

**“BRING SECURITY TO THE PEOPLE AND NOT THE PEOPLE TO SECURITY”:
SECURITY, REFUGEE, AND ETHNIC MINORITY POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION
IN VIETNAM’S CENTRAL HIGHLANDS, 1968-1975**

by

MATTHEW F. COHEN

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. David Graff

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Abstract

The central highlands of Vietnam were of vital strategic importance during the Second Indochina War (1955-1975); the collapse of South Vietnamese forces in this region in March 1975 led to the fall of Saigon just one month later. Despite this area's importance, most central highlands historiography addresses large military campaigns, such as the 1972 *Nguyen Hue* "Easter Offensive" and the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Offensive. Micro-histories are of great value in examining the implementation of national programs, yet all province case studies examine events in the more heavily populated and ethnically homogeneous Saigon and Mekong Delta regions of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

This thesis examines Lam Dong province, at the southern end of the Vietnamese central highlands. Focusing on the territorial forces initiative and RVN policy toward ethnic minority Montagnards in the highlands—two vital yet under-studied topics in Vietnam War historiography—this study demonstrates the operational success of the former and the strategic failure of the latter. The thesis is organized chronologically and concentrates on the final six years of the war, when South Vietnamese officials were increasingly promulgating and executing policy. The first part of the study details background information and outlines the war through 1967, when the National Liberation Front (NLF) held the advantage. The middle section scrutinizes the late 1960s and early 1970s and describes the factors that led to increased province security. The final section analyzes the final two years of the war following the departure of U.S. troops. In this period, South Vietnamese forces held the advantage against a weakened NLF, yet ordinary citizens' discontent reached a climax.

In-depth study of both province- and national-level documents from this period demonstrates that local officials, both American and Vietnamese, often attempted to address challenges but were hindered by the centralized nature of the Saigon bureaucracy. The inability and unwillingness of the RVN to address adequately issues such as highlands refugee policy led to the gradual dissatisfaction of many Montagnards in the highlands. This study elucidates RVN initiatives such as the territorial force, Main Living Area, and Return to Village programs—seldom-mentioned yet key facets of the Saigon government's attempt to mollify ethnic tensions and counter the threat posed by the NLF.

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To my parents, who taught me to work hard and meet adversity with resilience; to my sisters, who allowed me to be a typically pompous older sibling; and to the many Vietnamese-Americans I've known who so long ago instilled in me an interest in Southeast Asia: thank you.

Lastly, I'd like to acknowledge my wife, Jenny, and son, Ethan. Jenny, thank you for your sardonic wit, inestimable patience, and tolerance of the many nights and weekends that it took for me to complete this paper. Ethan, I hope that by the time you're old enough to read this, I can make up for all of the time at the computer and in the archives by embarking with you on an ambitious father-son project. That tired old three-oh-deuce is about due for a rebuild. How about it, Ethan?

Dedication

To

Spc. Charles E. Odums II, KIA May 2004

Spc. Raymond L. White, KIA November 2004

Interp. “Calvin,” KIA January 2005

of the Battalion Reconnaissance Platoon, 1/8 Cavalry, First Cavalry Division

“Honor and Courage”

“So and such they were, these men—worthy of their city.”

—Pericles’s funeral oration at the outset of the Peloponnesian War, 431 B.C.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency

CIDG: Civilian Irregular Defense Program

Chieu Hoi: Literally, “open arms”—a program that attempted to entice NLF members to join the RVN

CORDS: Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support

COSVN: Central Office for South Vietnam

CTZ: Corps Tactical Zone

DRV: Democratic Republic of Vietnam

EM: Ethnic Minorities

FLM: Front for the Liberation of the Montagnards

FULRO: *Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées* (United Struggle Front for the Oppressed Races)

GVN: Government of Vietnam

HES: Hamlet Evaluation System

ICCS: International Commission of Control and Supervision

JGS: Joint General Staff

MAAG: Military Assistance Advisory Group

MACV: Military Assistance Command Vietnam

MAT: Mobile Advisory Team

MDEM: Ministry for the Development of Ethnic Minorities

MHSWR: Ministry of Health, Social Welfare, and Relief

MLA: Main Living Area

MR: Military Region

NCO: Noncommissioned Officer

NLF: National Liberation Front (literally, Front for the National Liberation of South Vietnam)

PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam

PF: Popular Forces

PRG: Provisional Revolutionary Government

PSA: Province Senior Advisor

RD: Revolutionary Development program

RF: Regional Forces

RSW: Refugee and Social Welfare

RTV: Return to Village

RVN: Republic of Vietnam

RVNAF: Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces

SAAFO: Special Assistant to the Ambassador for Field Operations

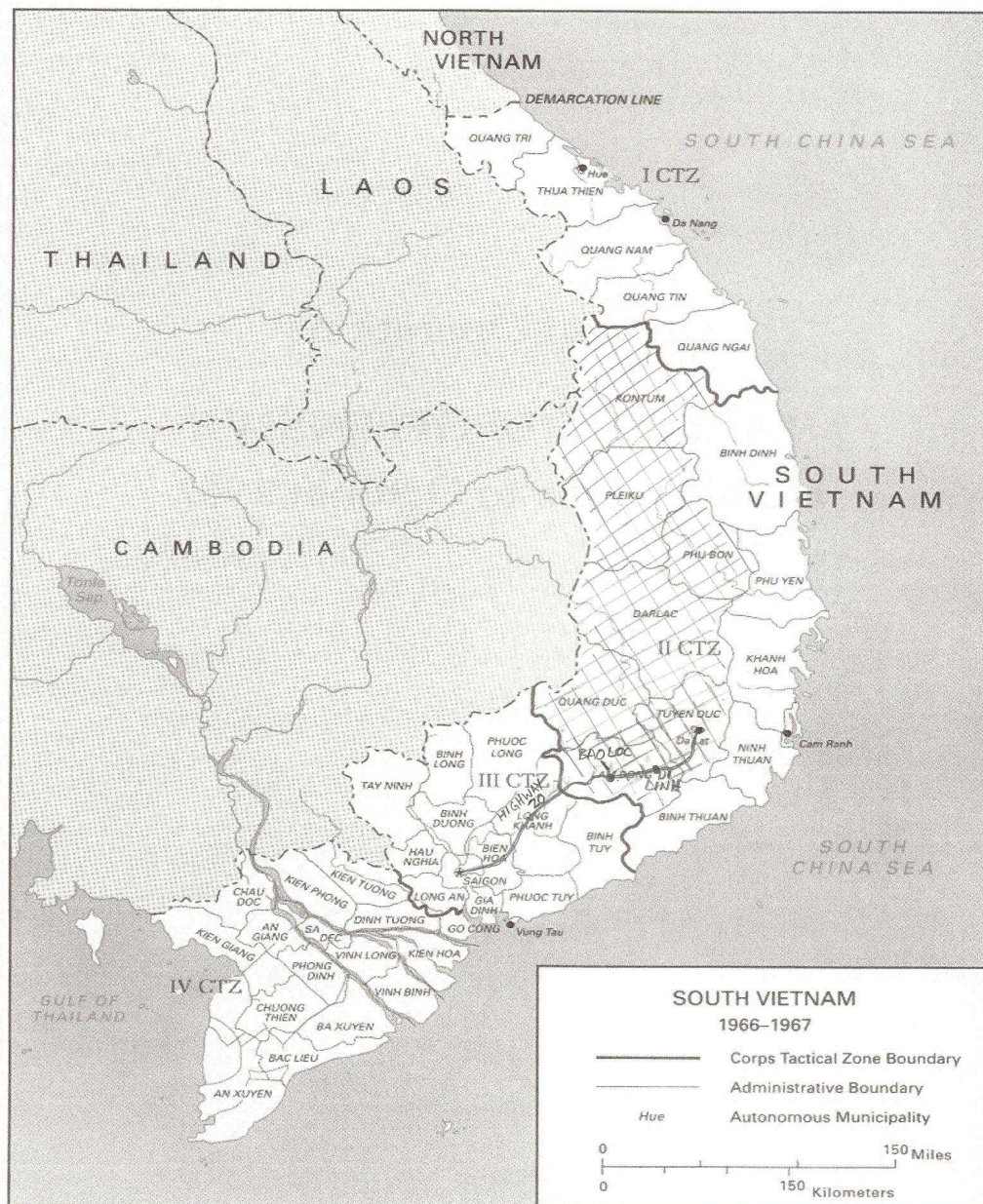
SCMA: Special Committee for Montagnard Affairs

TS: *Truong Son* program, the Montagnard equivalent of the RD program

USAID: U.S. Agency for International Development

VNAF: (South) Vietnamese Air Force

Map of the Republic of Vietnam. Central highlands provinces are shaded.¹



¹ George L. MacGarrigle, *The United States Army in Vietnam: Combat Operations, Taking the Offensive, October 1966-October 1967* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1998), ii. Modifications to map (shading; identification of Highway 20, Bao Loc and Di Linh) by author.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

To seize and control the Highlands is to solve the whole problem of South Vietnam.

—People's Army of Vietnam General Vo Nguyen Giap²

On 10 March 1975, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN³) F-10 Division, supported by two additional PAVN divisions, launched a three-pronged attack on Ban Me Thuot, a crucial city in *Tay Nguyen*, the central highlands of South Vietnam. Defended by only one regiment of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and approximately nine Regional Force (RF) battalions—the latter composed primarily of Montagnards, the indigenous people of the highlands—the city fell in only a day.⁴

On 14 March, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu asked General Pham Van Phu, commander of the highlands, how long he could hold against the North Vietnamese invasion. Phu replied that he would defend the highlands to the death and could possibly hold for a month. Thieu, believing that a withdrawal was necessary in order to preserve combat power, directed that Phu abandon the highlands.⁵ Thieu ordered Phu to keep the news from province chiefs, leaving only RF units to defend the withdrawal.⁶ Contemporaneous observers noted that a Montagnard separatist group, *Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées* (United Struggle Front for the Oppressed Races, or FULRO), had been operating in the central highlands for the past year as a communist front. As a result, some Montagnard villagers had been

² U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "The Highlanders of South Vietnam: A Review of Political Developments and Forces," June 1966, Box 10, General Records, Office of Management Support, MACV CORDS MR2, Records Group [hereafter RG] 472 [unless otherwise cited, all archival materials are from the U.S. National Archives].

³ For a list of acronyms and abbreviations, see Appendix A.

⁴ Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse* (Washington, D.C.: Indochina Monographs, 1983), 68-75.

⁵ Thieu's decision to abandon the highlands was one of the most important of the war, yet the precise reasons for it remain unanswered. PAVN General Van Tien Dung, claims that captured ARVN Colonel Pham Duy Tat noted that Thieu's animosity toward the Montagnards factored into his decision. Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 97.

assisting FULRO, allowing the National Liberation Front (NLF) to move reconnaissance elements into the area uncontested. On the day of the attack, North Vietnamese tanks assaulting Ban Me Thuot had “Front for the Liberation of Ethnic Minorities” painted on their sides and many of the Rhade Montagnard RF units had not resisted the PAVN onslaught.⁷

Why had some members of this minority group, associated with loyalty to United States forces, assisted the PAVN? How had years of U.S. and Vietnamese investment in the highlands come to naught? Given the importance of the highlands, what was U.S.-RVN policy in this region and how was that policy implemented at the local level?

Answering these questions requires an in-depth look at the preceding decade of U.S.-RVN policy in the central highlands. Specifically, a micro-history will allow a detailed examination of policy measures and the manner in which they were implemented at the operational and tactical levels of war. This paper addresses two interrelated initiatives that helped account for the tactical and operational success yet strategic defeat in Lam Dong: the territorial militia program and U.S.-RVN initiatives toward the Montagnards. In addition to providing significant explanatory power, examination of these policies and programs will address under-studied aspects of the war.

Most Vietnam War historiography focuses on the United States presence in Vietnam—particularly 1965-1968, the period of greatest U.S. involvement—with an emphasis on American policymakers and operations. Some have argued that the United States pursued a course of action overly dependent on counterinsurgency—deemed “pacification” during the war—while others have argued that the U.S. never deviated from a conventional approach.⁸ Recently, scholars have addressed the origins of the Second Indochina War and, to a more limited extent, the Paris peace talks which ended most American involvement in January 1973.⁹ Historians have also begun to

⁷ Gerald Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 273.

⁸ For the former view, see Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1982). For the latter view, see Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (2002; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁹ See, for example, Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); and

examine North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front.¹⁰ Unfortunately, analysis of the South Vietnamese government remains limited, with most historiography concentrating on Ngo Dinh Diem, who held power in Saigon from 1955 until his ouster and assassination in a November 1963 coup.¹¹ Even sparser is analysis of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). Though several historians have examined the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the Regional Forces and Popular Forces, which represented approximately the same number of troops as the ARVN, have yet to be analyzed in detail.¹²

Though some literature has examined individual provinces during the Vietnam War, none of these micro-histories has focused on the central highlands. Given the significant insights gleaned from previous micro-histories of provinces in the Mekong Delta region and Saigon area, a micro-history of a highlands province will fill this gap in the literature.¹³ More importantly,

Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

¹⁰ See, for example, Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Robert Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Edward Miller, "Grand Designs: Vision, Power, and Nation Building in America's Alliance with Ngo Dinh Diem, 1954-1960" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2004); Jessica Chapman, "Staging Democracy: South Vietnam's 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai," *Diplomatic History*, September 2006, 671-703.

¹² For literature on the ARVN, see Robert Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: NYU Press, 2008); Ha Mai Viet, *Steel and Blood: South Vietnamese Armor and the War for Southeast Asia* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008). The sparse literature on the RF and PF primarily addresses the U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoon (CAP) program. See Francis J. West, *The Village* (1972; New York: Pocket Books, 2002); Michael Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989); and Albert Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994).

¹³ Previous micro-histories include Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); and David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*, 2 vols. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003). Bergerud focused primarily on the operations of U.S. forces, Elliott focused mainly on the actions of the National Liberation Front, and Race examined the operations of U.S., ARVN, and NLF forces.

existing micro-histories have focused on areas dominated by ethnic Vietnamese. As one historian noted in his province study, “[U]nlike many provinces in the Central Highlands, Hau Nghia [province] was almost entirely populated by ethnic Vietnamese, so it is not necessary to consider the special circumstances caused by the presence of non-Vietnamese hill tribes.”¹⁴ Any analysis of the highlands, however, must take into account presence of the Montagnards and their relationship with the local and central government. Significantly, no study addresses U.S.-RVN Montagnard policy, and Highlanders have received only brief mention in Vietnam War historiography.¹⁵ Though only a small minority in South Vietnam—approximately five percent of the population—the Montagnards occupied some of the most politically, economically, and militarily important terrain in the country, and comprised approximately half of the population of the central highlands and Lam Dong province during the war.¹⁶

Because of the relatively limited presence of U.S. units and officials in many highland provinces—a function of the low population density in these areas—the South Vietnamese central government, local government, and security forces all had a chance to develop and face challenges on their own; the limited presence of American forces in Lam Dong makes it an excellent place to analyze the effect of policies promulgated by the centralized Saigon

¹⁴ Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 1.

¹⁵ Anthropologists have addressed Montagnard issues to a much greater extent than historians. American anthropologist Gerald Hickey devoted more study to the Montagnards than any other scholar during or after the war. See Hickey, *Free in the Forest*; see also Hickey’s *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), *Shattered World: Adaptation and Survival among Vietnam’s Highland Peoples during the Vietnam War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), and *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002). For other anthropological perspectives, see Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). See also Francis J. Kelly, *Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972); and Christopher K. Ives, *U.S. Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Military Innovation and Institutional Failure, 1961-63* (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁶ Lam Dong Survey [1963], Historian’s Background Files, Military History Branch, Box 12, MACJ3, RG472; American Embassy Saigon, The Montagnards and U.S. Policy, April 1968, Box 10, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

government and its superpower patron. Similarly, the limited U.S. presence provides a unique opportunity to examine Vietnamese forces, especially since these units often could not rely on American support for local security. Additionally, a study of Lam Dong allows for insight into ethnic policy in Vietnam; the province saw a large number of North Vietnamese refugees resettled in the 1950s—a Saigon directive that put many ethnic Vietnamese and Montagnards in close proximity for the first time. Additionally, because the province was spared the heavy fighting of the late 1960s and early 1970s, it experienced an influx of Montagnard refugees during this period.

Due to the limited availability of certain records, and to ensure a detailed examination of the often-neglected “Vietnamization” period of the war—in which the South Vietnamese government undertook an increasingly large burden of responsibility—this study focuses on 1968-1974 in Lam Dong.¹⁷ This monograph argues that while Washington and Saigon’s territorial militia program yielded great dividends in the form of increased local security, the two governments often operated at cross-purposes regarding Montagnard policy; while provincial security improved, even during the years of American withdrawal, highland policies suffered from failures of conception and execution. The vicissitudes of American influence in Vietnam combined with perennial instability in Saigon proved disastrous for the formulation of coherent policy in the highlands.

There are three components to this argument. First, U.S. involvement increased the effectiveness of security policies embraced by the Vietnamese—notably the territorial security forces program—but as U.S. influence waned, the more complex issue of highland ethnic minorities policy became convoluted and often contradictory. As the war progressed, tension over a variety of issues between ethnic Vietnamese and Montagnards was so intense that only forceful measures from Saigon could have salvaged the situation, but these measures were rarely forthcoming. At both the local and national levels, U.S. officials had to prod South Vietnamese officials to undertake more conciliatory policies toward the Montagnards. In the early years of the American war, U.S. involvement inadvertently helped foment Montagnard ethno-nationalist

¹⁷ According to Rich Boylan, a retired National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) military records archivist, many U.S. units at the province and lower levels burned excess records due to a lack of secure storage. This procedure was not changed until a directive from LTG William Peers—the result of the investigation in the wake of the My Lai massacre.

separatism. As the war progressed, U.S. officials used their considerable leverage over RVN officials to force Vietnamese officials to acquiesce to promises of better treatment of Highlanders. As the U.S. withdrew, however, it lost leverage over Saigon and became increasingly unable to dictate policy to its ally. At the national and local levels, this caused a shift in policy, the effect of which was to see highland promises unredeemed. In the final years of the war, with large numbers of highland residents displaced by the war, Saigon's failure to address adequately the profound refugee crisis became a security issue, as increasingly large numbers of citizens became simultaneously dependent on the government's largesse and disaffected with its policies.

Second, on the key issue of pacification, the manner in which Saigon countered the NLF threat improved over time. Beginning with the small and extremely weak Civil Guard and Self-Defense Force, Washington and Saigon mounted a momentous effort to quantitatively and qualitatively strengthen territorial forces. The territorial militia had an inherent advantage over ARVN in that the RF and PF usually lived in their home villages and thus were structured in consonance with traditional Vietnamese (and Montagnard) cultural practices. Though maligned in passing by many writers, the RF and PF in Lam Dong grew to become a relatively capable force.¹⁸ By the end of 1972, the territorial militia was capable of holding their own against the weakened NLF, yet one of the main attributes that made the militia so effective—the close proximity of family—also made it vulnerable to a large scale conventional force onslaught. Conversely, the NLF in Lam Dong was quite powerful through 1968, but gradually withered away, and by the early 1970s it increasingly focused on mere survival.

In this regard, and others, U.S. strategy was inverted. In Lam Dong, the war through 1968 resembled a civil war: province residents fought against each other to advance competing visions of the future. As the war progressed, however, the NLF was caught in a vicious cycle: NLF cadres indigenous to Lam Dong were slowly eroded and, as replacements from the South

¹⁸ One of the few authors to acknowledge the positive contributions of the territorial forces is Krepinevich, who notes that RF/PF casualties comprised approximately half of all RVNAF casualties from 1967-71. Additionally, he observes that the “*RFs and PFs accounted for 12-30 percent of all VC/NVA combat deaths (depending on the year), yet they consumed only 2-4 percent of the total annual cost of the war.*” [emphasis original] As the focus of Krepinevich's work is on strategy, however, he does not devote additional study the employment of the territorial forces over time. Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam*, 218-221.

were not forthcoming, they were replaced by personnel from the North. After 1968, the war in Lam Dong began to resemble one country versus another, particularly subsequent to the 1972 Easter Offensive, the aftershocks of which were still felt in 1974. Through 1967, however, the United States focused on conventional operations and the buildup of the ARVN, and in the late war period the United States began an intensified effort to improve pacification and local security initiatives—an effort that succeeded in many areas, most notably in the effectiveness of territorial forces. These findings challenge historiography which claims that the United States did not devote sufficient attention to the guerrilla war, as well as literature that asserts the war was either entirely an NLF victory or entirely a PAVN triumph.¹⁹

Third, locally-sourced solutions were often more effective than national programs. Lam Dong struggled under the weight of Saigon's initiatives—most notably the national mobilization decree, the Lam Dong tea cooperative, and local and national level democracy initiatives. The tea cooperative, the largest project directed from Saigon, took years of time and effort, and was never truly operational. Additionally, the significant American presence often had a detrimental effect on the United States' objective to create a self-sufficient state. Although Lam Dong never had a large American presence, it was affected nonetheless. Near the end of the war, the economic dependency that the U.S. had created was acutely felt: prices for commodities and construction materials skyrocketed, causing hardship for most residents and sending the wealthiest to Saigon.

The U.S. presence, however, had a mixed effect on one of the most important highland issues of the war: Vietnamese-Montagnard relations. As security in the countryside increased, relations between Highlanders and Lowlanders deteriorated as issues that had festered for some time—Vietnamese settlement and forced Montagnard relocation—came to a head in 1968.

¹⁹ For examples of work that emphasize the role of the NLF, see Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam*; and Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). For those who emphasize the pre-eminence of the PAVN (and DRV in general) in the outcome of the war, see Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), trans. Merle L. Pribbenow. See also Summers, *On Strategy*; Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999).

Despite prodding from U.S. and local Vietnamese officials, it was not until the end of 1969 that Saigon began to issue land titles in an attempt to address the problem, and South Vietnamese failures of policy conception and execution played into the communist narrative of capitalist exploitation of Highlanders. The study of refugee resettlement and ethnic minorities in the central highlands reveals that South Vietnamese government officials had considerable agency—agency that often contradicted the policy goals and objectives of the United States. Though historians of the Ngo Dinh Diem era (1954-63) have recently contested historiography that portrays South Vietnam as a mere appendage of the U.S.—or as one historian argued, a “fictive” state—the orthodoxy depicting the post-Diem government and local Vietnamese officials as American puppets has heretofore not been challenged.²⁰

²⁰ For Diem period revisionism, see Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*; and Miller, “Grand Designs.” For “fictive state” comment, see Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5. For an exposition of Buzzanco’s “fictive state” point of view, see James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Chapter 2 - Foundations: Vietnam and Lam Dong through 1954

This is another type of war...war by guerrillas, subversives, assassins, war by ambush instead of combat, by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him...It requires, in those situations where we must counter it...a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force.

—President John F. Kennedy, speech to West Point cadets, 1962²¹

The partition of Vietnam in 1954 and the subsequent Ngo Dinh Diem period were instrumental in setting the conditions for the development of Lam Dong. Seeking greater religious and economic freedom, refugees from the North migrated to the South after the partition of the country. Encouraged by the U.S.-backed Diem government, many of these refugees settled in the highlands, placing them in close proximity to the Montagnards—the historical occupants of the highlands. Seeking the economic development of the region, Diem embarked on a policy of Montagnard resettlement and forced assimilation.

Though the communist movement in South Vietnam suffered grave setbacks in the late 1950s, in 1960 it launched a counteroffensive with the founding of the Front for the National Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF). With an extremely effective assassination campaign, the NLF reversed much of Diem's momentum, and Diem sought to increase security in the countryside with a number of campaigns of forced village relocation—most notably, the Strategic Hamlet program. These actions backfired, sowing resentment among the populace, particularly in the highlands, where Montagnards were resettled—ostensibly for security reasons—and their land subsequently occupied by ethnic Vietnamese. With a growing ethno-nationalism encouraged by the arrival of U.S. Army Special Forces in the early 1960s, tensions exploded in 1964 with a Montagnard revolt in several Special Forces camps in the highlands. Though the situation was eventually resolved—largely by Americans, and not the South Vietnamese government—the so-called “FULRO revolt,” named after the Montagnard separatist organization that had fomented it, was a turning point in this region.

²¹ Ronald Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 188.

The NLF was able to gain traction by exploiting cleavages between Montagnards and ethnic Vietnamese. With a large “carrot”—the promise of equality in a new socialist Vietnam—and an equally large “stick”—death or impressments—the NLF made inroads in the Montagnard community. Through the end of 1967, the NLF in Lam Dong maintained the initiative, launching regimental-sized attacks and decimating ARVN and territorial force units. Though Vietnamese and American officials increased efforts to develop territorial forces beginning in 1966, they were still not yet a match for the NLF during this period.

Background

Vietnamese and Montagnard History and Culture Through 1954

With its origins in southern China, Vietnamese cosmology was influenced by an amalgam of beliefs incorporating three great traditions inherited from the Middle Kingdom—Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.²² In A.D. 938, the nascent Vietnamese civilization won independence from China and began to expand south, absorbing parts of the Cham and Khmer kingdoms.²³ In the fifteenth century, a renewed challenge from the Chinese Ming dynasty caused the beginning of a cultural divide between northern and southern Vietnamese, as regional loyalties sometimes superseded a homogenous Vietnamese identity.²⁴ Northern Vietnam was heavily influenced by Chinese traditions of scholasticism and Ming dynasty neo-Confucianism; by contrast, southern Vietnam developed traditions of autonomy.²⁵ Foreign influence further altered the economic and cultural landscape of Vietnam. By the 1880s, the French, who had begun to colonize Vietnam in the mid-nineteenth century, solidified their hold on the country dividing it into three areas—Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China. Cochin China was the home of Saigon, a major port city, and the only one of the three territories that was a direct colony of

²² Pacification Studies Group, Historical and Cultural Considerations, Box 4, Office Files of Henry Lee Braddock 1968-75, HQ MACV, RG472.

²³ There is no definitive date of Vietnamese independence, but in A.D. 938 the Vietnamese defeated the Chinese at the climactic Battle of Bach-dang River; the next year saw the ascendancy of Ngo Quyen as the first modern Vietnamese “king.” Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 268-70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 296-97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

France. As a result, it was the most heavily influenced by French culture and capitalism—eventually becoming known as “the Paris of the Orient.” The health of Saigon’s market economy would become an issue of crucial importance during the period of American involvement in Vietnam.

During the Vietnamese expansion, the indigenous people of Vietnam remained concentrated in mountainous areas of Southeast Asia. The ethnic Vietnamese called these people *Moi*, or “savage”—the term *Montagnard* (“mountain dweller” or “mountaineer”) was first used by the French in the 1920s as a replacement for the pejorative Vietnamese term.²⁶ The Montagnards, or Highlanders, had migrated into modern-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia during prehistoric times and maintained their distinct culture and identity. A diverse group of less-advanced Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian people with great differences from the Indianized peoples of Cambodia and Laos as well as the Sinicized peoples of Vietnam, the Highlanders were divided by language and further divided by sub-ethnic group, or tribe.²⁷ In Lam Dong most Montagnards were of Mon-Khmer stock, of the Koho linguistic group, and divided into the Maa and Sre subgroups.

Over the course of a millennium, wars and territorial expansion had gradually brought the Montagnards and ethnic Vietnamese into close geographical, but not cultural, contact. Beginning in the Red River Delta in the tenth century A.D., the Vietnamese civilization began to expand southward. By the eleventh century, the Vietnamese pushed south to the city of Hue, seizing territory from the Kingdom of Champa. The fourteenth century saw Vietnamese control from the Chinese border to the city of Da Nang. After a decisive military victory over the Cham

²⁶ Terminology remains an unresolved issue. In recent years, the Rhade terms *Ana Chu* (Sons of the Mountains) and *Dega* have been adopted by some Montagnard communities—the latter in the large refugee community in North Carolina—yet the lack of a common language has made it impossible for Highlanders to use common terminology. To avoid confusion, this study will use the terms “Montagnard” or “Highlander” to refer to the indigenous inhabitants of the highlands and the terms “ethnic Vietnamese” or “Lowlander” to describe the *Kinh* or *Viet* peoples that now occupy most of present-day Vietnam. See Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, xx.

²⁷ Though the Vietnamese are most often compared to the Chinese—particularly because of similarities in culture, governmental administration, scholarship, and literature—the ethnic Vietnamese have some commonalities with the Montagnards: the Vietnamese language is Mon-Khmer (Austroasiatic) in origin and has Austronesian influences, and the proto-Vietnamese Dong-son civilization (seventh century B.C. through the to first century A.D.) was heavily influenced by Austroasiatics. Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, xxi, 7-10.

in 1471, the Vietnamese expanded into the coastal plain, and by the end of the seventeenth century they had conquered the final remnants of the once-mighty Cham civilization. By 1780, the Vietnamese had pushed westward and annexed parts of the Khmer empire, most notably the fertile Mekong Delta. This expansion, however, was primarily in the coastal lowlands, and though the Jarai Montagnard kingdom had a tributary relationship with the Vietnamese court at Hue, it, like other Montagnard communities, maintained its autonomy and relative isolation.²⁸ The historical lack of contact was due in part to the traditional beliefs of the Vietnamese, who felt that the highlands were the haunt of evil spirits and that the upland streams carried “poisoned” water which caused “fever,” or malaria. The lack of natural irrigation in the highlands further discouraged Vietnamese settlement because most Vietnamese cultivated wet rice as a staple crop.

Additionally, an attitude of hostility prevailed—the Vietnamese considered all non-Sinitic peoples to be “barbarians.” In the fifteenth century the Vietnamese royal court began attempts to limit the corrupting influence of the southern civilizations, going so far as to prohibit Vietnamese intermarriage with Montagnards and even the advanced Cham.²⁹ Foreign influence exacerbated these tensions; upon completion of their conquest of modern-day Vietnam in 1883, the French declared the highlands a separate domain and sought to limit ethnic Vietnamese influence in the area. With a population of 500,000 in 1900, the Montagnards represented a dominant force in the highlands, and the French sought to make inroads into Highlander communities in order to use their land for economic projects such as rubber, tea, and coffee plantations. These efforts to gain influence were largely successful—many Montagnards saw the French as protectors. In 1950, by French decree, the highlands became a crown domain and thus were not a part of the Vietnamese states of Annam, Tonkin and Cochin China. In 1951, the titular head of Vietnam, Bao Dai, promulgated a *statut particulier* (special statute) that recognized highlander courts, land rights, and autonomy within the framework of the Indochinese state. During the First Indochina War, fought between the forces of the French Union and the Viet Minh, the French Union Fourth Infantry Division—the “Montagnard Division”—was led by ethnic Vietnamese officers but composed primarily of Highlanders.³⁰

²⁸ Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, 144-45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 146, 154.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 407-35.

