vietnam, considered by the former minister to be largely a fete of his own. The minister proposes to serve as chairman of the board, appointing the outstanding able Air Vietnam Technical Director, Nguyen Tan Viet, as president. Nguyen Tan Trung, the capable ex-general manager (ousted by former minister Thuan in August, 1967) will be re-employed in the capacity of financial and administrative director. Minister Sieu has instructed the new Secretary General of Transport Thien to recover as much as possible of the more than one million dollars paid to Air Viet to date in the apparently distributed to various and sundry beneficiaries by Thuan from a separate extra-legal account. The company is to be recapitalized, the 24 percent French interest bought out, and 49 percent of a capital stock reissue offered for sale to the Vietnamese private sector. The airline will move ahead rapidly to acquire Boeing's 727's (it will be recalled that Thuan was reported to be on the verge of buying Caravelles). The minister intends to put these into domestic service at

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nine internal airfields, and has set as a first priority target improving the image of the airline and the new Government of Vietnam in the rural areas.

4. Pacification measures -- This vital priority area is in the midst of a spurt of year-end activity, as Government of Vietnam agencies seek to complete both the 1967 program and plans for the more ambitious program scheduled in 1968. Since the Vietnamese year really runs from Tet to Tet, the Government of Vietnam is counting on using January to finish up 1967 effort before launching the 1968 program following Tet, the end of the lunar year. General Tri, the new Minister of Revolutionary Development, and General Thang are working well together. Both have been spending more than half their time in the field. So far, the 1968 plans they have approved have been entirely in line with our objective of stepped-up pacification in 1968 -- number of hamlets are more than 50 percent greater than in last year's plans and substantial budget increases have been granted. Moreover, the comprehensive military/civil planning on priorities, level of effort, and creation of additional Regular Forces/Popular Forces that preceded the field review is paying off.

I believe that the reorganization of our advisory and supporting role which you approved last June has been even more successful than expected. Single management has paid off. Integration of our civil-military effort has resulted also in increased Vietnamese military interest in pacification as well.

A most promising development is General Thang's intent to train most Popular Force platoons, beginning with some 35,000 men in 1968, for pacification duties as well as local defense. The Popular Force soldier is no longer to be merely a combatant. He must also serve as a cadre whose duty is to fight and build at the same time. The Popular Force training program will be totally overhauled, instructors will be retrained at Vung Tau, 44 mobile instruction teams will be formed, and the 37 small Popular Force training centers will be consolidated into 11 larger, more effective ones. This is a tall order, which we will probably have to support with additional military advisors and some construction assistance.

On the problem side, Bob Komer is disturbed by the continuing high rate of Revolutionary Development team attrition, which is back up to 25-30 percent after an earlier drop. Of course, the Revolutionary Development cadremen are volunteers, and allowed to quit if they so desire. We are developing a package of remedial measures, including more military discipline. The new mobilization decree may also reduce attrition, since Revolutionary Development team members are temporarily draft exempt.

5. Attack on corruption -- Prime Minister Loc is continuing to take measures in his attack on corruption. In addition to the action being taken against the former minister of transport and communications, reported above, and the replacement of the director general of customs, President Thieu mentioned to me yesterday that the former vice minister of information and the director general of supply are under

investigation. He said that the Prime Minister is also clamping down on activities abroad by Loan's secret security service operator, Mai Den, whose activities had not been confined to collecting intelligence. Thieu said that as a result of these actions by the Prime Minister, individuals who had been ousted had started a press campaign against Loc. Thieu added that he recognized the difficulties this created for the Prime Minister, but had instructed him to go ahead and said that he intended to back him fully on these measures.

6. Economic stabilization -- Although in the period immediately preceding the American military build-up the war was going badly, there was little pressure on the country's economic resources. With the arrival of American troops, the situation began to change. Prices rose by 125 percent between May of 1965 and July of 1966. The rice harvest declined by one million tons, and about one and a half million people left the land.

By the end of 1966, the economy had reached full employment, a much greater degree of urbanization, and imports were providing a large part of the basic food supply.

