

# VIET-NAM INFORMATION NOTES

OFFICE OF MEDIA SERVICES, BUREAU OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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## POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH VIET-NAM

### SUMMARY

The vast majority of the people of South Viet-Nam are determined to build their own future under institutions and leaders of their own free choice. In the Declaration of Honolulu on February 8, 1966, the Government of Viet-Nam pledged "to formulate a democratic constitution...including an electoral law...and to create, on the basis of elections rooted in that constitution, an elected government."

There are two salient political facts about South Viet-Nam today:

1. The present government has been in power since 1965, bringing a stability and continuity to South Viet-Nam which has been lacking since the fall of the government of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.
2. The present government, only 6 months after coming to power, set a course toward constitutional representative government which has been followed unswervingly, both as to its timetable and its direction.

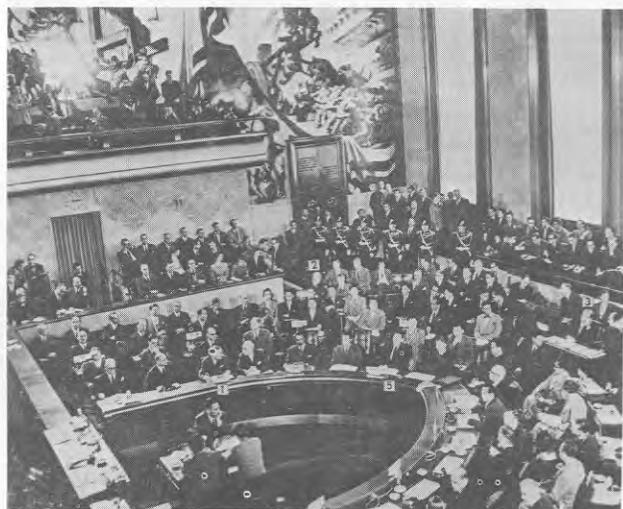
Politically, 1966 was a year of preparation in South Viet-Nam; 1967 is a year of realization and fruition. If political progress continues throughout 1967 as anticipated, it could have a major bearing on the course of the conflict.

### Determination of the People

The South Vietnamese have refused to be deterred from their exercise of "rice-roots democracy" by Viet Cong terrorism and the upheaval of conflict. Whenever the opportunity arises, whether on the local or provincial level, the Vietnamese citizens have turned out in mass to cast their ballots.

"Three times in less than 2 years South Viet-Nam has moved closer toward establishing a government fully responsive to the people," President Johnson has observed. The first of these steps was the provincial elections held in May 1965; the second step was the election of September 11, 1966, for members of a Constituent Assembly. Now a democratic constitution has been adopted.

During 1967 a new round of village and hamlet elections is being held involving the selection of over 900 village councils and nearly 5,000 hamlet chiefs. Viet Cong acts of mining, mortaring, assassination, and attempts to destroy the registration cards of the qualified voters have failed to keep the South Vietnamese from the ballot boxes. Despite precarious security conditions in many parts of the country, they remain as resolute in exercising the right of self-determination today as did many of them in 1954, when the Geneva agreements gave them the choice of "voting with their feet" between North and South and nearly one million chose to leave the North for South Viet-Nam.



**GENEVA CONFERENCE 1954.** A general view of the opening of the Geneva Conference of 1954 shows among the assembled delegates (1) Foreign Minister Georges Bidault of France, (2) Secretary of State John Foster Dulles of the United States, (3) Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden of the United Kingdom, (4) Foreign Minister Chou En Lai of Communist China, and (5) General Nam II of North Korea.

The United States has pledged that the people of South Viet-Nam shall have the right to decide their own political destiny free of external interference and force. Helping the South Vietnamese to defend this right is the principal purpose of the American presence in South Viet-Nam.



**REFUGEES FROM NORTH VIET-NAM.** These people were among the more than 1,000 refugee fishermen led by their parish priest from Communist North Viet-Nam in the fall of 1954 into free South Viet-Nam.

