

INFORMATION

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Thursday, February 8, 1968
6:05 p. m.

free file

Mr. President:

Herewith an extraordinarily interesting summary from Ellsworth Bunker. Thus far pluses greater than minuses, although we are not out of the woods.

W. W. Rostow

Saigon 18582

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WWRostow:rln

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White House Guidelines, Feb. 24, 1983
By Ng, NARA, Date 1-21-92

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Thursday, February 8, 1968

FOR THE PRESIDENT FROM BUNKER (Saigon 18582)

Herewith my Thirty-Eighth Weekly Telegram:

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Authority State 11-7-78 letter
By 11/1 KARIS, Date 3-15-79

A. General

Because of the emergency situation caused by the Viet Cong Tet attacks, my last report was sent to you on February 4, just four days ago. Nevertheless, I think enough has happened in the meantime to justify a short report at this time. As more facts concerning the massive Tet offensive of the enemy comes to light and the story unfolds, a number of things become evident. Information is being steadily accumulated as reports come in from the country and Saigon. Consequently, what were somewhat tentative assumptions a few days ago begin to take more definite shape.

It seems fairly clear now that:

A. Plans for the offensive were worked out long in advance and with meticulous care. Instances have come to light in which enemy units were infiltrators disguised as civilians to reconnoiter targets, withdrawn, and re-infiltrated again as civilians immediately before the attack.

B. Commitment of enemy troops was considerably larger than the estimate I reported in my last message. Estimates now are that 52,000 enemy troops, plus another possible 10,000 guerrillas, for a total of approximately 62,000 enemy forces, were committed to these widespread attacks.

C. The enemy believed that there would be uprisings in their support and that they would be able to take over many of the cities. This is supported by captured documents and prisoner interrogations which indicated that enemy troops were told they would find popular support, that there would be defections from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam troops, and that reinforcements would follow. Unlike previous heavy attacks, they had no orders covering possible withdrawal. The tenacity with which the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army have held on to some of the areas they have captured (as in Hue and parts of Saigon) also suggests that the leaders envisaged a seize-and-hold and not a hit-and-run operation. Given the forces available to the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, this would not be possible without massive popular and Army of the Republic of Vietnam support. The enemy radio constantly pounded on the theme that the masses were rising to help the Viet Cong, and the government forces were defecting to join with the Communist troops.

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LYNDON BAIN

A particularly interesting captured document is the order of the day from the headquarters of the South Vietnam Liberation Army to all military forces in South Vietnam. The document has a tone of urgency and calls all enemy troops "to liberate the 14 million people of South Vietnam" and "fulfill our revolutionary task." It refers to the attacks as the greatest battle in Vietnamese history and states that the assaults "will decide the fate and survival of the fatherland". It exhorts the enemy forces "to achieve the final victory at all costs."

D. No popular uprisings took place in any city, nor did the security forces defect to the enemy. Initially, many Vietnamese were frightened and impressed by the enemy's ability to attack on such a wide scale, and their confidence in the ability of their government and the United States to provide security was shaken. Now they have observed that the enemy was not able to stand in the face of our forces but has instead fallen back and has been able to remain in none of the cities he has tried to seize. The reaction consequently has changed from one of apprehension and doubt to anger, indignation, and resentment at the treachery of the enemy's attack during the Tet holidays, at the widespread destruction he has caused, and the terrorist tactics he has employed.

E. The enemy has suffered a major military defeat. He has suffered losses on an unprecedented scale. From the early morning hours of January 31 until midnight of February 7, the enemy lost nearly 25,000 killed in action, nearly 5,000 detainees, more than 5,500 individual and nearly 900 crew-served weapons. These losses are two and one-half times that of any previous month. Although these losses seem extraordinarily high, they are substantiated to a considerable degree by the number of detainees and weapons captured. Friendly losses have been 2,043 killed (703 U. S., 1,303 Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and 37 Free World less than one-twelfth of the enemy's. General Westmoreland tells me that this estimate of enemy killed in action is computed on a very conservative basis, since neither enemy killed by air strikes nor artillery have been included. This has been a heavy blow for the enemy, particularly as many of the men killed were among the best they had, carefully trained regulars and commandos, many of them from North Vietnam. From a military point of view, he had gained little in return for his heavy expenditure of men and equipment.

