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LAIRD-T Huong Meeting - Saigon 3/69

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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

UNCLASSIFIED

13 March 1969

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting of Secretary of Defense with the Prime Minister

Participants:

Republic of Vietnam

His Excellency Tran Van Huong - Prime Minister of the RVN
→ His Excellency Nguyen Van Vy - Minister of Defense
His Excellency Huynh Van Dao - Minister to the Prime Minister
Mr. Tran Van Dinh - Interpreter

United States

Honorable Melvin R. Laird - Secretary of Defense
Honorable Ellsworth Bunker - Ambassador
General Earle G. Wheeler - Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
Honorable G. Warren Nutter - Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA)
Honorable Robert Froehke - Assistant Secretary of Defense (A)
General Creighton W. Abrams - COMUSMACV
Honorable Samuel D. Berger - Deputy Ambassador

Time: 1030 - 1130, 8 March 1969

Place: Prime Minister's Office

1. Secretary Laird opened with an expression of concern over the attempted assassination, and our great happiness with the Prime Minister's escape. The Prime Minister smiled, "It's one of the risks of office." The Secretary said he hoped everything would be done to improve further the Prime Minister's personal security arrangements.
2. The Secretary said he would be appearing before Congress soon on the defense budget for 1970. He had been 17 years in Congress, but this was the first time he would be on the administration's side of the table. President Nixon thought he should take this trip to Vietnam to acquire a better understanding of the situation here for his job and for his appearance as a witness.
3. The Prime Minister replied that this was a good idea. Perhaps the reports he has been getting from here are "too rosy." The Secretary replied that President Nixon has great confidence in Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams and in what they report, and then asked the Prime Minister how he viewed the progress, and what he thought of the problems which still remain.

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4. The Prime Minister said the situation has greatly improved during this past year, thanks to the vigorous activities of the government, but especially thanks to the firmness of President Thieu, who had made the right decisions at the right time. He asked the Secretary what problems he saw here in Vietnam. The Secretary said that we were concerned about reports of desertions in the armed forces, and he would like the Prime Minister's views of this matter.
5. Mr. Huong said the armed forces had come a long way in improving, both in quality and quantity. Morale has never been as high as now, and discipline has improved. Proof of the progress can be seen in the successes of the fighting efforts of the SVN forces in these last months. But the situation is not yet satisfactory. The Prime Minister then called on the Minister of Defense to explain the reasons for desertions.
6. Minister Vy said that compared with previous years desertions are much lower, and the desertion rate is not alarming. Most of those who desert quit one branch of the service to enroll elsewhere, where they can be nearer their homes or where the pay and allowances are greater, or the conditions better. He has been trying to improve conditions in all the services in order to reduce the desertion rate. What is very reassuring is that there were few soldiers defecting to the enemy. The Prime Minister expanded on this, but made no additional points.
7. The Secretary then asked the Prime Minister to discuss the programs for improving and expanding the police forces. The Prime Minister said that both recruiting and training of the police are going on all the time. About 10,000 are being added each year. The main emphasis this year is training the police for service in the villages and hamlets. Ambassador Bunker said the plan is to put six policemen in each village. The Prime Minister said that the extension of the pacification program has been so great and has come so quickly that it has been beyond their expectations. There is much now to be done to consolidate the presence of the government in the villages and hamlets and to introduce projects that would help improve life in the villages. More funds were needed for this kind of work.
8. The Secretary asked General Wheeler if he would like to make any remarks, and General Wheeler said he wanted to go back to desertions. It is our experience that where there is good leadership there are good results. Soldiers like to serve under good officers and when there are good officers and good leadership, desertion rates are low. The Prime Minister agreed, but said good officers must have more than technical knowledge of fighting. The men must know what they are fighting for and for whom. There must be justice in the units. There must be good morale and a good spirit. The officers must look after their men and be concerned with their welfare.
9. Secretary Laird then expressed concern about statements made giving numbers of American troops to be reduced this year (an oblique reference to President Thieu's interview last week with the Washington Post). He was

sure he would be asked about these numbers when he appeared before Congress. American troop reductions will require close coordination between the two governments. The question had to be studied by the respective staffs and any statement made had to be carefully worked out together and coordinated. To make statements that could not be fulfilled would create additional problems in the United States. At the end of the last administration, he had to say frankly, public support for Vietnam was very low, and many of our people no longer believed what they were told. The new administration had to work on these matters in order to revive public support for our Vietnam policy. The American people will give the new administration some time to work out things, both here and in Paris. He doesn't know how long that will be -- six, ten, twelve months, or longer. The important thing is that troop reductions must be associated with the ability of the South Vietnamese forces to take on the greater share of the burden of fighting so as to reduce the American burden, and that when we make the reduction announcement we know it can be carried out.