Equally influential in Vietnam, particularly in the highlands, was the French *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission). In contrast to the Theravada Buddhism of Indian-influenced civilizations and the Mahayana Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism of Chinese-influenced civilizations, the various Montagnard tribes adhered to a somewhat diverse set of traditional beliefs which emphasized various animist spirits and ritual animal sacrifice.³¹ In the mid-nineteenth century and early twentieth century, respectively, French Catholic and American Protestant missionaries began to proselytize in highland communities. Their efforts were largely successful; of the one-hundred most influential Montagnard leaders during the Vietnam War, fifty-five adhered to traditional religious practices, thirty identified themselves as Catholics, fourteen identified as Protestants, and one identified as a Buddhist.³² In 1850, missionaries in highland communities began to introduce a Roman script for Montagnard languages similar to the Vietnamese *Quoc Ngu*. This was relatively unsuccessful, however, as most Montagnards felt that there was no need for a written language.³³

The least understood and most problematic Montagnard cultural issue, however, was that of agricultural methods. Though Vietnamese and U.S. officials often described the Highlanders as “nomadic” people who practiced “slash-and-burn agriculture,” the reality was more complex.³⁴ The various Montagnard groups all observed a practice called swidden farming or shifting cultivation. This involved clearing plots of land through the slash and burn method. As they did not practice crop rotation, they farmed a plot of land until the soil was exhausted and then moved to an adjacent plot of land. At any given time, a Montagnard farmer might have one plot of land actively being cultivated and another four or five lying fallow. As soil nutrients

³¹ Saleminck, *Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*, 27-28; Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, xvi.

³² Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 307. These numbers somewhat obscure the fact that many Highlanders practiced a syncretic religion combining elements of animism and Christianity. Religious demographics by Vietnamese province are problematic, as province boundaries did not correspond to the geographical boundaries of each Montagnard ethnic group. Both Toplui Pierre K'Briuh and Topui K'Broi, the two leaders of the Sre ethnic group that comprised most of the Montagnard population in Lam Dong, were Catholic.

³³ Paul L. Seitz, *Men of Dignity: The Montagnards of South Vietnam* (Bar-le-Duc, France: Imprimerie Saint-Paul, 1975), 27.

³⁴ See, for example, Gerald Hickey, “Land Titles for the Highlanders,” 12 December 1968, Box 15, General Records, Office of Management Support, MACV CORDS MR2, RG472 and Gerald Hickey, “The Highland People of South Vietnam: Social and Economic Development,” [ARPA Study RM-5281-ARPA], May 1967, Box 2, *Ibid.*

were restored—depending on environmental factors, usually a five- to seven-year process—the farmer would seed the previously cultivated plots. Typically, Montagnards would remain in their settlements for generations, and move only if environmental or situational conditions dictated. As large amounts of land lay fallow at any given time, however, many ethnic Vietnamese considered swidden farming to be “wasteful” and “primitive.”³⁵ A growing dispute over land would increase in the 1950s and by the 1960s would become one of the key issues in the central highlands.

Lam Dong

Lam Dong province (see figure A.1), located at the southern end of the central highlands was approximately 180 kilometers northeast of Saigon. With an average temperature of 20-25 degrees Celsius year-round, the province had a much milder climate than the lowlands of Vietnam. A rugged, rural province, Lam Dong featured jungle extending up slopes of mountains and modern agriculture along the plateau. As a U.S. military survey noted in 1963, “The terrain through Lam Dong Province is advantageous for the use of guerrilla tactics.” As the only areas of cleared vegetation were along roads, the presence of trees and heavy underbrush provided “easy concealment for military forces and favors the use of ambushes by either friendly or enemy forces.”³⁶

In 1963, the provincial capital, Bao Loc city (derived from the Koho Montagnard name, “*Bla*”), had a population of 7200 and like most of the towns and villages in Lam Dong was located close to the major road, National Highway 20, which bisected the province from the southwest to the northeast and connected the major cities of Dalat and Saigon. Many inhabitants of Bao Loc had employment at French-owned tea plantations, and U.S. advisors operated out of Bao Loc Agricultural College, a four-year college built by the United States Overseas Mission (USOM) in 1956 with a population of approximately 200 students. The province advisory team occupied two five-room houses which formerly housed college professors, and provided assistance to the province chief, district chiefs, Civil Guard (the PF’s predecessor) and the Self

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Lam Dong Survey, 1963, Historian’s Background Files, Military History Branch, Box 12, MACJ3, RG472.

Defense Corps (the RF's predecessor). Bao Loc city was also the capital of Bao Loc district, which comprised the western half of Lam Dong.³⁷

Di Linh city (derived from the Koho name, “*Djiring*”), the capital of Di Linh district, which encompassed the eastern half of Lam Dong, was located approximately 35 kilometers northeast of Bao Loc city and had a population of 3700 people employed in tea and coffee plantations and a 350-person leprosarium run by the Catholic Church. Inter-province Route 8 passed through the city, connecting Ban Me Thuot and Phan Thiet. Most dwellings in Di Linh and Bao Loc cities were built of cinderblock or brick with wood frames, while in the outlying villages, most homes were simple thatched huts or bamboo and grass dwellings.³⁸

With a land mass of approximately 4700 square kilometers and a 1963 population estimated at 62,000, Lam Dong had the low population density characteristic of the central highlands. The estimated 33,000 Vietnamese and 29,000 Montagnards also reflected the ethnic diversity typical of this area in the 1960s.³⁹ Until 1954, the majority of highlands residents were Montagnards. After the July 1954 Geneva Accords ended the First Indochina War and temporarily partitioned Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel into the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the noncommunist Republic of Vietnam (RVN), approximately 800,000 Northerners immigrated to the South. Many of the refugees were Catholics and Nung fearing religious or ethnic persecution, Vietnamese who had assisted the French and feared retribution, and those who sought greater economic opportunity in the South. In order to give itself political power in key areas, the Diem government settled many of these refugees around Saigon and in the central highlands.⁴⁰ In the highlands, the resettlement put large numbers of ethnic Vietnamese in close proximity with the Montagnards for the first time.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.; Koho names of *Bla* and *Djiring* from Neil Olsen, “The Other War,” 26 January 1968, in collection of Mr. Olsen’s unpublished letters.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Demographic information on the refugees remains imprecise. According to one sample of 12,550 refugees, 11 percent were men, 23 percent women, and 66 percent children. Catholics composed 93 percent of the refugee population, and 86 percent of those surveyed considered themselves poor—most made their living as fishermen or laborers. Other groups, however, were composed largely of Vietnamese who had served in the French colonial army, and their dependents. Ronald B. Frankum, Jr., *Operation Passage to Freedom: The United States Navy in the Vietnam War* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007), 14, 28, 36.

Conclusion

Lam Dong was typical of many provinces in the highlands in that it contained large numbers of both ethnic Vietnamese and Montagnards. As most of the ethnic Vietnamese had immigrated to the highlands in the mid-1950s, the two cultures had a very brief period in which to overcome their vast social, cultural, and linguistic differences. Significantly, most Vietnamese considered the Montagnard agricultural practice of swidden farming to be wasteful and primitive—an issue that would be of great importance as the war progressed and government programs attempted to allocate land to both groups of people.

Chapter 3 – Tumultuous Change: 1954 through 1967

In II Corps, GVN forces are on the defensive and pacification efforts have stopped...Some GVN forces in II Corps are already in a pessimistic frame of mind and are reluctant to engage in offensive operations...[the] Montagnard situation, while temporarily quiescent, may explode at any time.

—Telegram from General William Westmoreland, commander U.S. MACV, to General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 6 March 1965⁴¹

After the Geneva Accords ended the First Indochina War, the French presence was gradually replaced by American patronage. The Dwight D. Eisenhower administration doubled the number of U.S. military advisors from approximately 350 to 700 and gave South Vietnam more than \$500 million in military aid and more than \$1.5 billion in economic aid.⁴² The planned elections of 1956 never occurred—the Viet Minh claimed that Diem had reneged on the Geneva Accords because he was sure to lose, while Diem claimed that Viet Minh subversion had rendered spurious any possibility of free elections—and through the late 1950s Diem solidified his hold on power through repressive anti-communist measures. With their forces in the south decimated, the revolutionary movement fought back, forming the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) and the Front for the National Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) in December 1960. In 1961, newly inaugurated U.S. President John F. Kennedy began an ambitious plan to expand the assistance effort to South Vietnam. Over the next two years, the number of U.S. advisors grew to 16,000 and the most ambitious Diem initiative, the Strategic Hamlet program, reached its zenith. The Strategic Hamlet program, which sought to secure villagers from the NLF through settlement in fortified compounds, eventually succumbed to increased NLF attacks and villager resentment engendered by forced relocation.⁴³

⁴¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter FRUS] 1964-1968, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1996), II: 400-01.

⁴² John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 58.

⁴³ Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 185-92.

In 1962, U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) replaced the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). The creation of MACV was an important step in the Americanization of the war, as it brought command authority to the U.S. organization in Vietnam, and divided the country into four Corps Tactical Zones: I Corps had responsibility for the northern portion of the RVN, II Corps consisted of the central highlands and central coastal provinces of the country, III Corps oversaw the Saigon area, and IV Corps encompassed the Mekong Delta.⁴⁴ Of note, however, there were structural deficiencies in the U.S. command structure. Because the overall headquarters for the central highlands, II Corps, included five lowland provinces that were demographically different from the seven highland provinces, it included not only the 600,000 Montagnards of the central highlands, but also 2.3 million ethnic Vietnamese.⁴⁵ The result was that the U.S. command structure was inherently less responsive to the unique circumstances in the highlands, where approximately half of the inhabitants were Montagnards.

Throughout Vietnam, Diem's initiatives proved inadequate against the NLF offensive, and rising tensions between the Catholic Diem and the majority Buddhist population of Vietnam were the catalyst for a U.S.-approved coup which toppled and killed Diem in November 1963. The coup proved disastrous for stability in Saigon and in 1964 U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson escalated the war in order to shore up a weak and disorganized Saigon government. By 1965, U.S. ground troops were conducting combat operations in South Vietnam, and over the next two years, American troop presence rose from 120,000 to 440,000. After two years of conventional operations emphasizing quantitative measures such as body counts, the U.S. decided to devote increased resources to counterinsurgency, or "pacification," and established Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) in mid-1967, which unified military and civilian efforts under a single command.

⁴⁴ Depending on the document and its organization/time period, these areas are variously referred to as CTZs, Corps, or Military Regions (MRs); this paper will use "Corps" to describe each command area.

⁴⁵ L.M. Guess, Chief, EMA Branch to Leo Ruelas, Chief, NLD, 3 May 1968, Box 9, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472. Of note, Montagnards were almost always undercounted in the highlands; even the U.S. Chief of the II Corps Ethnic Minorities Affairs Branch estimated that there were only 400,000 Highlanders in II Corps, while noted authority Gerald Hickey estimated that there were approximately 600,000, with an additional 200,000 in other CTZs.

During this period, Lam Dong underwent tumultuous change. Like most of the highlands, a tradition of central government had not existed at the province level, and the 1955 establishment of the RVN brought government administrators at the province level. Increased settlement, directed by Saigon, changed the ethnic makeup of the province, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s Lam Dong transitioned from majority Highlander to majority Vietnamese. The American advisory effort began in earnest with the establishment of MACV in February 1962; by 1964 U.S. advisors were present in every South Vietnamese province. During 1964-1967, U.S. advisors struggled to establish local governance and build the nascent territorial militia to provide local security. As more U.S. forces entered Vietnam, these efforts were soon overshadowed by battalion-sized operations as units moved about the highlands in search of a resurgent NLF. The heyday of the revolutionary movement in Lam Dong, 1965-1967, saw local and main force NLF units launch company- and battalion-sized operations, inflicting heavy casualties on territorial forces as well as RVN and American regulars.

The Inter-war Period

With the end of the First Indochina War in 1954, Vietnam finally had its borders defined under the terms of the Geneva Accords. In March 1955, Diem put the highlands under the administrative control of Saigon, and in October they were formally incorporated into the nascent Republic of Vietnam which soon classified the Montagnards as “ethnic minorities,” an action that infuriated Montagnard leaders who observed that they had been the sole inhabitants of the highlands for thousands of years. In 1956, Saigon launched an ambitious land development program throughout the highlands designed to provide economic opportunities for the South Vietnamese.

As a prelude to economic development, Diem sought to consolidate his power by settling ethnic Vietnamese in the sparsely populated highlands. In response, in 1955 indigenous leaders formed the Front for the Liberation of the Montagnards (FLM) and demanded equal treatment in the civil service and recognition of land claims.⁴⁶ With their claims disregarded, in 1957 an FLM activist made a failed assassination attempt on Diem’s life.⁴⁷ Further exacerbating tensions was an ambitious RVN land development program that sought to expropriate highland areas in

⁴⁶ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 50-51.

⁴⁷ Prados, *Vietnam*, 58.

order to support Vietnam's growing consumer economy. In response, a low-level U.S. official urged Saigon to recognize Montagnard land rights; his recommendation, however, fell on deaf ears. As tensions grew, semi-independent scholars such as Gerald Hickey and Bernard Fall urged greater consideration of indigenous land claims, while high level U.S. civilian advisors such as Wolf Ladejinsky and the Michigan State University Advisory Group supported Diem's policy of Vietnamese settlement and forced Montagnard assimilation.⁴⁸ In 1957, Montagnards formed the Bajaraka (a combination of Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade, and Koho—the four major Montagnard ethno-linguistic groups in Vietnam) movement. The following year, Bajaraka protest marches resulted in RVN imprisonment of Highlander leaders and confiscation of the spears and crossbows that most Montagnards used as weapons.⁴⁹ At the end of the decade, the Diem government promulgated decrees prohibiting Highlanders from owning land.⁵⁰ With relatively limited U.S. influence during this period, the government of South Vietnam promulgated and enforced increasingly restrictive measures directed at its Montagnard citizens.

1961-1963: The Beginnings of the American War

At the beginning of the decade, U.S. officials feared that ethnic minorities, particularly Montagnards, would be prime targets for communist recruitment because of their subordinate status in Vietnamese society. Yet American efforts during this era inadvertently exacerbated cleavages between Highlanders and ethnic Vietnamese. A major U.S. study in 1961 recognized the strategic importance of the highlands, and recognized that the NLF was moving at will in the area, which they could use as staging areas to control the more populated areas of the country. Under President Kennedy, a proponent of counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare, the U.S. expanded its efforts throughout Vietnam—particularly in the highlands.⁵¹ By the end of 1961, U.S. Special Forces were serving as advisors to RVN Special Forces units in the highlands, most of which were comprised of Montagnards led by Vietnamese officers and NCOs. Simultaneously, the Combined Studies Group—cover name for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Vietnam—established the Village Defense and Mountain Scout

⁴⁸ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 19, 43-45.

⁴⁹ Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, 19-20

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 135

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19-20

programs. The Village Defense program entailed villagers denouncing the NLF in exchange for arms and training in local defense. The Mountain Scout program, also known as the Commando program, involved training for Highlanders in infiltration, tactics, psychological operations, civic action, and intelligence collection.⁵²

The advisory effort continued to expand; in February 1962 the U.S. government replaced the MAAG with MACV, and a growing American presence in the highlands exacerbated tensions between RVN and U.S. officials. In mid-1963, under Operation Switchback, the CIA transferred Village Defense and Mountain Scout programs (now called the Civilian Irregular Defense Group, or CIDG) and other highland operations to MACV.⁵³ Considerable debate about highland policy characterized this period; Saigon officials expressed reservations about arming Highlanders, and CIA personnel lamented that U.S. Special Forces had changed their programs from political and defensive in nature to military and offensive, resulting in Americans, rather than Vietnamese, leading operations.⁵⁴

Of particular importance, mutual misunderstanding characterized U.S involvement in the highlands in the early 1960s. Many highland leaders who had been involved in the ethno-nationalist Bajaraka movement welcomed the U.S. presence, as they felt it would shelter them from the wrath of the Vietnamese government.⁵⁵ Policy failures by the RVN and U.S. during this period meant increased Highlander alienation and dissatisfaction with their government. As a U.S. Special Forces commander in Vietnam, Colonel Francis Kelly, noted in a semi-official history, during the early years in Vietnam, the newly independent U.S. Special Forces organization was learning by doing, and often practiced a “let’s-try-it-and see-what-happens” approach.⁵⁶ U.S. Special Forces troops often overstepped the boundaries of their advisory role, assuming command of RVN Special Forces units when they encountered problems with the Vietnamese officers. Often inadvertently, U.S. competence was contrasted with Vietnamese incompetence, and Highlanders increasingly gravitated away from the RVN.

⁵² Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 74-78.

⁵³ Ives, *U.S. Special Forces*, 27-32.

⁵⁴ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 79-81.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁶ Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, 10.

Many U.S. advisors observed that Montagnards tended to embody the qualities most prized by the American fighting man. By virtue of genetics, pre-modern technology, and a rural lifestyle, Highlanders tended to be more muscular and had greater physical strength and endurance than the ethnic Vietnamese. In addition to physical attributes, Montagnards often exemplified the values most important to American soldiers—honesty, courage and loyalty. The Highlanders’ lack of guile and artifice was endearing to their advisors, and their bravery became legendary. Lam Dong RF/PF advisor Major Joseph Mucelli recalled that in a protracted battle on 24 February 1967, two NLF main force battalions overran two RF companies and an ARVN company. With almost all of the RVN soldiers killed or seriously wounded, Mucelli and several RF soldiers fought together in a ditch against attackers from all sides. As a group of NLF soldiers approached, a Montagnard RF soldier, whose name Mucelli did not even know, shouted in Koho that he had expended the last of his ammunition. Seeing several enemy soldiers approaching Mucelli from the advisor’s blind side, the RF soldier pitched his Browning Automatic Rifle at his enemies and then threw his body over that of his American advisor. Killed instantly by incoming submachine gun rounds, the Montagnard’s action saved the life of his advisor and allowed Mucelli to kill his attacker and survive the engagement.⁵⁷

Additionally, genuine concern for the plight of the Montagnards drew U.S. troops closer to the Highlanders. Some advisors explicitly compared the situation in the highlands to the nineteenth-century American frontier. Specialist Four Neil Olsen, who learned the Koho language during his tour in Lam Dong, summed up a view common among many Americans assigned to the highlands:

In working with the RF companies, I have come to know the Koho people and their language and culture. These people, like all Montagnards, have gotten the raw end of the deal from the ruling Vietnamese. All Montagnards hate the Vietnamese with a holy passion. The situation is somewhat reminiscent of the way we treated our Indians in the last century. I personally feel that they are the most trustworthy group around. A Koho soldier will thank you for a kindness, perhaps paperback book, or some candy, he appreciates the gift and knows that it is given with friendship. The typical Vietnamese (though not all, but most) expects the

⁵⁷ Joseph Mucelli, “Combat Actions in Lam Dong, 24 February 1967,” recollection written in 2008. I am indebted to Major Mucelli for sharing with me numerous written statements, personal recollections, and maps from his 45 months in Lam Dong province.

Americans to lubricate his palm and land with bountiful gifts. I think that [there] might well be another conflict between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese when all of us are finished getting the Communists off our back. I would support the Montagnards to the hilt. (I was always for the underdog.)⁵⁸

Because of the natural human inclination to support the underdog—as basketball player Wilt Chamberlain once pithily observed, “Nobody roots for Goliath”—many American advisors relished their role as protectors of the Montagnards, even though this duty had not been prescribed by U.S. officials. Remaining neutral was very difficult; American soldiers in another highland province noted that U.S. military advisors were “caught between two cultures that disliked each other immensely.”⁵⁹

Additionally, prior to the 1960s French researchers had undertaken almost all ethnographic study of the highlands; American knowledge of the unique history and demographics of the region was sparse. In the initial years of American involvement in Vietnam, American officials offered little guidance on how to resolve disputes between Montagnards and Vietnamese in the highlands, and junior officers and NCOs were often on their own to formulate policy. While higher-level U.S. officials from the early 1960s often demonstrated ignorance of Montagnard history and culture—for example, by referring to highlanders by the pejorative term “*Moi*”—lower-level CIA and military officers warned of potential Highlander backlash against Diem’s relocation and “cultural uplift” programs.⁶⁰ Had the U.S. officials responsible for the formulation of policy understood issues such as France’s role as benefactor of the Montagnards and the historical animosity between the Highlanders and

⁵⁸ Neil Olsen, letter entitled “The Other War,” 26 January 1968, from an unpublished collection of Mr. Olsen’s letters home from Vietnam. I am grateful to Mr. Olsen—who has since become one of the foremost experts on the Koho language—for sharing his personal letters with me.

⁵⁹ Introduction to “Tales from the Team: Stories and photos from MACV Team 31 [Cheo Reo Province],” unpublished compendium of recollections from U.S. advisors Joe Pickerill, Max Lund, Larry White, Steve Harrison, Lewis Grissaffi, and Jim O’Malley. I am grateful to Mr. Grissaffi and Mr. O’Malley for offering to share their recollections with me.

⁶⁰ For *Moi* reference, see for example, Memorandum from Edward Lansdale to Maxwell Taylor, n.d. [July 1961]; for warnings based on input of lower-level military and CIA officers, see Central Intelligence Agency, Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, 13 July 1962, both in Mike Gravel, ed., *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 644, 687.

Vietnamese, the situation in the highlands might have developed in a manner more favorable to RVN interests.

Instead, as Colonel Kelly lamented, the close relationship that developed between the Montagnards and Americans—one a pre-literate group of tribesmen who wore loincloths and hunted with spears and crossbows, the other a group of soldiers armed with automatic weapons and the ability to summon helicopter gunships with the assistance of a tactical radio—“tended to diminish the authority of the counterpart Vietnamese Special Forces almost to the point of eliminating the chain of command.”⁶¹ As the U.S. increasingly dominated decision-making in Vietnam, it helped foster a separate Montagnard identity with implicit guarantees of increased rights and treatment—guarantees that the U.S. was unable, and the RVN unwilling, to redeem during the late-war period. Both parties’ failure to formulate consistent policy would prove to be disastrous.

1964-1967: The GVN on the ropes

RVN-Montagnard Relations in the Khanh Era

During January 1964, General Nguyen Khanh, commander of the Vietnamese forces in the highlands, overthrew the ruling junta in Saigon. Khanh, who had commanded Mobile Group II operating in the highlands during the First Indochina War, changed policy and released Montagnard activist Y Bham Enuol, appointing him deputy province chief for highland affairs in Darlac. Khanh also released other highland leaders and in May 1964 upgraded the bureau of highland affairs to a directorate under the Ministry of Defense.⁶² Despite these improvements, U.S. officials in the highlands expressed skepticism, noting that the “Montagnard-Vietnamese problem continues with minimum progress being made in resolving it.” Though there was interest at the local level, the officials argued that the “problem must be resolved at the national level and specific instructions forwarded to the lower administrative echelons before any progress can be made.”⁶³ U.S. officials continued to monitor closely the situation between RVN

⁶¹ Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, 53, 167.

⁶² Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 93-95.

⁶³ MACJ3 II Corps Monthly Evaluation, June 1964, Box 1, MACVJ3 Evaluation and Analysis Division, Monthly Evaluation Reports March 1964-July 1965, RG472.

and Montagnard leaders. In August, the Vietnamese II Corps commander convened a “Montagnard Congress” to allow civilian and military personnel to express their grievances.⁶⁴

Despite these measures, in September 1964 revolts orchestrated by the *Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées* (United Struggle Front for the Oppressed Races, or FULRO), a Montagnard, Khmer Krom, and Cham ethno-nationalist separatist organization, broke out in five highland Special Forces camps. Killing and taking hostage Vietnamese soldiers but sparing Americans, approximately 3,000 rebels proclaimed their desire to retake territory that they claimed had been stolen from the ethnic minorities of Vietnam.⁶⁵ Specifically, FULRO demanded a powerful representative in Saigon, foreign military and economic aid, and an American-trained force of ethnic minorities to provide security for the highlands.⁶⁶

After disregarding Vietnamese demands to launch an attack to free the hostages, U.S. Special Forces troops negotiated an end to the crisis. American officials noted that the rebellion was quelled not by RVN officials, but by “US influence and the quick, effective action of US advisors.” American observers blamed both their Vietnamese enemies and their Vietnamese allies, suggesting that Montagnard separatism had been encouraged by NLF propaganda, which was able to capitalize on “the maltreatment suffered by the Montagnards at the hands of the Vietnamese, past and present.”⁶⁷ In turn, RVN officials argued that U.S. interference in the highlands had helped precipitate the revolt. One ARVN general blamed a legacy of French and American colonialism and neo-colonialism, arguing that, “The white man has a certain mystique for the highland people that the Vietnamese do not have.”⁶⁸

In the aftermath of the revolt, Khanh, pressured by the U.S., made significant concessions at a highlands Vietnamese-Montagnard conference. The RVN leader granted amnesty for dissident leaders, promised to practice positive discrimination regarding Montagnard school and

⁶⁴ MACJ3 II Corps Monthly Evaluation, August 1964, Ibid.

⁶⁵ MACJ3 II Corps Monthly Evaluation, September 1964, Ibid.; Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 99-100. The Cham were the remnants of the ancient empire of Champa and the Khmer Krom had been inhabitants of parts of the Khmer empire that the Vietnamese had conquered in the nineteenth century. Though mentioned in the FULRO manifesto, the bulk of FULRO membership and leadership was composed of Montagnards.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁶⁷ MACJ3 II Corps Monthly Evaluation, September 1964, Ibid.

⁶⁸ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 104.

job applications, withdrew Diem's land ownership decrees of 1958 and 1959, established a junior military school for Montagnard children, agreed to the teaching of Montagnard languages alongside Vietnamese in primary school, and promised to allow Highlanders into a prestigious military academy.⁶⁹ Though instability between Buddhists and Catholics in southern Vietnam caused Khanh to cede power to Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky in February 1965, Khanh's promises of education and respect for Highlander culture and land rights would come back to haunt the South Vietnamese government.

Territorial Forces in the Khanh Era

The RVN pushed for maximum use of the territorial forces in the mid-1960s. Though the large-scale increase in U.S. forces countered main-force NLF units, the PF absorbed about half of all NLF actions against RVNAF forces from 1964 through 1967.⁷⁰ During this period, there was ample reason for Saigon and its patron, the United States—which had increased leverage as the American presence expanded and a series of weak Vietnamese leaders attempted to consolidate power—to focus on the expansion, development and training of the territorial forces. In 1965, the annual per capita costs for an RF soldier were less than one-third that of an ARVN soldier, while per capita costs for a PF soldier were less than one-eighth of an ARVN soldier. This cost disparity gradually lessened as the pay and equipment gap between the various forces was narrowed, yet even by 1967, when there was substantially less difference in training and equipment between ARVN and the RF—on average an RF soldier cost less than half of ARVN soldier and a PF soldier less than one-third that of an ARVN serviceman—MACV and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS) did not act to fully use the territorial forces. It was not until the end of 1967 that MACV set in motion plans to increase the training of the territorial forces; by April 1968, the U.S. had formed 114 Mobile Advisory Teams (MATs), raising the proportion of RF/PF advisors to eleven percent of the total U.S. advisors in South Vietnam.⁷¹

⁶⁹ MACJ3 II Corps Monthly Evaluation, October 1964, Ibid.

⁷⁰ Thomas C. Thayer, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Systems Analysis), *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965-1972*, Vol. 7, U.S. Army Center of Military History [hereafter CMH], 145.

⁷¹ Ibid., 146. Fiscal Year (FY) 1965 figures for one soldier were ARVN \$2147, RF \$600, PF \$258; FY1966 figures were ARVN\$2073, RF \$919, PF \$534; FY 1967 figures were ARVN \$1893, RF \$892, PF \$571.

During this period, Lam Dong experienced problems in turning the territorial militia into an effective fighting force. Overall, there was little activity in the province in 1964, though the small advisory team almost immediately began experiencing problems with officer leadership in the province.⁷² With emphasis on expanding territorial forces—in 1964 Lam Dong had recruited approximately 2900 of 3500 authorized territorial forces authorized—the province made strides to improve its local security. The territorial militia suffered from poor training, equipment, organization, and morale; as a result, in 1964 Saigon attempted to improve morale with a pay raise.⁷³ The period saw an influx of Combat Youth—a quasi-military training and organization program of the early 1960s—into the PF and by the end of 1964, a total of twelve RF companies and twenty-three PF platoons were assigned to the province. The province senior advisor noted that the “Province Chief is ineffective as a Sector Commander” and “has repeatedly failed to assume an offensive posture or to take an active interest” in military planning. The province chief did not listen to U.S. advice, the province senior advisor noted, and the chief’s single-minded focus on the defense of the provincial capital was a contributing factor in his lack of interest in other activities.⁷⁴ The complaints would be repeated by successive province advisors; it would not be until 1968 that Lam Dong received a province chief who assigned priority to the planning and execution of offensive operations.

Even with increased numbers of U.S. advisors, the RVN’s positions in the highlands deteriorated in 1965. In a harbinger of future events, the NLF used the Tet cease-fire to re-arm and conduct troop movements and attacks throughout the highlands. The deteriorating security situation in the countryside led to increased numbers of refugees displaced by NLF activity. By April 1965, at least 126,000 civilians, most of whom were Montagnards, had either fled or been forced to move by the RVN. Overwhelmed with the number of refugees, Vietnamese officials participated in symbolic measures such as the dedication of a Montagnard trade school in

⁷² Lam Dong SAME Report, August 1964, Box 2, Senior Advisors Monthly Evaluation (SAME) Reports, MACV J3 Evaluation and Analysis Division, RG472.

⁷³ MACJ3 II Corps Monthly Evaluation, June 1964, Box 1, MACVJ3 Evaluation and Analysis Division, Monthly Evaluation Reports March 1964-July 1965, RG472.

⁷⁴ LD SAME, November 1964, Box 4, Senior Advisors Monthly Evaluation (SAME) Reports, MACV J3 Evaluation and Analysis Division, RG472.