F. In inflicting this severe military defeat on the enemy, our forces everywhere turned in a superior performance. A highly encouraging development also was the very commendable performance of Army of the Republic of Vietnam forces. General Westmoreland reports that all the Army of the Republic of Vietnam Division Commanders were on their toes and performed well, as did the Corps Commanders. General Abrams has been visiting the Army of the Republic of Vietnam Divisions. He returned yesterday from the Second Corps with glowing reports of the performance of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam 22nd and 23rd Divisions. The commander of the 23rd Division, with headquarters at Ban Me Thuot, allowed no Tet leave and, anticipating an attack, had deployed his troops outside the city; had he not done this, destruction would have been much greater.

G. Although the enemy has suffered a heavy setback, he still retains the capability of launching a second wave attack in Saigon and in the Third Corps area. Elements of three enemy divisions, the 5th, 7th, and 9th, are in the Third Corps area. In Northern First Corps, in the DMZ, and the Khe Sanh area, he still has four divisions and farther south is threatening to exert pressure on Danang. As I have previously reported, it is Thieu's opinion that the enemy will endeavor to keep up pressure throughout the summer in the First Corps and the central highlands. In my talk with him yesterday, he added the view that in addition to this pressure, he believed the enemy would continue efforts at harassment and infiltration against the cities in order to pin down friendly troops in defense of the populated areas and would also endeavor to recover territory in the countryside, in what he called a "counter-pacification effort".

H. Enemy attacks have resulted in heavy damage in many cities and towns. We do not yet have an accurate count of the number of houses destroyed or refugees created, but we do have enough information to know that there has been very considerable property damage. As of this metropolitan area was 93,000 and for the far, with 31 provinces out of 50 reporting, the number of evacuees (many of whom will may reach between 250,000 and 300,000. destroyed though this figure will undoubtedly from preliminary figures total almost 800 is probably much under the actual total. Some hospitals, radio stations, and power plant of Vietnam, however, has taken problems through the joint task force, which to which I shall refer in some detail later

number of houses destroyed or refugees to know that there has been very con- country as a whole about 190,000. Thus even though sketchily, we estimate return home as soon as fighting subsides. About 15,000 homes are reported y increase. Civilian casualties compil- lead and 7,500 injured, though this also some important installations, such as pt measures to deal with all these , have also been damaged. The Govern- h I mentioned in my last message, and a this report.

It may be argued that the enemy objective military defeat is more than compensated. But I believe clear evidence is emerging that a number of cities. Enemy documents and at least middle and lower level cadre and officers to victory. The order of the day of the South Vietnamese credence to this view. Some Vietnamese tell us that they think the Communists expect to win the war. This, in fact, seems to be a fairly general interpretation among our contact

as not primarily military, that his y his political and psychological gains. At Hanoi expected to take and hold a interrogations clearly suggest that at others thought this was to be the final push. The Vietnam Liberation Army would lend leaders who know the Communists well intended to take the cities and so end the general interpretation among our contact

As I mentioned in my last message, however, Thieu leans to the theory that the Tet attacks represent an effort to get into a more favorable position for negotiations. He believes that the enemy realizes his strength is ebbing and so took a desperate gamble so they could at least give the impression abroad of great and growing Communist power in South Vietnam.

I think the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. It seems possible that Hanoi would actually expect that the Vietnamese people would in many cases side with the invading forces, either out of fear or because of grievances against their own government. The experience of the Buddhist "struggle" movement in the library

Corps in 1966, when military and police units sometimes sided with the anti-government forces, may have encouraged Hanoi to believe that it was possible to trigger defections from the Government of Vietnam security forces. Thus their maximum objective may have been the occupation of some major urban centers and the collapse of the Government of Vietnam.

But the primary objective of winning the war in one great series of attacks on the cities does not preclude a lesser objective. Hanoi may well have reasoned that in the event that the Tet attacks did not bring the outright victory they hoped for, they could still hope for political and psychological gains of such dimensions that they could come to the negotiating table with a greatly strengthened hand. They may well have estimated that the impact of the Tet attacks would at the very least greatly discourage the United States and cause other countries to put more pressure on us to negotiate on Hanoi's terms.

