

PROVINCIAL REPRESENTATIVES REPORT

LONG AN PROVINCE
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The disintegration of the strategic hamlet program continues unabated. Political and psychological inroads by the Viet Cong have met with such success that only twenty or at the most thirty of the 219 government-sponsored hamlets remain within provincial control. This definition includes those hamlets which still have their protective fences intact, that are visited by representatives of the local government and have some semblance of hamlet militia left who are willing to defend the hamlet. The USIS/GVN Survey Teams, for example, found only six of twelve hamlets within five kilometers of Tan An able to meet these criteria.

As presented to the Secretary of Defense and the Ambassador on the 19th of December briefing, a joint US/GVN military and civilian agency operation is now underway in an attempt to reverse this situation. The following summary explains both methods.

Military

Beginning in about two weeks one ARVN airborne battalion will begin operations in an area generally southeast of Tan An. This area will include thirty-two strategic hamlets and some additional non-strategic residential areas. The purpose of this operation is to drive out or eliminate Viet Cong military units and political cadre, provide security for the implementation of the civilian agency program and at the same time indicate to the people the strength and presence of the national government. The battalion will remain in this area for thirty to forty-five days. During this time units of the battalion will physically occupy each hamlet, expanding outward from Tan An. As the ARVN unit is withdrawn from the hamlet a squad of Self Defense Corps personnel will replace them to provide security. The SDC squad will remain in the hamlet until the hamlet militia can be retrained and rearmed. The defensive posture of the hamlet -barbed wire, moat, etc.-will be replaced or modified as deemed necessary. After pacification of the initial area the same procedure will be employed in other regions of the province. Concurrently with the clear and hold operation other ARVN forces will conduct "hunt and kill" operations elsewhere in the province to regain military initiative.

Certain definite benefits should be gained from the military operation. If the proposed plan, drafted by MAAG personnel and modified by Vietnamese military officers, is carried out as written, security from Viet Cong overt attack and recognition by the people of the power of the government can reasonably be anticipated. However, from the viewpoint of these people living in the hamlets, the constant propaganda efforts of the Viet Cong political cadres remains the most efficient weapon in the hands of the Communists. The use of troops, no matter how brave or proficient on the battlefield, cannot win over the minds or loyalty of the people. It is with this understanding that the civilian agency plan has been developed.

Civilian Agency

To determine the reasons for the failure of the strategic hamlet program and the lack of popular support for the war against the Viet Cong an interview with every family in every hamlet in Long An Province is being conducted. This survey began on December 19th and has completed a total of twelve hamlets. These hamlets are in the area of the initial military clear and hold operation. Guided by Vietnamese employees of the U.S. Information Service and supervised by an American field representative of USIS these three teams of eight men each are compiling extremely valuable data. Eight basic questions are asked of each family in the hamlet:

- a. What are your objections to the strategic hamlet?
- b. What is needed to make this hamlet a better place to live?
- c. What complaints do you have against the government and local administration?
- d. What objectionable things have happened here in the past?
- e. What do the Viet Cong tell you when they come to the hamlet?
- f. What do you like about the Viet Cong?
- g. What don't you like about them?
- h. What can you do to help make this a better hamlet?
- i. What do you feel is most needed in your hamlet right now?

These questions are structured carefully, by Vietnamese trained in interviewing techniques. Responses from individuals which suggest additional questions or possible intelligence information are pursued without regard to their appearance in this sequence. Upon completion of each bloc of three hamlets a debriefing is held for each survey team, and a joint written report submitted by the USIS and provincial staff member appointed as nominal team "leader". Interviewers do not take notes during the interview, but another team member remaining outside where he can serve as security guard and also overhear the conversation does so. The Province Chief is furnished a full and complete Vietnamese translation of every team report. Additional copies are provided the Long An MAAG Sector Advisor and the action copy for my use.

A very significant factor is that of the twelve hamlets surveyed thus far, each has its own distinct problems and requests for assistance. Some general complaints are common to all; neglect by the local government, desire of the relocated families to return to their old homes and sincere hope for an end to the fighting. But to generalize from one district to another or even one hamlet to the next would be a serious mistake.

The general problems brought to light such as lack of security and failure of the local government to visit the hamlets and tell the people the government story must be met and solved on a province-wide basis. The individual requests for relief from a corrupt local official, the building of a hamlet school or the training and supply of a medical technician for the hamlet must be met on a hamlet-by-hamlet basis. The Provincial Committee, composed of the Province Chief, MAAG Advisor and USOM Representative will study each case and act upon it. The full support of the USOM technical divisions, the Office of Rural Affairs and the material resources available to us will be brought to bear on each hamlet.

To effectively counter the Viet Cong propaganda, a daily, professional information effort must be made to take full advantage of the material assistance and political reforms being made in the hamlets by the new revolutionary government. If such a follow-up is not made, our efforts will be rendered at least 50% ineffective. The pressing problem is where to secure such personnel. The pick of the provincial civic action and information service personnel are already working on the three survey teams. These teams must continue their survey in the succeeding areas destined for the military clear and hold operation. To make a change in the present attitude of the people calls for an intensive propaganda effort. If the ready supply of new recruits for the Viet Cong cannot be stopped, we cannot win. This is a staggering program, for both the province and the nation, which may well not be within the financial and personnel capabilities of the country. The Viet Cong have eighty-one squads of political cadre in Long An, one for each village. Can we match it?

The Viet Cong can provide only words and negative military actions in their campaign to win the people. We have vast amounts of material assistance, technical advice and positive military operations. The difficulty lies in the application. No new democratic policy or assistance program, however sincerely and vigorously announced from Saigon or Tan An, can be effective unless it reaches every family in every hamlet. The whole system of government breaks down in proportion to the distance from the capitol, whether it be Saigon, Tan An or each District Headquarters. We must go in now at the hamlet level. There is no time left to train the entire civil service. One solution could be trained, motivated personnel from various appropriate Vietnamese agencies in Saigon. Another might be a canvass of all units of the Long An Provincial government -public works, education, etc., to select the most qualified people, then back them up with Americans, pushing from behind, not leading from in front, to keep colonialism out of the picture as much as possible. In either case, it must be done and quickly.