

FACT SHEET ON VIETNAM: MARCH 13, 1969

Prepared by:  
National Mobilization Committee  
5 Beekman Street  
New York, New York 10038

The latest NLF offensive is now in its third week. There has been no significant response from anti-war forces in this country. This fact sheet has been prepared to provide organizations across the country with information for local press releases, general meetings, etc. It is important that anti-war forces gain a sense of the situation facing the U.S. government right now and how it affects the Paris talks.

The U.S. position in Paris has remained irrelevant to the basic political questions of the war. The first two items on the U.S. proposed agenda for the talks are neutralization of the DMZ and troop withdrawals. This fits a scenario which sees the war ending by the establishment of the Saigon regime in control of the South and all NLF forces withdrawing to the North, i.e., they are asking the NLF to accept defeat, whereas in reality it is the U.S. that is defeated.

The U.S. military position is so hopeless that "search and destroy" operations have been dropped in favor of "probe, withdraw and bomb". U.S. troops are now used to find what are supposed to be concentrations of NLF troops; upon contact, they call in the bombers and retreat. Bombing levels since the beginning of the talks have risen strikingly.

The halt of the bombing over the North was in fact a practical solution to the need to escalate the war in the South. Naval shellings in the South are reported four times higher since the talks began, use of fragmentation bombs is four to six times higher, and in sheer tonnage, the bombing in the South exceeds any per acre concentration during World War II. The Bombing of Hamburg during World War II -- saturation, block-by-block, levelling type bombing -- required 1000 tons per day and created an uproar on the Allied side over its severity. In Cantho, a Delta city, the U.S. recently dropped 4500 tons of bombs in one day. Each B-52 has a capacity of 30 tons, and the planes are continually involved in bombing various parts of the country. The NLF reports that some of the bombs now being used are as large as 5000 kilograms (nearly 6 tons) -- in earlier stages of the war 500 lb. and 750 lb. bombs were normal and until recently the largest bombs were 2500 kilograms. The population has previously depended on tunnels for protection, but recently the big bombers are being used in the delta, where it is impossible to dig deeply.

NLF statements accurately describe U.S. tactics as "death-bed attempts" (they are). In an attempt to establish some semblance of control in the countryside, sweeps and the mass incarceration of the population have been undertaken. One of the clearest examples is the sweep on Batangan peninsula south of Quang Ngai. In that area, 12,000 people have been forced into a "reception camp" with signs outside that declare "refugees from Communism are forbidden to leave the camp". Food allocations -- only rice -- are below the minimal adult requirement. Already 200 prisoners have escaped, but guards surround the camps and fire their M-16's in the air whenever the inmates press around the gates. (For details on Thein-An reception camp, see articles by Hugo Hill in Liberation News Service packets nos. 143 and 145.)

The burning of villages and incarcerating of the population is reported throughout South Vietnam as part of stop-gap "pacification" work. In addition, special projects such as project "Phoenix" have begun with the aim of exterminating NLF political cadres throughout the South. 80,000 South Vietnamese have been described as NLF leaders and put on a list of persons to be assassinated.

Even in the U.S. press, it has been admitted that the current offensive has demonstrated the NLF's ability to deal with the U.S. military and raise an effective counterattack. The two clearest aspects of the military side of the offensive are that it is nation-wide like Tet and the following two offensives, and that it is aimed at U.S. military installations. This is a significant change from Tet, where the primary target was the puppet army, the pacification programs in the countryside, and the occupation of cities.

In some cases during this offensive, the NLF has moved to liberate the population being held in U.S. concentration camps. The figures cited in the U.S. press of Vietnamese "made homeless" by NLF assaults refer to the liberation of "resettlement camps" such as Thien-An or Konhoring (the latter was reported to have been opened by the NLF in the first days of the offensive, freeing several thousand civilians). But in most cases, the emphasis has been on U.S. military installations. In the earliest days of the offensive, the New York Times reported that NLF troops were moving past recently occupied villages and heading toward the urban centers and military installations. CuChi, the site of an American helicopter base and a stronghold of guerrilla activity, saw an attack in which the NLF cut through ten rings of barbed wire circling the base, entered the concrete bunkers that house the helicopters and destroyed twelve while seriously damaging four others. Bien Hoa's American base came under attack in the early stage as well, the NLF operating from the village of Tan Hiep near the base.