This year, 1967, has been a relatively stable one. Retail prices have increased 30 percent overall, about half of that during the first quarter. Food prices, particularly rice, pork and fish, have increased the most. There is little or no unemployment, but labor shortages are serious only in the higher skills. Finally, gains in real income made by some urban classes in 1965-66 have now spread to rural areas. Imports have been the most effective anti-inflationary tool used during the past three years. The total level of imports more than doubled from 1965 to 1967, and the successful devaluation of June, 1966, greatly increased their money-absorbing effect. But since imports alone cannot completely control inflation, we have made efforts to convince the Government of Vietnam of the need to increase domestic tax collections, with only modest success. Credit has been effectively restrained, but no effort has yet been made to encourage savings through high interest rates. There has been some success in holding wages down, but salaries of public servants have fallen behind, and their morale and efficiency have suffered. Price controls and rationing have never been successful in Vietnam, and we have opposed their use by the Government of Vietnam. In the future, we plan to concentrate more heavily on encouraging an increase in domestic production as a method of containing inflation. Since resources are fully employed, major advances will be difficult, but because resources are sometimes employed inefficiently, some progress can be made.

Finally, it has been necessary to set expenditure ceilings on our own programs. The 1967 ceiling of 58 billion piasters has been held, and we are trying to hold 1968 expenditures under 63.2 billion piasters.

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Prices next year could be about as stable as this year, but there are some dangers, particularly in the first half. The new Vietnamese Government will probably take some months to settle down to hard economic decisions. It may be difficult to hold within reasonable limits the long deferred civil service wage increases. And in the first half of the year, import arrivals threaten to go through a temporary decline. For the year as a whole, we anticipate that money supply, the chief indicator of inflationary pressure, will increase by slightly more than it has in 1967, and inflation should continue to be held to a tolerable level.

7. Peace -- We have been in close touch with the Government of Vietnam regarding a possible new initiative on Vietnam in the U. N. The Government of Vietnam understands our position on a possible invitation to the National Liberation Front by the Security Council and appreciates that, as a consequence of Security Council Rule 39, we would be obliged to document National Liberation Front representatives to appear. In a conversation with the political counselor December 11, Tran Van Do made clear that, in such an event, the Government of Vietnam would only appear pursuant to Article 32 of the charter (appearances by members and non-members states) in contrast to the National Liberation Front, which would appear pursuant to Security Council Rule 39 (statements by individuals and groups), Foreign Minister Do told the political counselor he expected to issue a statement in the next few days which would clarify the Government of Vietnam's position on the appearance of the National Liberation Front at the U. N. and related questions.

In my conversation with President Thieu on December 2, I brought him up to date on developments in New York, noting in particular that Ambassador Goldberg has been in close touch with the Vietnamese Government's representative at the U. N., Ambassador Nguyen Huu Chi. Thieu asked my opinion on the probability of action in the Security Council. I replied that I thought action unlikely in view of the unchanged Soviet attitude on Vietnam. However, the Mansfield Resolution, which was recently unanimously approved in the Senate, required us to explore the situation carefully, which we were doing. I noted that Hanoi radio on December 9 reported that the National Liberation Front denied as "sheer fabrication" the reports that the National Liberation Front wished to send representatives to the U. N.

During my meeting with President Thieu December 6, I reviewed with him the status of his proposed letter to Ho Chi Minh suggesting direct talks between North and South Vietnam. He has not yet completed drafting the letter, though he indicated it would be very similar to the draft I left with him November 28. He is still having problems with finding a suitable channel for delivery of the letter. Hanoi and the National Liberation Front have already rejected the letter in radio broadcasts.

In a conversation with the political counselor on December 11, Foreign Minister Tran Van Do said that he had drafted a statement for Prime Minister Loc to issue which would restate the role and future possibilities for Chieu Hoi ralliers under the Government of Vietnam national reconciliation policy. It would make clear that ralliers who give up Communism would be welcomed, given full rights as citizens, and their talents used by the Government of Vietnam in accordance with their qualifications. This would be a logical domestic counterpoint to the very firm statement issued by the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on December 4 which makes it clear that, while negotiations between North and South Vietnam are necessary to bring the war to an end, the Government of Vietnam will refuse to accept the presence of the National Liberation Front as a separate delegation in any peace talks. We understand that Prime Minister Loc will make a statement in the National Assembly on the subject. This will give it greater weight and will associate the Assembly more directly, in the mind of the public, with the stand of the government. The Upper House, for its part, on December 8, approved a declaration condemning acts of terrorism and sabotage by the National Liberation Front.