#### U.S. SUPPORT FOR ELECTIONS REAFFIRMED IN FOURTEEN POINTS FOR PEACE

In its "Fourteen Points for Peace in Southeast Asia" (see "The Search for Peace in Viet-Nam," Viet-Nam Information Note No. 2, February 1967), the United States has continued to reaffirm its position on the political destiny of Viet-Nam. In point No. 9, the United States declares:

We support free elections in South Viet-Nam to give the South Vietnamese a government of their own choice:

--We support the development of broadly based democratic institutions in South Viet-Nam.

--We do not seek to exclude any segment of the South Vietnamese people from peaceful participation in their country's future.

And in point No. 10, the United States emphasizes:

The question of reunification of Viet-Nam should be determined by the Vietnamese through their own free decision:

--It should not be decided by the use of force.

--We are fully prepared to support the decision of the Vietnamese people.

There are difficulties and complications to be overcome in the achievement of these goals, but as President Johnson said on June 30, 1966: "Political progress cannot wait until the war ends."

#### REGIONAL, ETHNIC, AND RELIGIOUS DIVISIONS

Viet-Nam is a very complex country. Historically it consisted of three quite distinct

regions: Tonkin (now North Viet-Nam); Annam, the central part (Hue and Danang are traditional centers of what was Annam); and Cochinchina, the south. Each had its own culture, was jealous of its prerogatives, and competed with the others. This regionalism, which was perpetuated by the colonial administration of Indochina, persists. The result is that even within South Viet-Nam today there are long-standing rivalries stemming from the historic divisions of the country, and these make the task of a central government very difficult.

There is also great ethnic variety within the population. In addition to people of Vietnamese stock, there are more than one million Chinese; nearly one million Montagnards (mountain people); half a million Cambodians; and smaller minority groups including Chams, Malays, Indians, and French.

Religious differences add further complications. The majority of the inhabitants are nominally Buddhist, but divided into different sects. There is a Catholic minority as well as religious sects such as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, which until recently exercised substantial temporal as well as religious power over their fellows, with their own troops and local governments in certain areas.

Finally, for almost 100 years prior to 1954, Viet-Nam was under colonial rule, and developed no real tradition or experience of practicing democracy.

Thus, any South Vietnamese central government would face serious problems in establishing an effective and democratic regime, even without the enormous burden of armed aggression from North Viet-Nam.

#### POLITICAL ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL VIET-NAM

It is not an easy thing to turn people into active supporters of the government when they have been intimidated and terrorized by the Viet Cong for years, and when no government in the recent past has been able adequately to protect them and enhance their well-being. As the Vietnamese Government prepared plans for its current pacification effort, officials became increasingly aware that revitalization of local self-government was indispensable in the task of winning the population over to the national cause. That attitude has been markedly reflected in government actions during recent years.

Under the unitary form of government inherited from the French, the division of the country into provinces and districts was a prerogative of the central government, specifically the ministry of the interior. Provinces thus could be created and dissolved at will, and provincial officials were appointed directly. As a first move to cause this echelon of government to be more responsive to the needs and desires of the people, consultative councils

of elected members were established. (A second step, the direct election of the province chiefs by the provincial electorate, is provided for in the new constitution promulgated April 1, but is postponed until the present emergency is over.)

The villages and hamlets of rural South Viet-Nam contain the two lowest echelons of government. In the last decade the traditional autonomy of the villages and their component hamlets has been eroded by two factors: Viet Cong politico-military activity, and centralization of local government affairs by the Saigon authorities. Local elections have been suspended for some years because of insecure conditions, and centrally appointed officials came to exercise more and more direct authority at local levels.

#### PROVINCE-LEVEL ELECTIONS, 1965

On May 30, 1965, elections were conducted throughout South Viet-Nam for provincial and municipal councils. Candidates for the councils had to meet certain qualifications: they had to be citizens at least 25 years of age, and to have been either born in the provinces or cities concerned or to have resided there at least 6 months prior to filing their candidacy. Certain appointed officials in office, such as province chiefs, mayors, judges, and commissioned and noncommissioned officers of the Armed Forces on active duty, were prohibited from running.