Pleiku.⁷⁵ To make matters worse for Saigon, increased NLF interdiction of major supply routes in the highlands—to include Lam Dong’s Highway 20—caused a severe shortage of civilian commodities, leading to a doubling of prices on the open market and a thriving black market.⁷⁶ In Lam Dong, RF and PF allocations were almost completely filled, but there were still problems with present for duty strength, especially with the RF. As 1965 progressed, there were increased numbers of combat engagements between the Lam Dong territorial forces and the NLF, but the PF still had many members who were unarmed and untrained. Further exacerbating problems, a U.S. advisor noted, at least two of the RF commanders were “unsatisfactory” due “to their inexperience and lack of mature judgment.” Additionally, he observed, though province personnel generally accepted advice on minor matters, they were “very hesitant to accept advice on matters affecting major policy changes or major unit displacements”⁷⁷

Through 1965, the RF and PF were increasingly trained at the platoon and squad levels yet continued to suffer from poor junior officer leadership. In the province, the RF bore the brunt of combat action, but when the PF engaged in battle, they were more likely to suffer disproportionate casualties. By the end of the year, the province had still not filled its RF and PF allocations and continued to experience problems with desertions in both of these organizations. Nonetheless, and despite the reluctance of province leaders to use their forces in an offensive role, 1965 saw growth in the size of the territorial forces and increased numbers of operations, particularly offensive night patrols.⁷⁸ Trends in Lam Dong reflected developments throughout the country; though desertion remained a grave problem, especially in the territorial forces, a year-old RVN conscription directive had helped fill the ranks of the burgeoning armed forces. By November 1965 Saigon controlled 300,000 regulars and local officials controlled 260,000 territorial militia split evenly between the RF and PF.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Preceding paragraph from MACJ3 II Corps Monthly Evaluations, February-May 1964, *passim.*, Ibid.

⁷⁶ MACJ3 II Corps Monthly Evaluation, June 1964, Ibid.

⁷⁷ LD SAME, January 1965, Box 6, Ibid. In the RF, only about 1500 of 1800 assigned were present for duty, compared with 1580 of 1630 assigned in the PF.

⁷⁸ LD SAME, February 1965, Ibid.; LD SAME, March 1965, Box 7, Ibid.; LD SAME, April 1965, Box 8, Ibid.; LD SAME, May 1965; LD SAME, August 1965, Box 10, Ibid.; LD SAME, November 1965, Box 12, Ibid.; LD SAME, December 1965, Box 13, Ibid.

⁷⁹ MACJ3 II Corps Monthly Evaluation, November 1965 Ibid.

Diem's ouster, however, had brought to power a series of inept juntas in Saigon, and as the government struggled to consolidate power in the mid-1960s, U.S. ground troops continued to pour into the country in an attempt to stabilize the situation. Though the introduction of American troops temporarily remedied the security situation, they had a detrimental effect on the territorial militia program. Beginning in 1965, the U.S. advisory effort was perennially undermanned, as the focus shifted to the manning of conventional units. In 1967, realizing the need for more advisors, particularly for the territorial forces, MACV began a plan to create 254 five-man teams to train and advise the RF and PF—an initiative that would become the Mobile Advisory Team (MAT) program. In 1968 MACV authorized an additional 2500 advisors, mainly to the territorial militia. Yet during the crucial 1965-1968 period, the large-unit conventional war occupied the focus of the U.S. military, and most U.S. advisory shortages—over 2400 personnel, a 29 percent deficit—were in civil-military and RF/PF areas.⁸⁰

Competition for Highlander Loyalty

During 1965 and 1966, relations between the RVN and the Montagnards fluctuated with continued leadership changes in Saigon. In April 1965, Saigon launched the *Truong Son* program in an attempt to improve relations in the highlands. Named after a mountain range in the highlands, *Truong Son* (TS) was a civic action program which conducted operations in highland areas and was one of the first Saigon initiatives that attempted to improve relations with Highlanders. An official U.S. briefing noted that the goals of the program were the improvement of “the economic and social condition of the Montagnards, political action to spread GVN [Government of Vietnam] propaganda themes” and improvement of RVN-Montagnard relations.⁸¹

There were myriad problems, however, with the structure and implementation of the TS initiative. A similar program for the ethnic Vietnamese, the Revolutionary Development (RD) program, began in January 1966, but there was a large pay disparity between the two programs, a problem that was not rectified until 1967. Additionally, Saigon policy allowed ethnic Vietnamese to serve in the TS, but Montagnards were forbidden from serving in the

⁸⁰ Thayer, *Systems Analysis*, Vol 7, 149.

⁸¹ MACCORDS Briefing, *Truong Son Cadre Program*, 29 July 1967, Box 10, MACV CORDS, MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

Revolutionary Development program. In total, the RD program had 27,000 cadre members while the TS had only 7000. Additionally, TS cadre trained at a separate Montagnard training center near Pleiku, while the RD cadre trained at the more prestigious National Training Center in Vung Tau. A U.S. CORDS report noted that the TS program was more successful than the RD initiative in gaining the support of the population. This was not only the result of the simpler mission of the TS—they were not expected to act against “Viet Cong Infrastructure” (the political apparatus of the NLF)—but also because of a “common membership in a despised ethnic minority.” Nonetheless, most American advisors agreed that the typical TS cadre member was “more diligent, more honest, and more dedicated than his Vietnamese counterpart.” Statistically, the TS had better morale, less absenteeism, and lower rates of desertion compared with the RD. The favorable comments by U.S. advisors underscored a continued problem with U.S.-Vietnamese-Montagnard relations. Noting that “Americans working with the Montagnards have traditionally tended to favor the simpler, more honest, more forthright Montagnard over his Vietnamese counterpart,” the U.S. report warned that “Vietnamese suspicions of the Montagnards have been transferred to the Americans.” Most importantly, “Poor judgment on the part of some US advisors in the past has exacerbated these suspicions to the point where some Vietnamese officials are highly mistrustful of American intentions toward the Montagnards and are extremely sensitive about direct American-Montagnard contacts.” With this atmosphere of mistrust, the U.S. assessment cautioned, even frequent assertions that “US sympathy for Montagnard aspirations does not include support of any kind for Montagnard autonomy movements” were not successful, and all Americans who worked with Montagnards maintained a level of suspicion “in the eyes of many Vietnamese.”⁸²

What is more, both the RD and TS were managed directly through province and district chiefs, yet were ultimately controlled and funded by different entities. The program meant to serve the Vietnamese operated under the aegis of the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, an influential and powerful Cabinet-level organization, yet the program for the Montagnards answered to the Special Committee for Montagnard Affairs (SCMA), a non-Cabinet level advisory body. As a result of pressure from U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Ky had created the SCMA in early 1966 to replace the extremely weak Directorate of Montagnard Affairs.

⁸² Ibid.

Though attached directly to the office of the Prime minister and headed by Paul Nur, a strong Bahnar Montagnard leader, the SCMA was, in the words of a U.S. assessment, a “relatively weak organization within the GVN which relies for much of its financial and logistical support on US government agencies.” Furthermore, the U.S. report noted, the RVN Ministry of Revolutionary Development had no interest in taking over the Truong Son program because of “deep-seated and long-standing Vietnamese feelings about the inferiority of the Montagnard peoples.”⁸³ Though the SCMA was never able to gain prominence in the Vietnamese government, it brought together Montagnards of disparate ethnic groups, which had the unintended effect of furthering a collective Montagnard identity.⁸⁴ The U.S.-RVN debate over Montagnard policy during the mid-1960s reflected U.S. concern that, though relations with Saigon were perennially strained, the U.S. had an obligation to pressure the RVN to enact more liberal policies. This pattern that would stay constant through the period of U.S. influence, but change markedly once withdrawal began in 1969.

With Montagnards increasingly gravitating to U.S.-sponsored programs in the highlands, communist forces increasingly switched to punitive measures such as attacks on villages.⁸⁵ Increasingly caught in between communist forces and U.S. air strikes, dissatisfied with the Ky and Thieu governments’ failure to honor Khanh’s 1964 promises, and angry that RVN representatives had broken off negotiations, in December 1965 FULRO launched its second revolt. After the revolt was suppressed, a second round of recriminations ensued. American officials blamed the Vietnamese for not moving quickly enough to satisfy FULRO demands, while Vietnamese blamed the U.S. for fostering Montagnard separatism. In turn, some Montagnard leaders blamed U.S. Special Forces for recruiting young Highlanders who might otherwise have remained in school. The biggest question for all parties was the extent and use of U.S. leverage over the RVN. Vietnamese officials resented being forced to grant concessions to the Highlanders, while one Montagnard leader illustrated his consternation by noting: “France

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 145.

⁸⁵ Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), 205.

gave birth to the baby, Vietnam. Why does a powerful nation like the United States let the Vietnamese baby push it around?”⁸⁶

Through 1965 and 1966, the U.S. pushed Saigon to implement promised highland reforms. The ministry of education built boarding schools for Highlanders and the ministry of agriculture drafted plans to ensure that each Montagnard family was allocated five to eight hectares of land, sufficient for swidden farming. Yet the U.S. war effort often operated at cross purposes to these initiatives, offering tantalizing alternatives to ostensible RVN plans for semi-autonomy and gradual assimilation. The CIA financed many Montagnard schools, and teenaged Highlanders could earn a relatively substantial amount of money by joining U.S. paramilitary programs. The communists intensified their activities throughout South Vietnam, particularly in the highlands, and by 1965 over 1,000 North Vietnamese troops per month were infiltrating into the highlands.⁸⁷ Additionally, NLF propaganda during this period intensified. The land development program, which had established settlements near the Cambodian border, soon faced opposition from the NLF, and by mid-1965 most of these ethnic Vietnamese settlers had fled to more secure areas to the south and east, and many remaining development centers were controlled by the NLF.⁸⁸

Through 1966, Saigon announced amnesty for FULRO troops, and thousands swore loyalty to the RVN; in April 1967 the RVN Constitutional Assembly announced a new constitution, calling for an Ethnic Minorities Council headed by the vice president. Two-thirds of the council would be composed of ethnic minorities and the council would advise the government on germane issues.⁸⁹ In the highlands, MACV desired to transition CIDG units—over 40,000 troops by 1967—to RF units under the control of the RVN, but organizational change was problematic because most Montagnards had developed a strong bond with their

⁸⁶ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 143.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 119, 123.

⁸⁸ Pike, *Viet Cong*, 204-06, 216, 251-52.

⁸⁹ Gerald Hickey, “The Highland People of South Vietnam: Social and Economic Development” (Santa Monica: RAND, 1967).

American counterparts which only served to further alienate the Highlanders from the ethnic Vietnamese.⁹⁰

Additionally, official promulgations showed competing demands for Montagnard loyalty by the RVN and NLF. The NLF declared that the socialist revolution would establish autonomous zones in which native culture and land rights would be preserved. In August 1967, Thieu signed Decree 003/67 which provided for “special rights” for the Montagnards, created the EM council, and promised to distribute titles to Highlanders so that they could practice swidden farming. FULRO leader Y Bham Enoul objected, suggesting that “*statut particulier*” be substituted for the phrase “special rights” and continued to demand that the highlands have a separate flag, direct access to foreign aid, and relations with foreign nations.⁹¹ Though Highlanders were dissatisfied with the slow pace of reform, the communist movement demonstrated that it was willing to use a powerful carrot-and-stick approach. In December 1967, the NLF—after entreaties to join the revolution followed by warnings to the Stieng Montagnards of Dak Son that they would be punished if they failed to join the movement—obliterated the village with flamethrowers and grenades, killing over two hundred-fifty civilians.⁹²

Territorial Forces in the Thieu Era

In Lam Dong, a September 1967 visit by General Westmoreland suggested that American priorities remained on the recent RVN elections and on securing the people from “VC harassment” through the use of conventional troops.⁹³ In October 1967 Westmoreland’s deputy, General Creighton Abrams, suggested a change in course, emphasizing the importance of the RF and PF. Abrams pushed his recommendations to Westmoreland but the Vietnamese JGS considered the initiative a U.S. take-over and opposed directing resources away from ARVN and toward the territorial forces. The strain in U.S.-Vietnamese relations took months to resolve before the JGS finally accepted U.S. recommendations such as the formation of MATs and the

⁹⁰ Jeffrey Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1988), 200-203.

⁹¹ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 163.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 167; Spector, *After Tet*, 206.

⁹³ COMUSMACV Visit to 23d DTA, Lam Dong Province, Bao Loc, 6 Sep 1967, Box 10, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

issuance of new weapons.⁹⁴ The change in policy was founded on solid evidence; a 1967 U.S. study on the RF/PF noted that these units took more casualties and accounted for more kills than ARVN. Yet there were problems with the territorial forces, to include perceptions of inadequate pay and, if wounded, inadequate medical care—U.S. medical evacuation helicopters were often available only if an American advisor was operating with the unit. The primary concerns of territorial force members, however, surrounded the centerpiece of Vietnamese and Montagnard life—the family. Specifically, territorial force members expressed concern that if they were killed, their families would not be supported. Unlike the ARVN, the PF had no death benefit and even a short relocation to a neighboring village was problematic due to inadequate family housing. Significantly, most did not understand the concept of the nation-state or the overall war against the NLF and were only comfortable expressing goals in terms of local and family objectives.⁹⁵

The study did, however, point to a structural advantage that the territorial forces had over their regular counterparts: the number one reason cited by RF members for “liking to be in the RF” was to be “near the family.”⁹⁶ Experts on Vietnamese and Montagnard society echoed these findings. In 1967, Gerald Hickey emphasized the importance of the territorial militia program, noting “the PF could provide a basis for grass roots organization of the Vietnamese villages in a way that the RD cadre as outsiders cannot.” Though political organization was “badly needed,” Hickey argued, Western-style organizations such as political parties were likely to remain weak, especially in relation to “multi-functional organizations such as [ethnic or religious] sects.”⁹⁷ Though resources and training still remained an issue, by the end of 1967, ARVN and territorial forces troops each numbered approximately 300,000 troops. In the case of the territorial forces, these 300,000 men were divided evenly between the RF and PF.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Notes from Province Senior Advisors Meeting, 20 April 1968, Ibid.

⁹⁵ Philip Worchel, Samuel Popkin, et al. *Preliminary Report on a Socio-Psychological Study of Regional/Popular Forces Viet-Nam*, (Simulmatics Corporation, 1967), CMH, 1-9.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Gerald Hickey, “Accommodation in South Vietnam: The Key to Sociopolitical Solidarity,” (Santa Monica: RAND, October 1967), CMH, 1, 18.

⁹⁸ Table 2 in Thayer, *Systems Analysis*, Vol. 6, CMH.

Land Reform and Refugee Policies

Land reform, an equally important and even more contentious issue, was mired in problems. In August 1967 Saigon had promulgated a land reform decree in order to assist distribution problems for Montagnard families and provided that the “maximum hectareage allowable for each family will be defined and established by the Minister of Agriculture.” Yet three months later there was no progress; RVN officials had not addressed the specifics of land reform and U.S. highland officials were still in the dark about the Montagnard Land Reform program.⁹⁹ In November 1967, a Saigon decree addressed the special concerns of swidden farming, permitting Montagnard families larger plots of land because of rotating agriculture. American highland officials noted, however, that local reports indicated that the problem was not the division of properties, but rather the “continued squatter invasion by Vietnamese into traditional Montagnard lands.” Exacerbating this condition was inadequate manning of local institutions meant to address land issues. Along with nine provinces and major cities in II Corps, Lam Dong had an inadequate land service office. American officials noted that only three provinces maintained acceptable offices, and even these were “under-staffed, under equipped, and questionably budgeted.” Despite U.S. characterization of RVN budgetary allocations for land services as “grossly inadequate,” Vietnamese officials did not propose additional funding.¹⁰⁰

The refugee policy of this era was confused and counterproductive. In order to increase security in the countryside, the U.S.-RVN policy was to relocate citizens into urban areas, which were generally more secure. In mid-1967, Under Secretary of State Katzenbach directed that U.S. policies should focus on “stimulating greater refugee flow through psychological inducements to further decrease the enemy’s manpower base.”¹⁰¹ Yet U.S. studies noted that almost three-quarters of the refugees were women, and most of the males were children or old men—hardly prime recruitment material for the NLF. More importantly, a U.S. Department of Defense study noted, the relocations engendered resentment at the Saigon government, and

⁹⁹ J.M Urtes, Legal and Land Aff Officer NLD/CORDS, Region II, Nha Trang to John L. Cooper, Chief Land Branch, USAID, AGR, 23 November 1967, Box 10, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹⁰⁰ Land Reforms, 22 November 1967, Ibid.

¹⁰¹ *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel ed., vol. 4, 508.

demonstrated to the people that the RVN was too weak to protect them.¹⁰² It would not be until the final years of the war, when U.S. influence in Vietnam was greatly diminished, that most American officials realized that such a narrow vision of security was detrimental to their own designs.

Security in Lam Dong

Security in Lam Dong during this period was tenuous, as the performance territorial force units—in particular the RF—varied greatly based on leadership quality. Lam Dong RF/PF advisor Joseph Mucelli recounted that “there were three of the fourteen RF companies in Lam Dong that were the equal of any similar size force in any army.” Through 1967, NLF main force units mounted battalion- and larger-sized attacks on U.S. and RVN forces in the province. For example, on 24 February 1967, the 186th Main Force Battalion, 840th Main Force Battalion, and 240th Company—a combined strength of approximately 1000 troops—overran the 407th Montagnard Scout Company and two RF companies.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Beginning in the mid-1950s, the government of South Vietnam undertook policies designed to exert control over the central highlands in order to consolidate power and exploit economic resources. With the settlement of large numbers of ethnic Vietnamese in areas controlled by the Highlanders for thousands of years, conflict over land rights and cultural assimilation ensued. Beginning in the early 1960s, U.S. Special Forces advisors played an increasingly large role in the RVN—particularly in the strategically important central highlands. U.S. advisors, frustrated by the perceived lack of competence of their Vietnamese counterparts, often assumed command of units composed primarily of Montagnards. Additionally, the Americans often sympathized with the plight of the Highlanders, who they felt had been the victims of unjust discrimination at the hands of the ethnic Vietnamese. During this period, a strong bond formed between Americans and Montagnards, further damaging Vietnamese-Montagnard relations, which reached their nadir in 1964 and 1965 with two large revolts in the

¹⁰² Study of Mass Population Displacement, Part 1, 77; A. Terry Rambo, et al., *The Refugee Situation in Phu Yen Province* (Human Sciences Research Corporation, 1967), 67, CMH.

¹⁰³ Mucelli, “Combat Actions in Lam Dong Province, 24 February 1967.”

highlands. The instability of the RVN following ouster of Diem in 1963 caused the U.S. to send large numbers of U.S. conventional troops to Vietnam in 1965. Though this temporarily stabilized the country, it drew the focus of the American effort away from the development of the South Vietnamese armed forces. From 1965 through 1967, U.S. leaders focused their effort largely on large-scale U.S. operations designed to destroy the NLF.

Chapter 4 – Counterinsurgency: 1968-1969

Over the past several years some 4 million people have gone through refugee status. That's an awful high percentage of a population of 17 million.

—Ambassador William E. Colby, Deputy to the U.S. commander MACV for CORDS, briefing to U.S. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, March 1969¹⁰⁴

In 1968, the tide began to turn in favor of government forces in Lam Dong. NLF losses during the Tet Offensives combined with increased attention to territorial forces—impelled by a new province chief and increased MACV emphasis on the development of Vietnamese units—resulted in greater security. Additionally, though increased RVN emphasis on local security forces was salutary, Saigon's other security initiative during this period—compulsory relocations—was not. Despite official changes of policy regarding refugees and relocation, provincial officials followed Saigon's orders to consolidate and relocate remote Highlander villages—a scheme eerily reminiscent of the failed Strategic Hamlet program of the early 1960s. To make matters worse, the government hastily proceeded with these relocations without devoting resources towards ensuring that citizens would have an adequate standard of living after their relocation. The Refugee and Social Welfare service in Lam Dong was in shambles, and as a result many refugees did not receive the timely and adequate assistance which they had been promised by the government. Despite these problems, territorial forces in Lam Dong were increasingly on the offensive, and by the end of the year, the province senior advisor would note the “great progress” in turning Lam Dong into a self-sufficient province.¹⁰⁵

1968

At the beginning of the Lunar New Year during January 1968, the NLF launched *Tet Mau Thanh*, a general offensive in major urban areas in South Vietnam with the objective of inciting a “general uprising” among the people of South Vietnam. By the end of February 1968,

¹⁰⁴ Sorley, ed., *Vietnam Chronicles*, 149.

¹⁰⁵ LDPR, 31 December 1968, Box 8, CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

the offensive had failed; South Vietnamese citizens had not taken up arms with the NLF, and after initial successes, revolutionary cadres had suffered a grievous blow. Smaller offensives followed in May and August; these, too, made initial progress before being defeated. Hanoi's own history noted that they had overestimated "the strength of the mass political forces in the urban areas" and "somewhat underestimated the capabilities and reactions of the enemy and had set our goals too high."¹⁰⁶

In July 1968, under U.S. direction, the RVN launched the Territorial Forces Intensified Offensive. Noting that the "severe beating inflicted upon the enemy and his resulting need to refit and retrain has caused the withdrawal of major VC/NVA units to sanctuaries in and out of country," the directive ordered province chiefs to capitalize on NLF operational losses through increased attacks by the RF.¹⁰⁷ Still, the capabilities of the territorial forces were inadequate, particularly in the highlands. In this area, American and Vietnamese forces assigned to work with the territorial forces averaged less than half of the recommended training per week, and there were problems with small unit leadership. Company commanders, platoon leaders, and squad leaders were not aggressive enough, not making use of modern technology such as the portable radios, and most importantly, Vietnamese district and province officials were often not taking the initiative to rectify problematic leadership.¹⁰⁸ General Cao Van Vien, chairman of the JGS, and his deputy chairman and RF/PF commander, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van La, noted that territorial forces units were not properly trained and often rushed into combat operations prior to formal training.¹⁰⁹

Territorial Security

Beginning January 1968, the U.S.-RVN war effort made quantitative and qualitative gains in the territorial forces through increased command emphasis, devotion of additional resources, and structural and organizational improvements.¹¹⁰ By spring 1968, each of the four

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Prados, *Vietnam*, 254-55.

¹⁰⁷ Territorial Forces Intensified Offensive, 19 July 1968, Box 10, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹⁰⁸ Development of Firepower and Tactical Capability of RF/PF, ND [1968], *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Postal Message from JGS/CTC, 10 Sep 68, *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Terms of Reference for the Deputy Commanding General, I Field Force Vietnam (I FFORCEV), 20 January 1968, Box 15, MACV CORDS, MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

corps commands in the ARVN had a brigadier general who served as corps deputy commander for territorial forces. Additionally, U.S. advisory efforts increased throughout the lower and higher level command structures. In addition to the 47 advisors per province and six advisors per district, the U.S. devoted specific resources to the territorial forces by creating Mobile Advisory Teams (MATs).¹¹¹ Other initiatives supplemented the increased emphasis on pacification. For example, a U.S.-directed effort to weed out incompetent or corrupt province chiefs bore fruit throughout South Vietnam; in Lam Dong, Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Duy Bach took the place of a corrupt province chief. The U.S. command in the highlands noted that although the campaign to appoint better province chiefs had “been most successful,” more effort was needed to replace incompetent or inept district chiefs “who are key executors of pacification, including territorial security.”¹¹² Yet the initiatives supported by U.S. and Vietnamese officials still required assistance from the national government. In Lam Dong, Colonel Bach assumed command and immediately relieved a number of corrupt and incompetent officials, but the cumbersome bureaucracy in Saigon failed to appoint replacements.¹¹³

In mid-1968, the U.S. began a comprehensive plan to increase the capabilities of the territorial forces. Each province was assigned several MATs, composed of five American officers and NCOs with an ARVN interpreter and assigned to advise and instruct the RF/PF as well as accompany them on operations until they were capable of independent execution. Additionally, the U.S. sought to improve combat firepower by issuing the most advanced weaponry to the RF and upgrading the small arms issued to the PF.¹¹⁴ In Lam Dong, MATs equipped many RF companies with the same small arms used by the U.S. Army and ARVN,

¹¹¹ Proposed Province and District JTD, 2 March 1968 and Recommended Change to CORDS JTD—RF/PF Division, 25 March 1968, both in Box 15, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472. Each MAT had a Senior Advisor, Assistant Light Weapons Infantry Advisor, Medical Advisor, Heavy Weapons Infantry Advisor—a captain, lieutenant, and three sergeants first class.

¹¹² DEPCORDS, II CTZ to All PSAs, Ineffective and/or Corrupt District Chiefs, 6 May 1968, Ibid.

¹¹³ PSA, Lam Dong to Robert K. Rogers, NLD/PAD CORDS, IFFV, Ineffective and/or Corrupt District Chiefs, 8 May 1968, Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Orientation for US Commanders, 17 July 1968, RF/PF Briefing, Box 14, MACV CORDS, MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472. By 1969, RF weaponry matched U.S. and ARVN units (M16 rifles and M60 machineguns) while the PF had an increased number of M2 carbines and BARs to replace their semiautomatic M1 carbines; all three of these weapons, however, were of Second World War vintage.

such as M16 rifles and M60 machine guns.¹¹⁵ Though security in Lam Dong continued to improve with the addition of three PF platoons and one additional RF company, security and pacification forces sometimes operated at cross-purposes; many TS cadre and RF/PF members deserted in order to join the 407th and 408th ARVN Scout companies (composed wholly of Montagnards) because of higher pay and better benefits.¹¹⁶ Due to similar developments throughout Vietnam, RVN officials worked to mitigate these problems by increasing territorial forces' training, pay and benefits.¹¹⁷ Lam Dong officials also used punitive measures against deserters, such as circulating blacklists that prevented their employment and requiring deserters to reimburse the government for training if caught.

The allied war effort also attempted to address family conditions noted by so many territorial forces personnel, yet progress in this area was uneven. Though medical care for RF/PF dependents improved, it was still inferior to the substandard care for ARVN families. Progress was often maddeningly slow yet steady. For example, Lam Dong had been authorized 400 units of PF housing for 1968; though local officials had planned and requested 100 units at the beginning of 1968, it was not until the end of the year that construction was completed.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, the increasing combat effectiveness and morale of the territorial forces in Lam Dong could be quantified in the form of steadily decreasing monthly desertion rates. By mid-1968 the province's RF and PF desertion rates were 1.2 percent and 0.27 percent, respectively, compared with a monthly territorial forces desertion rate of approximately four percent from mid-1964 through 1965.¹¹⁹ By November 1968, the province senior advisor reported that because of the "interest, dedication, and effectiveness" of Colonel Bach, pacification progress was "significant and improving" and there were positive and "marked departures in the performance of GVN civil and military units and personnel" from the mediocre performance of

¹¹⁵ Bao Loc District Report, 31 December 1968, Box 8, Ibid.

¹¹⁶ LDPR, 31 October 1968, Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Summary of Senior Advisors Monthly Evaluation, October 1968, RG 472, MACV J3 Evaluation and Analysis Division, Senior Advisors Monthly Evaluation (SAME) Summaries, Box 1, NA.

¹¹⁸ B'Sar Subsector Report, 30 November 1968, Box 8. MACV CORDS, MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹¹⁹ LDPR, 31 July 1968, Box 22, Ibid. For mid-1964-1965 figures, see Lam Dong SAME Reports, Box 1-13, Senior Advisors Monthly Evaluation (SAME) Reports, MACV J3 Evaluation and Analysis Division, RG472.

early and mid-1968.¹²⁰ Much of this was attributable to better leadership for the territorial forces. The U.S. had directed that Popular Force platoon leaders and squad leaders attend a six-week training course and village and hamlet officials attend a separate six-week training course. Enrollment by the various provinces was so high that there was no more room at the National Training Center, and Saigon was forced to enact a quota for each province.¹²¹

Nonetheless, other problems remained; the senior U.S. advisor in Lam Dong noted that though the province chief continued “to press for maximum utilization” of territorial forces, the RF and PF remained “overcommitted to static defense requirements for Highway 20, US base areas and permanent facilities within [the] province.”¹²² Many of these problems could be traced to the large number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam during this time period. Numbering approximately a half-million, most were support personnel who lived lives of relative luxury, requiring large numbers of convoy operations to sustain their standard of living. Additionally, the American combat troops were often dependent on logistically-intensive equipment such as helicopters, artillery, and armored vehicles. Though U.S. units were present in Lam Dong only intermittently, the large logistical requirements affected the province as substantial numbers of RF troops were required to provide security for U.S. and RVN engineers repairing and upgrading Highway 20—a major re-supply route through the south-central highlands—and for security of the large number of convoy operations. The result, American advisors noted, was a “decrease in the ability to conduct operations which [would] have a direct and continuing effect on the security of the contested areas.”¹²³

Viewed in its totality, Lam Dong’s progress in the area of local security, attributable both to the decrease in NLF activity and the increased capabilities of the territorial forces, was indicative of trends as a whole in the southern highlands. A fall 1968 U.S. assessment of security in the highlands was sanguine, crediting the increased security in the southern provinces

¹²⁰ LDPR, 30 November 1968, Box 8, MACV CORDS, MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹²¹ Revised 1969 Training Plans, NTC, 9 December 1968, Box 10, MACV CORDS, MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹²² LDPR, 30 September 1968, Box 8, Ibid.

¹²³ LDPR, 31 July 1968, Box 22, Ibid.

of Binh Thuan, Lam Dong, Ninh Thuan, Quang Duc, and Tuyen Duc to the improved capabilities of local Vietnamese forces.¹²⁴

NLF

In the highlands, though the NLF presence remained strong, weaknesses began to appear in the communist-led war effort. A key NLF document, captured in October 1968, noted that “in the General Offensive and General Uprising we have killed or captured a number of the enemy’s administrative personnel and intelligence agents at the village and hamlet level.” Yet despite this success, the document noted, the revolutionary movement was yet to “operate successfully at the district and province level.” As a result, “the enemy have [sic] been able to consolidate and develop their forces to continue their activities against the Revolution.” Though resilient, the “U.S. and their puppet allies” could be toppled “from the province level down” through a concerted effort against local government. The NLF emphasized planning, compiling lists of local officials, learning addresses and movement patterns, interrogation of targets, and the eventual capture or assassination of targets. In short, the goal of the continuous NLF offensive was to “eliminate the leaders of the enemy puppet machinery.” While improving its own “espionage, secret security, and armed reconnaissance forces,” the NLF sought to “kill everyone from cell leader up who is working for U.S. and puppet intelligence agencies.”¹²⁵

Developments in Lam Dong reflected the mixed successes of the NLF in 1968. In the first half of the year, though only one of the two main force battalions in Lam Dong conducted significant operations, the NLF remained a powerful force in the province. The Front divided Lam Dong into five districts, assigning several six- to ten-person armed propaganda teams to each zone. In addition to the two main force battalions and an estimated 700-person political apparatus for proselytizing, logistics, and intelligence, the NLF maintained eight company-sized local force units capable of conducting infiltration, harassment, security for political activities, and ambushes. These units had the ability to move and deploy securely, and, compared with territorial forces, possessed superior weaponry including large numbers of automatic weapons, Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs), and mortars. Overall, Lam Dong advisors noted, the NLF

¹²⁴ HQ I FFV, CORDS Field Overview September 1968, 13 October 1968, Box 14, Ibid.