Tan Hiep was totally levelled by the U.S. in the effort to dislodge the NLF. The village was of particular significance because it has a highly Catholic population and was considered one of the most secure villages of the country. Wilfred Burchett reports that after the destruction of Tan Hiep, a system of tunnels was found throughout the village, revealing intense involvement by the population of the village on the side of the liberation forces.

The political significance of the role of the people of Tan Hiep is not lost on the Vietnamese people: the NLF's ability to hold the offensive edge on the U.S. is a consequence of the growing support even within the cities for the NLF. The call for a "peace cabinet" by religious and ethnic minorities in Saigon to replace the Thieu-Ky regime is one indication of the way in which elements still outside the NLF or the Alliance of Peace National and Democratic Forces are moving against the Saigon government and the U.S. military presence. (The NLF endorses this move by minority elements though it is clear that it was not made at their initiative).

All the political consequences of the present offensive will not be clear for months, but it is certain to have wide-ranging effect. Since the beginning of the talks, the Saigon regime has closed down 15 newspapers in Saigon and Hue in their attempt to maintain control but have only isolated themselves more from the urban population. Most recently, the National Salvation Front, an organization pulled together by the Saigon regime after the Tet offensive has even moved into a critical

stance and seems to be adopting the "peace cabinet" position. Their first anniversary statement, cited in the New York Times March 11 calls for a "truly based government" for the "coming political struggle" with the NLF. A change in position by this group is not a matter of ideological conversion -- it must be seen as a pragmatic response, an indication of the isolation and instability of the Saigon regime.

The toppling of the Saigon regime would be of great significance. It could signal the opening by which the U.S. would begin to admit that it cannot defeat the NLF militarily and was prepared to accept a government there that would do the negotiating with the NLF which would facilitate U.S. troop withdrawals and the establishment of a caretaker regime reflecting the overwhelming political strength of the Front. The other path for the U.S. is to attempt to punish the Vietnamese militarily: given the fact that U.S. bombing and shelling in the South has already been escalated to the point where it is severely taxing U.S. firepower, it seems the only way that retaliation could take place would be through a resumption of bombing in the North or an invasion north of the DMZ. The first option has proved futile in the past and the second would be an incredible debacle for the U.S. It also seems quite clear that world public opinion and particularly the governments of Western Europe would not readily tolerate a resumption of the bombing.

To the present time, the NLF has not committed its troops in any significant numbers to the offensive. In the last three days, some reports have appeared in the press of regiments standing to fight, but even these are reported to be engagements involving only a few hundred of NLF troops. Reports of NLF troop concentration around Saigon range as high as 65,000. The U.S. troop level in the same area is estimated at 81,000, but it must be remembered that the NLF is a people's army which means that every soldier is prepared for combat whereas probably only 10-20% of the U.S. troops are combat forces. It is impossible to predict whether the NLF will commit its main forces to battle, but it should be remembered that each offensive by the Front is a "simultaneous uprising", which means that political insurrection in the cities would probably accompany any major troop involvement.

Government officials have recently begun stressing the role of the puppet South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) in carrying on the war while American troops withdraw. This suggestion can be nothing more than deception of the American people, since it is clear the ARVN is no better prepared to carry on than it has been in the past. The ranks of ARVN are filled with forced conscription; many companies of ARVN draw pay but never engage in combat; during Tet, the NLF reports, over 400,000 ARVN troops were lost through casualties, mass desertions and the disintegration of whole companies.

Our work at this time -- and it is very urgent -- is to prepare the anti-war forces in this country for any eventuality. Understanding the character of the offensive and the level of U.S. activity preceding it must be as widespread as possible so that any move by the U.S. (even "peace moves") not based on recognition of U.S. military failure will meet with strong opposition throughout the country.