Throughout South Viet-Nam, 1,000 candidates contested 471 seats. Of the 4.7 million registered voters, 3.5 million, or 74 percent, cast ballots. To make voting easier for those who read with difficulty, each candidate chose an identifying symbol to emblazon on campaign posters—for example, a plow, a water buffalo, a lamp, a flower, or a conical hat. Several groups and organizations were particularly successful in placing their candidates. The major organized labor confederation elected 13 of its 16 candidates. In the central provinces, candidates associated with Buddhist organizations made a strong showing. In several southern provinces the Hoa Hao predominated. No significant irregularities were observed; indeed some foreign press observers termed the elections the most honest Viet-Nam had ever had.

Since their election, these councils have played increasingly significant roles in providing advice to the Government's provincial administrators.

#### DEMOCRATIC PROCESS STRENGTHENED AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

At the Manila Conference, October 1966, the South Vietnamese Government representatives pledged to strengthen further the democratic process at the local level by holding village and hamlet elections early in 1967.

In keeping with that pledge, the Government issued a series of decrees in December 1966 completely revising the structure and functioning of local government. These decrees provide for popularly elected village councils, which will choose the village chief from among their membership, and for popularly elected hamlet chiefs, with elected deputy chiefs in hamlets having more than 3,000 residents. Moreover, village and hamlet officials will enjoy generally unrestricted exercise of a wide range of new powers. For example, only village budgets or programs in excess of one million piasters (about \$8,500) need have prior approval by the central government.



**COUNTING THE BALLOTS.** Government officials, the outgoing chairman of the hamlet council, and the Revolutionary Development Team leader, count the ballots in the presence of the assembled RD team and a few curious spectators on election day July 12, 1966.

The Government of South Viet-Nam is now in the process of conducting phased elections for village councilors and for hamlet chiefs. The former were to be held during the 5 Sundays in April, the latter to take place on the 5 Sundays beginning May 14 through June 11. These local elections are to be conducted in areas where sufficient security can be provided to protect the candidates, the voters, and the subsequently elected officials from the Viet Cong. Of approximately 2,500 villages in Viet-Nam, 1,004 will hold elections this spring. About 205 more probably will hold elections in the summer, when proper security has been established.

Of the approximately 11,250 hamlets in Viet-Nam, 4,578 held elections this spring and about 1,500 are expected to do so in late summer. As Revolutionary Development programs progress throughout the remainder of this year, improving the economic and social lot of the people in the countryside and insuring their protection from the Viet Cong,

more villages and hamlets will qualify for and hold elections. New, representative leadership at the local level will emerge from these elections of approximately 13,000 local officials this spring and approximately 3,300 more during the summer.



**CASTING THE BALLOT.** Vietnamese woman drops her ballot in the box as Revolutionary Development Team members look on. A Viet Cong concentration across the river from the polls was under attack by government forces during the voting. But the residents were accustomed to this martial background to their daily lives.

An example of the voter turnout for these local elections is provided by the results of the first of the five scheduled weekly elections for village councilors. Elections were held in 219 villages with 615,000 registered voters. There were 2,718 candidates seeking 1,962 council positions, averaging about 12 candidates for 9 positions at stake. This relatively low ratio of candidates to positions reflects in part the depletion of resident local manpower by both Viet Cong depredations and government service requirements. Available returns from the 33 provinces involved in this first stage indicate that 80.5 percent of the registered voters cast ballots.

#### STEPS TOWARD NATIONAL ELECTIONS BY PRESENT GOVERNMENT

The present Government of South Viet-Nam, formed on June 19, 1965, under the direction of Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, the Chief of State, and Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, the Prime Minister, is by its own commitment a transitional government to be replaced this year in a free national election.