¹²⁵ Vietnamese Security Service Field Office, The Mission of Viet Cong Provincial Security Forces, 8 October 1968 Box 15, MACV CORDS, MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

units were “more than a match for equivalent sized GVN units” and Front efforts to subvert RVN forces “directly and through relatives have enjoyed some success.”¹²⁶

In the second half of 1968, their strength blunted by the losses from the Tet Offensives and increasingly powerful local security forces, the NLF shifted operations in Lam Dong to squad and platoon sized engagements, to include small-scale infiltration into hamlet population centers—developments that presaged a 1969 COSVN directive to limit operations and conserve fighting power. Nonetheless, NLF cadres continued to collect taxes at will from villages and highway traffic.¹²⁷ Additionally, NLF intelligence remained effective; the identification, kidnapping and assassination of local officials and informants continued. The last four months in 1968 saw five officials kidnapped, one RVN informant assassinated, and numerous citizens kidnapped, all in Highlander villages. American intelligence estimated that the “kidnapping of a large number of people in the highland provinces attested to a continuing shortage of able bodied personnel within VC ranks.”¹²⁸ Even though there were few material consequences, the psychological effect of NLF operations was acute. For example, U.S. officials in Lam Dong reported that the attack on a Montagnard hamlet in September 1968 “did much to instill fear” in its Highlander inhabitants.¹²⁹ Largely because of security concerns, local governance in Lam Dong remained problematic. Fearing kidnap or assassination, many village and hamlet chiefs did not remain in hamlets at night, and U.S. advisors assessed that village and hamlet council personnel were similarly reluctant to engage in efforts that might make them a target. Overall, a U.S. report noted, “virtually non-existent tax collections, absence of officials from their hamlets,

¹²⁶ LD Combined Province Pacification Plan, 31 July 1968 Box 14, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472; Combined Province Pacification Plan, 24 January 1968, Box 20, Ibid. Specifically, intelligence reports indicated that the NLF maintained the 186 and 145A and 186 Main Force Battalions of approximately 482 and 300 men, respectively. Additionally, the NLF had in Lam Dong two engineer companies, three organic provincial forces (total 229 men), 327 men organized into 10 platoon-sized local district units, and 15 armed propaganda teams of approximately 10 men each.

¹²⁷ Di Linh District Report, September 1968, For example, in one month in Di Linh, NLF abductions included 2 hamlet chiefs and 3 assistant chiefs, as well as rural health workers, a school teacher and a postal official.

¹²⁸ Summary of Viet Cong Activity in II Corps for the Week Ending 28 December 1968, Box 9, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹²⁹ LDPR, 30 September 1968, Box 8, Ibid.

and poor supervision of hamlet workers” reflected poor local government.¹³⁰ Though Highlanders were often intimidated by the NLF, they were often more likely to desert the Front than their Vietnamese counterparts. The *Chieu Hoi* (“Open Arms”) program in Lam Dong was indicative of Montagnard dissatisfaction with the NLF. A nationwide program designed to induce NLF members to “rally” to the GVN with promises of amnesty, *Chieu Hoi* in Lam Dong seemed to only attract *Hoi Chanh* (“ralliers”) with Montagnard names.¹³¹

FULRO

During this time, as part of their highlands strategy, the communist leadership reached out to *FULRO*. U.S. reports suggested that *FULRO* leader Y Bham Enoul had received offers of support from NLF political cadre, to include an offer to form an independent Montagnard nation in exchange for *FULRO*’s allegiance.¹³² Exacerbating the intransigence of the Montagnard separatist group were representatives of the U.S. and South Vietnam. The U.S. Ethnic Minorities Affairs (EMA) chief in the highlands reported that many higher-level U.S. officials demonstrated “a poor awareness of the political situation in the Highlands,” allowing possible exploitation by *FULRO* and the NLF. The EMA chief outlined four obstacles to the effective implementation of the EMA program: onerous RVN administrative procedures, MDEM inefficiency, the continued deadlock between Saigon and *FULRO*, and inadequate staffing of South Vietnamese organizations meant to serve ethnic minorities. Though *CORDS* and the EMA supported a greater U.S. role in resolving RVN-*FULRO* disputes, the U.S. Embassy enforced a strict policy of non-interference, which the EMA chief criticized as “an amateurial [sic] approach to a critical problem” and warned that the festering issues were quickly moving to a crisis point. In addition to problems from the American side, the U.S. official trenchantly noted that the MDEM in Saigon was manned primarily by ethnic Vietnamese who possessed little intrinsic motivation to assist Highlanders.¹³³

Nonetheless, through 1968 RVN and *FULRO* officials continued negotiations. Saigon agreed that *FULRO* could have its own banner as long as it was flown subordinate to the national

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ See, for example, B’Sar Subsector Report, 31 October 1968, Ibid.

¹³² SA 23d Inf Div to DSA II Corps, 31 July 1968, Ibid.

¹³³ L.M. Guess, Chief, EMA Branch to Leo Ruelas, Chief, NLD, 3 May 1968, Ibid.

flag and also agreed that Saigon would establish a General Commissariat for Montagnard Affairs, with FULRO leader Y Bham Enuol as commissioner. Wary of Montagnard irredentism, however, Saigon refused to consider FULRO's demand for American- and Vietnamese-advised Montagnard military units commanded by Montagnard officers. Eventually, Y Bham dropped his demand for separate regimental-size units and accepted Montagnard company-sized units within RVN security forces, though Vietnamese officials attempted to forestall the integration of Montagnard-organized platoons and companies—many of which had been created by FULRO—into ARVN. A U.S. observer noted that “FULRO and Montagnard problems are still very much a reality, and the committee provides the only sounding board for the several agencies and organizations concerned with policy and programs in the highlands.”¹³⁴ As negotiations progressed, U.S. observers warned of the possibility of FULRO sympathizers deserting if Saigon refused the integration of FULRO units into the RVNAF.¹³⁵ Additionally, rumors swirled throughout U.S.-Montagnard Special Forces camps that CORDS and Embassy personnel operated with a veil of secrecy regarding RVN-FULRO negotiations and “often acted contrary to the official policy of ‘hands off’ regarding the FULRO effort in the Highlands.” Highlanders and U.S. military personnel voiced the belief that American civilian officials were aiding FULRO in commodities and perhaps materiel assistance through flights by Air America, the CIA's proprietary airline.¹³⁶ Though the rumors were unsubstantiated, their very presence served to further undermine Saigon's authority.

By the end of 1968, however, the conditions were set for the dissolution of FULRO. After years of self-imposed exile in Cambodia, intense negotiations, and RVN promises to integrate former Montagnard separatists into Vietnamese society, FULRO Chairman Y Bham Enuol agreed to return to Vietnam and cooperate with the Saigon government. The concession set the stage for the dissolution of the resistance group, as hard-line Montagnard, Cham, and

¹³⁴ Minutes of the [Montagnard] Committee Meeting of September 18, 1968, Box 9, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹³⁵ FULRO Situation, 9 August 1968, Box 10, Ibid.

¹³⁶ L.M. Guess (ethnic minorities affairs advisor) to DEPCORDS II CTZ, Rumors Concerning Sensitive CORDS-US Embassy-US Special Forces Relations with FULRO, 16 March 1968, Box 15, Ibid.

Khmer Krom separatists split from the movement, and more moderate FULRO leaders made preparations to integrate their militants into the RVNAF.¹³⁷

Consolidation and Relocation

According to William Colby, head of the U.S. rural pacification effort, mid-1968 marked a change in U.S. attitudes toward refugees. Whereas previous U.S. policy had been to encourage refugee flow in a shortsighted and cynical gambit to limit the “manpower base” of the NLF, by 1968 MACV emphasized that population centers be secured rather than evacuated, and the returning of refugees to their villages became a top priority.¹³⁸ Nonetheless, the example of Lam Dong demonstrates that the reality of the situation in the highlands was more complex and often out of the purview of MACV.

While officials in the northern highlands debated issues of concern to FULRO, the Montagnard residents of Lam Dong—few of whom were members of separatist organizations—had to contend with RVN directives to consolidate and relocate hamlets. Though the Tet Offensives had primarily impacted major cities, the national government, as part of measures to increase security in the countryside, embarked on a plan to bring residents of the highlands—most of them Montagnards—to secure areas, an initiative that would mirror closely the failed strategic hamlet program of the early 1960s. For example, in the Kala area of Di Linh district, local TS cadre attempted to improve security by consolidating residents from three Highlander hamlets into one secure area. The TS cadre, who were instrumental in the interface between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese provincial government, suffered from numerous problems. For example, about ten TS cadre had joined the program after fleeing NLF impressment. Once their own families were shifted from semi-secure to secure hamlets, the Montagnard TS members no longer felt obligated to remain with the program. RVN directives dictated that disciplinary measures be taken against deserters and recalcitrant members, yet the preferred

¹³⁷ Norman C. LaBrie, “FULRO: The History of Political Tension in the South Vietnamese Highlands” (M.A. Thesis, U. Massachusetts, 1971), 99-103. LaBrie was the U.S. Embassy’s political reporting officer for the central highlands from April 1968-September 1969. Much of his thesis is based on interviews with Vietnamese and Montagnard officials.

¹³⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Ed., Vol. 4, 508; William Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America’s Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (New York: Contemporary Books, 1989), 238.

punitive measure—conscription—was not possible as Highlanders were not subject to involuntary service in the armed forces.¹³⁹ Leadership of the TS was also a problem; most service chiefs—RVN civilian officials directly subordinate to the province chief—were not willing to accompany TS or RD cadre on missions in the field. Colonel Bach, displeased with this development, began to require local officials to spend more time visiting RD and TS groups.¹⁴⁰

Other problems in Montagnard villages arose from the particular social milieu of the Highlanders. In mid-1968, for example, the Lam Dong senior advisor noted that there were approximately 4000 Montagnards living in unsecured areas and in need of relocation, but many of these citizens were even more reluctant than their ethnic Vietnamese counterparts to move to unfamiliar locales.¹⁴¹ Other measures intended to expose the Montagnards to modernity had little effect; though Lam Dong had had an operational rural credit program since 1967, to the consternation of the U.S. credit advisor most Highlanders were still subsistence farming and not operating in the market economy. The credit advisor noted that the lack of security in Pleiku and Kontum instilled fear in the Highlanders of Lam Dong. Most Montagnard families, particularly those who had relocated to the southern highlands to escape the heavier fighting in the north were more concerned with survival than obtaining credit.¹⁴² Additionally, though most members of the TS—indeed most Montagnards—were illiterate, the RVN supplied only a three-day adult literacy course for cadre members.¹⁴³ Saigon also engaged in other measures designed to assimilate the Montagnards into the Vietnamese cultural sphere; for example, in 1968, local officials implemented the RVN's primary school education initiatives. In schools composed primarily of Montagnards, Vietnamese was the primary language of instruction, but Koho was also used to explain difficult concepts, and both languages were used equally in reading.¹⁴⁴ If

¹³⁹ Summary of Senior Advisors Monthly Evaluation, October 1968, Box 1, MACV J3 Evaluation and Analysis Division, Senior Advisors Monthly Evaluation (SAME) Summaries, RG472.

¹⁴⁰ Dec 1968 Monthly RD Cadre Field Program Report. Box 8, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹⁴¹ LD Combined Province Pacification Plan, 31 July 1968, Ibid.

¹⁴² Credit Advisor Quarterly Report, 25 January 1968, Ibid.

¹⁴³ Multi-Improvement Plan Synopsis, November 1968, 8 September 1968, Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Minutes Regarding Discussion...Lam Dong Educ. Office, 4 December 1968, Box 20, MACV CORDS, MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

ethnic Vietnamese students dominated, however, Koho was not used at all. Secondary education was vocational in nature; the Agricultural Technical High School in Bao Loc, for example, taught “Vietnamese agricultural methods and techniques” as well as carpentry, mechanics, welding, metal working, electricity, plumbing, blue print reading, and shop management.¹⁴⁵ Though Saigon was determined to bring modern agriculture as well as Vietnamese language and culture to the Montagnards, transforming an entire society in the span of a few years was improbable, particularly due to the poor state of local and national institutions.

As in the rest of the highlands, the Lam Dong Refugee and Social Welfare office was understaffed. Though authorized six staff members, the Lam Dong office had only two personnel—the incompetent and corrupt chief and a clerk—and through much of 1968 lacked a U.S. advisor. In addition to the lack of emphasis from Saigon, expanded draft levies exacerbated crucial manning shortages. The Lam Dong RSW chief was a continued target of ire from the province senior advisor, who criticized the Vietnamese official’s “competency, honesty and performance” and noted that “[d]espite continued prodding and assistance, refugee and social welfare programs in the province are virtually non-existent.” Though refugee services were a crucial component of security in Lam Dong the service chief, despite a GVN directive to expend 150 percent of his budget, spent less than 25 percent of his annual budget, and was “possibly implicated” in the diversion of foodstuffs and materials. “Continued lack of performance by this service cannot be permitted,” the U.S. official noted, and advisors at multiple levels “recommended strongly” that the chief be removed.¹⁴⁶

Unfortunately, only intervention by Vietnamese citizens and officials could solve the problems of corruption and incompetence—yet even when this occurred, officials normally remained in the government and were merely transferred to different provinces. In a rare successful example of citizen removal of corrupt officials, an anonymous letter from the “Lam Dong Anti-Communist League” named the province deputy chief for security and other GVN officials as “conspirators in the diversion of RD commodities and materials.” The province deputy for security, long suspected by U.S. advisors of being a communist collaborator and a corrupt officer, promptly requested a transfer from the province chief, which was immediately

¹⁴⁵ Leo L. Ruelas, Chief NLD/Region II to Ralph W. Gill, Ag. Educ. Advisor Bao-Loc ag. school, Objectives of the Agr. Shop at Bao-Loc, 17 May 1968, Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ LDPR, 31 July 1968, Box 22, Ibid.

granted, and the Lam Dong representative in the National Assembly successfully removed four other officials.¹⁴⁷ Despite this fleeting success in the improvement of local government, the refugee situation continued to experience slow and uneven progress, especially in Highlander hamlets. Six months later, hamlet residents whose homes were burned in March 1968 finally received a payment for each family member. Additionally, U.S. officials reported that the Lam Dong refugee program suffered setbacks as Highlander refugees refused to return to their native hamlets “for fear of severe danger.”¹⁴⁸

In October, the province chief began execution of a three-phase program to increase pacification by the beginning of 1969. Though refugee and social welfare services were key components of the pacification campaign, the province senior advisor noted that there was “[n]o change in the directionless refugee program in Lam Dong due to the continued inefficiency and disinterest [sic] of the refugee service chief.” In an unwelcome development, Saigon’s Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MHSW) withdrew \$VN1.4 million because of failure by the Lam Dong RSW chief to spend it. Despite attempts to transfer the “deplorable” RSC chief, however, the official remained, and U.S. officials requested a contact team from the Saigon MHSW to discuss the growing refugee problem with the province chief.¹⁴⁹

The situation in Gung Re II hamlet in Di Linh district was a typical example of the security issues associated with the growing refugee problem. An NLF attack on a hamlet in Tuyen Duc province resulted in approximately 100 Montagnard families migrating to Gung Re II Hamlet in Lam Dong. Not native to the province, the families were considered refugees and according to RVN policy had until 1 January 1969 to decide whether to remain in Lam Dong or return to their old hamlet. The families faced an unenviable choice; if they returned, they could be subject to more NLF attacks, but if they remained in Lam Dong, they had to begin their lives anew with minimal help from the quantitatively and qualitatively deficient Refugee and Social Welfare Service. The security situation in Lam Dong was also not without problems; the hamlets south of Di Linh were still considered contested and subject to frequent taxation by the NLF. The lack of security meant U.S. and RVN artillery missions, which in December 1968

¹⁴⁷ LDPR, 30 September 1968, Box 8, Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ B’Sar Sub-Sector Report, September 1968, Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ LDPR, 31 October 1968, Ibid.

accidentally killed three civilians. Local officials' lack of effort to ameliorate the situation, a U.S. advisor noted, caused resentment and "provided [the] VC with excellent propaganda"¹⁵⁰

By the end of 1968, Lam Dong had set in motion plans to comply with RVN directives mandating the abandonment of all hamlets deemed "VC Controlled." Province refugee administrators began to relocate citizens who lived in these hamlets; because Montagnard hamlets were normally in more remote locations, they bore the brunt of the relocation program, which was eerily similar to the failed Strategic Hamlet program.¹⁵¹ In the last months of 1968, seven previously contested hamlets were relocated to secure areas within the district; while Saigon viewed this as a matter of "bringing 2623 additional persons under GVN control," the government failed to articulate the necessity of providing measures needed to ensure that hamlet members would remain loyal to the RVN. In Lam Dong, officials relocated at least 5000 citizens, and the last hamlet in Bao Loc rated "VC controlled" was abandoned—its 35 families were relocated and combat engineers assigned to Lam Dong worked to clear land to provide new homes.¹⁵² Though Saigon directed local officials to carry out its program of relocation, it did not provide the resources such as construction materials, engineer support, and food necessary to ensure refugee satisfaction. By the end of 1968, Lam Dong had many homeless refugees, and deficiencies in rice and salt allowances in most Highlander refugee hamlets were acute. When Lam Dong officials elevated the issue to the national government, Saigon's MHSW promised only to "take [the] matter under consideration early next year"¹⁵³

Land Reform

In August 1968, after two years of prodding by the U.S. Mission, the RVN Prime Minister's office announced the formation of a special commission on land reform. American officials continued to argue that legal guarantees of Montagnard land ownership were necessary in order to protect against Vietnamese encroachment and to preserve tribal rights and future

¹⁵⁰ Di Linh District Report, 31 December 1968, Box 1, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472.

¹⁵¹ Bao Loc District Report, 30 November 1968, Box 8, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472; Sewall Menzel, interview by phone, March 2011.

¹⁵² Bao Loc District Report, 31 December 1968, Ibid.

¹⁵³ LDPR, 31 December 1968, Ibid.

expansion. Since the settlement of North Vietnamese refugees in the mid-1950s, Montagnard lands had been gradually taken over by individual Vietnamese, often with the consent of local and national officials. Official and unofficial seizures of Montagnard lands were usually ignored when the Highlanders brought claims through the Vietnamese judicial system, and in the rare occasions when courts rendered a favorable verdict for Montagnards, local officials would often refuse to enforce it. Though there was often enough land for both communities, friction arose when Vietnamese and Highlanders attempted to exploit neighboring holdings. Local land service representatives were not numerous or powerful enough to resolve disputes, especially after the RVN's mobilization law had decreased their capabilities. Noting that land issues were a "constant theme of complaint in the 1964, 1967 and 1968 Montagnard conferences," Tuyen Duc Province Senior Advisor Frank Wisner expressed a common American view that land issues were "the most important area of contention between the highlanders and the Vietnamese."¹⁵⁴

While the national government continued to make slow progress on the important issue of land reform, it continued to devote an inordinate amount of resources to complex economic development initiatives, such as the Lam Dong Tea Factory, which had been under construction since 1967. In a harbinger of events to come, the operation of the Lam Dong Tea Factory continued to be delayed because of problems in procuring the expensive and complex equipment needed for the enterprise, as well as the absence of the Ceylonese technician required to operate the equipment.¹⁵⁵ More ominously, RVN officials were having problems financing the project because of the consequences of large-scale U.S. involvement. The Vietnamese piastre was continuing to decline in value, driven by increased money supply, lack of confidence in the piastre, and the introduction of large amounts of American dollars into the Vietnamese economy.¹⁵⁶ Additionally, U.S. involvement was draining the pool of qualified RVN workers; many chose employment with U.S. military and civilian organizations due to the relatively high

¹⁵⁴ Frank G. Wisner to Deputy CORDS, Land Reform in the Highlands, 15 October 1968, Box 15, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹⁵⁵ LDPR, 30 September 1968, Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ RAS Spot Report No. 91/68, 27 August 1968, Box 9, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472. The RVN's currency was initially the Piastre, a holdover from French rule, but was gradually replaced by the Dong. The previous high in 1967 was 175 P/Dollar, the new high in 1968 was 210 P/Dollar, while the official rate was 118 P/D.

wages offered by these organizations. For example, the overall attrition rate for the RD program was 33%, largely because Vietnamese took employment with the U.S. government.¹⁵⁷

Toward the end of 1968, however, there was some justification for guarded optimism on the part of U.S. and RVN officials in the highlands. Due to NLF losses and greatly increased territorial forces, security—particularly in Lam Dong and the four other southern highland provinces—was dramatically improved from previous years. Local RVN officials, particularly in Lam Dong, were more competent than previously, and many anti-communist local leaders were willing to assume office even after their predecessors had been assassinated by the NLF—a sure sign of increased confidence and security. Despite these improvements, certain developments did not augur well for the highlands. “One of the most important influences” in the highlands economy, noted a U.S. assessment, was the “presence of FWMAF [Free World Military Armed Forces] and their need for local workers and services.” Additionally, the assessment noted that the South Vietnamese government was failing to care for the increasingly large number of refugees displaced by the war. Though U.S. officials in the highlands optimistically predicted that increasingly large numbers of civil affairs projects would both placate the refugees and continue to stimulate the economy, they failed to acknowledge that their time was running out.¹⁵⁸ In the United States, antiwar sentiment was rising rapidly. Though initially supportive of the war, by late 1967 a majority of Americans believed that the U.S. decision to intervene in Vietnam had been a mistake.¹⁵⁹ Though the January 1968 Tet offensive had been an operational defeat for the NLF, the surprise and ferocity of the communist onslaught seemed to belie official U.S. pronouncements of a rapidly approaching victory. Later that year, protests at college campuses, in Washington D.C., and at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago demonstrated that the U.S. could not stay in Vietnam indefinitely.

Yet the results of the increased effort in the highlands still remained to be seen. As 1968 drew to a close, the Bishop of Dalat came to Lam Dong to celebrate Mass in a Montagnard resettlement hamlet. Expressing hope for the future, the bishop’s sermon in both Koho and

¹⁵⁷ Multi-Improvement Plan Synopsis, 7 August 1968, Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ HQ I FFV, CORDS Field Overview September 1968, 13 October 1968, Box 14, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹⁵⁹ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*, Second Ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986), 174.

Vietnamese emphasized the importance of projects in Lam Dong as an illustration of what could be accomplished through the cooperation of Montagnards and Vietnamese.¹⁶⁰

1969

In Lam Dong and the highlands, developments in 1969 largely mirrored those of the previous year. Increased training effort and decreased numbers of U.S. troops led to continued improvements in the territorial forces, while the weakened NLF instituted a policy of limited combat engagement in order to preserve their remaining strength. Increasingly, NLF operations were supplemented by North Vietnamese PAVN troops masquerading as South Vietnamese guerrillas. As an American official and student of Montagnard politics observed, by 1969, the communist movement was “resigned to the fact that its penetration, agitation and propaganda efforts had failed, [and] that the highlands would have to be taken by storm if at all.”¹⁶¹ Beginning in 1969 and continuing until the end of the war, the NLF and PAVN increasingly shifted from soft power to hard power operations targeted at Montagnard refugee camps and resettlement areas. As many U.S. officials contemporaneously noted, many Montagnards chose to vote with their feet and leave these contested areas.¹⁶² What the Americans did not anticipate, however, was that the communist attacks on Montagnard areas would—perhaps unwittingly—undermine Highlander confidence in the RVN, as the government proved both unable and unwilling to accommodate large numbers of displaced ethnic minorities.

At the beginning of the year, the situation in the highlands from the U.S.-RVN perspective appeared to be favorable. Not only was the NLF increasingly marginalized in both combat effectiveness and political cachet, the RVN finally appeared to be making inroads in the Montagnard community. After arduous negotiations and the departure of hard-line Montagnard separatists, FULRO was formally dissolved in February 1969. Over the course of the year, however, and despite warnings from local officials, Saigon failed to redeem its promises of land rights and assistance for the Montagnards. With a narrow definition of security that failed to

¹⁶⁰ Di Linh District Report, 31 December 1968, Box 8, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹⁶¹ LaBrie, “FULRO,” 120-21.

¹⁶² See, for example, *Ibid.*, 121; Spector, *After Tet*, 184-212.

consider factors beyond the narrow confines of “GVN or VC control,” the overall relationship between the Montagnards and the RVN remained tenuous.

FULRO

The late-1968 decision by FULRO Chairman Y Bham Enoul to return to South Vietnam and work with the government had caused considerable consternation in the ranks of movement. In January 1969, several hundred FULRO members, insistent on autonomous states for ethnic minorities in Vietnam, detained Y Bham in Cambodia. Nonetheless, the RVN took advantage of an opportunity to rid itself permanently of an unwelcome gadfly, and on 1 February 1969, in an elaborate ceremony in Ban Me Thuot, thousands of FULRO members pledged their loyalty to the RVN. FULRO leaders representing Y Bham proclaimed that FULRO was now dissolved, and promised full cooperation with the RVN. Though there were promising indications of a new era of Vietnamese-Montagnard relations, there were soon signs of discontent. Some South Vietnamese officials complained that former FULRO members would be integrated into the RVNAF, and objected to the placement of *Moi* into leadership positions in the military. On the other side, many Montagnards worried that the RVN placement of Highlanders in the government was a façade, and that the government would never honor its promises of greater autonomy and respect for ethnic minorities. The celebration dinner following the FULRO dissolution ceremony was an ominous sign that Vietnamese and Montagnard fears and suspicions would be realized. An American official noted that as President Thieu dined with his Vietnamese ministers and foreign guests in one room, Montagnard leaders and lower-ranking American advisors dined separately in a smaller room.¹⁶³

Refugee and Land Issues

Since the early 1960s, as citizens relocated in an attempt to find greater security and jobs, urban populations had grown and slums often appeared in cities. These increasingly large urban areas were disproportionately impacted by the Tet Offensives. By October 1968, there were 320,000 refugees in II Corps—largely the result of the of NLF attacks of that year, as most American military complexes were located in major cities. With the planned reduction in

¹⁶³ LaBrie, “FULRO,” 102-05.

American forces, it was imperative to move refugees back to the countryside to produce the commodities necessary for RVN survival. Otherwise, U.S. officials speculated, the “malaise caused by living a refugee existence for extended period of time” would be exacerbated and massive unemployment would occur.¹⁶⁴ The U.S. command prioritized five approaches for relocation: 1) to the original community, 2) to an extant community, 3) to a newly created resettled hamlet, 4) the upgrading of a temporary refugee camp into resettled hamlet, 5) inter-province resettlement in which refugees from one province would be resettled in another. Despite these priorities, and the acknowledged complications inherent in placing refugees in different provinces, few refugees were settled in original or other extant communities, and many were resettled in different provinces. Through 1969, U.S. and RVN officials had to contend with 90,000 displaced persons in recognized refugee camps that had yet to receive all entitlements under Saigon’s resettlement program and an additional 129,000 in unrecognized camps who were dependent on RVN security forces. Many of these citizens expressed the desire to return to their original communities and also clamored for additional resettlement allowances as well as receipt of timely and adequate aid from the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and Relief (MHSWR). With the complexities inherent in such massive resettlement operations, province officials formulated integrated refugee resettlement plans and military operations to restore security for resettlement.¹⁶⁵

In reality, there were myriad problems in both the conception and execution of these resettlement plans. Recognizing the problems with large numbers of refugees in inadequate camps, beginning in January 1969 RVN highland officials, directed by II Corps commander General Lu Lan, began to encourage the resettlement of refugees in original communities “where security permits.”¹⁶⁶ Unfortunately, while people whose original communities were connected to the government structure or located along lines of communication were “prime subjects for resettlement,” the directive noted that “[p]rimitive Montagnard refugees from isolated areas in

¹⁶⁴ II CTZ Campaign Plan for the Resettlement of Temporary Refugees, 15 October 1968, Box 15, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of Management Support, General Records, RG472.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Campaign Plan for the Resettlement of Temporary Refugees, II CTZ, 21 October, Ibid.; Campaign Plan for the Resettlement of Temporary Refugees, II CTZ, 8 December 1968, Ibid.

the highlands are not likely candidates for return to ‘original community’ areas.”¹⁶⁷ Because most refugees in the former category were ethnic Vietnamese, while those from isolated hamlets were primarily Highlanders, the directive had the effect of rendering assistance to the former group but not the latter—it would be up to RVN officials and U.S. advisors at the province level to solve the Montagnard situation without higher-level assistance.

Other issues prefigured the systemically flawed approach to security that would manifest itself in the coming years. In February 1969, TS cadres in Lam Dong began the relocation of 230 Montagnard families to more secure areas. The same month, despite objections from American advisors, the Di Linh district chief withdrew territorial troops protecting two Montagnard hamlets, an action that resulted in an NLF entry into one of the hamlets and its abandonment by most of the hamlet population.¹⁶⁸ In May, Saigon officials delivered only a fraction of the promised rice allocation to Montagnard resettlement sites. Though province officials attempted to intervene with the RVN’s ministry of agriculture and MDEM, it is unclear if the villagers ever received the allocation.

Many lingering issues from the previous year were still not resolved until late 1969. Despite a directive from Saigon, highland officials struggled over the best manner to delineate land boundaries, finally settling on the use of aerial photographs, a technique that encountered many delays because of bad weather and lack of air assets. Additionally, even by mid-1969, there were still many refugees from urban areas in northern South Vietnam who had been displaced during the Tet Offensive. Officials in various provinces, including Lam Dong, opposed the resettlement of refugees due to anticipated political and economic disruption. It was not until the second half of 1969 that most of the refugees were resettled in the highlands and the first few land titles granted to Montagnard families.¹⁶⁹

Economic Development

Over the course of the year, the Vietnamese economic development of the highlands continued unabated. A significant impetus was a study by the U.S. Development and Resources

¹⁶⁷ Campaign Plan for the Resettlement of Temporary Refugees, II CTZ, 8 December 1968, Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ LDPR, 29 February 1969, Box 2, Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ LDPR, 31 July 1969, Box 8, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472; LDPR, 31 August 1969, Box 9, Ibid.

Corporation entitled “The Postwar Development of the Republic of Vietnam: Policies and Programs,” Volume Two. Published in March 1969, the study outlined “substantial areas of the Highlands” that offered postwar economic development opportunities. As one U.S. official sardonically noted, “In the minds of many people, ‘Postwar’ appears to be today.” The monograph detailed agriculture and forestry possibilities, was a very popular item at the U.S. Embassy Commercial Library, and had many reviewers from the Vietnamese private sector. Additionally, the U.S. official noted, it “served as model for relocation and resettlement planning” for RVN agriculture and forestry officials.¹⁷⁰

For its part, Saigon continued to remain focused on the tea production in Lam Dong, which continued to have problems with price fluctuation and demand—lack of off-shore export markets, war, uncontrolled exploitation for quick profits, decreased quality of tea processing, in-country marketing restrictions all contributed to decreased demand and over-production of tea.¹⁷¹ While Saigon devoted its resources to the tea factory, it neglected other, more important initiatives. The TS program, which often served as the interface between Saigon and Montagnards, was, in the words of the Lam Dong senior advisor, falling “into the contempt of the general Vietnamese public” due to U.S. and RVN failure to provide direction and support, leading to the “foreseeable disintegration of this vital program.”¹⁷²

Local Security

In 1969, quantitative and qualitative conditions improved for the territorial forces. In the first half of 1969, the PF desertion rates were less than half that of RF and regular units.¹⁷³ A study indicated that socio-economic factors, particularly housing conditions and the delay of entitlements, were the primary cause of desertions. As a result, toward the end of the year the U.S. and RVN redoubled their efforts to provide quality housing for members of the ARVN and territorial forces. Additional empirical data indicated that the territorial forces were an

¹⁷⁰ Robert D. Judy, LR Advisor and Millard Burr, Planning Advisor, Economic Implications of Highland Hamlet Relocations, 25 March 1971, Box 32, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of the Executive Secretary, General Records, RG472.

