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Mr. J. L. Brent, Director/USOM

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Conversation with President Diem on 27 May 1963

1. The following is the summary of a conversation I had with President Diem on 27 May 1963. I opened the conversation by saying that I felt it might be useful to explain what the functions of the USOM provincial representative were. I explained that they were mainly volunteers who had come to Vietnam to help without arriere penses, and that they were all people of good will. I went on to say that their sole purpose was to help his government at the critical provincial level and to reinforce the government's operations. Perhaps the government had gotten the impression that these representatives might be trying to control or even undermine the government but this was not the case. I said I had noted at one point, just after the problem wall-building in Vinh Long had arisen, that the President seemed to feel that the sovereignty of certain province chiefs was being questioned by some of our people. My impression was that with the province chiefs who were true nationalists, we had the best relations. They were the easiest to help. What few difficulties we had had were mainly with province chiefs who were not sure of themselves, not doing too well, and who wanted to hide this from the government. I then said I would like to get the President's opinion on whether he felt our provincial representatives were carrying out their jobs correctly and if they were helping or not.

2. The President said he appreciated the work our people were doing and that the remarks he had made before the Honolulu Conference were not directed at our people but rather at certain military advisors. Then he went into an expose of Colonel Phuoc's accusations against Major Ring in Vinh Long, Major Nhat's (Kien Tuong Province Chief) accusations against Major Poston in Kien Tuong and General Cao's (IV Corps Commander) accusations against Lt. Col. Van, former 7th Division Advisor. After the President had gone into great detail about what had been reported to him, I told him that in at least two (Vinh Long and Kien Tuong) of the three cases he had cited, the Province Chiefs had not told him the truth. I then detailed what had happened in Vinh Long and also what had happened in Kien Tuong. In summary, I pointed out that the behavior of the Sector Advisors there had been of the highest order and that I could only conclude that the province chiefs concerned

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had attempted to shift the blame for their own shortcomings on to their American advisors.

3. The President then said he often had difficulties in finding out what was happening in the provinces and that he didn't believe everything he was told by any means. He then spoke in general terms about the difficulties encountered in carrying out the Strategic Hamlet program in the Delta. I remarked that we had recently prepared an evaluation of the status of the Strategic Hamlet program province-by-province and wondered if he might be interested in seeing it. He said that he would like to see this report and I said I would send him a copy.

4. The conversation, which had been very friendly throughout despite the somewhat sensitive nature of the subjects discussed, terminated on a cordial note with the President saying that he appreciated having our frank opinions and that he would like me to keep in close liaison with the Minister of Interior.

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