As presently constituted, the Government vests ultimate ruling responsibility for the nation in a Congress of the Armed Forces composed of the general officers of the Armed

Forces, the corps commanders, and the division commanders. This body has appointed a National Leadership Committee, or Directorate, of 10 civilian and 10 military members to be responsible for the daily conduct of affairs. The Chief of State and the Prime Minister are both members. More than half the Cabinet, appointed by the Prime Minister, is composed of civilians. Since July 1966 a 79-member body known as the Peoples-Armed Forces Advisory Council has served as adviser to the Prime Minister and his Cabinet on political, economic, and social matters. It consists of 59 civilians from various political groupings and 20 military officers (see chart).

In addition, Prime Minister Ky periodically has convened national conferences of representatives from local provincial councils, province chiefs, and military officers of all ranks to discuss the nation's vital problems and to assist in finding solutions to them. Thus, while the present government did not assume office through the electoral process, virtually all major non-Communist political, regional, religious, and social groups take part in different ways in the governing process.

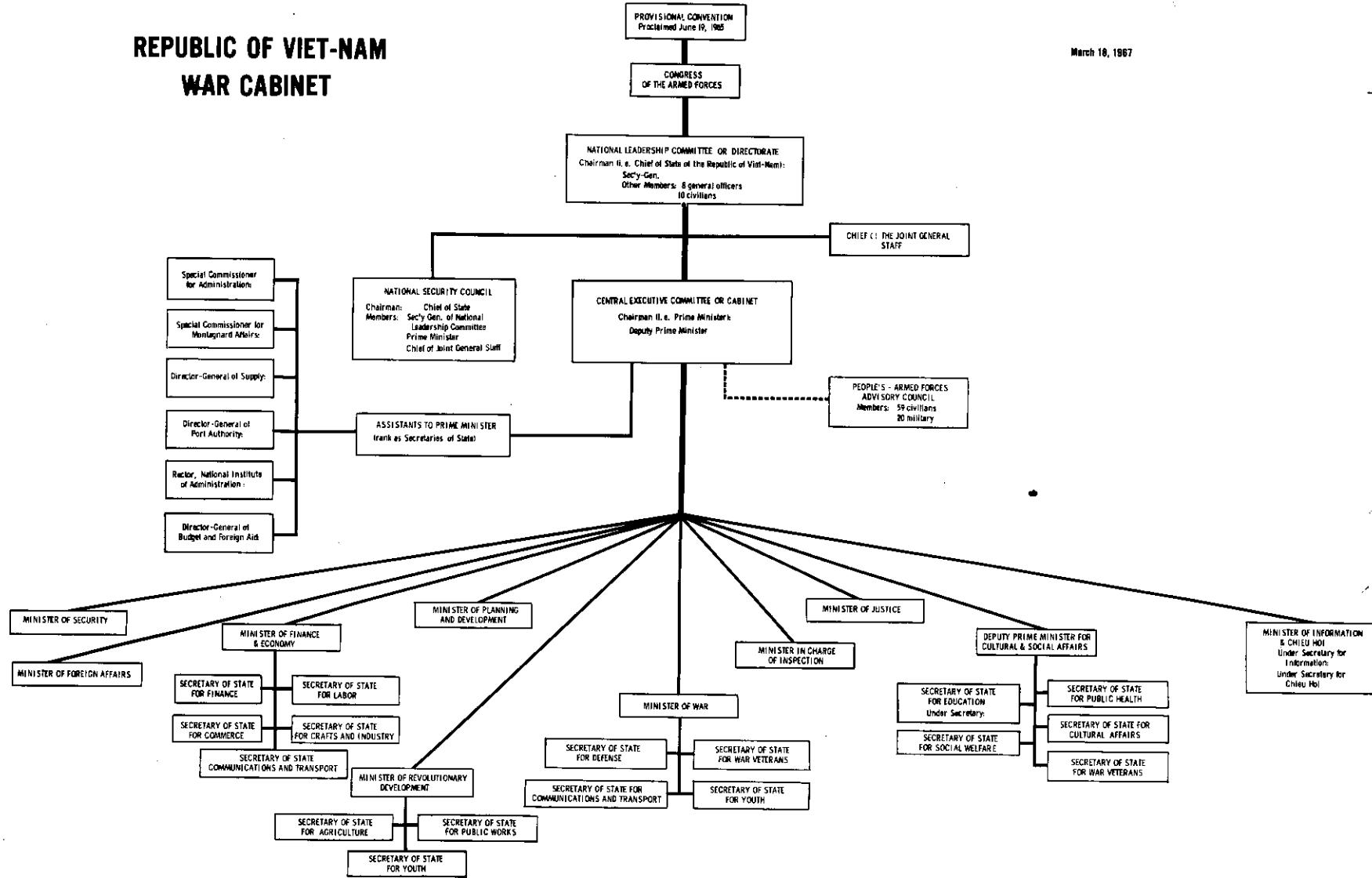
On January 15, 1966, Prime Minister Ky announced his government's intention to set in process the transition to constitutional representative government to be completed by the end of 1967. On April 14, following the intent of the recommendation of the National Political Congress, a body representing all non-Communist groupings in South Viet-Nam, Chief of State Thieu decreed that free elections would be held within 3 to 5 months to select a body to prepare a draft constitution. In preparation for the constituent assembly elections, the Government convened an Election Law Drafting Committee, composed of 32 representatives of all major non-Communist groups in Viet-Nam, which was assigned the task of preparing the election regulations and procedures. On June 19 the Government decreed that elections would be held on September 11 to select 117 deputies to the constituent assembly, and that each deputy would represent 50,000 registered voters in his district. In addition, the decree eased the citizenship requirements for candidates to permit most of the Chinese community to qualify, and excluded "those who have directly or indirectly worked for the Communist and pro-Communist neutralists, or neutralists whose actions are advantageous to the Communists."