But I am convinced that there is now a great opportunity not only to frustrate Hanoi's expectations, but to compound the enemy's military defeat by also turning it to political and psychological advantage for the Government of Vietnam. Much depends on the promptness and effectiveness with which the Government of Vietnam acts to return the situation to normal, to set about the task of reconstruction and to care for the victims of the fighting. I have urged on Thieu that this is the psychological moment to assert aggressive, dynamic leadership, to mobilize and energize elements of the government, and to let the people know that he proposes to push ahead with the programs he outlined in his State of the Nation message. I have stressed the importance of capitalizing speedily on the mood of anger and resentment at the Viet Cong treachery at Tet which is sweeping the nation. And I have urged on him the importance of keeping the people informed about the Government of Vietnam's programs to help them; that through frequent brief appearances on radio and TV he should tell the people what is going on and seek their support.

I have also suggested to Thieu that other Cabinet members supervising emergency activities should speak to the people about their programs and that notables in Vietnamese life should be involved in all these activities and should be encouraged to stimulate efforts by the population. I offered our assistance and participation on these information activities in any way that he thought useful, and left him with a memorandum of specific suggestions.

I also suggested to Thieu yesterday he might want to consider broadening the base of his Government by associating with it in some way prominent and influential civilians such as

and others

Thieu said that perhaps such individuals could be asked to serve as an advisory council to the government and that he was considering convening a congress of notables, something along the lines of the congress which had been convened in 1967 to promote the movement for elections for a constituent assembly to draft the constitution. He also noted that Ky had gone on television on February 5 to inform people of the Government of Vietnam's relief and recovery effort and that he himself will address a joint session of both Houses of the Assembly on the morning of February 9.

COPY - Lyndon Bain

Our pacification organization has turned itself into a relief operation for the time being. Bob Komar is managing U.S. support of the Government of Vietnam's relief and recovery effort under Vice President Ky and has established a command post in the palace with Ky. A small group of bottleneck-breakers and problem solvers are working there to pull together civil-military operations on both Government of Vietnam and American sides. One basic issue in getting recovery operations into full swing is still unresolved, those in charge of clearing operation General Vien, Military Governor Khang, Loan, Saigon Mayor Cua and others, are still insisting that tight security measures such as curfews and checkpoints take precedence over relief. Ky and the Government of Vietnam fear a "second wave" assault on Saigon. Continued Viet Cong activity in the Cholon-Phu Tho area lend some credence to their fears. Operating under these restrictions, the emergency committee at the palace is making headway nevertheless. Curfew has been relaxed in Districts 1 and 2 and runs from 1700 to 0700. Government offices and universities will be open; public utilities are operating 24 hours; buses will operate. In effect, except for primary and secondary schools, about everything will be normal during daylight. It is expected that the curfew will be relaxed tomorrow in District 4 and part of District 3. Twenty-seven rice distribution points were opened yesterday. Rice was sold at 20 piasters per kilo with two kilos, a five-day supply, allotted to each member of a family. Revolutionary Development cadre provided security, checked family rosters, talked to people, and helped with distribution. In some areas, students chipped in to help the Revolutionary Development cadre.

One sideline is of interest. The contractor who furnished 50 laborers for the Thu Duc rice run showed up with a written contract asking for payment of laborers wages only with no portion to himself. Instead, he said he was donating his share to the people of Saigon.

The road situation is improving. The main routes into the city are in good condition. Route 4 to the Delta is now open to military convoys to as far as My Tho. The main problem is to restore security sufficiently so that Army and police checkpoints can be opened to trucks and barges carrying food and produce to the city. When this is done, private enterprise will soon take care of food distribution.

Dr. Que and the Ministry of Social Welfare and Refugees, now pretty well accustom to emergencies, are doing an excellent job under still difficult conditions. Mobile teams are working with major concentrations of refugees in Saigon and surrounding urban areas. Two thousand five hundred Revolutionary Development cadre arrived in Saigon Monday by LST and two smaller boats from Vung Tau to assist in recovery operations and are reinforcing the Ministry. The Minister of Health and the Minister of Public Works and their respective ministries have also done excellent work.

