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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

Return to JWN
ST

file POL-1
DATE: September 18, 1963

SUBJECT: Vietnamese Problems

PARTICIPANTS: Dang Duc Khoi - Deputy Director General of Information, GVN
Joseph A. Mendenhall - Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs

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✓ FE - Assistant Secretary Hilsman
M - Mr. Jorden
INR - Mr. Whiting

Ambassador Lodge, Saigon
Mr. Trueheart, Saigon

I called on Mr. Khoi at the Hotel Woodner to follow-up the conversation which Mr. Jorden had with him on September 17. Knowledge of Mr. Khoi's presence in Washington is being restricted at this time to a very few people and, therefore, further distribution of this memorandum should be closely guarded.

1. Reasons for Khoi's Departure from Viet-Nam.

I explored with Khoi what had impelled him to escape from Viet-Nam. He said that it was concern over expected action by Madame Nhu (not Mr. Nhu) against him. He had crossed her several times, particularly in the field of press matters, and was convinced that she was out to get him. He had received a specific warning, and left via a prearranged plan. His concern was not over being arrested because there would have been no legal grounds for arrest, but rather of "just disappearing". Khoi said this has happened recently to others, and mentioned specifically a Nguyen Phan Chau (?) who he said used to be a collaborator of Diem's.

He said that Madame Nhu's brother, Tran Van Khiem, has become her hatchet man. I asked Khoi what had brought about the change in Khiem's attitude since he used to be violently anti-Madame Nhu. He said Khiem told him that he had "seen the light" on the basis of talks with the Nhuses. I asked Khoi whether fear had brought about Khiem's transformation, but Khoi did not know. He did say, in response to my question, that the change in Khiem's attitude occurred after the arrest of Maître Dzu, Khiem's legal partner.

Khoi

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Khoi said that Thuan is also under pressure similar to that which Khoi felt. Dr. Tuyen, formerly head of the secret police, has likewise been under similar pressure according to Khoi, and has been sleeping in different places each night. Khoi expressed the hope that Tuyen had managed to get out of Viet-Nam on the way to his assignment as Consul General in Cairo because this would remove him from danger.

2. Power Structure in the GVN.

Khoi asserted that the real wielder of power in the GVN is Madame Nhu. She controls Nhu who in turn controls Diem. She likes to point out that she is the only one in the Palace with real courage when the chips are down. She declares that, if it had not been for her, the family would not have held out either against the Binh Xuyen in 1955 or against the coup d'etat attempt in November, 1960.

Actually, according to Khoi, Madame Nhu also exerts great power over Diem directly. He cited two specific instances in support of this statement:

a. In June, 1963, Khoi, in his censor's job as Deputy Director General of Information, was confronted one morning by a Times of Viet-Nam article labeling the members of the Buddhist Committee negotiating with the Government as Communists, crooks and pimps. Since the appearance of this article would have undercut negotiations which the Government was then conducting with the Buddhists, Khoi slashed out the article. Mrs. Gregory of the Times of Viet-Nam then called Khoi to state that this was Madame Nhu's own article, but Khoi refused to change his decision. In a series of subsequent maneuvers which Khoi described, Diem, under Madame Nhu's pressure, authorized the publication of the article after an agreement had been signed between the Government and the Buddhists.

b. On an occasion about two months ago, Diem was slated to be interviewed by a UPI correspondent at the same time that Madame Nhu was to have a TV interview with a CBS correspondent. Diem had installed himself with the UPI correspondent in the room in the Palace which he customarily used for informal meetings when Madame Nhu came along and demanded that he move to the dining room because she wished to use that particular room for her TV interview. Diem obediently made the move as requested. Later, Madame Nhu, finding that the noise emanating from the room where Diem was giving his interview interfered with the sound in the room where her TV interview was being conducted, asked that Diem move again, but this time he refused. (Khoi said that he had an account of this incident from both the UPI and CBS correspondents, as well as from a Palace guard who was involved in it.)

3. Reports of Nhu's Negotiations with the DRV.

Khoi has no specific information on the reports of Nhu's negotiations with the DRV, but he said that it conforms to Nhu's character and experience for him to think that he may be able to handle the Communists as well as others. Khoi said

that Nhu

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that Nhu has, in the past, pushed out into realms which everyone but Nhu thought would fail, and Nhu's success on these occasions has emboldened him to believe that he can carry off any well-nigh impossible operation.