#### Constituent Assembly Election

Competition for the 117 Assembly seats was vigorous. Campaigns were conducted by 532 candidates, or an average of 5 candidates per seat. They included professors and teachers, civil servants, members of locally elected councils, doctors, lawyers, military personnel, businessmen, and women.

**REPUBLIC OF VIET-NAM  
WAR CABINET**

March 18, 1867



The Government conducted a major information campaign to educate the populace on the significance of the elections and the voting process. This campaign involved radio broadcasts, distribution of leaflets, and a seminar in Saigon for local officials to brief them on election procedures and the importance of objectivity and honesty in their implementation.

Some 5,200 polling places were established--an average of 1 polling place per 1,000 registered voters. Locally appointed committees supervised the polling and counting of ballots.

On election day, September 11, 4.3 million voters went to the polls. The figure represented 81 percent of the 5.3 million registered electorate, and over 50 percent of the estimated 8.25 million population of voting age. (As a measurement of voter participation, it is interesting to note that in the 1964 U.S. Presidential elections, out of an eligible voting population of 113,931,000 only 62 percent (70,642,000) exercised the franchise.)

The Government of South Viet-Nam had invited U.N. Secretary-General U Thant to send observers to witness the elections. U Thant was unable to accept the invitation, but the elections were fully observed and favorably reported on by the diplomatic corps and the 300-man resident foreign press corps. Parliamentary delegations from Japan and Korea also had praise for the manner in which they were conducted.

The Viet Cong conducted a vigorous propaganda campaign of intimidation up to election day. Seeing the election as a challenge to their political pretensions, they carried out numerous attacks on lines of communications, blew up trucks carrying voters to polling places, mined bridges, detonated grenades at or near polling places, and directed harassing fire at a number of district headquarters during the election period.

As the results show, the South Vietnamese refused to be intimidated. They thereby demonstrated the falsity of the Viet Cong claim that they control two-thirds of the population and are the "sole representatives" of the Vietnamese people.

