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TO : Col. Browne & PMS Team

FROM: Direct Aid Section

Indications of Viet Cong
Strength and Influence in the High Plateau

A. Military.

1. Kontum.

No organized Viet Cong military units have been reported in northern Kontum, but in the west, on the borders of Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh, the presence of company sized components of the 17th Battalion has been well established (the total strength of this battalion has been estimated at 200 men).

It is believed, however, that some military instruction (including the use of poison arrows) has been given to the mountaineers in northern Kontum, and some villages may have been fortified, possibly with barbed wire and automatic weapons, for use as base camps. Probably the mountaineers who have been trained in this area are to be used only for surveillance and local protection.

In addition, there are undoubtedly armed Viet Cong elements to protect the important base and administrative area in northern Kontum, which stretches from the eastern fringe of the plateau almost to the Laotian border, and laps over into Quang Nam.

2. Pleiku.

The heaviest concentration of armed Viet Cong units in the PMS, and probably in all South Viet Nam, is in western Pleiku and the border regions of Binh Dinh and Phu Yen. The presence of one regiment and three un-attached battalions has been reported in this area. The key to this region is the Tho Lo secret zone, which pivots on the junction of the borders of these three provinces, which is served with an internal telephone net and is heavily guarded.

8 South-west of Tho Lo and south-east of Cheo Reo, the 371st Bn. of the 84th, with a strength of 400 men (including 9 mortars and many automatic rifles), commands the corridor into Phu Yen and the mountains between Cheo Reo and Banmethuot. The 84th is reported to be mostly composed of mountaineers who have an excellent knowledge of the terrain and who are able to operate effectively in the mountains.. There may be Chinese officers with this unit.

Little is known about the 109th, 120th, and 88th battalions also reported to be operating in this area. These three battalions protect the Tho Lo zone on the east and north, and the 120th in north-eastern Pleiku probably links VC forces in Pleiku with the 17th battalion in western Kontum.

The discovery of important arms caches in northern Pleiku and western Binh Dinh, suggest that the heart of this resistance area at Tho Lo must be well supplied. The formation of mountaineer guerrillas and small auto-defense groups in western Pleiku is reported to be "continuing regularly."

B. Political.

There is no evidence that Viet Cong propaganda efforts in the PMS have diminished lately, and leaflets have been reported even in Pleiku town. The standard Communist tactic of intimidation is being employed, and it may be expected that in remote regions of Pleiku and Kontum the mountaineers will be afraid to report the presence or activity of Viet Cong cadres.

The main themes of VC propaganda are the same here as in other regions of South Viet Nam, with relatively slight emphasis being given to the hostility between Mountaineers and Vietnamese. Administrative committees for propaganda dissemination have been installed in some villages of northern Kontum, and demonstrations for the opening of consultative conferences have been reported in Pleiku and An Khe towns.

Viet Cong propaganda activities are reported to have been particularly effective among the Sedang and Kasseng in the north of Kontum and the Bahnar in western Phu Yen and Binh Dinh.

C. Trade.

There is a considerable contraband trade, chiefly in opium, which uses the route south from the DRV through Laos, the Southern Highlands, and Banmethuat and Saigon. The proportions of this trade do not appear impressive at the present time, but the route used, if not identical to the one employed by Viet Cong political and military cadre, must be a valuable auxiliary access to the South.

D. General.

The reported appearance of new armed units in the mountainous regions of Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai, the organization of mountaineer units to protect administrative bases in Quang Nam, and the intensified operations of mobile company units between main Viet Cong bases, all indicate an increased flow of personnel and supplies from the north into the PMS.

While there may be communication and supply channels directly across ~~the~~ Pleiku, between the Tho Lo region and Cambodia, the main avenue of Viet Cong movements is north from Tho Lo through western Pleiku and Kontum, and around the northern boundary of Kontum to the Laotian border. While this chain might be cut in several places, it appears that the crucial point of all VC communications is in the north-western corner of Kontum, near the Laotian frontier.