¹⁷¹ LDPR, 31 May 1969, Box 7, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472.

¹⁷² LDPR, 31 October 1969, Box 10, Ibid.

¹⁷³ Table 6 in Thayer, *Systems Analysis*, Vol. 6, CMH.

increasingly viable entity; through 1969 and 1970, ARVN combat units had a desertion rate four to five times the rate of the PF and about three times the rate of the RF.¹⁷⁴ The most commonly cited cause for desertion was “separation from family and concern for their welfare,” a consideration not faced by the territorial forces who lived close to their families.¹⁷⁵ This would prove to be a double-edged sword, however, as many dependent deaths would result from the close proximity of territorial force family members.

At the beginning of the year, ARVN strength was approximately 395,000, while RF strength stood at 252,000 and PF manpower at 186,000. The basic problem for all Vietnamese forces was still leadership, a U.S. study noted, though in 1969 there was a marked improvement in the performance of the territorial forces and a corresponding decline in that of the ARVN.¹⁷⁶ Through 1969, security continued to improve due to a decline in NLF activity and quantitative and qualitative improvements in the territorial forces. The decrease in communist activity and General Abrams’s increased emphasis on indigenous forces yielded dividends at the local level, as U.S. troops focused on training Vietnamese units, rather than on conventional operations. U.S. officials in Lam Dong attributed increased PF effectiveness to the remaining American infantry company in the province, which for several months conducted a miniature version of the Marine Corps combined action program, in which U.S. squads embedded with individual PF platoons at the hamlet level.¹⁷⁷ By fall 1969, U.S. troops, with the exception of the small advisory team and three MATs, had left Lam Dong.¹⁷⁸ It is possible to extrapolate the improvements in the Lam Dong territorial forces to the entire country; territorial force

¹⁷⁴ Thayer, *Systems Analysis*, Vol. 7, 66, 72. For more analysis that confirms the hypothesis that socio-economic conditions leading to desertion, see Brigham, *ARVN*.

¹⁷⁵ Thayer, *Systems Analysis*, Vol. 7, 74-75.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 90-92, 114. In the more important weapons captured metric (a more reliable gauge of performance than the number of enemy killed, as the latter could often be fabricated) in 1968, ARVN accounted for 3.1 weapons captured per 1000 troops, the territorial forces accounted for 2 per 1000, and U.S. troops 4.1 per 1000. *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷⁷ LDPR, 31 May 1969, Box 7, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472.

¹⁷⁸ LDPR, 30 September 1969, Box 10, *Ibid.*; LDPR, 31 July 1969, Box 8, *Ibid.*

performance in the province was average amongst II Corps provinces, and II Corps RF and PF performance was consistently the worst of the four corps areas in the RVN.¹⁷⁹

Despite these improvements in security, the situation for residents of Lam Dong remained tenuous. By 1969, Vietnamese officials were almost wholly running operations in Lam Dong—only one company of U.S. troops remained, and U.S. advisors had been cautioned to let province officials make their own decisions. Toward the end of 1969, as the RVN began to stand on its own, problems manifested themselves that would prove harbingers of the future. In November, President Thieu presided over the long-delayed opening of the Lam Dong tea factory. Yet as soon as Saigon declared the large-scale highlands project operational, it had to shut down for repairs. The Refugee and Social Welfare Service, whose stated goal was the integration of Montagnards into Vietnamese society through the “rehabilitation and economic improvement of former refugees,” experienced problems. Though eight refugee classrooms were almost complete, the RSW Service replaced refugee teachers with Education Service personnel, a move protested by American advisors but sanctioned by Saigon. Though the Education Service instructors had more formal education, they lacked cultural and linguistic understanding of the Montagnards.¹⁸⁰

Additionally, toward the end of 1969 the GVN assigned former FULRO rebels to RF units as part of the modus vivendi between the government and the separatist group. There were problems with this initiative, however—the RF company assigned to Lam Dong, despite a large amount of training by American forces and a good reputation, was on the verge of having its M16 rifles withdrawn, a measure that U.S. advisors warned would have a deleterious effect on morale and combat power. Additionally, seventy-eight other former FULRO members assigned to Lam Dong as replacements were denied weapons altogether; though U.S. officials did not

¹⁷⁹ Office of Territorial Forces Advisory Report, Vol. I, No. 2, 1969, 21 August 1969 Box 4, HQ MACV, Territorial Security Directorate, Regional Forces/Popular Forces Division, General Records 1968-70, RG472; RF and PF performance in II Corps was less than half that of the national average, measured in metrics such as “kill ratio,” weapons captured, desertion rate, etc.

¹⁸⁰ LDPR, 30 November 1969, Box 11, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472.

know the source of the orders, they suspected that it was due to political machinations in Saigon.¹⁸¹

The NLF

In mid-1969, at the same time that the territorial forces began assuming greater defensive responsibilities, COSVN promulgated Directive 9, which mandated that the NLF place a greater emphasis on selective targeting and economy of force tactics.¹⁸² As the year progressed, territorial forces, though hampered by understrength units, continued to inflict damage on the NLF, in one instance killing seventeen NLF troops in an ambush.¹⁸³ American intelligence reports indicated that the NLF was increasingly focused on survival and forced to levy heavier taxes and acquire rice at any price.¹⁸⁴ As NLF operations tapered off, kidnappings and assassinations of village officials declined, in 1969 averaging only one per month, a fifty percent decrease. Though October saw one RF post overrun, increasingly NLF units sought to conserve combat power by engaging in squad and platoon sized standoff attacks against territorial forces using mortars and rocket-propelled grenades—a method that had the effect of killing more civilians, who were increasingly located in close proximity to the RF and, especially, the PF.¹⁸⁵ The increased numbers of civilians killed by the NLF served to undermine proselytization efforts, and the Front failed to replenish its depleted cadres. By fall 1969, the U.S. senior advisor in Lam Dong reported the “near elimination” of NLF cadres at the village and hamlet level, and the two NLF main force battalions had ceased to operate in the area, though approximately six local force companies in the area remained an effective fighting force.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ LDPR, 31 December 1969, Ibid.

¹⁸² Thayer, *Systems Analysis*, Vol. 7, 295.

¹⁸³ LDPR, 30 November 1969, Box 11, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472.

¹⁸⁴ LDPR, 31 October 1969, Box 10, Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ During May and June, 7 civilians were killed and 16 wounded by NLF mortar and B40 rocket attacks on hamlets; see LDPR, 31 May 1969, Box 7 and LDPR, 30 June 1969, Box 8, Ibid. The NLF kidnapped a total of 6 and assassinated 1 during the final six months of 1969; see above reports and LDPR, 30 December 1969, Box 11, Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ LDPR, 30 September 1969, Box 10, Ibid.; LDPR, 31 July 1969, Box 8, Ibid.

Conclusion

In many ways, 1968 and 1969 set the pattern for many years to follow in Lam Dong. Large scale resistance by the NLF had waned, and the withdrawal of U.S. combat units had a salutary effect on the performance of the RF and PF. Yet Saigon demonstrated a marked reluctance to fulfill its promises to displaced persons, and with the decline in U.S. influence the government displayed an unwillingness to honor its guarantees of Montagnard land rights. Unfortunately for the RVN-U.S. effort, these problems would only be exacerbated in the coming years with the increasing number of refugees and the waning of U.S. influence.

Chapter 5 - Increased Security: 1970-1971

One of the things that, and it's been for a long time, the RF and PF are carrying the major burden of the war.

—General Creighton Abrams, U.S.

commander MACV, comments at a Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update, 23 October 1971¹⁸⁷

The years 1970 and 1971 represented the high-water mark for government control in Lam Dong and the highlands. The ambitious U.S. program to increase the capacity of the territorial forces was quite effective, and the consolidation zone continued to expand, even with the lack of regulars in Lam Dong. NLF activity was increasingly limited to standoff engagements using indirect fire weapons and RPGs, which unproductively resulted in increased numbers of civilian casualties. The RVN had finally begun to identify and distribute land under the Main Living Area program, and a better crop of officers, to include Colonel Bach in Lam Dong, worked to improve the efficiency of local government. Yet during this period of relative calm in the highlands, the government failed to move with a sense of urgency to establish systems that could aid displaced persons in the case of another communist offensive. Though the RVN had reached a modus vivendi with FULRO that provided for the integration of former Montagnard separatists into the RVNAF, the implementation of this agreement was at best problematic. It remained clear that many high-level RVN officials would only address Montagnard welfare issues when pressured by American officials.

1970

By 1970, RVN policy toward the Montagnards, at least on paper, was conciliatory. The MDEM in Saigon was to act as an advocate for the interests of ethnic minorities, and its representatives throughout South Vietnam were to enforce the increased educational and humanitarian measures.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, in April 1970, Saigon restricted the use of forced

¹⁸⁷ Lewis Sorley, ed., *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes, 1968-1972* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), 681.

¹⁸⁸ LaBrie, "FULRO," 146.

relocations, but II Corps Commander General Ngo Dzu ignored the order, arguing that he had personal authorization from Thieu to continue with resettlement. Through the coming years, Dzu would prove one of the most formidable opponents of Montagnard advocates such as U.S. anthropologist Gerald Hickey. Dzu, who had had relatives killed by rebellious Montagnards, saw security strictly in terms of military utility, such as the proportion of families relocated to areas that the government deemed secure. Additionally, he was under pressure from those Vietnamese who desired Montagnard land—particularly in southern highland areas such as Lam Dong, Ban Me Thuot, and Dalat, where developers increasingly did not have to worry about NLF attacks.¹⁸⁹ It would not be until mid-1971 that pressure from U.S. political officials would compel Dzu to change his policies.

NLF

At the beginning of 1970, intelligence reports indicated that there were less than 1000 communist troops in Lam Dong, and most of these were PAVN masquerading as NLF. Additionally, there were an estimated 300 political cadres, most of whom were also suspected to be from outside the province. PAVN/NLF attacks during this period increasingly resulted in civilian casualties. Those killed or wounded were often ordinary citizens, rather than local officials. It is unclear whether this was intentional targeting, the result of increasing numbers of standoff attacks (attacks from a distance with rocket-propelled grenades and indirect fire weapons, rather than hamlet infiltration), the result of the close proximity of the new territorial forces' family housing, or a combination of all three. In some cases, the NLF/PAVN engaged in rocket and mortar attacks on population centers in Bao Loc and Di Linh.¹⁹⁰ With the attacks on the two cities, the first six months of 1970 were bleak for the people of Lam Dong. In addition to six assassinations of local officials, citizens endured twenty-five kidnappings, and a total of fifty-one civilians were killed and 114 wounded by NLF attacks during this period. Additionally, sixteen RVNAF personnel—most of them RF and PF—were killed and another

¹⁸⁹ Henry S. Bradsher, "Saigon Orders Relief for Montagnards," *The Evening Star*, 16 June 1971, Box 32, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of the Executive Secretary, General Records, RG472.

¹⁹⁰ See especially LDPR, 30 April 1970, Box 12, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472, in which rocket and mortar attacks on the two cities killed twelve and wounded twenty-five civilians (five military personnel were also casualties in these attacks).

forty wounded during the first half of 1970.¹⁹¹ There was also an increase in attacks designed to disrupt the provincial election in June; NLF activity and some confusion and disorganization at polling places led to a relatively low turnout of 75 percent. The U.S. senior advisor lamented that the NLF was able to operate with “almost complete immunity” during June, and local security forces remained on the defensive during this period.¹⁹²

This activity was short-lived, however, peaking in the spring and summer months before being crushed by an aggressive territorial force campaign directed by Colonel Bach. By fall 1970, mauled by engagements in which the RF and PF held the upper hand, the NLF switched to tactics such as the emplacement of command- and pressure-detonated mines along Highway 20. By September, the senior U.S. advisor noted that the NLF “no longer poses a major threat to pacification and development” as communist losses had exceeded government losses for the third consecutive month. The U.S. advisor credited his counterpart and his local security campaign, noting approvingly that, “It is an accepted fact that any program he [Col. Bach] personally directs moves with dramatic results.”¹⁹³ In another positive development, in the aftermath of two communist attacks on population centers in March, U.S. officials reported that Lam Dong RSW personnel “responded outstandingly and provided required assistance immediately”¹⁹⁴

By October 1970, though local force companies were still using Lam Dong for the movement of supplies through the region, the six local force companies, two local force platoons, and eighteen reconnaissance teams were avoiding contact, either due to operational losses or biding time for a major offensive.¹⁹⁵ NLF attempts to procure supplies were costly, and twelve NLF cadres were killed in manned and unmanned ambushes. Local units secured areas where Montagnards harvested rice—common targets for NLF supply procurement—and an RF company worked with a U.S. unit, temporarily assigned to Lam Dong, to destroy supply caches, crop areas, and base areas. Other signs similarly pointed to a shift in the war. A November NLF offensive throughout MR6 failed in Lam Dong—an RF unit repulsed an attempt by a reinforced

¹⁹¹ LDPRs, January-June 1970, Box 11-14. Totals for civilian KIA do not include the assassinations.

¹⁹² LDPR, 30 June 1970, Box 14, Ibid.

¹⁹³ LDPR, 30 September 1970, Box 15, Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ LDPR, 31 March 1970, Box 12, Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ LDPR, 31 October 1970, Box 16, Ibid.

NLF company to overrun an outpost. Local units captured important documents and began to emplace approximately fifty mechanical ambushes—Claymore antipersonnel mines attached to trip wires—per night.¹⁹⁶

Territorial Forces

Much of the decline in NLF capabilities was attributable to the increased combat power of the territorial forces. Largely through the efforts of the MATs, the performance of territorial forces improved markedly, particularly the ability to undertake longer-duration operations, night ambush operations, and the capacity to work in larger units such as two or more PF platoons and in three to four RF company groups.

Yet there were problems involving some territorial force units. After intense negotiations throughout the previous year, the South Vietnamese government and the leadership of FULRO agreed that members of the Highlander separatist group could renounce their belief in an independent Montagnard state, swear loyalty to the RVN, and become members of the RVNAF. At the beginning of the year, Saigon officials had threatened to withdraw the advanced M16 rifles that had been issued to the 225th RF company in Lam Dong which was composed of former FULRO members from another province. Only through high-level advocacy by U.S. advisors was the company allowed to keep its M16s and, after months of waiting, finally given an operational assignment. Despite the objections of local Vietnamese and U.S. officials, however, scores of men designated as RF replacements, all of them former FULRO members, were given Second World War-vintage weapons.¹⁹⁷ In April, the 225th RF Company, which province officials sent to the Koho village of D’Jiramour, was attacked and overrun by several NLF companies, and almost all of its personnel killed or wounded. Though the former FULRO troops had fought bravely, the incident demonstrated a number of problems with the government’s integration of former FULRO members. Chief among these problems was language difficulty; for example, the RF Company, village residents, and Vietnamese support units all spoke different languages—calling for artillery support was impossible because the territorial force artillery units in Lam Dong were manned by soldiers who spoke only Vietnamese.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ LDPR, 30 November 1970, Box 16, Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ LDPR, 31 January 1970, Box 11, Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ LDPR, 30 April 1970, Box 12, Ibid.

In addition to the problems with former FULRO integration, there remained other significant challenges to the successful employment of territorial forces. Though U.S. combat troops had been virtually absent from the province for approximately a year, security requirements for U.S. engineers working to maintain and improve Highway 20, as well as general security for the 120 kilometers of highway in Lam Dong, continued to make heavy demands on territorial force resources.¹⁹⁹ Despite the improvement in the capabilities and effectiveness of the territorial forces, the senior U.S. advisor noted that leadership—specifically, the “lack of qualified officers to replace totally incompetent commanders”—remained the main problem in RF and PF units.²⁰⁰ American advisors in the field noted that territorial force leaders knew what to do, but were not doing it. For example, though they had been instructed otherwise, units still engaged in risky and amateurish behavior such as marching down the middle of established roads with no flank security and failing to deploy men to search likely ambush and sniper positions. There were also problems in recruitment; though province officials had begun an aggressive campaign designed to recruit Montagnards—who were exempt from the RVN’s conscription law yet represented half of all military-age males in Lam Dong—the effort was unsuccessful at persuading members to join. Nonetheless, an additional three PF platoons were authorized and raised, bringing the province total to thirty-nine.²⁰¹ In a sign of their ability to undertake increasingly complex operations, Lam Dong RF units, in conjunction with ARVN support and VNAF air assets, participated in a multi-company airmobile assault deep into an NLF/PAVN base area.²⁰² During October 1970, the temporary presence of a U.S. brigade assisted in the development of the territorial forces in Lam Dong; instead of leading operations, the U.S. platoons operated in tandem with RF companies. In these operations, they were now supported almost entirely by Vietnam Air Force (VNAF) pilots who had supplanted U.S. Air Force pilots in the direction of air assets.²⁰³

By the end of 1970, U.S. officials noted an “upswing in optimism by Lam Dong officials and a large element of the population” and a corresponding increase in investments and long-

¹⁹⁹ LDPR, 31 May 1970, Box 14, Ibid.

²⁰⁰ LDPR, 30 June 1970, Box 14, Ibid.

²⁰¹ LDPR, 31 July 1970, Box 15, Ibid.

²⁰² LDPR, 30 September 1970, Box 15, Ibid.

²⁰³ LDPR, 31 October 1970, Box 16, Ibid.

term construction. More importantly, residents of Lam Dong demonstrated increased confidence in their security situation as they had begun the repair of buildings damaged or destroyed by the NLF. Previously, citizens had been reluctant to rebuild because of fear of retribution. The U.S. senior advisor observed that “the war in this province against VC forces threatening territorial security is being fought entirely by Vietnamese forces with no support from US combat units.” With five NLF/PAVN soldiers killed for every government soldier killed in Lam Dong, communist forces were increasingly focused on procuring crucial supplies such as foodstuffs, and RVNAF intelligence indicated that their adversaries no longer had the potential to mount a major assault.²⁰⁴

Refugees and Resettlement

Despite military gains, political factors remained problematic in Lam Dong. In January, local officials had completed eight classrooms for refugees, staffed with refugee cadre teachers, and also planned vocational classes in subjects such as masonry, carpentry, and sewing.²⁰⁵ In 1970, Lam Dong often received scores or even hundreds of refugees per month, often from isolated border regions that were primarily inhabited by Montagnards. Province services showed a marked improvement; in most cases, refugees received immediate attention and temporary housing, and local medical officials were becoming increasingly adept at treating the outbreaks of communicable disease that could wreak havoc in high-population density environments.²⁰⁶ Overall, U.S. officials noted that the local RSW service was responding “rapidly and effectively” to the challenges it faced.²⁰⁷ Larger questions of the refugees’ permanent disposition, however, remained unanswered, as families who were forced out of their homes due to NLF attacks often remained permanently in government refugee camps.²⁰⁸ Additionally, the rising cost of living throughout Vietnam was felt acutely in Lam Dong. Through the Agricultural Bank loan program, the province had 730 recipients of credit, but economic fluctuations meant that new

²⁰⁴ LDPR, 31 December 1970, Box 17, Ibid.

²⁰⁵ LDPR, 31 January 1970, Box 11, Ibid.; LDPR, 28 February 1970, Ibid.

²⁰⁶ See, for example, LDPR, 31 March 1970, Box 12, Ibid.; LDPR, 30 April 1970, Ibid. and LDPR, 31 May 1970, Box 14, Ibid.

²⁰⁷ LDPR, 30 June 1970, Box 14, Ibid.

²⁰⁸ See, for example, LDPR, 31 March 1970, Box 12 and LDPR, 31 May 1970, Box 14, Ibid.

construction—now a possibility due to the improved security situation—had ground to a halt as the price of construction materials such as cement skyrocketed. Other businesses were similarly impacted; for example, the high cost of feed resulted in a decrease in hog production.²⁰⁹

Beginning in mid-1970, the rising costs of staple items, particularly foodstuffs, would become a major concern in Lam Dong.²¹⁰

Since 1966, PAVN and NLF units had violated Cambodian neutrality and established base areas and re-supply routes that fed men and materiel from North to South Vietnam. In April 1970, U.S. President Richard Nixon authorized a secret incursion into Cambodia in order to capture COSVN and eliminate sanctuary areas. Heavy fighting in Cambodia resulted in an unprecedented number of war refugees in Lam Dong. In mid-1970, the RSW service chief in Lam Dong began preparations to receive 10,000 refugees, most of whom were ethnic Vietnamese from Cambodia. Overall, U.S. officials noted that the local RSW service was responding “rapidly and effectively” to the challenges it faced. Nonetheless, U.S. and RVN officials worried of possible problems with the refugees’ integration into the social and economic structure of province. Officials also noted that it was unclear how the large numbers of refugees would eventually become economically independent and where their loyalties lay.²¹¹ Lam Dong absorbed the 10,000 refugees in a six-day period, causing a thirteen percent province population increase. The U.S. senior advisor noted that the “achievements of the Province Chief and his staff in preparing for receiving, housing and feeding these repatriates was nothing less than outstanding.” But higher prices in the province, and an “almost total commitment of the province to the refugee problem” resulted in a slowdown of other projects. Local officials were assisted by religious, military, civilian, and private sector involvement, and the refugees were housed in five existing structures and 133 tents. In accordance with RVN policy, all refugees received temporary resettlement and travel allowances.²¹² Not accustomed to the alien environment of the highlands, however, over 3000 of the refugees left almost immediately for the Mekong Delta—a region far more culturally, geographically, and economically similar to

²⁰⁹ LDPR, 30 April 1970, Box 12, Ibid.

²¹⁰ LDPR, 30 June 1970, Box 14, Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² LDPR, 31 August 1970, Box 15, Ibid.

Cambodia—and most of the remaining repatriates expressed a desire to leave Lam Dong.²¹³ The desires of refugees often caused consternation on the part of U.S. and RVN officials; the senior American advisor noted the “disappointing” progress toward the establishment of local governance for repatriates due to the “indifference on the part of the repatriates themselves.” Similarly, services provided by the RSW slackened and the Province Chief lost interest in the Cambodian refugees after it became clear that they wanted to leave. Eventually, only 2000 were resettled in Lam Dong.²¹⁴ The repatriates did spark interest at the highest levels of the command structure; in November, the Prime Minister, cabinet members, and William Colby visited the Cambodian refugees that remained in Lam Dong.²¹⁵

The many Montagnard refugees in Lam Dong did not attract similar high-level interest, however, and problems with both refugees and non-displaced Highlanders continued in 1970. It was not until the end of the year that the final group of refugees from the beginning of 1970—a total of 177 Montagnards—received their final resettlement benefits.²¹⁶ Of even greater importance was the slowness of the MLA program. At the end of the year, RVN Minister for the Development of Ethnic Minorities Paul Nur issued land certificates to over 700 Montagnard farmers. Yet the average plot of land was only two hectares—far less than the five hectares deemed necessary for traditional Montagnard swidden farming—and most Highlanders still did not have deeds to their land at all, making them vulnerable to encroachment. The first land title had been issued at the end of 1969, and through 1970 the government issued approximately 2600 land titles—yet these averaged only two and one-half hectares per title.²¹⁷ The inadequacies of the land reform program would become one of the most serious problems in the highlands during the 1970s.

Local Governance

In mid-June, twenty-three candidates competed for six seats on the Lam Dong provincial council. In all, U.S. officials deemed the elections “fair and square,” and the results reflected the

²¹³ LDPR, 30 September 1970, Box 15, Ibid.

²¹⁴ LDPR, 31 October 1970, Box 16, Ibid.

²¹⁵ LDPR, 31 December 1970, Box 17, Ibid.

²¹⁶ LDPR, 31 October 1970, Box 16, Ibid.

²¹⁷ LDPR, 31 December 1970, Box 17, Ibid.

demographics and identity politics present in the province: three ethnic Vietnamese and three Montagnards were elected.²¹⁸ In an unexpected development, however, the election of officers for the new council resulted in the selection of Montagnards as chairman and deputy chairman. The U.S. senior advisor noted that “serious problems of cooperation” were bound to result from such an arrangement and would delay province development and the council budget. The Vietnamese refused to take direction from Highlanders, and also refused a secretary seat on the council.²¹⁹ The matter was finally resolved through the cajoling of the province chief; a series of meetings between the Montagnards and Vietnamese leaders resulted in the resignation of the Highlander chairman and his replacement with an ethnic Vietnamese. Even after the scuffle, more serious problems remained; the rising cost of living remained the primary concern of Lam Dong residents.²²⁰

Economic Development

The completion of the Lam Dong tea factory, the U.S. senior advisor noted, “brought to a head all of the long-brewing political dissatisfactions” surrounding the project, and “machinations by differing local elements promise substantial eventual embarrassment for the United States.” If swift action were not taken to get the factory “properly managed and in production,” he warned, it “could become one of our most prominent white elephants in Asia.” Despite a total U.S. investment of over one million U.S. dollars, the projected needed RVN ministerial intervention in order to reorganize the leadership and give clear guidance for operation. Otherwise, the project would never be able to run efficiently and produce high-quality tea needed for export.²²¹ The vicissitudes of the economy had resulted in a decline in the tea industry, but the enormous amount of lead time and capital investment resulted in continuous pressure from Saigon to ensure the project worked. Direct intervention from the RVN Prime Minister meant that local officials would continue to throw good money after bad in a fatally flawed enterprise.²²² Despite these efforts, and continued RVN investment, prospects for the re-

²¹⁸ LDPR, 31 July 1970, Box 15, Ibid.

²¹⁹ LDPR, 31 August 1970, Box 15, Ibid.

²²⁰ LDPR, 30 September 1970, Box 15, Ibid.

²²¹ LDPR, 31 January 1970, Box 11, Ibid.

²²² LDPR, 31 May 1970, Box 14, Ibid.

opening of the tea factory “remained dim” due to the failure to select a new board of governors.²²³ At the end of the year, the senior advisor noted that Lam Dong “is now the father of two magnificent white elephants,” the “infamous” Lam Dong tea factory and the recently completed Tan Phat airfield. The airfield, another major project, was originally built at great cost for use by Air Vietnam, but the South Vietnamese airline no longer had interest in the field, and it could not support sustained use by U.S. aircraft, so was limited to six Air America courier flights a week.²²⁴ Instead of addressing complex, controversial problems, such as Montagnard-Vietnamese relations, Saigon continued to expend large quantities of resources on large projects of marginal utility.

1971

Dispatches from Saigon at the beginning of 1971 indicated the RVN’s steadily increasing reliance on territorial forces. Nguyen Van Thieu and William Colby both noted marked gains in the performance of the territorial forces, and they proposed expanding the scope of these military units’ missions so that they could increasingly take over operations of the next high-echelon unit. Since the beginning of the professionalization of the territorial forces in 1965, U.S. officials had conceived of local security as three concentric rings. The first ring, at the hamlet and village level, was the PF; the second, district and province level ring was the RF; and the final, national level ring was the ARVN. Though Thieu expressed his desire that the People’s Self Defense Forces (PSDF, a program designed to provide village members with weapons and rudimentary training) take over the role of the PF, allowing each group to move up one level, Colby expressed his doubts about the ability of PSDF members to defend themselves. The U.S. official did observe, however, that territorial force operations were increasingly effective, and proposed that the RF be increasingly groomed to focus on province operations into base areas as well as reaction operations where “muscle is needed for territorial security.”²²⁵ The optimism of such high-level Vietnamese and American officials was well-placed; by 1971, territorial forces accounted for almost forty percent of communist combat deaths, a dramatic increase from

²²³ LDPR, 31 August 1970, Box 15, Ibid.

²²⁴ LDPR, 30 November 1970, Box 16, Ibid.

²²⁵ W.E. Colby, DEPCORDS/MACV, Manpower Deployment, 19 March 1971, Box 32, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of the Executive Secretary, General Records, RG472.

previous years, in which territorial forces sustained, yet failed to inflict, large numbers of casualties.²²⁶ Yet 1971 was similar to 1970 in that concrete gains in security were undermined by continued apathy on the part of Saigon toward its citizens in the highlands. Even though a highly publicized incident exposed the RVN's mistreatment of Montagnards, substantive progress in addressing the root causes of these issues—Saigon's policies involving mandatory relocation and land tenure—was fleeting.

Relocation

Though the RVN was increasingly standing on its own, the rapid U.S. withdrawal had a detrimental impact on the situational awareness of province advisory teams. As advisory elements were cut, smaller teams hunkered down and often observed actions primarily through aerial reconnaissance. U.S. advisors' growing reliance on reports from their Vietnamese counterparts often led to widespread information gaps. One of the most egregious examples of this was regarding Montagnard relocations. In 1970 and 1971, tensions flared between Gerald Hickey and RVN highlands commander General Ngo Dzu. Despite the 1969 Saigon directive meant to curtail mandatory relocations, Dzu had continued with his campaign of forced resettlement for Montagnards in the highlands. With little effort from Saigon to enforce its own directive, Hickey complained loudly and repeatedly to U.S. officials about the relocation, and treatment in general, of the Montagnards. Whenever he was confronted by American officials, Dzu noted that he was busy with security issues, and argued that Hickey's statements were interfering with Dzu's efforts to prosecute the war in the highlands and validated communist propaganda that portrayed the RVN as completely uninterested in the plight of the Montagnards.²²⁷ In truth, there were no good options for the Montagnards; relocation meant abandoning their territory—which, contrary to widespread Vietnamese and American belief, had remained in the family for generations—and starting anew with only minimal assistance. Staying in place, however, exposed them to NLF attacks and impressment, as well as errant fire from RVNAF units who often did not exercise the same discretion in Montagnard environments

²²⁶ In 1969 and 1970, territorial forces accounted for ten percent and twenty percent of communist combat deaths, respectively. Thayer, *Systems Analysis*, Vol. 7, 295.

²²⁷ CORDS MR2, Situation Report, 15 March 1971, Box 32, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of the Executive Secretary, General Records, RG472.

as in ethnic Vietnamese areas. The only viable solution—bringing RVN security forces to Montagnard areas—was difficult because the traditional lands of the Montagnards were in isolated areas.