#### Composition of Assembly

The Assembly Delegates were young people and representative of all major non-Communist elements of the Vietnamese body politic, as may be seen in the following breakdown:

Regional and Ethnic Origin	Religion
28 Central Vietnamese	34 Buddhists
44 Southerners	30 Catholics
27 Northern Vietnamese	10 Hoa Hao
8 Montagnard	7 Confucianists
4 Cambodian	5 Cao Cai
3 Chinese	31 Other
3 Other	

#### Profession

	Age
23 Educators	36 between 25 and 34
22 Businessmen	32 between 35 and 44
18 Civil Servants	29 between 45 and 54
18 Military	15 age 55 and over
8 Lawyers	5 age unknown
7 Farmers	
5 Doctors	
5 Notables	
6 Retired	
5 Other	

#### Adoption of Constitution

The Constituent Assembly convened on September 27, 1966. After 170 days of debate and trips by the Drafting Committee to the countryside to obtain local views on desired constitutional provisions, the Assembly on March 18, 1967, unanimously approved a revised draft of the proposed text. On March 19 the Directorate approved the draft constitution and transmitted it to the Armed Forces Council, parent body of the Directorate. The Council approved the Constitution on March 27, and Chief of State Thieu promulgated the document on April 1.



**HISTORIC OCCASION.** Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu signs the decree which puts the Republic of Viet-Nam's new constitution into effect. Taking part in the April signing on the steps of Independence Palace in Saigon are: Lt. Gen. Pham Xuan Chieu, Secretary General of the National Leadership Committee; Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, Defense Minister Gen. Cao Van Vien, and National Constituent Assembly speaker Phan Khac Suu (on Thieu's left, partially obscured).

#### Main Provisions of the Constitution

The form of government ordained in the Constitution is a modified presidential system. It calls for a President as Chief of State who will designate a Prime Minister and Cabinet to manage governmental business. In addition, a bicameral National Assembly

and an independent judiciary will exercise legislative and judicial powers respectively.

The Assembly can override a presidential veto of a bill by an absolute majority of the total membership of both houses. It can also recommend Presidential removal of any or all Cabinet ministers, including the Prime Minister, by two-thirds majority of total Assembly membership. Should the President demur, this recommendation is binding if subsequently re-adopted by three-quarters of the total membership. The Constitution also contains important provisions for the protection of human rights and the advancement of social welfare.

During the crucial interim period between promulgation of the Constitution and election of a president, both the ruling National Leadership Committee and the Constituent Assembly will remain in office. The Constituent Assembly will draft laws for the fall elections, the

registration and activities of political parties, and press regulations. It will also supervise the conducting of elections and certify the winners.

Elections for President and Vice President and for the upper house will be held September 1, with lower house elections to be held 1 month later. When the President assumes office, replacing the Directorate, the Constituent Assembly will acquire full legislative powers until installation of the newly elected National Assembly approximately 1 month later.

Thus, by the end of 1967, South Viet-Nam is scheduled to have an elected government and representative institutions from the bottom of the governing structure to the top. If this takes place as anticipated, it will constitute an almost unprecedented achievement in rapid political evolution under uniquely adverse circumstances.

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## PRESENTLY AVAILABLE ...

Basic Data on South Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8195) summarizes general information on the land, people, history, government, and economy of the country. 4 pp.

The Search for Peace in Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8196) reviews the efforts of individuals, governments, and international bodies to bring about a peaceful solution to the conflict in Viet-Nam. The policy of the Government of North Viet-Nam with regard to a peaceful settlement is included. 7 pp.

Communist-Directed Forces in South Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8197) seeks to answer such questions as: What is the Viet Cong? Who are its leaders? How is it related to party and government organs of North Viet-Nam? What are the Communists' objectives? Their strengths? Their weaknesses? 7 pp., illustrated.

Free World Assistance for South Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8213) describes the scope of the international aid program for the Republic of Viet-Nam. It gives facts and figures about the contributions of 36 participating nations (U.S. aid is not included--a separate Note is to be devoted to that subject). 6 pp., illustrated.

## COMING SOON ...

Several other Viet-Nam Information Notes will be available in the near future. Anticipated subjects include "The Legal Basis of the U.S. Commitment"; "Why We Fight in Viet-Nam"; "The Military Struggle"; and "Communist Aggression Against South Viet-Nam." The Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, on request, will place individuals on its mailing list to receive Selected United States Government Publications--a free, biweekly announcement of new publications, including subsequent numbers of this series.