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MARCH?

SUMMARY

The Long An "Clear-and-hold" operation, launched last January with great fanfare and some real promise, has ground virtually to a halt with little to show so far for the effort. The operation has only extended to 12 hamlets, some of which were fairly secure already, and neither full security nor adequate civil administration has yet been assured in any of them. Local GVN activities have been weak in key areas such as revitalizing SDC and militia forces, carrying out administrative and social reforms, and exploiting civic action projects for maximum psychological effect. But the most destructive factors have been the frequent changes in command and troop dispositions and the outside political maneuvering, both well beyond the control of the province itself.

The VC continue to exploit GVN incompetence and to wage their own political-military campaign effectively. The April 8 attack on the Phuoc Loi SDC Training Center, which revealed a number of GVN command and tactical weaknesses, was particularly successful for them. Yet a workable base for the GVN to build on still seems to exist. What is essential is a firm GVN decision that pacification takes priority over all else affecting Long An, and that the necessary command structure and military resources to accomplish it will be assured.

I. Pacification Operation

A. Plan:

The first phase of the Long An pacification plan, launched January 15, called for the clearing and consolidation of 32 hamlets located in a semi-circle generally south of the provincial capital of Tan An. This phase was to have been completed within 90 days, with the operation then moving on north of the capital. Security was to be the responsibility initially of troops from the Airborne Brigade, with an expanded and revitalized SDC and militia taking over as the regular troops moved outward. Province cadre teams and provincial services would work behind the security forces to carry out necessary economic, social, and administrative projects.

B. Execution:

The pace of pacification in Long An has fallen far behind schedule. At present only 12 hamlets in the initial operational area have been "consolidated", and even these are by no means completed. The first 8 were undertaken more or less on time, but the next 4 were begun sporadically, and there are no indications the GVN intends to move into additional hamlets at present.

The military task force has not maintained security continuously throughout the operation, and the units themselves have been switched so rapidly that their effectiveness as a screening and pacification force was seriously hampered. MAAG advisers estimate the units in the pacification area were changed, or withdrawn and then replaced, over 20 times since the beginning of the operation. The Airborne troops in particular were responsive to their own brigade command structure rather than to provincial control, and they were constantly switched out of the area for operations elsewhere. The Marines and the ARVN 7th Division troops that just replaced the Airborne have proven little better so far; the hamlets under "pacification" are still going without outside protection for days at a time.

This problem was compounded by the former province chief's loss of political backing in Saigon as a result of the January 30 coup. His authority over the operation was severely reduced and the ensuing divided command arrangement was totally unworkable. He was replaced on March 3 and the command structure was somewhat simplified, but the question of control over the pacification forces still remains to plague the operation.

Plans for revitalization of the SDC and militia have not been fulfilled in the pacification area. In some hamlets along Route 4 an adequate and mobile SDC force already existed. In one or two others west of Tan An, the village-based SDC have now stationed themselves in the hamlets, with fairly good psychological results so far. But no SDC have been retrained, there are few new recruits, patrolling and night operations have not changed noticeably, and nothing has been done with the militia. Thus, the local defense forces are no more capable now than before of

maintaining security in the pacified area and of allowing the regular forces to move on.

There has been no improvement in police activities to root out the VC "infrastructure" in the hamlets. As far as one can tell, there were no arrests of clandestine VC agents and few if any new GVN agents placed in the area.

Several hamlets have received useful civic action projects, and the ARVN engineers assigned have performed well. The Airborne medical personnel also deserve honorable mention. But GVN psychological exploitation of these projects is quite poor, and the overall effect of the civic action effort is minimal so far. In some cases the Americans rather than the GVN have received credit for the projects (the peasants have shrewdly and quite correctly diagnosed the actual situation). Administrative reforms designed to meet popular grievances in the hamlets have not yet begun.

16 cadre teams were established in Long An utilizing local personnel (including cadres from the defunct Ministry of Civil Action) and some civil servants sent from Saigon. The latter have not proven too useful so far, and their morale is poor. Cadre teams have worked the hamlets in the pacification area with fair results in some cases. But in others they have not been assured adequate security and have pulled back when the regular forces moved out of the area.

C. Results:

Security has been temporarily improved in some of the hamlets, while in others it was always relatively good because of their close proximity to Tan An. Only one of the 12 hamlets has received open VC harassment since the operation began, and this small probing attack was beaten off easily by the SDC.

