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Mr. William C. Trueheart, Charge d'Affaires
ad interim

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Rufus C. Phillips

Assistance to FAR Battalion 33

1. During my recent stay in Hue, I was briefed on 12 August by General Tri, Commander of the 1st Division, ARVN, and his G-2, Captain Minh, on the status of FAR Battalion 33.

2. At the beginning of the briefing I explained to General Tri that USOM/Vietnam had been asked to look into the possibility of supplying rice and other assistance to FAR Battalion 33 which was reported to be starving and I would appreciate any information he could give me about the status of the Battalion and of any assistance the GVN was giving it. General Tri and Captain Minh then gave me (along with Mr. Helbe, U. S. Consul at Hue, Mr. Greiner of CAS, Mr. Amber of USIS, Lt. Col. Dunlap of MAAG, and Mr. Maynard of USOM) a very detailed run-down on the FAR Battalion and ARVN contact with it. Afterwards, he gave me several papers plus a map (which are attached) which cover most of the information given in the briefing.

3. Several important points were made during the briefing which do not, however, show up in the attached papers. According to General Tri, the 1st Division has had a five man intelligence team with the FAR Battalion for several months. The Division is fully aware of their requirements, its representatives having personally visited all the units. At present, the Battalion and the population are having difficulties in feeding themselves but are not actually starving. General Tri has been negotiating with the FAR Commander for some time and has recently concluded an agreement with him to exchange 500,000 VN Piastres for Lao Kip each month in order to permit the Lao to purchase foodstuffs in Vietnam. ARVN will also supply the Lao with vehicles and gasoline. In return for this, the FAR Battalion has agreed to carry out intelligence activities for the 1st Division (covering the main infiltration routes between Houei Sans and Tchepone) and to provide cover for intelligence and sabotage activities of VN special forces-type teams. According to General Tri, this agreement had been concurred in by the President and he is expecting funds to put it into effect.

4. General Tri made the point several times that due to the situation the Lao Battalion found itself in, it had in the past played ball with

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GROUP 4

Downgraded at 3-year intervals
Declassified after 12 years.

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both sides. Although the Lao Commander is anti-communist in his beliefs, no activities of any consequence have been carried out against the Pathet Lao. General Tri made it clear that he did not anticipate any real action from the Battalion, but that he believed the advantages to be derived from monitoring, if not actually controlling, the infiltration between Houei Sane and Tchepone were so great that it was well worth trying to assist and use the Battalion. He felt that adequate cooperation could be obtained by carefully controlling the granting of assistance. General Tri asked that any assistance granted be channelled through, and carefully controlled by ARVN, expressing a conviction that cooperation received from the Battalion would otherwise be minimal.

5. During the briefing it was stated that the Lao would need rice in addition to the exchange funds mentioned in the attached papers, although this is not stated in the documents. This is apparent from the relatively small amount of money proposed to be exchanged monthly, and the reduction by nearly one-third from the nominal ration value. This point, as well as the discrepancy between strength breakdown and total strength for rations, of the Lao Battalion, needs further clarification.

6. General Tri and his staff gave me the impression of knowing exactly what they were about. I indicated to him that it was very doubtful that we would be able to assist with any funds, but that we might be able to help with supplies in kind, if required. This could be done by making purchases at Quang Tri, through our provincial representatives, of supplies which would then be turned over to ARVN for delivery to Lao Bao, and pick-up by the Lao. General Tri said that this procedure would be agreeable to him.

7. Comments and Recommendations:

a. General Tri was frank and open in his presentation, which appeared to be entirely above-board. The impression was given that American support and participation were welcome. I believe that General Tri's analysis of the situation is correct, and I agree with his view that assistance should be channelled through ARVN and carefully controlled in order to assure the continued cooperation of the Lao Battalion.

b. Based on the foregoing, I would be happy to contact Secretary Thuan to determine if, and how, the CVN plans to support General Tri's agreement. Following that, I suggest a meeting with CAS and MAC-V to discuss how American support and participation should be handled.

cc: Mr. J. L. Brent, Director, USOM
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