In the Fourth Corps, an emergency-recovery committee paralleling the National Committee, began functioning yesterday with U.S. representation. Today the committee intends to survey the three worst hit cities, Ben Tre, Vinh Long, and

My Tho. Throughout the Corps, except in Go Cong and Vinh Binh, where they still hug the cities, the Viet Cong seem to be withdrawing to intermediate areas. Provincial reconnaissance units, broken down into ten-man teams, are attempting to follow Viet Cong units in order to direct air and artillery on them as they withdraw. Ky visited Can Tho yesterday afternoon and explained recovery plans to Corps and provincial officials.

The Third Corps Emergency Recovery Committee is in full operation and emergency needs are being met.

It is a little early to judge the reaction of the people to the efforts of the government. There have been a large number of expressions of willingness to chip in and help and I think various labor and religious groups are heading in the right direction. At the same time, there is also some tendency to blame the government for failing to anticipate and prevent the attacks, and this may grow if vigorous action is not now taken.

Criticism of the government's failure to provide adequate security was voiced in the Senate at its session on February 6, particularly by Dai Viet Senators Nguyen Van Ngai and Senator Pham Nam Sach. Yesterday the Senators were in a calmer and more constructive mood and there was no irresponsible criticism of the Government of Vietnam. The draft resolution approved unanimously by the 43 Senators in attendance denounced the savage actions of the Viet Cong and its treachery in carrying out their preconceived attack during Tet; expresses its concern for the refugees and advocates that assistance and protection be a matter of priority; expresses its gratitude to the armed forces and all those participating in the defense of the nation; applauds the effective contributions of allied forces, especially the armed forces of the United States; and warmly welcomes the movement of unity and cooperation between the people and the authorities for self defense. It urges public agencies to bring unity to fruition in order to continue to defeat the Communists and construct the nation; heighten the vigilance of the people, contribute financial and material resources to help the victims of recent events; severely punish and prevent corrupt elements to take advantage of this situation; develop a movement of groups and people for armed self defense.

Fortunately, both in the Senate and the Lower House, critics of the government are greatly outnumbered by members who are anxious to do whatever is necessary to help the government in the present situation. These include such "oppositionists" as MRS. Leader Ly Quy Chung who is busy spreading the word that the attacks were a great political defeat for the Communists because the populace refused to help them. Also encouraging are strong statements of support from deputies such as Khieu Thien Ke whose latest speech at Danang on February 3 (rebroadcast several times since) is just the sort of thing that is needed.

One of the most encouraging factors of the present situation is the degree of cooperation and better feeling which it has created between President Thieu and Vice President Ky. These two have consistently risen above their personal rivalry.

C O P Y - Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

to do what is necessary for the nation. This was true during the Buddhist "struggle" in 1966, in the Cabinet crisis of the same year, in their joint effort to persuade the military to accept the constitution just after the Guam Conference, and in the final decision to run together on one ticket for the sake of military unity. They are doing it again. I have mentioned previously that I believe they have been working together better than at any time since my arrival here last April. I think there is good reason to hope that this present experience will show them the way to work effectively together in the new constitutional framework in the future. At the moment, it is an important factor in the good beginning which has been made in turning the Tet attacks into a political as well as a military defeat for the Communists.

B. Economic

The economic situation in Saigon one week after the beginning of fighting presents us with some serious worries, but as yet these chiefly concern the future, and events have not yet gotten out of hand. Most Saigon families had large food stocks laid in for Tet, and markets would have been closed most of the week in any case. Therefore, there probably have been few really hungry people, at least among those whose homes have not been disrupted.

The civilian economy of Saigon began to revive as early as Thursday and Friday of last week. Beginning with a few items sold at very high prices, food markets started to operate without official sanction, and by Tuesday quite a large variety of fruit, vegetables, fish and meat, and miscellaneous foodstuffs became available in markets in secure parts of town. Prices range from around pre-Tet levels for a few staples evidently still in large supply, such as sugar, to roughly double pre-Tet prices for fresh meat and fish. In Cholon, where security is worse, prices are reported much higher and the population of Cholon may be on the threshold of severe hardship.

No figures are available this week on the Saigon Retail Price Index or the Imported Commodity Index.

C. Chieu Hoi

Because of the emergency, latest figures are not available.