

FIGHTING BETWEEN ARVN, HOA HAO RESULTS IN 7 KILLED

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[Text] Saigon, Feb 3 (AFP)--Seven militiamen have been killed and 16 others wounded in fighting between South Vietnamese troops and parttime soldiers of the militant anti-communist Buddhist Hoa Hao sect following the government's decision to disarm the sect's 50,000-man private army, a Hoa Hao leader declared here today.

About 10,000 Hoa Hao, including armed Bao An (militiamen) have been entrenched around the pagoda of Long Kien village in the Mekong Delta since last Friday, surrounded by South Vietnamese soldiers and police. The besieged men include the head of the Hoa Hao, Luong Trong Tuong, and members of the sect's high council.

Troops and police have set up roadblocks at ferry crossings and other key points in the delta, where the Hoa Hao number several hundred thousand believers. About 600 Hoa Hao have been arrested by government forces, according to Hoa Hao Senator Le Phuoc Sang in Saigon.

In the South Vietnamese capital itself, police last night arrested 13 journalists belonging to 9 Vietnamese newspapers seized yesterday for printing accounts of charges by a Roman Catholic priest that President Nguyen Van Thieu had betrayed the people, the army and the peace and ought to resign.

The charges were made in a suburban church on Saturday by Father Tran Huu Thanh, leader of the Catholic anti-corruption movement who last year accused the president and his family of enriching themselves illegally.

The journalists included writer Vu Hanh and two editor publishers. They were taken from their homes by police in a series of raids, according to reports from newspaper offices here. They work for the dailies DAI DAN TOC, DIEN TIN, SONT THAN, BUT THEP, DONG PHUONG, DOC LAP and TIA SANG.

The South Vietnamese Government spokesman Nguyen Quoc Cuong said he had not been told of the arrests but that the nine newspapers seized on Sunday printed news items and documents of a tendentious character liable to prejudice, security, and public order and prejudicial to national policy by opposing the Government of the Republic of Vietnam, defaming the head of state and sowing confusion among the people.

Mr Cuong said the newspapers had violated four provisions of the South Vietnamese press code and that the government had acted to end a campaign aimed at poisoning peoples minds.

The government spokesman said the death toll in disturbances involving the Hoa Hao was lower than the figures cited by Senator Le Phuoc Sang. According to Mr Cuong, casualties were one person dead and one wounded.

The Bao An have been attempting to assemble at Hoa Hao centres ever since the order to disband the sects militia was issued by the Interior Ministry on Thursday. The sects private army has fought the communists since the first Indochina war when its founder Huynh Phyl So was assassinated by the communist Viet Minh.

According to a reliable source, Bao An who had earlier been incorporated into the government's regional and popular force militias abandoned about 20 outposts in the delta since the order was given to disband the Bao An. The outposts were occupied by communist troops without a shot being fired, the source said.

Last summer when a similar attempt was made to disarm the Hoa Hao, militant believers hacked off their fingers and sent them to President Thieu as a protest.

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