As a result of continued tension from Montagnard advocates—most of whom were lower-level military officers and civilian advisors who had served with Highlanders—the U.S. command in the highlands asked province senior advisors for information on all relocations of Montagnard hamlets. American officials in the highlands noted that the lack of U.S. resources in theater and the waning of U.S. influence meant that the RVN was essentially on its own, particularly on non-military issues such as refugee assistance and social welfare support. Though the U.S. command was able to temporarily halt forced resettlement, General Dzu continued to demand a return to the practice.²²⁸

An incident in the winter of 1970-71 brought refugee issues to a head and forced a change in policy from the highest levels of the RVN. At Plei Kotu refugee camp in Pleiku province, 250 of 2000 relocated Montagnards had died of neglect after being placed on a windy ridgeline without adequate protection from the weather. By spring 1971, outrage from some U.S. officials had reached Washington. U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy convened a refugee subcommittee; fearing that the U.S. Congress would reduce aid to South Vietnam, Thieu issued an order mandating Saigon's specific approval for any forced relocations of Montagnards. Nonetheless, U.S. officials were not of one mind on the issue of Montagnard resettlement. Many higher-level U.S. officials supported relocation, while lower-level U.S. military officers were often the staunchest critics of the RVN's treatment of the Montagnards.²²⁹

Illustrating the divergence of opinion on relocation policy were officials of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), who defended relocation programs and characterized most camps—over which they had oversight responsibility—as humane. USAID officials, in turn, placed blame on the Highlanders themselves, noting that Montagnard tribal leaders often did not understand complex policies; for example, a USAID official noted, with the exception of the MDEM, Montagnard leaders were not “paying attention to the MLA program.”

²²⁸ CORDS MR2, Movement of Montagnard Population, Highland Provinces, 21 February 1971, Ibid.

²²⁹ Henry S. Bradsher, “Saigon Orders Relief for Montagnards,” *The Evening Star*, 16 June 1971, Ibid.; interview with Joseph Mucelli, January 2011; interview with Sewall Menzell, March 2011; email correspondence with Neil Olsen, March 2011.

Additionally, USAID, like the RVN, was focused on the economic development of the highlands. If properly administered, a USAID official noted, the MLA program could be “the catalyst to solve the entire gamut [sic] of accumulated land grievances [sic] and problems that have plagued the GVN for years.” Once problems were “surfaced and solved, the door to development of the Highlands can be opened.”²³⁰

It was largely moot, however, that local officials throughout the highland provinces were divided on their evaluation of Montagnard relocation policy—true power continued to be held by RVN officials in Saigon, which had always treated provinces as extensions of the central government apparatus. The centralized control resulted in a contradiction that would persist throughout the short life of the RVN; Saigon demanded that provinces exercise self-sufficiency and initiative, yet it steadfastly blocked exercise of local power and continued to exercise firm measures of control, such as the personal appointment of all province chiefs by President Thieu.²³¹

Local Security

During 1971 there were indications of increased province security, yet local programs continued to experience problems. For example, measures to improve the living conditions of territorial forces’ dependents continued to experience uneven progress. One assessment described the importance of benefits for dependents in the overall campaign to improve the performance of the RF and PF. As the study noted, “It is difficult to interest RF/PF or ARVN soldiers in civic action when, in some instances, their families are living under worse conditions than the people the soldiers are supposed to help.”²³² Yet combat effectiveness remained relatively high. Of crucial importance was the presence of U.S. forces in a supporting, though not direct combat, role. The U.S. First Cavalry Division continued to operate along the II/III Corps border area, forcing NLF infiltration routes to unfamiliar areas in Lam Dong and making

²³⁰ Max E. Sauerbry, Ch Land Reform Div MR2, Montagnard Land, 26 October 1971, Ibid.

²³¹ CORDS Plans, Policy and Programs, Local Fiscal Self-Sufficiency, 12 April 1971, Ibid.

²³² HQ MACV, Utilization of Territorial Forces in Pacified Areas, 15 October 1971, Box 32, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of the Executive Secretary, General Records, RG472.

them vulnerable to mechanical ambushes.²³³ The continued presence of U.S. troops in border regions—limiting infiltration but allowing local forces to engage and combat NLF/PAVN units—made 1971 an effective year for the U.S.-RVN effort in Lam Dong. In mid-1971, Bao Loc achieved gains in security that allowed it to be transferred to RVN officials for evaluation, while Di Linh, which had a larger number of Montagnards, remained under the aegis of the U.S. for evaluation purposes.²³⁴

Despite gains in security, an assessment by John Paul Vann, the new U.S. senior advisor in the highlands, laid bare the problems with higher-echelon leadership in the region. Vann, who had served in III and IV Corps from 1966-71, noted that with the exception of General Dzu and his staff, “the II Corps Headquarters leadership is inadequate.” Political intrigue, a problem throughout the senior ranks of the ARVN, was especially acute in the highlands. Thieu sought to isolate senior officers loyal to other leaders—for example, General Duong Van Minh—by assigning them away from the Saigon area and placing them in the remote highlands. Furthermore, Vann noted, “ARVN troop morale and fighting spirit are less than satisfactory and there is an obvious reluctance on the part of both ARVN commanders and troops to do battle with the NVA.” Though common throughout Vietnam, the ARVN units in the highlands suffered from an “over-reliance on air and artillery to get the job done and a truly remarkable lethargy when it comes to taking the fight to the enemy.”²³⁵

Vann also noted though II Corps was responsible for both the highlands and the lowlands of central Vietnam, the two regions were drastically different. In the heavily populated coastal lowlands, composed almost entirely of ethnic Vietnamese, territorial forces were “quite obviously the lowest quality of the RF/PF efforts countrywide.” For example, many territorial forces members in the coastal provinces did not carry weapons during the day—clear “evidence of an accommodation” between the communists and the RVN militia, Vann noted—and many, especially in the PF, held daytime civilian jobs. Though the highlands had more effective fighting forces, conflicts based on ethnicity plagued these units. For example, the Second Ranger Group, which operated along the Vietnamese-Cambodian border, had twelve Ranger

²³³ Edward Long to MG Brown, CG, IFFV, Lam Dong Province dtd 15 Apr 71, [18 April 1971], Box 33, Ibid.

²³⁴ COMUSMACV, Districts for HES Evaluation, 16 June 1971, Ibid.

²³⁵ John Vann to COMUSMACV, 19 June 1971, Ibid.

battalions manned primarily with Montagnards and officered primarily by ethnic Vietnamese. Vann noted that the Vietnamese officers rarely accompanied their men on operations. The lack of confidence was palpable, as these units rarely operated outside of their artillery range fans, and as a result only covered ten to twenty percent of their assigned area of operations. Vann noted that great improvements could be made by replacing Vietnamese officers with Montagnards, yet General Dzu had rejected this recommendation. U.S. advisors were frustrated because efforts to relieve or transfer corrupt officers were not successful; as most of the senior ARVN officers were assigned to II Corps as punishment, disobedience was common.²³⁶

For their part, U.S. advisors in Lam Dong remained frustrated at what they perceived to be a lack of support from their higher headquarters. The II Corps regional headquarters was “ineffective and unnecessary,” Colonel Barton Hayward, the Lam Dong senior advisor noted, and the “advisory effort is being accomplished in spite of the regional headquarters,” rather than because of it. Also, he argued, “most of the staff sections at region exist to justify their existence” and were unresponsive to requests for assistance, yet produced “a steady stream of papers, directives, and report requests” though most did not have “the least idea of what Lam Dong even looks like” or whether their directives applied to the province. Particularly egregious, Colonel Hayward noted, was the lack of support for non-combat functions. Despite the best efforts of U.S. advisors in Lam Dong, they could not even procure a full-time agricultural advisor, and the “fantastic potential” was being wasted because of the lack of “sound advice” on agricultural matters. Higher level guidance was often contradictory and not tailored to the actual requirements on the ground. For example, Hayward noted that his first and only instruction from a senior U.S. civilian official was to “get the tea factory operating.” Though the RVN had designated the tea factory the number one problem in Lam Dong, the lack of tea advisors in Vietnam and the U.S. meant that Lam Dong required the assistance of the United Kingdom, which possessed many tea experts. Yet Saigon did not furnish representatives to conduct coordination, and as a result local U.S. and Vietnamese officials were on their own to liaise with a foreign government.²³⁷

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ LTC B.M. Hayward to DEPCORDS MR2, Evaluation of the Regional Headquarters, 30 August 1971, Ibid.

Territorial Forces

At the beginning of the year, RVN officials withdrew the 53d ARVN from Lam Dong, leaving the province completely without U.S. or ARVN regulars for the first time since the Americanization of the war. During this time, local officials also embarked on a major shuffling of territorial force units in Lam Dong in order to hinder NLF attempts to infiltrate these units.²³⁸ In mid-1971, MATs began standing down and were gradually replaced by Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) composed of ARVN officers and NCOs. Controlled by the RVNAF JGS, each team was composed of fifteen personnel and dedicated to the training of the RF/PF. Though the teams were three times the size of an equivalent MAT team, the RVN fielded a third as many teams as the U.S. (103 MTTs versus over 350 MATs), and the Vietnamese teams possessed neither organic transportation nor communications equipment.²³⁹ During this time, provinces also received territorial artillery to replace ARVN artillery units assigned to support local security missions. Lam Dong received three platoons of territorial artillery, but these units experienced shortcomings in training and equipment.²⁴⁰

Though the province experienced some security problems with hamlet entries during the first half of the year, by the summer province advisors reported that there were fewer hamlet entries and “people feel more secure as they venture farther and farther out into the consolidation zone in pursuit of their day-to-day activities.”²⁴¹ Further, businesses were being established in areas that had been insecure in 1970 and the volume of traffic on Highway 20 continued to increase. By late summer 1971, the performance of the PF had improved such that RVN officials, after being prodded by U.S. advisors, directed that the PF take over security for the highway, a development that promised to alleviate the manpower drain on the RF. While RF units maintained a steady pace of operations, they still remained deficient in some areas—for example, in their reluctance to use fire support, which stemmed in part from the lack of trained

²³⁸ LDPR, 31 January 1971, Box 18, *Ibid.*; LDPR, 30 April 1971, Box 19, *Ibid.*

²³⁹ Edward Long, CORDS MR2 to George Jacobson, 25 February 1971, Box 32, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of the Executive Secretary, General Records, RG472.

²⁴⁰ LDPR, 31 May 1971, Box 19, *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ LDPR, 31 July 1971, Box 20, *Ibid.*

artillery forward observers that were essential elements of the fire support plan for each company.²⁴²

The continued development and reassigning of duties was part of a larger “Vietnamization” plan designed by U.S. officials to turn over greater responsibility to the RVN. Equally important in this effort was the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), which assigned a letter grade to all hamlets based on a complex amalgamation of objective and subjective measurements. Grades of A or B indicated that government forces controlled the hamlets, a C meant that NLF activity was possible, a grade of D meant that NLF activity was present, and a grade of V meant “Viet Cong control” of a hamlet. As part of the campaign plan, officials planned to eventually remove all RF units from A and B hamlets and locate PF platoons outside of hamlets, security conditions permitting.²⁴³ Additionally, in Lam Dong local officials initiated plans to create a mobile reaction force and replace with PF units two static positions manned by RF companies. Accordingly, RF companies and provisional battalions were increasingly dedicated to mobile operations.²⁴⁴ With continued security gains at the end of 1971, RVN officials reassigned one of Lam Dong’s RF companies, leaving the province with nineteen total companies. The end of the year also saw Lam Dong officials move RF companies to less secure areas in the province, such as V-rated hamlets, and an extension of the consolidation zone.²⁴⁵ Additionally, Lam Dong experienced a successful recruiting drive to fill RF and PF ranks to almost one-hundred percent of authorized strength, but “[s]omewhat disturbing,” the province senior advisor reported, was that over seventy percent of those recruits were “Highlander ‘volunteers.’”²⁴⁶

NLF

In a new tactic, NLF units attacked a Montagnard refugee camp on 26 February 1971, sowing fear amongst its inhabitants.²⁴⁷ This development was perhaps due to the failure of the

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ LDPR, 31 August 1971, Box 21, Ibid.

²⁴⁴ LDPR, 30 September 1971, Box 21, Ibid.

²⁴⁵ LDPR, 30 November 1971, Box 22, Ibid.

²⁴⁶ LDPR, 31 December 1971, Box 23, Ibid.

²⁴⁷ LDPR, 28 February 1971, Box 18, Ibid.

NLF and PAVN to consolidate control in Lam Dong. The NLF apparatus in Lam Dong, U.S. officials reported, was “down” but not yet “counted out” as evidenced by an attack on the Di Linh National Police headquarters and several assassinations of suspected RVN collaborators. Though mechanical ambushes were so successful that NLF cadres and guerrillas moved almost exclusively during daylight hours, yet by occupying higher terrain, guerrillas were increasingly adept at avoiding the approximately 250 mechanical and 200 manned ambushes that the territorial forces employed on daily basis.²⁴⁸ NLF attacks during this period concentrated on smaller, easier targets, for example, squad size attacks against a PF platoon outpost. Intelligence reported that thirty NLF replacements had been assessed during this period, but these replacements were mostly teenagers recruited from outside the province.²⁴⁹ Documents captured from guerrillas killed by territorial forces indicated that NLF units were “understrength, underfed, underequipped and terribly afraid of the mechanical ambush.”²⁵⁰ Confirming the NLF’s focus on survival, Lam Dong RF companies found increased evidence of NLF food production activity throughout the province.²⁵¹

RVN-Montagnard Relations

In 1971, many local officials in Lam Dong struggled to provide services to the Montagnard community while encountering roadblocks from Saigon. At the beginning of the year, local officials distributed at least two water buffaloes or cows to each Montagnard refugee hamlet.²⁵² Additionally, the Agricultural Development Chief visited each Montagnard village, and 314 applicants received money for agricultural projects such as animal husbandry. While every applicant received aid, the relative dearth of applicants indicated that local officials were still not entirely successful in publicizing programs meant to benefit ethnic minorities. As always, the lack of a shared language was one of the most significant obstacles in this endeavor.²⁵³ One of the primary groups dedicated to the interface with Vietnamese officials, the

²⁴⁸ LDPR, 31 January 1971, Box 18, Ibid.; LDPR, 30 April 1971, Box 19, Ibid.

²⁴⁹ LDPR, 31 August 1971, Box 21, Ibid.

²⁵⁰ LDPR, 30 November 1971, Box 22, Ibid.

²⁵¹ LDPR, 31 December 1971, Box 23, Ibid.

²⁵² LDPR, 31 January 1971, Box 18, Ibid.

²⁵³ LDPR, 30 April 1971, Box 19, Ibid.

TS, was successful in completing the census, but U.S. officials reported that the effectiveness of the organization was still “severely limited” by the cadre members’ lack of literacy.

In mid-1971, the RVN finally established guidance for the Main Living Area program, which was designed to address contentious land tenure issues. RVN Decree 138, which stated that it was imperative that the Montagnards “maintain their life in accordance with their particular customs and traditions without bother or invasion by other people,” was the result of years of entreaties by the U.S. government “[I]n order to protect the Montagnards’ land in their absence,” the decree established a main living area for “traditional hamlets,” resettlement hamlets, and original hamlet sites currently abandoned. Further, it maintained that each province chief had authority over final decisions on land. Saigon also decreed that even if there were existing ethnic Vietnamese lands in the area, Montagnards would receive other land in compensation. Additionally, national officials sought to alleviate the problem of squatting by directing that local officials exercise “tight control” over sites vacated by Montagnards for security reasons.²⁵⁴

Though Decree 138 was a substantial and long-awaited step forward, local officials encountered many problems in the implementation of the directive. In Lam Dong, although the province detailed two six-person teams to work with the Land Affairs service chief on the MLA program, progress was impeded by Saigon’s failure to issue implementing instructions, as was customary for other decrees, for Decree 138.²⁵⁵ The Lam Dong Land Affairs service chief complained that the “extremely complicated process” was further complicated by the original resettlement of many Highlander hamlets; much to the consternation of Montagnard citizens and local officials assigned to assist them, the original communities had ceased to exist. RVN officials had, for the sake of convenience, taken numerous Highlander hamlets and designated them as single new hamlets. Each of the original hamlets maintained their identity, however, and insisted on MLA allocation on the basis of original hamlets. Through the second half of 1971, local officials made progress in identifying Montagnard lands, but were only able to produce

²⁵⁴ RVN Ministry of Land Reform, Agriculture and Fishery Development and Ministry for Development of Ethnic Minorities, Circular 6409, Establishment of Main Living Areas for Montagnard Hamlets, 5 June 1971, Box 33, MACV CORDS MR2, General Records, RG472.

²⁵⁵ LDPR, 31 May 1971, Box 19, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472.

land titles for several hundred families. Despite this slow progress, the Land Affairs service's goal was to complete land title requests for all Lam Dong Highlander hamlets by end of 1972.²⁵⁶ Nonetheless, U.S. officials noted that a "major obstacle" to land reform was the "vast unutilized holdings" of the Bao Loc Agricultural high school and the Lam Dong Forest and Agricultural experimental stations—both of which were controlled by the national government. The province chief requested that the Ministry of Agriculture resurvey and reallocate land, but like most requests sent to Saigon, a response was not immediately forthcoming.²⁵⁷

Local efforts made progress in some areas but were stymied in others. The RVN desired an expansion of lowland rice planting by Montagnards, and instructed province officials to train Highlanders in wet rice cultivation, modern agricultural techniques, and the use of genetically engineered rice seed—so-called "miracle rice." Yet Montagnard communities were reluctant to embrace change, and still wanted to plant local varieties instead of new seeds. Some communities, however, acquiesced to the use of transplanting and increased use of fertilizers and insecticides. Despite these difficulties, Montagnards in one region of Lam Dong planted over 200 hectares of lowland rice, compared with thirty hectares the previous year. Nonetheless, the average yield of Highlander rice crops was small, and only enough to feed families through April 1972.²⁵⁸ Additionally, problems continued with the province RSW service—U.S. officials reported that the chief spent at least fifty percent of his time in Saigon and "programs come to a complete stop in his absence."²⁵⁹

The province chief's appointment of a Montagnard as Ethnic Minorities (EM) service chief, though "long over-due," in the opinion of the senior U.S. advisor, initially backfired in the Montagnard community because it was seen as a political appointment meant to mollify the Highlanders.²⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the province senior advisor reported that the new EM service chief "has been a breath of fresh air" and cooperation with other services markedly improved—especially the vital area of land reform. The new chief, Aspirant (a subaltern rank) K'But, emphasized adult education, took an "active interest" in the long-neglected TS program, and was

²⁵⁶ LDPR, 31 December 1971, Box 23, *Ibid.*; LDPR, 30 September 1971, Box 21, *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ LDPR, 30 October 1971, Box 22, *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ LDPR, 31 December 1971, Box 23, *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ LDPR, 31 May 1971, Box 19, *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ LDPR, 31 July 1971, Box 20, *Ibid.*

“at last bringing hope that someone is interested in doing something” for the Montagnards.²⁶¹ During the second half of the year, the province senior advisor noted an “overall improvement” in the performance of the EM program, as K’But started on school lunch program for the Montagnard boarding school and an improved food distribution program for relocated families. Significantly, the new EM chief insisted that all Highlander village and hamlet officials who could not speak Vietnamese attend adult education classes that he conducted in various Montagnard hamlets.²⁶² Even in 1971, the majority of TS cadre—the organization at the forefront of the land reform program—and Montagnard village and hamlet officials were illiterate, a factor that critically limited their effectiveness.²⁶³ Though the Land Affairs service chief held a six-day literacy class for these teams, progress on the identification of land remained slow, as most Montagnard families were illiterate and had difficulty in identifying their own land. Though the first two months of the program netted only a limited number of title dossiers, on average each plot contained enough land for a family’s self-sufficiency. Despite signs of progress, each individual packet had to be approved by Saigon, a process that often took months.²⁶⁴

Another important Saigon-directed initiative was the return-to-village (RTV) program. Just as security problems in the 1960s and forced relocation had clustered many citizens in urban shantytowns, the continued improvement in many provinces’ security meant that population dispersal was finally possible. The need for the RTV program in Lam Dong was especially acute, as approximately 4800 people from numerous hamlets had relocated over the course of several years to a small area just east of Di Linh. Stress on the existing land was great, and local officials saw the need to cajole residents to return to their hamlets, many of which were now in the secure consolidation zone.²⁶⁵ The lack of rice lands in this area, the PSA reported, “stymies economic development of these hamlets.”²⁶⁶ After much prodding by U.S. advisors, the new province chief, Lieutenant Colonel Huu, finally initiated a plan to move the hamlets to Di

²⁶¹ LDPR, 31 August 1971, Box 21, Ibid.

²⁶² LDPR, 30 September 1971, Box 21, Ibid.

²⁶³ LDPR, 31 July 1971, Box 20, Ibid.

²⁶⁴ LDPR, 31 August 1971, Box 21, Ibid.

²⁶⁵ LDPR, 30 June 1971, Box 20, Ibid.

²⁶⁶ LDPR, 31 July 1971, Box 20, Ibid.

Linh.²⁶⁷ Despite the need for more RTV programs, the Di Linh program was the sole prospect, as it was difficult to find Montagnard volunteers since the continued fear of the NLF caused many to stay in impoverished, crowded areas. Highlander apprehensions were compounded by mistrust of their own government. Not only were Montagnards often impressed into the communist military, they were also impressed into the ARVN—a violation of Vietnamese law. Additionally, many Montagnards feared that their presence away from the watchful gaze of American advisors would make them vulnerable to the Phoenix program—the PSA reported that many citizens feared that they would be “continually arrested and harassed by Phuong Hoang”²⁶⁸

Economic Development

Initiatives for economic improvement continued to encounter significant challenges. Despite a VN\$31 million loan approved for tea and an additional VN\$8 million still needed for capital improvement, there was still no market for tea.²⁶⁹ Local tea entrepreneurs marshaled resources to fight the cooperative, and small tea growers expressed concern about being crowded out of production. The factory had been completely idle for over a year and a half, and the co-op could not formulate a viable plan for a loan. Tea, advisors reported, was the “number one problem” in the province, as continued attempts to turn Lam Dong into an export powerhouse had failed. The U.S., for its part, lacked civilian advisors with expertise in this area, and had to continue to bring representatives from the British embassy, including the Deputy Chief of the British Mission in Vietnam, to assist with technical matters and marketing. After continued delays, and the installation of VN\$12 million of new machinery, the factory was finally operating

²⁶⁷ LDPR, 30 September 1971, Box 21, Ibid.

²⁶⁸ LDPR, 31 December 1971, Box 23, Ibid. *Phuong Hoang*, or Phoenix, was a program designed to “neutralize”—capture, turn, or kill—members of the “Viet Cong Infrastructure” (the political apparatus of the NLF). It was a controversial, U.S.-directed attempt to train South Vietnamese forces in the tactics of the NLF. For three very different views of the program, see Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990); Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997); and Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program* (New York: William Morrow, 1990).

²⁶⁹ LDPR, 28 February 1971, Box 18, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472. During this time, exchange rates were approximately VN\$150: US\$1.

six days a week at one-third capacity during fall 1971, but its tea quality was still subpar.²⁷⁰ The province senior advisor noted ruefully that Lam Dong's "only hope for long range prosperity lies in agricultural diversification."²⁷¹

Local construction, particularly in the province's two urban areas, was still increasing rapidly, but people remained concerned about rising prices. In most of the 23 villages and 87 hamlets in Lam Dong, Saigon's struggle to cope with the American withdrawal had resulted in hardship for citizens. For example, white sugar had become a rationed item, and the price of staple products such as bread and rice had increased by about twenty percent.²⁷² In a positive economic development, however, the Mekong Bank, a Saigon-based private company, opened its first province branch in Bao Loc, a development that local officials considered a vote of confidence in the security and economic potential in the province.²⁷³

Conclusion

A 1971 debriefing report penned by Lieutenant General A.S. Collins Jr., senior U.S. military official in the highlands from 1969-1971, summed up the tenuous situation in the highlands on the eve of American withdrawal. While Collins and his advisors felt that "the individual Vietnamese soldier is a good soldier," he was ineffective without leadership, which was lacking in the ARVN, especially at higher levels. The American general observed that the U.S. had been conducting an ARVN training program for fifteen years, yet still had problems stemming from the "promotion of incompetents, and keeping them in positions of responsibility." Addressing the problem was difficult, as the Vietnamese had their own selection system, and the U.S. was loath to intervene directly in the RVNAF promotion process.

Although Collins observed that the "ARVN was ineffective," he noted that the performance of the territorial forces "was one of the most encouraging indicators" in the highlands. The U.S. general noted that although the RF and PF took many casualties, on a monthly basis they usually accounted for more enemy casualties than U.S., South Korean, or ARVN regulars. In the highlands there were more territorial forces than regulars, and the NLF

²⁷⁰ LDPR, 30 October 1971, Box 22, Ibid.; LDPR, 30 April 1971, Box 19, Ibid.

²⁷¹ LDPR, 31 May 1971, Box 19, Ibid.

²⁷² LDPR, 31 March 1971, Box 18, Ibid.

²⁷³ LDPR, 31 December 1971, Box 23, Ibid.

was increasingly concentrating its efforts in an attempt to destroy the RF and PF. Though the territorial forces still demonstrated problems with manning, recruitment, and poor operational employment, Collins noted approvingly that “RF/PF units have stood their ground at a time when they have been little helped by the ARVN.”

Despite this development, the senior U.S. officer in the highlands was not sanguine regarding the ultimate possibilities for a South Vietnamese victory. Though local security had improved, myriad problems remained with the ARVN and the civil government. Collins lamented that “over the long run,” he expected the communists to triumph. The general somberly concluded, “I hope that the passage of time will show that I have been too pessimistic and I have not seen the future clearly.”²⁷⁴

²⁷⁴ Senior Officer’s Debriefing Report, LTG A.S. Collins, Jr., March 1971, Box 33, MACV CORDS MR2, Office of the Executive Secretary, General Records, RG472.

Chapter 6 - Refugee Problems: 1972

Once conventions and rules of war lose their force there are no limits to reprisals, except those imposed by human revulsion, charity, and compassion, or by fear of counterreprisals.

—John U. Nef, *War and Human Progress*²⁷⁵

From spring 1972 until their final defeat in spring 1975, RVN officials in the highlands were beset by a number of refugee problems. The *Nguyen Hue* campaign, known in the West as the Easter Offensive, severely disrupted the American Vietnamization campaign. Though American air power allowed ARVN forces to hold against the PAVN, the massive number of displaced persons—most from northern or western provinces—overwhelmed RVN officials. Though the PAVN tide was turned relatively quickly, the second-order effect of the offensive caused a huge disruption in many areas of Vietnam, particularly in Montagnard communities of the central highlands, many of which were caught in the crossfire between PAVN armored columns and American B-52 bombers. As anthropologist Gerald Hickey noted, after 1972 existing ethnographic maps of the highlands were rendered obsolete. The long-term effect, however, was that the offensive exacerbated existing fissures stemming from RVN treatment of the Montagnards.

Throughout the year, provinces in the highlands worked to improve the efficiency of territorial forces by rectifying problems identified in 1971 and implementing measures encouraged by U.S. advisors. These measures included a restructuring of forces, as northern provinces increasingly experienced more NLF/PAVN activity than those in the south. Accordingly, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Kontum, and Pleiku gained forces while the RVN reduced the number of forces allocated to Binh Thuan, Ninh Thuan, Khanh Hoa, Lam Dong, Quang Duc, and Phu Bon. Since mid-1971, the NLF had primarily shifted to squad-sized operations in the highlands; they could cause less damage, but also it was also easy for these smaller units to avoid the RF, who normally operated in company strength. In 1972, the communist leadership increasingly relied on PAVN forces to attack territorial force units. Additionally, U.S. combat

²⁷⁵ John U. Nef, *War and Human Progress: An Essay on the Rise of Industrial Civilization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 137.

troops continued their withdrawal; at the beginning of 1972, MACV instituted a plan to further reduce the presence of American advisors. By mid-1972 most districts were reduced from a team of three to five officers and NCOs to a single district advisor, while only five advisors remained at the province level.²⁷⁶

Security

Security continued to improve throughout 1972. At the beginning of the year, the remaining U.S. engineer unit departed Lam Dong, leaving only a small advisory team. Additionally, by 1972, the VNAF flew all missions in the province, including artillery adjustment, observation, and convoy cover.²⁷⁷ At the beginning of the year, local officials worked to eliminate four RF static outposts and place twelve RF companies into four company groups oriented toward mobile operations.²⁷⁸ These company groups experienced significant quantitative improvement, including an “enemy to friendly kill ratio” of 3.5:1 for the first 6 months of 1972 versus 2.4:1 for 1971. The harder to fabricate, and thus more important weapons captured to weapons lost ratio was 7:1 during the first half of 1972 versus 1.2:1 in 1971.²⁷⁹ Nonetheless, territorial forces still experienced problems; U.S. advisors complained that the RF/PF still clustered in operations around Highway 20 and were reluctant to execute night missions. Also, an RVN JGS Inspector General inspection exposed “numerous instances” of “corrupt practices and inefficiency” by unit commanders. While many of the highlands provinces experienced security gains similar to Lam Dong, the coastal provinces in II Corps continued to have problems, and RVN officials insisted that province chiefs transfer RF companies to problematic provinces as replacements for beleaguered ARVN units. Worried that a high desertion rate would ensue from forces being apart from their families for an extended period of time—the rumor of extended deployments away from the province had caused a spike in the RF desertion rate—the Lam Dong province chief recommended and received approval to

²⁷⁶ CORDS MR2, JTD Briefing, 11 December 1971, Box 32, MACV CORDS, MR2, Office of the Executive Secretary, General Records, RG472.

²⁷⁷ LDPR, 31 January 1972, Box 23, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472.

²⁷⁸ LDPR, 29 February 1972, Box 23, Ibid.; LDPR, 31 January [sic; 31 March] 1972, Box 24, Ibid.