But this improvement is illusory. It is due primarily to the (relatively) massive assistance of outside forces and has no permanent local basis without them. The constant shifting of these forces has given substance to the VC propaganda line that the ARVN and GVN will not persist but will soon leave the hamlets again to the mercies of the VC. The peasants themselves have quite clearly connected the presence of the regular forces with their own security and have appeared grateful for it. The GVN risks loss of this new confidence by constant replacement or withdrawal of these forces.

The few successful civic action projects completed or begun so far do not seem to have won any hearts or minds of the people. Quite aside from the GVN's ineffective propaganda exploitation, the fact is such projects by themselves are relatively unimportant compared to the overwhelming and immediate need for better physical security in this area. Furthermore, the projects are all of the physical construction type and by their nature the easiest to impose from the provincial level (and at U.S. urging). They have not made a significant dent in the GVN's other major problem regarding the population--i.e., long-time maladministration and neglect by local officials.

The operation has lost all its initial momentum, both militarily and psychologically. It is a token effort at present, and the confusion regarding command and the future of the operation itself persists. The loss of a promising province chief and the wasteful misuse of scarce military resources have robbed the operation of much of its initial enthusiasm and lowered local morale in Long An. From this psychological standpoint, the province seems worse off now than when the operation began.

Use of the Airborne troops for this operation was a mistake. Their participation in long-term pacification activities clashes with their primary mission as a rapid reaction and strike force. But more important, they are not responsive to any province-level command. Their brigade commander is a key figure in Saigon politics, particularly since the January 30 coup, and it is unlikely he would ever have released control of his troops to a province chief. His outright meddling in Long An politics cost the GVN dearly during February, when he saddled the province chief with a totally incompetent Airborne "Sector Commander" who sapped provincial authority and effectiveness.

II. General Security Situation

Security in the province as a whole has deteriorated since January, and VC incidents in April are double the rate in March. The VC have continued their low-level political-military campaign without effective counter-measures by the GVN, although GVN operations did improve over the low point of November and December. VC terrorism goes on unabated and may actually have begun to alienate the population significantly. One particular outrage on March 22, when they mined a bus and killed 23 innocent civilians, reportedly aroused considerable public opinion against the VC.

But the most serious blow to the GVN was the VC's April 8 attack on the Phuoc Loi SDC training center at Go Den, on Route 4 in northern Long An. It cost the GVN 23 killed, 36 wounded, and 37 missing, plus over 100 individual weapons; VC losses were nil. It rudely shattered the relative security in that part of the province, incidentally the part closest to Saigon. And it showed up glaring GVN ineptitude in reacting to the attack, with neither provincial forces nor regular troops in the province able to pursue the VC or to limit their success in any way. (15 of the missing SDC have since been liberated in recent GVN operations.)

The attack was also a deep psychological setback in the southern part of the province, where the pacification operation is under way. Almost all the SDC casualties were from three posts in the pacification area (though not from hamlets already being "consolidated"), and were either new recruits or veteran SDC undergoing initial basic training. The SDC has long been understrength and recruiting has been painfully difficult in these insecure areas; indications are it will be even harder now. To replace these SDC the province has temporarily taken some mobile SDC from more secure hamlets near Tan An, thereby reducing further their thin local defenses and the number of mobile forces available. Thus, in one stroke the VC were apparently able to score a significant political victory by reducing morale throughout the province and by striking at the heart of the security portion of the pacification plan--i.e., rebuilding and expanding the SDC and militia.

(Note: The VC are apparently aware of the implications of their victory--in a recent "Liberation Front Radio" broadcast, they boasted that the successful attack on Phuoc Loi "contributed to defeating the first step of the Long An Pacification Plan.")

In January the ARVN battalion guarding the two main bridges on Route 4 at Ben Luc and Tan An was replaced by two Civil Guard companies from the province. This may have increased ARVN mobility elsewhere, but it seriously reduced the number of local forces available to the province for pacification operations. From the narrower provincial standpoint, Civil Guard are far better for these operations because they are completely under province control and can remain in place. On balance, the switch in this static defense responsibility appears to have been a net loss to pacification efforts in Long An.