C. Land Reform

Since I understand that the Moss Committee may issue a report on land reform this week, I thought it would be interesting to summarize the recommendations for policy recently proposed to us by J. Price Gittinger of the World Bank who studied the matter here for two months. Mr. Gittinger believes that land reform is not one of the most critical issues facing the United States in Vietnam. Tenure grievances are not high on the list of peasant complaints, and the inequality of holdings is not a serious problem compared with conditions in Latin America where in some countries, nine percent of the owners hold 90 percent of the land in units of more than 100 hectares. More than a third of all rented riceland in Vietnam was expropriated for transfer to former tenants during the land reform of the fifties, and over 80 percent of the land is now held in units of less than 50 hectares.

Nonetheless, Mr. Gittinger recommended that we give continuing attention to speeding up the distribution of titles on former French lands and proposed further consideration of possible expropriation of all non-resident land should there be objective evidence that this is necessary in support of pacification. Moreover, in my talk with President Thieu today, I urged him to promulgate the ordinance we have prepared suggesting the delegation of land tenure administration to the local village councils. He replied that this and other measures were under study by the Minister of Agriculture who was working on a comprehensive plan of land reform. He added that he expected that this plan would be presented to him within a few days and that he would endeavor to take it up at the next Cabinet meeting. Mr. Gittinger's findings confirm the view of the mission here that the land reform problem is not so serious as has been suggested by some.

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D. Political

In a call on Prime Minister Loc on December 4 (covered in a previous telegram) Ambassador Eugenie Anderson suggested that the Government of South Vietnam was not doing enough to present its cause abroad. Loc admitted that this was the case and that improvement of the Vietnamese diplomatic service was the first point in the government program he announced on November 13. He said he planned to strengthen the Foreign Ministry as well as Vietnamese missions abroad. A subsequent conversation with Foreign Minister Tran Van Do indicates that while he is planning certain changes to improve the functioning of the Foreign Ministry and Foreign Service, especially in the information field, his plans are not as extensive as we had hoped. Pham Dang Lam, Vietnamese Ambassador to the Philippines, will apparently function only part-time as Under Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, commuting from Manila. Lam, who is experienced and capable (long-time Secretary General of the Ministry and Foreign Minister in 1964 and again in 1965) might have done a good deal to reinvigorate the Government of South Vietnam diplomatic effort, but we understand he did not want to return to Saigon. Do told President Thieu he did not really need Lam to assist him in this effort. It has become a somewhat delicate personal issue, so we are not pressing in on it at the moment. We shall see how this develops before deciding what might be most helpful from our side.

In the same conversation with Ambassador Anderson, Prime Minister Loc pointed out that the plethora of statements about Vietnam emanating from the United States causes great difficulties for the Government of South Vietnam, compounded by the fact that the U. S. as a country has vast communications resources which tend to overwhelm Vietnam through the radio, newspapers, and even over TV. Loc said that irresponsible remarks by U. S. opponents of our policy in Vietnam have a demoralizing effect on public opinion in South Vietnam and encourage the North to fight on in the belief that sooner or later dissension in the U. S. will cause us to withdraw from South Vietnam. Ambassador Anderson explained that we could not simply silence our critics, although we recognize the deplorable effect their pronouncements can sometimes have on those fighting for their freedom in Vietnam.

We were very much encouraged at the very strong and forthright support for South Vietnam and for the allied effort in the Vietnam conflict which was provided by the Third General Assembly of the Asian Parliamentary Union in Bangkok, which closed December 6. The political resolution adopted by the Assembly voiced forceful approval of South Vietnam and the allied effort in the Vietnam war, which it described as "undeniably a war instigated and waged by North Vietnam, aided and abetted by other Communist nations, in violation

of the 1954 Geneva Agreement." It supported the bombing of North Vietnam and cautioned that demands for unilateral peace moves give moral support to the Communists in their attempt to compel the withdrawal of allied forces from South Vietnam. The resolution is further evidence that the free Asian nations are well aware of the stakes in Vietnam and are by no means neutral in the struggle, as some of our critics would have us believe.