10. The Prime Minister said that he understood this problem very well. President Thieu's statement was aimed to appease the American people and give them a feeling that South Vietnam was prepared to take on a greater share of the fighting. Secretary Laird said that until we see the studies of General Vien and General Abrams and have some better estimate of the degree of progress in the training and equipment of the South Vietnamese forces and in the general situation, it would be wise to avoid giving out any numbers for the reduction. The Prime Minister agreed.

11. The Secretary asked what effect the shelling of the cities was having on the people of South Vietnam. The Prime Minister said the people were getting used to it. Vietnamese, like other Asians, are fatalistic. They believe there is a time fixed in destiny when each person will die, and nothing can be done about it. What was remarkable was that there was no panic here during these recent shellings, and this was perhaps because the intensity and frequency of the rocketing was small compared with the past. The rocketing has also given the government some advantages. It has proved to both the Vietnamese people and the people of the world the true face of communism. It has sown even more hatred here for the communists. The fighting forces are very angry and they speak only of revenge. Ambassador Bunker asked what is the enemy's purpose in shelling the cities. The Prime Minister said their ultimate purpose is to take over the country at any cost, but this they can no longer do. They have suffered too many losses, and so they find it difficult to face their people in the North and in the South. They must therefore do something to show they are active, something dramatic to impress their supporters. This is one aspect, but there is another. Hanoi believes the people here and abroad are impatient for peace. The rocketing is designed to show the world and the people in the South that they are strong and they can strike at will. They believe it will put them in a better position in Paris. The Northerners are patient and they believe that American patience is running out. If they step up the attacks perhaps the Americans will pull out. They, therefore, have staged these recent attacks in order to try to extract concessions in Paris. This is

the trap that they are laying. Southerners are also patient, and indeed more patient than Northerners. The question is American patience. It is here where the South Vietnamese are concerned.

12. Secretary Laird said that the Americans recognize Hanoi's game and take this into account. He believes the great majority of Americans will give the new administration some time to see what progress could be made in terms of bringing the war to an end, but it is a little early to gauge how American public opinion will go. He then asked if South Vietnam has to face elections how much public support does the government have.

13. The Prime Minister said when he took over in May the situation was very difficult. It was just after Tet with all its destruction and uncertainty, and the confidence of the people was low. He accepted office because it was his duty to help restore the confidence of the people in government and in victory. It is difficult to measure the extent of public support of the government, but there are tangible signs that confidence has been restored:

a. Last May there was much talk of an economic crisis and collapse, and people were getting ready to leave the country. But there has been no collapse. Prices have since been fairly stable and there has been an economic revival. The people no longer fear danger in this quarter.

b. The military successes of last year have also done much to restore confidence. Last year many people were doubtful and fearful of the future because of the heavy attacks of the communists at Tet. But the communists have had so many casualties, so many caches have been captured, and the fighting forces of the South are so much more effective that people now, he thinks, do have confidence in the future.

c. Many of the caches that have been found, much of the success in battle, have come through the cooperation of the people, who more and more are supplying information about the enemy to the government. This is a very good sign.

d. Finally, although he did not want to appear vain, he thought it might be useful to mention the reaction of the people to the attempted assassination on him earlier this week. He has had hundreds of cables and letters and expressions of sympathy. These have come from every part of the country, from all the religious groups, from both sides of the Buddhists, from the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, and others. "Even the Upper and Lower House and the Tri Quang Buddhists," he said with a smile, "have come to me to express their sympathy."

14. The Prime Minister ended by saying there has been a very great improvement here since last May when he took over, and he thinks there is now a good measure of confidence in the country and support for what the government is trying to do.

15. The Secretary thanked the Prime Minister, and this concluded the conversation.