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Wednesday, February 7, 1968

FOR THE PRESIDENT

TEXT OF CABLE FROM BUNKER (Saigon 18399)

SUBJECT: Hanoi's Expectations From and Reaction To Its Recent Offensive

As information from documents and prisoners captured in the recent fighting begins to accumulate, the evidence is growing that Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army planning relied heavily on prospects of a "general uprising" and large-scale defections of Army of the Republic of Vietnam units to make possible a Communist take-over of the administration of many provincial capitals and territorial units. Their tactics were designed to encourage such a development.

One technique was to try to render Army of the Republic of Vietnam units leaderless. In several cases, enemy forces were given the specific mission of killing or kidnapping various high-ranking Army of the Republic of Vietnam Commanders and paralyzing Army of the Republic of Vietnam command posts (the Joint General Staff compound itself was one specific object of the attack) in the belief that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam units concerned would then defect to the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army side. The Communists invented a special organization -- the Revolutionary Armed Forces -- to enable defecting Army of the Republic of Vietnam units to team up with the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army without having to join the People's Liberation Armed Forces as such. The other prime target of the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army operation was the administrative and police structure throughout the country, and Communist propaganda from the earliest hours of the offensive referred to the importance of establishing revolutionary administrations to supplant those of the "puppet government" destroyed by the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army attack. There are reports of individuals having already been nominated for key jobs in the new Viet Cong administrative apparatus and of plans even having been made for a flag-raising ceremony for the new Viet Cong administration in Kontum on the first day of the lunar new year.

The virtually total absence of the usually elaborate Viet Cong withdrawal plans as well as the "no retreat" instruction given to the units concerned strongly suggest that it was believed that all they would have to do was to seize their objective and hold it for a brief period of time while the masses of the people and the defecting Army of the Republic of Vietnam could be mobilized for their support.

There is growing evidence, in captured documents and interrogation reports as well as Communist propaganda, that a mass shift in popular support to the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army was anticipated as the allied military situation deteriorated and Government of Vietnam administrative authority crumpled. Here again a special organization -- the Alliance of National and Peaceful Forces --

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was invented to make it possible to defect from the government side without actually becoming part of the National Liberation Front itself. Some enemy units even had instructions not -- repeat not -- to damage installations and equipment (at Tan Son Nhut Airfield, for example), as these should be kept intact for Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army use.

The tenacity with which the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army have held on to some of the areas they have captured (in Hue and parts of Saigon, for instance) also suggests that the leadership envisaged a seize-and-hold, not a hit-and-run operation. The only way this would be possible with the forces available to the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army would be if they received massive popular and Army of the Republic of Vietnam support.

It is clear by now that the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army expectations were not fulfilled -- we know of no Army of the Republic of Vietnam unit which defected to the enemy, and the popular uprising simply did not take place. In part, this may have been due to the failure of specific operations -- the attempts to kill or kidnap commanders almost all failed, as did many efforts to seize key installations. The principal point, however, is that the Communists misjudged the temper of the people and the Army -- they simply were not ready to throw in their lot with the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army. The result is that the new groups which the Viet Cong set up for defectors among the Army and people remain unmanned; the areas which the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army wrestled from the Government of Vietnam are being taken back; the Government of Vietnam is pulling itself together; and it is the Government of Vietnam, not the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army or the new front groups, which is in control of the cities and is starting the long -- and potentially politically profitable -- rehabilitation effort.

In sum, we can say that, while the recent offensive without question brought definite successes for the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army, it would appear that the enemy's expectations were fairly sharply disappointed and Hanoi is now confronted with quite a different situation than it had anticipated.

Hanoi's response to the current situation is not yet clear, and it may indeed still be taking shape. We have noted one interesting straw in the wind on a key subject -- negotiations with the allies. It is a Cabanes piece from Hanoi (reporter from Paris AFP transmitted in English, February 5) which analyzes a February 5 Nhan Dan article on President Johnson's February 2 press conference. According to Cabanes, the Nhan Dan article indicates that Hanoi now feels that it has given sufficient signs of goodwill on the negotiation issue and that it is up to President Johnson to make the next move. Cabanes says Hanoi "no longer expects a positive reply in the near future from Washington to its offer to negotiate", though it will not close the door to talks if President Johnson should eventually come around. This sounds to us as if Hanoi leadership, disappointed in any hopes that their recent offensive would put them in a position of strength which they might have felt would have permitted them to bring some flexibility into their negotiating posture, have decided that negotiations should not be pursued at present unless President Johnson knuckles under.

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This one sign, then, points to a digging in of heels on Hanoi's part, a posture that would be consistent with Hanoi's earlier responses to adversity. However, what their final position will be remains to be seen, and indeed may not be determined pending further developments -- Khe Sanh, for instance.