We had a brief echo of Mr. Truong Dinh Dzu, the opposition leader who ran second to President Thieu in the September 3 elections. On December 7, according to a statement by Dzu to American journalists, the police sought to arrest him and put him in prison. He said he refused to go with them, since they had no warrant for his arrest, and that they left without further disturbing him. [REDACTED] told an Embassy officer December 11 that he had had an extended conversation with Dzu December 9, that Dzu was still at home (though under house arrest), and that it appeared unlikely he would be arrested, as Dzu stated to the American journalists. Although we feel that Dzu has largely shot his bolt and is not highly regarded in South Vietnam, we were struck to learn that a National Liberation Front representative named Lam (no other name given), in an interview with a newspaper in Florence, Italy, stated that the National Liberation Front is "ready to support and respect the democratic front created by Dzu." This National Liberation Front evaluation of the significance of Dzu (whose democratic front is Moribund) is as faulty as many of its other judgments, but the fact the statement was made remains of interest.

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E. Economic

The Saigon Price Index rose to 305, compared to last week's level of 300, after a month of stability. Most rice prices were unchanged, but pork, shrimp, selected vegetables and fruits, and charcoal prices rose. The Imported Commodity Index also rose, both tendencies related to the oncoming TET holiday season when prices rise seasonally. The Government of South Vietnam is making a particular effort to keep open vital route No. 4 between Saigon and the Mekong Delta, over which much of Saigon's food normally travels. Saboteurs (presumably Viet Cong) sank three 150-ton sand-filled craft, blocking an important canal linking Saigon with the Mekong Delta area. The Canal carries large quantities of rice to market in Saigon. The Government of South Vietnam has decided to blast a passage through the sunken hulks to restore traffic.

In a speech before members of Vietnamese business organizations on December 8, Minister of Economy Truong Thai Ton said that the Government of South Vietnam wishes "to build a capitalist economy for the masses in order to achieve self-sufficiency, --that the government should minimize centralization" and at the same time orientate the creation of capital for the benefit of the poorer classes

of society." He said that the program of increasing production is aimed at improving the living conditions of the people. "But under the circumstances of war, we can only devote our efforts to increase production in the comparatively more secure areas."

F. Chieu Hoi

During the past week there were 215 returnees, compared to 309 the previous week and 772 during the same period of 1966. Particularly noteworthy, however, was the defection of a 35-member Viet Cong village platoon from Binh Lam Village, Quang Tin Province. Twenty of the total are civilian, and 15 are military. The 35 defectors were joined by three additional ralliers from a nearby village to make up a total of 38 in the group, the largest to defect as a whole. Extensive wire service coverage has been arranged for this story, and there will be follow-up exploitation. The Viet Cong platoon leader told the press they were not happy with treatment they had been getting from a North Vietnam Army Regiment in the area, but with the stepped-up Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army activity recently, they had to organize their escape carefully, breaking away in small groups between November 26 and December 5 in order not to draw fire. All ralliers had families which had been evacuated as refugees when the U.S. 196th Brigade swept through Binh Lam Village recently, freeing the members of the Platoon for their escape. Our operations may "create" refugees, as charged, but they also allow ralliers to get their families out and then escape on their own.

Prime Minister Loc decorated five returnees and six Chieu Hoi Ministry Staff members December 10. Two of those decorated were former Viet Cong Lt. Colonels, who have been appointed to responsible positions in the Ministry of Chieu Hoi affairs. During a visit to Quang Tin Province December 9, the Prime Minister distributed substantial cash awards directly to former Viet Cong members who gave information to the government on the location of Viet Cong weapons caches and base camp complexes.

G. Vietnamese Killed

During the week ending December 9 the enemy killed 232 Vietnamese civilians, wounded 439, and kidnapped 104. This does not include all of the large number of civilians killed at Dak Son, Phuoc Long Province, on December 5, since the total figure remains to be determined. Among the dead reported for the week were 18 Revolutionary Development workers, one village chief, three hamlet chiefs, and 115 refugees killed at Dak Son. During the same week the enemy killed 360 Vietnamese military personnel. Since January 1, 1967, the Viet Cong have killed 3,709 civilians, wounded 7,300, and kidnapped 4,591.