III. Attitudes and Personalities

The popular attitude in Long An appears to remain one of apathy toward either side. The pacification operation so far has not convinced anyone that the GVN is making an effective comeback. At the same time, however, the VC have been particularly destructive in Long An and may have overdone their terror campaign. They still seem to have only the forced acquiescence of much of the population they "control". Province psywar activities, spurred mainly by U.S. personnel, have begun to exploit VC atrocities successfully, particularly the March 22 bus incident.

Provincial civil servants have been bewildered by the changes and resulting lack of decisive leadership at critical points. The new (Ca. April 1) Deputy Province Chief for Administration appears able and willing to improve the province's creaky administrative apparatus, but many of his technical service chiefs remain weak. The new police chief may represent no improvement, since he was formerly district chief at Tan Tru and compiled an undistinguished record there. There are two new district chiefs since early March, one of whom replaced the effective Ben Luc chief. Fortunately, the latter has just been put in charge of the province's "New Rural Life" program, representing an outstanding improvement over the former incompetent.

The new province chief, Major Nguyen Van LOC, is a young airborne officer who was involved in the abortive 1960 coup against Diem. He spent 3 years in exile in Cambodia before returning to service with the Airborne Brigade in Vietnam after the November 1 revolution. He is 33 years old, reportedly has an impressive military record, but is totally without administrative experience. He is yet untested in a job which basically requires a mature, experienced, and personally dynamic man with sufficient political backing in Saigon. Loc has already felt the disadvantage of not having control of all troops in his province for pacification operations, and he claims he has threatened to resign if command difficulties are not straightened out.

IV. Economic Situation

Long An suffered about a 15% rice crop loss from insect damage during the 1963 harvest. The losses appear to be localized, largely in the area around Tan An

including the pacification area. This offers a good propaganda opportunity for the coming season, and USOM and local GVN technicians are working out an excellent agricultural program to go hand-in-hand with the pacification operation. The program includes pesticides, fertilizer, improved seed, livestock, and more effective agricultural credit. The "civic action" and psychological potential of these agricultural activities is quite promising, probably the brightest spot in the overall effort so far, because the program is practical and geared thoroughly to the province's "clear-and-hold" activities. If carried out and exploited properly, it will do considerable to show the advantages of living in GVN-controlled areas and opting for the GVN over the VC.

V. Comment

Pacification has been ineffective in Long An so far, primarily because of events and decisions outside the province itself. It would be premature to say this situation has improved with the departure of the Airborne troops. There are indications the 7th Division troops and command structure that have replaced them are not going to stand for province control either, nor is Long An necessarily taking priority in the Division's operations.

Almost all observers agree that Civil Guard are far better suited for pacification than regular forces. Yet Long An has not had enough Civil Guard (it even lost two companies to guard the bridges), nor can it recruit more under present security conditions. If a real "clear-and-hold" effort is to be made in the province, substantial outside assistance is necessary.

Can pacification then succeed in Long An? It certainly cannot unless the basic decision is made to go ahead with it above all else and to set up an effective command structure, preferably at province level. Actually, there is little military alternative to pacification--large ARVN sweeps and sporadic forays by inadequate local defense forces by themselves will certainly not stop the persistent and effective VC political-military campaign. And without radically improved security in this province, GVN civil activities no matter how enlightened simply will not function effectively.

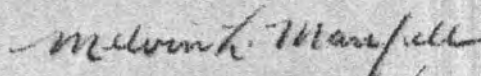
There certainly remains a solid base for the GVN to build on. The population is by no means mainly hostile. On the contrary, Long An has suffered VC terrorism and destruction on a large scale and over a long period, and there are signs the people are as thoroughly disenchanted with the VC as they have been with the GVN in the past. With some solid GVN achievement and some obvious success in overcoming VC armed strength, a marked swing of popular opinion away from the VC is possible.

The province's civil resources appear adequate. Much of the initial organization, training, and re-orientation of attitudes toward pacification are just now starting to pay off, and the civilian side--though far from perfect--needs mainly proper direction and some assurance of security to begin working on the "hold" portion of the operation.

VI. Conclusion

The last three months in Long An were discouraging and largely wasted, and the pacification operation so far has been a near-failure. But in fact the margin of difference between success and failure was not that great and was due in large part to circumstances outside the province. Within Long An itself, the basic situation is by no means as discouraging as the experience since January would indicate. Given some enlightened backing from Saigon, particularly on the question of command and control of military forces, the GVN can still make real and significant progress in pacification there.

For the Ambassador:



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