As an example, Khoi cited the anti-American campaign which Nhu mounted in the press in November, 1961, after Ambassador Nolting presented the U.S. Government's demands growing out of General Taylor's mission to Viet-Nam. Most Vietnamese were convinced that Nhu's anti-American campaign would backfire and fail, but, as it turned out, it succeeded because the U.S. promptly backed down.

As another example of Nhu's confidence in his own judgment, Khoi stated that two or three months ago Nhu had commented to him that he was not deeply concerned about the Buddhists and other opposition agitation against the Government because this could be quickly crushed by a Saint Bartholomew's massacre of several hundreds or thousands of intellectuals. This is the kind of operation which Nhu subsequently carried out on August 20 against the Buddhist pagodas, with the success in a power sense which is evident.

Khoi said that it is his personal estimate that the purpose of the trip to Saigon by Tran Van Dinh (of the Viet-Nam Embassy in Washington) in mid-August, 1963, was to serve as an intermediary for Nhu in contacts with the DRV. Khoi said that he has not been able to figure out any other reason for Dinh's trip and, noting Dinh's old association with the Viet Minh in Laos and Thailand during the French-Indochina War and the fact that Dinh visited Thailand during his recent trip back to Southeast Asia, Khoi surmised that Nhu was putting to use the contacts which Dinh could make with the DRV through Viet Cong in Thailand. Khoi also said that Dinh's forthcoming assignment to New Delhi as Consul General fits with this hypothesis as Dinh could serve as a channel of contact through DRV representatives there. (I made no mention to Khoi of the reports we have had about Nhu's contacts with the DRV through the French and the Polish ICC representative.)

Khoi, in response to a question, said that he was not aware of any negotiations which Nhu might be conducting with Viet Cong in South Viet-Nam.

Comment: It seemed apparent that Khoi had no specific information on Nhu's reported contacts with the DRV.

4. French Role in Viet-Nam.

In response to my query about the French role, Khoi said he thought it was significant that General Ton That Dinh was selected by Nhu to play a major role in recent events because Dinh has a long standing connection with the French officer who is now Chairman of the Joint General Staff in Paris (whose name Khoi could not recall). Khoi said this officer had picked Dinh from the lowly status of an orderly during the Indochina War and had advanced him to the rank of First Lieutenant. Khoi said that he knows that Dinh and this French officer have been in recent communication, but did not know the nature of the communications.

Khoi also

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Khoi also said that Nhu recently sent Col. Duong Ngoc Lam, Commander of the Civil Guard, on a special secret mission to Paris. Khoi did not know the nature of this mission.

5. Buddhist Leaders.

Khoi said that, in addition to Tri Quang, he considers Thien Minh (now in prison in Hue and like Tri Quang in his forties) and Tam Chau (who is missing) as important Buddhist political leaders. Khoi expressed the conviction that these Buddhist leaders are not neutralist in sentiment.

6. Generals.

I asked Khoi about General Tri's position and motivation in the present situation. Khoi thought that Tri's support of the Government might be motivated by his animosity toward General Nghiem who has been pro-Buddhist, as well as by his recent promotion from Colonel to Brig. General.

Khoi said that General Khanh in the II Corps has always been opposed to the Ngo family. Khoi tried to cast some doubt on Khanh's support of the family during the November, 1960 coup, but I do not think that this point would really stand up against the facts.

Khoi labeled General Cao of the IV Corps as a vainglorious individual who manufactures victories and Viet Cong casualties to enhance his own position.

7. Buu Hoi.

I asked Khoi why Buu Hoi, whose mother had threatened to immolate herself in support of the Buddhist cause, had consented to represent the Government at the UNGA. Khoi said that, when Buu Hoi returned to Saigon a few weeks ago, he was initially totally opposed to the Government's handling of the Buddhist issue, but emerged from talks with Diem and Nhu completely won over. Khoi noted that Buu Hoi has just bought a new laboratory in Paris, implying that money might have aided his conversion.

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