²⁷⁹ LDPR, 30 June 1972, Box 25, Ibid.

attach RF companies to ARVN units on a 30-day rotational basis. The first company departed for Binh Dinh in mid-1972, and over 120 deserters returned to their units after it became clear that deployments would be limited in duration.²⁸⁰ By the end of the year, RF company groups were routinely conducting mobile operations, and the senior advisor noted, “Territorial Security Forces continued to give a good account of themselves in every encounter with the enemy.”²⁸¹

NLF/PAVN

At the beginning of the year, U.S. officials reported that communist activity was mostly limited to “generally unproductive food and supply acquisition,” propaganda, intelligence collection, and mine emplacements targeted against road security.²⁸² Additionally, the New Year saw a shift in the focus of NLF activity; the Province Senior Advisor reported that the NLF specifically targeted Highlander refugee resettlement areas, operations that represented new security challenges for the RVN.²⁸³ By the late summer, continued propaganda and small-scale attacks against Highlander refugee camps and resettlement areas had resulted in civilian casualties and alarm on the part of province officials; the Province Chief countered by increasing territorial force operations in these areas and requested that a battalion of the 53rd ARVN return to the province to assist with security.²⁸⁴

With the NLF an increasingly spent force, COSVN increasingly directed PAVN regulars into Lam Dong. By autumn 1972, elements of two PAVN battalions—an estimated 370 soldiers—were operating in the province and attacking territorial forces outposts, which frequently resulted in civilian casualties—a tragic byproduct of the close proximity of RF/PF dependents. PAVN forces took control of parts of Highway 20; after four days of bitter fighting, the road was reopened, though there were several other smaller attempts to establish road blocks on Highway 20, all of which were defeated in a matter of hours. Overall, the senior advisor noted, “TSF [Territorial Security Forces], with minor exceptions, gave [a] good account of themselves” and not only killed over fifty PAVN in direct combat and an additional sixty-five

²⁸⁰ LDPR, 31 July 1972, Ibid.

²⁸¹ LDPR, 30 November 1972, Box 27, Ibid.

²⁸² LDPR, 30 June 1972, Box 25, Ibid.

²⁸³ LDPR, 31 July 1972, Box 25, Ibid.

²⁸⁴ LDPR, 31 August 1972, Box 26, Ibid.

with artillery, but also captured substantial quantities of materiel. During these offensives, the PAVN received little help from NLF local force units in the area.²⁸⁵

Refugee Troubles

The most significant development in Lam Dong, as in many of the highlands provinces, was the large presence of refugees in the aftermath of the Easter Offensive. Throughout the seven highland provinces, the effect was the same: the offensive displaced Highlanders from northern provinces into southern provinces and exacerbated land conflicts between Montagnards and ethnic Vietnamese.²⁸⁶ For many provinces, such as Lam Dong, that were not directly affected by the seesaw battles in the spring of 1972, the influx of refugees also presented a security risk. NLF and PAVN activity began to target refugee camps with propaganda and, in the case of uncooperative communities, direct attacks. This situation increasingly underscored the paramount importance of the RTV and MLA programs.

In spite of numerous problems, the first significant Return to Village programs in Lam Dong occurred during this period. Even though 1500 citizens in Lam Dong expressed their desire to return to their original villages, there were continued delays in their relocation. Though Saigon purported to have a great deal of interest in the RTV program, it did not dedicate the personnel and monetary resources necessary to facilitate the programs. For example, the RTV program in Lam Dong was delayed because of the Ministry of Social Welfare's failure to allocate funds.²⁸⁷

Though Saigon made a spectacle of the distribution of MLA titles to Montagnard farmers, dispatching the Minister for the Development of Ethnic Minorities to the province, only a handful of MLA dossiers were completed per month.²⁸⁸ Much of the slow progress stemmed from a lack of qualified personnel to draw maps.²⁸⁹ The feeble resources devoted to non-combat related issues were soon overwhelmed by the Easter Offensive. As heavy fighting occurred in the northern highlands in April and May 1972, ARVN units moved north to defend Kontum

²⁸⁵ LDPR, 31 October 1972, Box 27, Ibid.

²⁸⁶ See, for example, Darlac PR, 30 April 1972, Box 24, Ibid.

²⁸⁷ LDPR, 29 February 1972, Box 23, Ibid.; LDPR, 31 January 1972, Box 23, Ibid.

²⁸⁸ LDPR, 31 January [sic; 31 March] 1972, Box 24, Ibid.

²⁸⁹ LDPR, 31 May 1972, Box 25, Ibid.

while numerous trucks and buses with civilians relocating from Pleiku and Kontum fled south on their way to resettlement in southern provinces such as Tuyen Duc and Lam Dong. In Lam Dong, 2500 Bru Mont settlers were flown in from Quang Tri, which further exacerbated land conflicts between ethnic Vietnamese and Montagnards and led to increased province emphasis on the MLA and RTV programs. Yet support from the national government was still not forthcoming; the delays in MLA identification and on the RTV program, the province senior advisor reported, was “permitting increased Vietnamese encroachment on lands earmarked for both these programs.”²⁹⁰ Part of the problem was that many Highlanders remained ignorant of the programs, particularly the MLA program meant to safeguard their land. The Provincial Land Affairs service solicited the assistance of Highlander teachers to publicize the program, but this measure met with uneven progress.²⁹¹

By mid-1972, thousands of new refugees and a lack of province resources created a minor crisis in Lam Dong. While province officials continued to make halting progress on the land tenure program, American advisors reported that the province chief was “under intense pressure from both Saigon and local officials for land grants that could seriously undermine the MLA program.” Though Colonel Huu was “holding out admirably” against these demands, his ability to continue this resistance in the face of increasing pressure was “questionable.” Though local officials were overwhelmed by the number of refugees in the province, they took pains to alleviate suffering and discontent by measures such as a special distribution of rice to families in resettlement camps.²⁹² Local officials had originally planned to complete identification of MLA lands in October 1972, but the program suffered continued delays because of shortages of transportation and clerical personnel.²⁹³ Land problems, exacerbated by the influx of displaced persons, continued to plague the province; by late summer, when the refugee problem had become acute, the province chief recommended the confiscation of former plantation land for the permanent resettlement of refugees from the north.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁰ LDPR, 31 May 1972, Box 25, Ibid.

²⁹¹ LDPR, 30 June 1972, Ibid.

²⁹² LDPR, 31 July 1972, Ibid.

²⁹³ LDPR, 31 August 1972, Box 26, Ibid.

²⁹⁴ LDPR, 30 September 1972, Box 26, Ibid.

The uneven progress continued through the end of the year. The RTV project for 1500 citizens that had been planned at the beginning of the year was finally started in November—a delay of eight months. Additionally, Montagnards in Di Linh district harvested their first successful crop of genetically engineered rice, yielding a larger quantity of rice per hectare than before. Yet increased NLF and PAVN activity targeting Montagnards in the more remote B’Sar area made many Highlanders afraid to harvest their crops.²⁹⁵ The problems in Lam Dong were even more acute in many other highland provinces. American officials in the highlands also noted that there was “considerable ‘foot-dragging’ in several provinces” regarding the MLA program, and problems throughout the highlands with RTV programs. Similar to Lam Dong, most provinces had experienced delays in both of these programs and had not begun their implementation until 1972.²⁹⁶

Despite the province’s problems with land reform, a mid-1972 U.S. assessment ranked Lam Dong seventh best of forty-four provinces in pacification.²⁹⁷ In addition to the delays that provinces experienced, the USAID ADLR (Associate Director for Land Reform) in Saigon received reports of continued operation of logging in areas “that should be officially part of MLAs” violating the intent of Saigon’s directives of the previous two years. Of note, the ADLR had to prompt the MDEM to contact Ethnic Minorities service chiefs to review operations and requests for land and logging. Particularly troubling was the multitude of agencies involved in complex disputes between ethnic Vietnamese and Montagnards.²⁹⁸ Throughout the central highlands, as security continued to increase, these disputes would grow in scope and animosity.

Economic Development

In Lam Dong, 1972 marked the start of a silkworm industry, a promising venture that would eventually prove to be too complex for RVN officials to handle. Additionally, while

²⁹⁵ LDPR, 30 November 1972, Box 27, Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Refugee Resettlement and Return-to-Village Programs, 15 November 1972, Box 33, MACV CORDS MR2, General Records, RG472.

²⁹⁷ Thomas Barnes to George Jacobson, 19 July 1972, Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Hatcher James to John Ford, 27 December 1972, Ibid. Saigon’s directives on the MLA program were contained in Decree 138 (9 November 1970) and MLR Circular 6409 (5 June 1971).

many entrepreneurs sought to exploit Lam Dong's resources, a development that brought jobs to the area, a second-order effect was the further exacerbation of tensions between ethnic Vietnamese and Montagnards. The unabated increase in the cost of living remained, in the words of the PSA, "the greatest concern of the people."²⁹⁹

In a belated attempt to diversify the province's economy beyond tea production, the local Agricultural Development Bank funded a silkworm cooperative, which immediately began the cultivation of the mulberry trees necessary for this enterprise.³⁰⁰ The tea cooperative, however, remained a debacle; the factory remained idle and the election of a new board of directors was repeatedly postponed due to political machinations. A visit from U.S. officials indicated that local RVN officials were incapable of resolving the economic and political problems that plagued the tea factory.³⁰¹ High-level U.S. officials acknowledged that the matter was of "great concern" to Lam Dong and "for the major portion of the economy" in the highlands, and promised greater assistance.³⁰² Overall, U.S. advisors reported, the economic situation in Lam Dong was "extremely serious." Approximately half of the population depended on the production and sale of tea or coffee for their livelihood. Yet while the cost of living continued to rise, the revenue from all three products was substantially below the costs of production, and many farmers stated their intention to move elsewhere to survive.³⁰³

Conclusion

In 1972, the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive caused a severe humanitarian crisis in the central highlands. Though many RVNAF units fought bravely and U.S. airpower inflicted grievous losses on the PAVN, the combination of North Vietnamese armored assaults and American B-52 strikes killed and displaced hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese citizens, most of whom were Montagnards. Throughout the remaining three years of the war, the manner

²⁹⁹ LDPR, 31 January [sic; 31 March] 1972, Box 24, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472.

³⁰⁰ LDPR, 31 January 1972, Box 23, Ibid.

³⁰¹ Donnie Pearce, Director OPRE CORDS MR2, Staff Liaison Visit to Team 38 Lam Dong, 30 December 1972, Box 33, MACV CORDS MR2, General Records, RG472.

³⁰² Hatcher James to John Ford, 8 September 1972, Ibid.

³⁰³ LDPR, 31 May 1972, Box 25, HQ MACV CORDS, Reports and Analysis Directorate, Reports Division, Province Reports 10/1967-03/1973, RG472.

in which the RVN dealt with this refugee crisis would be an important factor in the outcome of the conflict in the highlands. Significantly, the almost total withdrawal of American troops and lack of American domestic support for the war meant that U.S. leverage—and thus perhaps any hope of salvaging the Vietnamese-Montagnard situation—was severely weakened. One example clearly illustrates this point. In Lam Dong, one of the most significant problems was logging on Montagnard lands. U.S. officials, their leverage dwindling, took pains to ameliorate conflicts. Describing the MLA program as “vital,” the ADLR requested that the Lam Dong senior advisor emphasize to his counterpart “that the Montagnard Land Reform program is basically a political program, intended to help win over the loyalties of the Montagnard people,” a goal that would be “even more important with the coming of the cease fire.” Additionally, the U.S. land reform official directed that Lam Dong officials take measures to encourage the Forestry service chief to “enforce the intent of Legal Decree 138...and the related implementing procedure and work plan which guarantee the Montagnard people the right to their traditional lands, within prescribed limits, will be protected.”³⁰⁴ Yet U.S. influence was waning; by fall 1972, only 27,000 American troops remained in Vietnam.³⁰⁵ It was now truly a Vietnamese war, and all the U.S. senior advisor could do was to “strongly counsel” the province chief on the importance of limiting encroachment on Montagnard lands.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ Hatcher James to John Ford, 8 September 1972, Box 33, MACV CORDS MR2, General Records, RG472.

³⁰⁵ Clarke, *Advice and Support...1965-73*, 524.

³⁰⁶ Hatcher James to John Ford, 27 December 1972, Box 33, MACV CORDS MR2, General Records, RG472. Saigon’s directives on the MLA program were contained in Decree 138 (9 November 1970) and MLR Circular 6409 (5 June 1971).

Chapter 7 - The Blessings and Curses of Security: 1973-1975

Toujours la guerre.

—Father Gabriel Brice, French priest who spent three decades living with Montagnards in the highlands³⁰⁷

The American war in Vietnam ended in January 1973 with the Paris Accords, which precipitated the withdrawal of virtually all U.S. personnel and changed the mission from advisory to support and observation. While the Paris Accords called for a cease fire and eventual elections, both sides violated the truce, and by the end of 1974 there was open conflict in the northern highlands. Continued conflict in the northern provinces of South Vietnam caused refugees to move to provinces in the southern highlands, such as Lam Dong. As there was minimal United States presence during the last two years of the war, this period, perhaps more than any other, allows for the evaluation of the local and national government.

Until the final North Vietnamese offensive at the beginning of 1975, Lam Dong remained a pro-RVN stronghold, with most of the population living in secure areas. Comparatively favorable security was a double-edged sword, however; it meant that Lam Dong, along with many other secure provinces, had to absorb large numbers of internally displaced persons, most of them Montagnards, from other highland provinces. During this period, Lam Dong officials were almost completely occupied by refugee issues. The enormous challenges posed by the influx of refugees strained the government. As before, RVN officials did not devote enough resources to caring for Montagnard refugees, and Saigon rebuffed efforts to enact locally-sourced solutions to persistent problems. Though the local and provincial government of Lam Dong continued to function without U.S. advisory support, the large American withdrawal had caused large-scale inflation and unemployment. Local forces in Lam Dong would likely have

³⁰⁷ Fox Butterfield, "Montagnards, Decimated by the War, Survive in Makeshift Refugee Towns," *New York Times*, 24 February 1974.

prevailed had they been opposed only by the NLF/PRG.³⁰⁸ In March 1975, however, PAVN divisions swept through the highlands, bringing the war to a swift conclusion.

1973: The Arrival of the Stieng

On 27 January 1973, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Politburo member Le Duc Tho signed the Paris Peace Accords. Despite a massive U.S. air offensive in December 1972, the DRV refused to cede ground to the U.S. As a result, the Paris Accords left approximately 550,000 ARVN troops and 525,000 territorial troops to face over 500,000 PAVN regulars, over 200,000 of whom were already in South Vietnam.³⁰⁹ Though the agreement called for a complete ceasefire, both sides continued to carry out combat operations in South Vietnam. In March 1973, the U.S. dissolved MACV and replaced it with the Special Assistant to the Ambassador for Field Operations (SAAFO). By the beginning of 1973, all military personnel had departed from provinces, and the only U.S. representatives in the field were the State Department Consul General representatives assigned to each province in a reporting capacity only. Their power to make recommendations gone, U.S. officials observed the RVN—which they had molded for the better part of two decades—as it operated with almost complete autonomy.

In Lam Dong, February 1973 saw twenty-six ceasefire violations, along with another fourteen in March, all of which were investigated by the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS), a multi-national organization with members from both communist and non-communist countries. In most cases, these investigations were perfunctory. Other developments in the province were a continuation from the previous year. The tea co-op remained closed pending another large loan, and the MLA program remained neglected. Vietnamese officials were busy complying with yet another decree from Saigon, this one mandating the registration of all political parties; as a result, noted one of the few American

³⁰⁸ Much to the consternation of the Thieu government, the Paris Accords gave official recognition to the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG)—the communist political apparatus that had operated in South Vietnam since 1969. While guerrillas in South Vietnam during this period should more correctly be referred to as “PRG forces,” as with other terminology (such as II Corps/II CTZ/MR2) I have chosen to use a single term—in this case, “NLF”—throughout this paper in the interest of greater clarity.

³⁰⁹ Clarke, *Advice and Support...1965-73*, 495.

representatives in Lam Dong, “Little field work was done on MLA dossiers.”³¹⁰ In the villages, province officials redoubled their efforts to encourage Montagnards to use hybrid corn seeds and chemical fertilizer. Providing demonstrations and classes, province officials attempted to explain the benefits of modern science, and distributed “rice kits” that contained everything necessary to grow modern Vietnamese rice.³¹¹

The first few months of the ostensible cease-fire, however, were the calm before the storm in Lam Dong. Heavy fighting in Cambodia in 1970, Laos in 1971, and throughout border regions in 1972 had created a large-scale refugee crisis. In April 1973, a large delegation from the Ministry of Ethnic Minorities visited Lam Dong in order to make preparations to resettle an estimated 12,000 Stiang Montagnard refugees displaced by the fighting in Binh Long province, west of Lam Dong and adjacent to Cambodia.³¹² The following month saw two visits by MDEM Minister Nay Luett in order to coordinate for the arrival of the refugees in June. By the end of May, the Binh Long refugees began to arrive. The province chief dispatched the Lam Dong TS cadre, who were scheduled to be augmented by seventy Stiang cadre.³¹³ Assisted by non-governmental organizations such as the International Rescue Committee and CARE, in June the South Vietnamese government resettled the remainder of the 11,000 refugees in Lam Dong, completing two temporary camps, Tan Rai and Minh Rong. Though religious organizations such as the Vietnamese Christian Service and the Sisters of Saint Paul worked to provide food and education to the new residents of Lam Dong, conditions in the camps were poor. Latrine and garbage facilities were inadequate, and the area itself was too small—a combination that resulted in poor sanitation conditions. Even more serious, existing wells did not provide enough water, and water shipped in was contaminated. The U.S. representative noted that Stiang leaders “appear to be more vocal in their likes and dislikes” than the Koho Montagnards who were indigenous to Lam Dong. Finally, there was illegal logging in the area that the province leaders had designated for refugee settlements.³¹⁴

³¹⁰ LDPR, 31 March 1973, Box 1, CORDS, Special Assistant to the US Ambassador for Field Operations, Province Reports, RG472.

³¹¹ LDPR, 3 May 1973, Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ LDPR, 4 June 1973, Ibid.

³¹⁴ LDPR, 1 July 1973, Ibid.

Over the next few months, province leaders addressed the most serious of the problems at the new refugee camps, yet a more intractable problem arose: agricultural issues. In July, U.S. observers and Stieng refugees began raising concerns that there was no land to farm. Though government policy allocated a six month social welfare rice ration for all newly displaced refugees, refugee leaders argued that they would not be able to obtain self-sufficiency if lands were not allocated for agriculture. The U.S. province representative noted that the refugees “feel both angry and confused” about the lack of land, and many demanded to know, “What happens when the Social Welfare rice runs out?” Local Vietnamese officials raised the issue at their level, but their requests for Land Reform adjudication—a necessity because of the centralized nature of the RVN bureaucracy—were met with silence from Saigon. Lacking external support, Vietnamese officials in Lam Dong turned to local solutions. After officials pressured leaders from the Ma—a Montagnard tribal group indigenous to Lam Dong—the Ma agreed to meet with Stieng representatives to discuss contracted, extended, and communal use of the Ma’s MLA land. Though the Ma were not eager to give their hard-won land to a group of outsiders from a different ethno-linguistic group, local officials deemed the negotiations the only viable solution.³¹⁵

Three months after the arrival of the Stieng, there was still a negligible amount of land cleared for agriculture. Officials estimated that each family needed three hectares for basic subsistence, yet most families had none. Settlers had personally written to the Deputy Prime Minister requesting his permission to clear their own land. This position was endorsed by U.S. officials, as it would allow less chance for corruption, be less expensive for the RVN, provide the villagers with a source of income, and build a sense of community in the refugee camp. Yet the Americans had no power to change the situation, and the Stieng refugees’ requests fell on deaf ears.³¹⁶

As most local officials’ efforts were devoted to resettlement efforts during the summer and fall of 1973, there were continued challenges in the implementation of the MLA program. Not only was distribution of MLA lands still incomplete, but encroachment on existing plots still remained a problem. The EM service chief tried to convince recipients of MLA land that to

³¹⁵ LDPR, 1 August 1973, *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

prevent encroachment they needed either to cultivate it simultaneously or, as the province chief had recently proposed, to rent it to others.³¹⁷ Yet the practices of simultaneous cultivation and landlordism were both foreign to the Montagnard culture, and despite the best intentions of the Lam Dong EM service, disputes over land continued unabated.

In October, minor skirmishes continued to occur between government and squad-sized guerrilla forces. More seriously, the NLF increased the frequency of its small unit attacks on refugee settlements which resulted in the deaths of two Stiemg TS cadre working at the Tan Rai refugee camp. Though Lam Dong territorial forces killed three guerrillas, the shift marked a significant renewal of effort by revolutionary forces. In Bao Loc district at large, there were eight attacks which, in the assessment of the U.S. Consul General representative, seemed “primarily concerned with hampering provincial efforts to make a success of resettling Stiemg from Binh Long.” The attacks on the refugee camps, the official reported, was “at least partially effective,” as 200 people during the month tried to leave the camp and return to Binh Long, efforts which were stopped by the police and resulted in visits by high-level provincial officials.³¹⁸

By fall 1973, the Stiemg refugees presented RVN officials with three concerns: lack of security, a belief that Lam Dong was only good for tea and would not support rice, and fear of starving with the impending end of the six-month government rice subsidy. The province chief attempted to address security concerns by assigning an additional RF company to the resettlement area. With the augmentation, there were a total of four RF companies and a battalion headquarters securing the area. The province chief also made a more capable officer, the Bao Loc district chief, responsible for defensive planning and coordination—previous responsibility had been with a less capable officer.³¹⁹ The concern over the inability of Lam Dong to support rice originated from the significant differences in Montagnard ethno-linguistic groups. The Stiemg, who were low-land Highlanders, were not accustomed to the Lam Dong variety of laterite. Additionally, the refugees were occupying MLA land that had been reluctantly surrendered—after Vietnamese officials had promised that the arrangement would be temporary—by the Koho during the negotiations that had begun in the summer. Disgruntled,

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ LDPR, 31 October 1973, Box 2, Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

many of the local Koho as well as local NLF cadre were sowing seeds of doubt about the land's fertility. Province officials attempted to counteract this through the use of propaganda and by establishing demonstration plots to show how well crops could grow in local soil.³²⁰

Even with the Kohos' surrender of MLA territory, the continued dearth of arable land remained the most serious and intractable problem in Lam Dong. In October 1973, the Lam Dong province chief, his own entreaties denied by his Vietnamese superiors, asked a U.S. representative in Lam Dong to contact the Ministry of State to request that the land dedicated to resettlement be given to refugees, who could then be put to work clearing and tilling their own land. While the U.S. official obliged, it was clear that the U.S.-RVN relationship had changed markedly. The ministry denied the American request, assuring Lam Dong officials that the ARVN engineers and private contractors dispatched by Saigon would finish clearing the land within 45 days.³²¹

The deputy minister of state had extended the rice subsidy, which was supposed to have ended at the end of November, by one month and agreed to consider the issue on a month-by-month basis, yet the Stieng insisted on a path toward self-sufficiency. Vietnamese officials, however, were primarily concerned with issues of control over the refugees, who now composed about an eighth of the province population. RVN officials believed that the Stieng's ten village councils were too unwieldy, and began planning to consolidate all 11,000 Stieng into two villages for easier administration. The new arrangement, however, was resisted by the Stieng, as it broke up traditional groupings and removed village officials from their stipend they received from the South Vietnamese government.³²²

As a U.S. official noted, "The largest challenge to a viable Vietnamese government in Lam Dong will rest with its handling of the land problem confronting Highlanders—approximately 40% of the province population" [including refugees, Montagnards were probably over half of the population of Lam Dong]. Though the problems with the Stieng refugees occupied most of the affairs of Vietnamese and American officials, the U.S. Consul General official warned that "the land problem of the remaining 33,000 Highlanders is quite critical," especially because "[o]nly a small minority" of the Lam Dong Montagnards lived on, or

³²⁰Ibid.

³²¹ LDPR, 31 January 1973, Box 1, Ibid.

³²² LDPR, 31 October 1973, Box 2, Ibid.

otherwise used, “their rightful lands.” As RVN pressure was mounting on the province to become self-sufficient in rice, the problem with illegal squatting on Montagnard land was expected to grow even more acute. In order to avert a potential problem of “catastrophic proportions,” a task force of RVN and Consul General officials was being established to study the problem.³²³

Through the end of 1973, issues of security, living conditions, land, and cultural assimilation continued to plague the 11,000 Stieng Montagnards in the two refugee camps, while several factors hindered tea cultivation and production in Lam Dong, a primary government priority. Communist guerrilla activity in and around the camps had become routine, and the rapidly increasing cost of living had forced many members of the seventeen RF companies to supplement their meager income with outside employment, thus hindering the effectiveness of these forces.³²⁴ Living conditions remained poor; though local officials had made progress on deepening wells, the existing water supply remained insufficient. A U.S. official in Lam Dong reported that development programs and improvements in Montagnard areas, particularly resettlement camps, were hindered by an “inactive” EM service. In turn, EM service officials blamed the problem on inadequate transportation and the rapidly increasing cost of gas. Furthermore, the Montagnard self-development program completed four projects, but there was “very poor indoctrination” of both EM service personnel and Montagnard villagers. A rush to meet national deadlines, the U.S. official reported, resulted in a series of projects that “while satisfactorily completed...must be considered of limited political value due to the lack of popular participation.” Further, while Highlanders wanting to relocate had to wait and go through bureaucratic channels, ethnic Vietnamese in the same predicament did not.³²⁵

The province tea situation showed the limits of government education initiatives, even when they were directed at the more advanced ethnic Vietnamese. The tea industry, which employed two-thirds of the Lam Dong population, was still in dire straits, as almost no tea was shipped from the province in 1972. In September, the factory could not remain competitive, and stopped operating, resulting in large fluctuations in the price of tea. Despite years of education by province officials, most operators of smaller tea plantations—most of them ethnic

³²³ LDPR, 31 October 1973, *Ibid.*

³²⁴ LDPR, 30 November 1973, *Ibid.*

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

Vietnamese—cultivated only one to three hectares of tea and still did not use modern agricultural techniques such as genetically engineered crops and chemical fertilizers. As a result, their tea was not competitive on the export market, as its inferior quality made it suitable for in-country use only. An economic downturn in South Vietnam greatly reduced demand for nonessential items such as tea, and significantly affected the seventy percent of the Lam Dong population employed in the tea industry. With decreased revenue from tea production and the increased cost of many market items, Lam Dong, which had prospered in the early 1970s, was now struggling for economic survival. While the refugee population of the province remained preoccupied with issues of survival, the primary concern of the remainder of the population was making a living.³²⁶

1974: Continued Refugee Problems

Through the beginning of 1974, communist tax collection and mortar attacks on RF units assigned to secure Tan Rai continued. Though Saigon had reduced RF companies in the province from eighteen to seventeen, overall Lam Dong RF strength remained approximately 2500 present for duty, and these men remained a capable fighting force. The lunar new year ushered in smaller-scale communist attacks throughout South Vietnam, but as a U.S. observer noted, “While Lam Dong action was perhaps insignificant when compared with more embattled provinces, it still was to the credit of the territorial forces that they had kept the upper-hand” in engagements with the communists.³²⁷

The increased security had its price, however; because of security relocations, by 1974 virtually all of the Lam Dong population was within a few kilometers of Highway 20—to include Montagnard communities that had traditionally lived in isolated areas far from the highway. By 1974, the province population was highly concentrated: throughout the province, thirteen hamlet areas were occupied, fifty-one were used for agriculture, and 194 were not occupied or used at all. As security improved, however, Saigon’s MDEM desired to relocate Montagnards to areas closer to their original land. MDEM noted that many Highlanders were now employed on tea plantations or industries owned by the ethnic Vietnamese, and farmers who

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ LDPR, 3 January 1974, Box 3, Ibid.

did not live on their land had to walk ten to fifteen kilometers each way to work. Despite their long commutes to work, many people were reluctant to be moved again, unless it was back to their original villages—a prospect that was denied by the government because these areas were often in remote areas controlled by the NLF.

Areas closer to Highway 20, however, were considerably more secure, a development that paradoxically caused considerable problems. Specifically, portions of Lam Dong west and south of Bao Loc along Highway 20 had large amounts of arable land that, due to NLF activity, had been lying fallow through the early 1970s, but security improvements meant that squatters increasingly occupied large swaths of this desirable area. These problems were rarely resolved by RVN officials, and by the end of 1973 squatters occupied land owned by the Bao Loc Agricultural College, experimental farm, and a land parcel purchased by several local and Saigon investors. Unless the ministry of state took prompt action, a U.S. official warned, the “serious” situation would soon become “critical.”³²⁸

Even more pressing were continued problems with adequate water supply and arable land at the Tan Rai and Minh Rong refugee camps. Lack of water was becoming increasingly serious as the dry season approached, and mortar attacks were used as an excuse for civilian contractors to cease land clearing operations for the entire month. Additionally, there were problems with the small areas of land that had been cleared; the ministry of state and MDEM had promised that all felled trees would go to the camp occupants, while the ministry of agriculture argued that all large trees were property of the government. Though the refugees had been present in Lam Dong for over seven months, they were still considered citizens of their native province, Binh Long, and all officials of the ten villages had to travel to that province every month for remuneration. Finally, though 1200 Tan Rai refugees were employed in bamboo harvesting in southwestern Lam Dong, their jobs were only one week or one month in duration and they had to obtain permission from camp commanders each time they wished to depart for work.³²⁹ Other refugees sought employment through unauthorized channels; by the sixth month of waiting for the national government to clear land, over 1,000 Stieng had left to seek employment as day laborers.³³⁰

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ LDPR, 31 January 1974, Ibid.

Without land, the Stieng refugees continued to be dependent upon the central government's rice ration. The deputy minister of state agreed to extend the ration on a month-to-month basis, but January's rice issue fit within a larger pattern of conflict between province and national officials. Officials at the ministry of state believed that Montagnards had problems with excessive alcohol consumption and feared that the Stieng refugees would sell their rice ration on the black market in order to buy alcohol to celebrate Tet. Only repeated entreaties by province officials rectified the situation—after a 45-day delay. By the end of February, an estimated ten percent of refugees at Tan Rai had permanently left because of poor living conditions and lack of adequate food. “The only answer” to the refugee issue in Lam Dong, a U.S. representative noted, was “in the people becoming self sufficient,” so that they would not have to depend upon the capricious Saigon government for sustenance. “To do this,” he continued, the refugees “must have land to plant.”³³¹

By March 1974, the refugee situation in Lam Dong had reached a crisis point. Working independently, a group of 750 refugee families were able to clear as much land in a month as the government had cleared in four months. Using this as an example, province officials were at last able to convince Saigon to authorize payment for families to clear their own land, giving the Stieng refugees a start at self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, shortly after families began clearing land, the government reneged on its promise, causing much discontent among the population. With the project again stalled, local officials again launched appeals to Dr. Phan Quang Dan, the deputy prime minister for social welfare.³³² That such an operation needed the approval of such a high level official was a symptom of the larger malaise of Saigon's centralized control, an approach that hindered any attempts to adapt policies to fit local situations.

The situation with the Stieng suggested larger problems in the province. The 1972 Easter Offensive had caused a series of migrations, as many refugees—most of them Highlanders—moved from province to province. By 1974, Lam Dong had 45,000 ethnic minorities; in addition to the Ma and Sre Montagnards indigenous to the province, three other distinct Montagnard tribes, as well as two other ethnic minority groups (Nung and Tai) had migrated from provinces to the north and west. Most of these people were living in temporary settlements, and only sixty

³³¹ LDPR, 28 February 1974, *Ibid.*

³³² *Ibid.*

percent were able to farm MLA land. The glacially slow MLA program had distributed small portions of land to some Highlander families, but large tracts of MLA-designated land still remained undistributed.³³³ Further, many Montagnards were increasingly being pressured by Vietnamese religious groups and individuals—often after social occasions involving large amounts of alcohol—to sell land granted to them by the MLA.³³⁴ Overall, the situation faced by the Montagnards posed a grave security risk for the South Vietnamese government, as conditions were ripe for the growth of discontent and anger.

Throughout Lam Dong, the economic situation continued to worsen, and small businessmen and the poor had a hard time obtaining basic commodities such as rice. Rising gas prices continued to drive rising market prices, especially for staple items such as *Nuoc Mam*, the pungent fish sauce that is an essential source of protein and flavor in Vietnamese cuisine. As a result, citizens bought very few non-essential items, such as coffee and tea—cash crops that were vital to the health of the Lam Dong economy.³³⁵ Even the cost of public utilities increased; in three months, prices for electricity and water increased approximately twenty-five percent, and bus transportation fees rose at least fifty percent.³³⁶

The market economy built by the French and Americans began to break down once U.S. aid was withdrawn. Steep cuts in economic assistance forced Saigon to levy increased taxes, which further hindered economic growth.³³⁷ The push to increase mechanized farming began to falter throughout 1973 and 1974 as gas prices skyrocketed. Other technology introduced by the U.S. assistance mission caused unintended problems. For example, the opening of a modern slaughter-processing house in Saigon precipitated a sharp rise in the demand for live pigs. Saigon buyers began to offer rates substantially greater than local market price for animals, increasing prices in the greater Saigon area by fifty percent in two months.³³⁸ Additionally, the

³³³ LDPR, 1 January-31 March 1974, Ibid.

³³⁴ LDPR, 28 February 1974, Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ LDPR, 1 January-31 March 1974, Ibid.

³³⁷ From 1966-1972, the U.S. directly and indirectly injected an estimated \$2 billion into the local economy, and the presence of hundreds of thousands of Americans directly created an estimated 300,000 jobs. William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 214.

³³⁸ Ibid.

lack of economic diversification hurt the many provinces that had followed the dictates of competitive advantage and produced only one or two crops—in the case of Lam Dong, tea and, to a lesser extent, coffee. Cooperatives, pushed so heavily in the preceding years by USAID advisors, began to break down once Americans departed, as the individualistic culture of many Vietnamese asserted itself. Though agricultural credit was available, it was increasingly sought only by individuals, and by spring 1974 a U.S. representative in Lam Dong lamented that the cooperatives, including the once-lauded tea cooperative, “have failed.”³³⁹

In February 1974, a new province chief, Lieutenant Colonel Hoang Cong Thu, replaced Colonel Huu, who had been promoted and reassigned. Local officials reacted poorly, as Thu’s assertive leadership style was challenged by staff members accustomed to indolence. During April 1974, the new province chief, recognizing that the ten villages in the Tan Rai resettlement project needed more attention, assigned each provincial service to a village on a one for one basis. For example, the agriculture province service was assigned to village one and ordered to make daily appearances to resolve issues. Though subordinates carried out Thu’s directive, resulting in improved resolution of refugee issues, there was significant resistance from some service personnel, which delayed operations.³⁴⁰

While the integration of former FULRO units into the RVNAF during the late 1960s and early 1970s had greatly diminished the influence of the Montagnard organization, by 1974 there were increasing indications that FULRO was being used as a communist front in order to tap into Montagnard dissatisfaction with the RVN and despair at being abandoned by the U.S.³⁴¹ During spring 1974, MDEM Minister Nay Luett visited Kontum and Pleiku and held a meeting with local Montagnard officials, hamlet, and village chiefs, in which he urged the cultivation of land and food production, and warned of the dangers of seduction by the communists and “the second FULRO Movement.” Many Montagnard leaders, especially representatives of recent refugee communities, were increasingly unhappy with the RVN’s efforts, noting that there was insufficient land for cultivation and basic survival needs. Furthermore, the leaders argued,

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Lam Dong Province Bi-Weekly Report [hereafter LDPBR], 20 April 1974, Box 1, CORDS, Special Assistant to the Ambassador for Field Operations [hereafter SAAFO] Province Bi-Weekly Reports (PBR), RG472.

³⁴¹ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 262-71.

Vietnamese settlers were encroaching on land allotted to the refugee communities, and some of the resettlement sites were not secure—they had been the targets of NLF mortar attacks.³⁴²

The cease-fire mandated by the Paris Accords was increasingly illusory, as both NLF units and province RF units engaged in small-scale offensive operations. According to U.S. provincial representatives, the International Commission of Control and Supervision team—charged with monitoring the cease-fire and composed of delegates from both communist and non-communist nations—was failing to investigate cease-fire violations and was “completely inactive.” The frustrated U.S. officials reported that the delegations “rise at 10 o’clock, retire for siesta, rise again for dinner, play a game of pool at the USAID Compound and go to bed.”³⁴³

The lack of security was particularly acute in areas inhabited by refugees. The NLF and PAVN targeted provincial resettlement efforts with a combination of soft and hard tactics. In the refugee camps, squad-sized units visited and proselytized, collected food donations, scouted for recruits, surreptitiously contacted informants, tested government defenses and reaction capability, and gathered intelligence on RVN operations. Though local officials made attempts to move some refugees out of temporary camps and into permanent resettlement areas in Lam Dong, this measure was equally problematic. An American land reform specialist from Saigon noted that most Stiang resettlement areas were still not viable communities because of security, land ownership issues, and the great distance between cultivation and population areas. In particular, many resettlement areas abutted known NLF production areas. Most Stiang stayed in the refugee camps, which gradually took on the character of permanent settlements.³⁴⁴

By summer 1974, the Stiang had cleared most of their land on their own, without the promised assistance from Saigon. Under the direction of the new province chief, the deputy province chief for Montagnard affairs and the EM service teamed with the Vietnamese Christian Service to resolve land disputes and provide support to Koho hamlets, many of which were in conflict with ethnic Vietnamese hamlets due to Montagnard resettlement in the vicinity of Highway 20.³⁴⁵

³⁴² Provincial Highlights, 7-20 April 1974, Box 3, CORDS, SAAFO Province Bi-Weekly Reports (PBR), RG472.

³⁴³ LDPBR, 6-20 May 1974, Ibid.

³⁴⁴ LDPBR, 20 May-3 June 1974, Ibid.

³⁴⁵ LDPBR, 22 April-6 May 1974, Ibid.

A U.S. official lamented that after thirteen months and “significant infusions of support,” the Stieng were “still not an economically viable community,” while a group of ethnic Vietnamese settlers, after only one month in Lam Dong, “have made very impressive strides toward economic viability.” By contrast, the Stieng situation was deteriorating, as recent rice and corn crops were not yet developing. Though lack of rainfall was partially to blame, the main factor was the Stiengs’ lack of understanding of modern agricultural methods, or, in the words of the U.S. official, “very poor agricultural practices.” The few Stieng refugees who did understand modern agriculture were hindered by high inflation, which made the cost of fertilizer and insecticides prohibitive. Lam Dong officials were in Saigon attempting to obtain large amounts of insecticides, but the province Agricultural Service had done very little to educate the refugees on different agricultural methods. Instead, government assistance focused on distribution of aid, rather than teaching refugees to be self-sufficient. Moreover, the new province chief continued to believe that cash crops such as mulberry bushes—necessary for silkworm cultivation—were preferable to rice and corn agriculture in the Tan Rai area.³⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, after a year in refugee camps, the Stieng were still dependent on rice subsidies from the national government and child feeding programs run by Catholic relief services and the local ethnic minorities service.³⁴⁷

In mid-1974, U.S. President Richard Nixon, his power significantly weakened by the Watergate scandal, struggled to preserve a modicum of funding for the Vietnamese government. Though Nixon had requested a total of over \$2 billion in RVN aid for fiscal year 1975, Congress appropriated only \$700 million.³⁴⁸ In August, as Nixon resigned in disgrace, Deputy Prime Minister Dan and a delegation of ten, including the British Prime Minister, visited resettlement sites in Lam Dong and discussed future refugee projects. Dan decided that the remainder of the Tan Rai land clearing budget be used to compensate refugees for clearing their own land, with the remainder being used to fund the deepening of four wells and the construction of a foot bridge. He also decided that a group of agricultural specialists be assigned to Tan Rai to assist them in upgrading their agricultural practices, and that Saigon would provide fertilizer to assist

³⁴⁶ LDPBR, 29 July 1974, Box 2, Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Vien, *The Final Collapse*, 46-47.

in this effort.³⁴⁹ Dan's decisions were highly beneficial to refugees in Lam Dong, but the requirement for such a high level official to make decisions about individual refugee camp budgets demonstrated once again the structural failures of the South Vietnamese government.

With decreasing funding from the United States, the import-export economy that the U.S. had built continued to encounter difficulties. For example, one of the largest producers of exportable tea in Lam Dong was forced to halt operations because the principal supplier of raw tea had continued to raise prices to balance rising transportation costs. Additionally, the silk worm industry that U.S. and RVN officials had built began to founder; poor weather had caused a drop in the nutritional value of mulberry leaves, the price for finished cocoons had fallen, and the cost of imported Japanese eggs had risen by fifty percent. In a development that affected farmers who had embraced the modern agricultural methods championed by the U.S. and RVN, chemical fertilizer was increasingly expensive and scarce. Further, the rising cost of transportation meant that even animal fertilizer, which had to be shipped from Saigon, had increased 250 percent in a six-month period.³⁵⁰

Despite two decades of U.S. involvement, one of the more ambitious civil works initiatives during the late war period, the Kala Dam irrigation project, exemplified the limits of U.S. influence on South Vietnamese politics and society. Even though the irrigation project had been in operation for approximately a year, there was still no organization for water rationing or use; there was no management control over the system which caused damage to the canals; and even though the system was providing increased water necessary for genetically engineered rice, most farmers were continuing to use local rice varieties instead of high yield rice. As a U.S. representative noted, "It is unfortunate that many times the construction of Irrigation Projects such as the Kala Dam are treated as technical problems only." Observing that the "more crucial problems of people's organizations and management of the irrigation systems" were left unaddressed, the official warned that the projects were "serviceable but not self-sufficient nor even partially utilized."³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ LDPBR, 27 August 1974, Box 2, MACV CORDS, SAAFO Province Bi-Weekly Reports (PBR), RG472.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ LDPBR, 23 September 1974, Box 3, Ibid.

Two projects that had been previously supervised by USAID personnel, the Lam Dong tea factory and Montagnard education initiatives, illustrated the dichotomy in American aid attempts. Despite a cost of VN\$600 million to build the Lam Dong tea factory in the mid-1960s, the plant, which upon its opening in 1968 was “acclaimed to be the most modern and largest in Southeast Asia,” had only been operational—at partial capacity—for a period of less than a year due to lack of local support and almost total dependence on Saigon.³⁵² By contrast, the Montagnard Boarding School Program had maintained the support of the local Highlanders that it aimed to serve. Local support for the program demonstrated that Montagnards were willing to assimilate culturally—the Vietnamese language and modern agricultural methods were taught in the schools—but the national government did not provide the resources towards this end. By late 1974 the program, which funded three schools in the province, was on the verge of insolvency, as MDEM subsidies for living expenses were not keeping pace with rapid inflation. Other problems included an enrollment nearly double capacity, and dilapidated facilities and equipment. A U.S. official lamented that “yet another social welfare development project among the Montagnard people” was being eroded because of poor investment and economic inflation.³⁵³ Further problems with Montagnard education stemmed from province officials’ lack of understanding. The province educational service, responsible for schools in hamlets and *buons*, replaced Montagnard teachers with ethnic Vietnamese teachers. A U.S. representative argued that even though “the Vietnamese teachers unquestionably have a higher educational background than many of the former Montagnard teachers,” it was “preferable that Montagnard teachers instruct Montagnard students” due to the unique “language, culture, and economic conditions of the Montagnard students and families.”³⁵⁴ In 1968, American officials would likely have prevailed in changing Vietnamese policies. In 1974, however, their attempt was futile.

At the end of 1974, the situation for most of the permanent residents of Lam Dong remained as it had been throughout the previous two years: fairly secure, yet with an increasingly precarious standard of living. The end of the year marked the conclusion of the two year long calm before the storm. The ripple effect of the Easter Offensive, over two years previous, was still being felt throughout South Vietnam, as refugees from border provinces continued their

³⁵² LDPBR, 21 October 1974, Ibid.

³⁵³ LDPBR, 7 October 1974, Ibid.

³⁵⁴ LDPBR, 3 November 1974, Ibid.

sojourn to find new homes. Even after the cease-fire, continued NLF/PAVN activity continued to drive many from their homes. The Stieng refugee situation still not resolved, Saigon nonetheless planned to re-locate additional refugees in Lam Dong in 1975, and also increasingly dictated that Koho Montagnards partake in return-to-village projects in order to make use of their land. Yet continued problems of organization, planning and management continued to plague the resettlement program. A U.S. official warned that “very ambitious” resettlement and RTV programs were planned for 1975, yet “despite the ambitious proposals for 1975, serious resettlement problems have not been solved for resettlement programs started in 1973 and 1974.” Agricultural and human services problems persisted at the Stieng resettlement sites, and because implementation of solutions to these problems were “slow, time consuming, and difficult,” the U.S. representative noted, “some attempt should be made to assess problem areas in the current resettlement program before any additional programs are implemented.”³⁵⁵ The U.S. government was powerless to act, however, and ten Montagnard hamlets that had taken refuge in Tuyen Duc for the previous eight years were being prepared for MLA resettlement in Lam Dong.³⁵⁶

As the final full year of the war drew to a close, there was open combat in Lam Dong between battalion-sized elements of the NLF/PAVN and the RVNAF. The NLF/PAVN maintained pressure on Highway 20 and continued to make entries into refugee camps and resettlement areas, while the RF ambushed two NLF companies, killing twenty-five. While the territorial forces continued to acquit themselves well, even against North Vietnamese regulars, non-combat operations proved to be the Achilles’ heel of the RVN effort. Representatives from the MDEM had met with the Koho and Stieng and brokered another deal to allow the Stieng to continue to clear and farm portions of Koho MLA land, but U.S. officials reported that the Koho had conceded the land only through “considerable persuasion and old fashion[ed] arm twisting” by MDEM officials—serious issues of land use and ownership remained unresolved. Though busloads of Stieng refugees who had left inadequate conditions in Lam Dong were returning to the province, their impetus was increased military activity in other provinces, and not the improvement of refugee assistance efforts. In the final report by an American in Lam Dong, an

³⁵⁵ LDPBR, 2 December 1974, Box 4, Ibid.

³⁵⁶ LDPBR, 16 December 1974, Ibid.

official assessed that the Stieng continued to lack confidence in prospects for success in their refugee camps or resettlement sites. Resettlement programs continued to move at a snail's pace, and the equitable division of land promised by the MLA program proved illusory, as many Montagnards failed to understand land boundaries and many ethnic Vietnamese did not heed legally established land demarcations.³⁵⁷

Throughout the highlands, RVN officials realized, too late, that Montagnard discontent and the second FULRO movement, co-opted by the communists, posed a threat to the government. Vietnamese officials deployed troops to quell unrest in the highlands, where some communist units had begun to operate openly and hundreds of Montagnards had begun to take up violence against the Vietnamese.³⁵⁸

1975: Abandoned

Following our great, decisive victory in the battle of Ban Me Thuot, our crushing of the enemy counterattack (from the 14th to the 18th of March) sped up the pace of our offensive campaign, isolated enemy forces, and drove the enemy army in the Central Highlands to the brink of collapse, opening the way for a collapse of puppet forces that could not be reversed.

—Official History of the PAVN³⁵⁹

Since the Paris Accords, North Vietnam had slowly infiltrated a total of five PAVN divisions into the highlands. At the beginning of 1975, communist units tested the waters by capturing Phuoc Binh, capital of the Stieng Montagnard Phuoc Long province, after a weeklong siege.³⁶⁰ After the fall of Phuoc Binh, PAVN leaders noted the complete lack of an American response, and decided to embark on Campaign 275 in the highlands—an event that marked the beginning of the end of the Second Indochina War. At the end of February, PAVN General Van Tien Dung, commander of the offensive, established a feint toward the provinces of Pleiku and Kontum. As Saigon sent ARVN regiments to the northern highlands, PAVN units moved to

³⁵⁷ LDPR, 30 December 1974, Ibid.

³⁵⁸ James M. Markham, "Montagnard Rebellion Spreads in Vietnam," *New York Times*, 2 November 1974; Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 268-69.

³⁵⁹ Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 374.

³⁶⁰ James M. Markham, "Attack Renewed on Vietnam Town," *New York Times*, 6 January 1975; James M. Markham, "Saigon's Forces Lose Phuoc Binh," *New York Times*, 8 January 1975.

capture Ban Me Thuot in the southern highlands. There were limited numbers of ARVN troops in the southern highlands, and in many cases their defense was left to outnumbered and outgunned territorial forces. Accounts of the final two months of the RVN are uneven, but reports indicate that many territorial force units fought bravely, while others did not resist PAVN units claiming to be part of FULRO.³⁶¹ In mid-March, Thieu made his fateful decision to abandon the highlands. General Pham Van Phu, II Corps commander, briefed his staff that they would withdraw to the coastal province of Phu Yen and re-consolidate forces in preparation for a counterattack. As soon as the withdrawal began, however, panic ensued in the highlands. Fearing abandonment by their government and capture by the PAVN, hundreds of thousands of highlands residents clogged roads trying to escape south to Saigon. In Cheo Reo, Jarai Montagnard RF units were abandoned by their Vietnamese officers.³⁶² The panic was infectious and soon spread to the entire region. In many cases, RVNAF troops fled south, leaving weaponry and equipment behind. By the beginning of April, most of the highlands were in the hands of the communists. After mounting a tenacious final stand at Xuan Loc, the final ARVN units began to disintegrate in mid-April, leaving the door to Saigon wide open. On 21 April, Thieu, who was blamed by many South Vietnamese for their country's predicament, resigned, and with the help of U.S. officials, fled to Taiwan.³⁶³ In the final week of the war, Americans, Vietnamese, and Montagnards all struggled to leave the country. Saigon officials promised to send aircraft to evacuate Montagnard leaders—the Highlanders waited for helicopters that never arrived.³⁶⁴

On 30 April 1975, a PAVN tank crashed through the gates of the presidential palace in Saigon. Central highlands commander General Pham Van Phu, who had followed Thieu's order to abandon the highlands, put his pistol to his head and pulled the trigger.

The war was over.

³⁶¹ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 272-74. Hickey based his account of the battles in the highlands on interviews with Montagnard leaders conducted after the war.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 278-79; Malcom W. Browne, "Vietnam Refugees Stream from Highlands to Coast," *New York Times*, 19 March 1975.

³⁶³ James Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 267-270.

³⁶⁴ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 282.

Conclusion

In the final two years of the war, local and national leaders in Vietnam were almost completely on their own to solve political, military, economic, and social problems. During this period, Lam Dong, like many other provinces in the southern highlands, had to cope with large numbers of Montagnard refugees who had been displaced by the fighting in the north and western border regions of the RVN. Though documents from this period are limited, reports indicate that the MLA and RTV programs, key elements of the RVN's highlands policy, continued to experience slow and halting progress. Additionally, while some local officials attempted to alleviate the suffering of the large numbers of refugees who were now residents of Lam Dong, the lack of coherent planning and execution meant that the Montagnard community indigenous to Lam Dong was pressured to surrender significant portions of their land to refugees. Throughout the highlands, American observers could only watch as Vietnamese-Montagnard relations deteriorated to their nadir. Further, operations in local refugee camps required the approval of Deputy Prime Minister for Social Welfare Phan Quang Dan—one of many examples that pointed to the larger malaise of Saigon's centralized control, an approach that made it impossible to adapt policies to fit local situations.

Though American leverage in Vietnam was all but gone, the heavy U.S. involvement had exacted a heavy price on the long-term viability of the South Vietnamese state. The extravagant use of U.S. aid early in the war combined with the precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces and funding in the 1970s led to problems such as rapid inflation; for example, while the dollar to piastre exchange rate had been 1:35 in 1964, by 1975 it was 1:700. From 1964 to 1972, the price of rice rose 1400 percent, while the wages, adjusted for inflation, of an ARVN captain shrank by over 400 percent. Increasingly precarious economic conditions throughout South Vietnam depleted morale, eroded confidence in the government, and contributed to rampant corruption.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁵ Clarke, *Advice and Support...1965-1973*, 503.

Chapter 8 - Epilogue: Unredeemed Promises

[The Montagnards] have run and run. Some had died a dozen times over the years. And they think of the mountains as their country. If they went to the coast, they would have been out of their country.

—Dr. Pat Smith, physician who ran a hospital in the highlands for sixteen years³⁶⁶

Only months after the communist victory in Vietnam, it became clear that promises of greater rights and autonomy for Montagnards would not be fulfilled. Through May, as the new leaders of South Vietnam consolidated their power, communist officials permitted the MDEM to continue its operations. In June 1975, with their power solidified, the communist Provisional Revolutionary Government dissolved the ministry, arresting its leaders, and also arrested Montagnard leaders in the highlands. Some Highlander leaders were executed and others, including Nay Luett and Pierre K'Briuh, died due to harsh treatment and neglect in prison. In September 1975 the government expelled all French priests and nuns, many of whom had worked on Montagnard welfare issues.

As Gerald Hickey noted, the communists had “hoodwinked many highlanders into supporting them with the promise of autonomy,” but in 1976 the new government enacted a Diem-like plan of Vietnamese settlement and Montagnard assimilation. In February 1976, the communist government further consolidated its power by reorganizing the provinces of South Vietnam. In the southern highlands, the new boundaries of Lam Dong province encompassed the former provinces of Lam Dong and Tuyen Duc. In March 1976, seeking to consolidate their power and exploit the vast resources of the highlands as Diem had attempted two decades prior, communist officials announced that the ethnic minorities of the highlands, along with many ethnic Vietnamese, would be forced into “new economic zones” where they would practice modern agriculture. With the support of the United Nations, communist countries, and Japan and Sweden, Montagnards were moved out and ethnic Vietnamese moved in to exploit the vast

³⁶⁶ “U.S. Woman Doctor Leaves Vietnam after 16 Years,” *New York Times*, 4 April 1975.

resources such as lumber that the highlands offered.³⁶⁷ In July 1976, both North and South Vietnam became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV).

Through 1976 and 1977, the SRV continued to direct its citizens into new economic zones, where they practiced collective agriculture and ethnic minorities were forced to embrace “the new culture.” As it became clear that the new government had no intention of honoring promises to the Montagnards, FULRO began to wage a guerrilla war against its former benefactor. In 1978, forced collectivization, a command economy, infrastructure devastated by the war, and unusually poor weather combined to bring Vietnam to an economic crisis. By 1979, Hanoi was at war with its erstwhile allies, the People’s Republic of China and the Khmer Rouge, over a number of issues including border disputes. In a somewhat bizarre turn of events, the conflict resulted in a temporary alliance between the Khmer Rouge, the PRC and FULRO.³⁶⁸ Throughout Vietnam, tens of thousands of ethnic Vietnamese and Montagnards alike remained imprisoned in re-education camps.³⁶⁹

Developments in Lam Dong were a microcosm of national events during this period. In 1976, the Lam Dong provincial party congress reported that more than 18,000 “nomadic ethnic minority people have settled and engaged in crop cultivation.” In 1978, with a grant from the World Council of Churches, Hanoi attempted to create an economic zone in Lam Dong, but after much investment the area had only 9,300 people instead of the planned 100,000.³⁷⁰ Simultaneously, the SRV embarked on a massive resettlement campaign designed to move ten million people over a twenty year period.³⁷¹ At the end of the 1970s, Lam Dong was a battleground between FULRO and SRV forces.³⁷² By the beginning of the new decade, the SRV

³⁶⁷ “U.N. Study Urges Heavy Vietnam Aid,” *Washington Post*, 2 June 1976.

³⁶⁸ Nayan Chanda, “Jeng Sary: Unite for Our Country,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 104, no. 25 (1979): 10-11; Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 299; John Burgess, “Right-Wing Rebels Aided by China Worry Laotians, Vietnamese,” *Washington Post*, 18 October 1980.

³⁶⁹ Robert Shaplen, “Rethinking the Revolution,” *New York Times*, 13 July 1986; Doan Van Toai and David Chanoff, *The Vietnamese Gulag* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1986).

³⁷⁰ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 296-97.

³⁷¹ Fox Butterfield, “Vietnam Plans Resettlement of 10 Million Over 20 Years,” *New York Times*, 31 May 1978.

³⁷² Fox Butterfield, “Vietnam Refugees Say Attacks on Communists Continue in Highlands,” *New York Times*, 1 June 1979.

realized that its policies were not economically viable, and began a program of economic liberalization that paved the way for the 1986 *Doi Moi* reforms that allowed for “Market Leninism” in Vietnam. The economic reforms unleashed a new wave of economic development in the highlands which resulted in increased SRV pressure on Montagnard rebels. After fighting the SRV for a decade and a half, in 1992 the leaders of FULRO began to emigrate to the large Montagnard community in North Carolina.³⁷³ With the end of significant Highlander resistance and the normalization of relations with the United States and PRC, the pace of economic development increased, particularly in the resource-rich highlands. As additional settlers moved into the region, Montagnards were increasingly moved off of their lands. The highland provinces are currently home to five million residents—many of their indigenous occupants now subsist by showcasing their culture to American tourists in Vietnam. In 2009, large bauxite mines destroyed much of the tea plantations that had dotted Lam Dong’s landscape for a century. In an ironic twist, even former PAVN General Vo Nguyen Giap’s warnings of ecological damage in Lam Dong could not halt the expansion of the mines—a necessary measure, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam emphasized, in order to provide for lucrative aluminum exports to the People’s Republic of China.³⁷⁴

³⁷³ The large Montagnard community in the United States is the result of the efforts of the Lutheran Church and large numbers of U.S. troops, many of them Special Forces personnel based out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, who sponsored their allies’ emigration to the U.S. after the fall of Saigon. As in other wars, many soldiers worked to redeem the broken promises of their own government.

³⁷⁴ Tran Dinh Thanh Lam, “Vietnam Farmers Fall to Bauxite Bulldozers,” *Asia Times Online*, 2 June 2009 http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/KF02Ae01.html, accessed 27 June 2011.

Chapter 9 - Conclusion

In many ways, the seldom-emphasized territorial militia program was one of the greatest U.S.-RVN successes of the war. With a relatively small investment in advisors and money, the RVN was able to build a force that was critically important in keeping the NLF on the defensive after its losses in 1968. Yet tactical and operational success could not salvage strategic failure; in a development that sealed the RVN's fate, the signing of the Paris Accords left approximately 170,000 PAVN troops in South Vietnam.³⁷⁵ Even had the Paris Accords and their aftermath been more favorable for the RVN, years of failed policy in the highlands had made many of the region's inhabitants disaffected with their own government.

While U.S. involvement greatly increased the effectiveness of the territorial militia program, the rapid escalation and de-escalation of support did not assist in the ostensible U.S. goal of creating a self-sufficient Vietnamese state. In the early years of the American war, U.S. involvement inadvertently helped foment Montagnard ethno-nationalist separatism. As the war progressed, U.S. officials used their considerable leverage over RVN officials to force Vietnamese officials to acquiesce to promises of better treatment. As the U.S. withdrew, however, it lost leverage over Saigon and became increasingly unable to dictate policy to its ally. In turn, the U.S. had never forced the RVN to decentralize any of its power—admittedly, a difficult task given the chronic instability of the Saigon government, particularly in the two years following the ouster of Diem. In the final years of the war, Saigon's approval was needed to address mundane yet vital issues such as the clearing of land for refugee agriculture. The saga of the Stien in Lam Dong is much like that of RVN citizens during the period of U.S. involvement in Vietnam—large numbers of people became simultaneously dependent on the government's largess and yet disaffected with its policies. In Lam Dong, the U.S. had ambitiously sought to create an export-driven economy based on tea and coffee. Yet when the U.S. withdrew, demand for these nonessential items decreased markedly, causing hardship for most residents and sending many to Saigon.

³⁷⁵ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 188-89.

This is not to ignore or discount significant policy failures elsewhere; for example, the failure of the U.S. to shut down the Ho Chi Minh trail and the abrupt termination of aid to Saigon despite American promises to the contrary. Yet the entire course of the war was marked by inconsistent and often contradictory policies in the highlands. Local leaders were often unable to address non-state centered security issues, such as refugees, without the resources and will from Saigon. Just as importantly, the U.S. presence helped lubricate the bureaucratic wheels in Saigon and keep a lid on ethnic Vietnamese ambitions in the highlands, yet the Vietnamization period marked the opening of the dam, as the Thieu government failed to follow through on promises that it had made after being strong-armed by the United States. By the early 1970s, American leverage at the local and national levels was gone; though local institutions—particularly the security apparatus—continued to function relatively well, the unintended consequences of U.S. involvement manifested themselves. The economic dependency that the U.S. had created came crashing down, affecting all residents of Lam Dong, particularly the ethnic Vietnamese, while failures in refugee policy affected primarily Montagnards. Though it is likely that the highlands' collapse was inevitable with the withdrawal of American air power, it is equally likely that non-military failures in this region ultimately contributed to the swift collapse of the highlands and the ultimate defeat of the RVN.

While lower-level officials often displayed an understanding of the vast ethno-cultural-linguistic differences among Highlanders, many higher-level officials—both American and Vietnamese—displayed an ignorance of basic customs and tended to lump all Montagnards together, perplexed that there was not stronger, more unified leadership. Additionally, the U.S. failed to articulate a coherent policy; in the early-war period, the U.S. displayed a profound ignorance of the historical relationship between the Highlanders and the ethnic Vietnamese, and in the late-war period it advocated both Montagnard rights and the economic development of the highlands. Throughout the war, highlands policy put the cart before the horse, encouraging economic development before basic issues such as land demarcation were resolved. Finally, Washington devoted far too much of its vast resources to building a western-style army, and far too little to inexpensive programs such as refugee assistance and education for Montagnards. Similarly, Saigon funneled tremendous amounts of resources to large-scale projects such as the Lam Dong tea factory and relatively little to initiatives such as the MLA program. Ultimately,

the U.S. and RVN acted as if their time and resources were unlimited, when they were surely not.

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