

Senator YBA

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

PARTICIPANTS: Nay Luett, Minister of Ethnic Minorities
Senator Ksor Rot
Senator Y-Ba
Pierre Marie K'Briuh, Secretary General of MDEM
Toung Han Tho, Sec. Gen. of Ethnic Minorities Council
Nai-Alep, Commander, National Training Center, Pleiku

G. D. Jacobson, SAAFO
L. M. Prosser, SAAFO
E. Sprague, SAAFO

TIME & PLACE: Embassy Conference Room - April 4, 1975 - 1600 hours

SUBJECT: Montagnard Attitude During National Crisis; Request for Political asylum in Event of the Fall of Saigon.

BACKGROUND:

The Montagnard leaders listed above had called on Mr. Prosser at his home the previous evening to discuss the national crisis. They said they wanted to advise the Montagnard people who are now behind enemy lines in MR I and II on what they should do but, in the absence of any effective leadership from the Prime Minister or the President, they were too unsure of the situation to make sound judgments. They asked Mr. Prosser's advice and whether they could count on continued USG assistance. Mr. Prosser suggested a meeting with the Special Assistant to the Ambassador for Field Operations. The meeting, of which this memorandum constitutes the minute, proceeded as follows:

THE MEETING:

Minister Nay Luett began by saying that during the last twenty days, all the traditional lands of the Montagnard had been lost. This might be only temporary, he said without conviction, but at the moment, as far as he could determine, there were less than 6,000 of the one million Montagnards of South Vietnam still in GVN control.

Of these 6,000, he continued, at least 1,000 would be in imminent danger of immediate assassination if the NVA occupied Saigon. The Minister said he had talked with three Montagnards who had just walked out of Ban Me Thout and Phu Bon and they had witnessed the public assassination by the NVA of leaders and the families of leaders by North Vietnamese officers when their hamlets were occupied.

Reporter's Comment: The father of Minister Nay Luett is reported to have been assassinated, among others. End comment.

The Minister then reviewed the close association of the Montagnards with the Americans first, as Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) in Special Forces Camps and later, as interpreters and Area Specialists with USAID. Everyone of these men who had worked closely with the Americans over the years was now a man marked to be killed, he said. Those who have held public offices in the GVN, from the Minister down to the Deputy Province Chiefs for Ethnic Minority Affairs and the Hamlet Chiefs, he said, would certainly be killed if the NVA takes over.

If the Government plans to make a determined stand and fight, he said, the Montagnards are willing to fight. However, because of erroneous reports, some printed in the Vietnamese and foreign press, that FULRO rebels were actively fighting with the NVA, the South Vietnamese were also now suspicious and vindictive towards the tribesmen. "Both sides are now out to kill the Montagnards", he said, "and now we ask for the protection of the U.S. Government. If we can get the 1,000 targeted individuals out to the U.S., Australia or Canada, they can carry on the fight by diplomatic and political means to attract the attention of the United Nations and the world to the genocide of the Montagnard race."

Mr. Touch Han Tho said there were nearly a million Montagnards who were now the target of both North and South Vietnamese. Unless something were done to protect them, genocide was their sure fate. He asked USG support in putting this issue before the Human Rights Council of the United Nations. *(not con)*

From outside the country, the Minister continued, or as representatives at the "Peace Conference" to come, Montagnard leaders might try to reach some sort of common ground with the Communist Montagnards. Those tribesmen who went to Hanoi in 1954, he said, did so in a sincere effort to improve the lot of their Montagnard brothers. Those who had stayed and fought with the GVN had done so for the same reasons. Both Communist and Free Montagnards wanted to improve the life of their people. He was confident they could agree on the broad things that need to be done and together they would be an influence against the NVA and for the preservation of the Montagnard people.

The Minister then said that he did not know what advice he should now give to his people. If the GVN does stabilize a position to defend the Capital and the Delta, he is confident he could persuade Montagnards to join in the defense. It might even be more effective if the Montagnards were organized into small guerrilla bands to work in NVA occupied territories of MR I and MR II. To do this effectively they would need organization, advice and practical support from the USG. He said he thought he could easily organize guerrilla bands of 50 or more in every Highland province to harrass the enemy, report on his movements, and carry out sabotage missions in coordination with ARVN maneuvers. At the moment there is too much suspicion by the GVN. He would need intervention by the USG to convince ARVN to cooperate.

If the GVN did not intend to fight, it was better to advise his people to go into the jungle or to stay quietly in their hamlets.

Mr. Pierre K'Briuh said that the NVA offer of autonomy for the Montagnards in the Highlands had a very strong appeal for all Montagnards. He suggested that if the GVN wanted the support of the tribesmen it must counter-balance the NVA offer by assurances of Montagnard suzerainty over their traditional areas when they are retaken by the GVN. He asked for evacuation of the leadership and of the Montagnard students.

Minister Luett said, "The Montagnard people are not afraid to die. They will fight to regain their lands but they do not want to be killed senselessly like animals. If the GVN intends to take back the Highlands, we will fight, if they let us, but if they don't hold at the eleventh parallel, we want your protection so that the seed of the Montagnard will not disappear. Those who were in the US Special Forces, who were American Employees, Son Thon Cadre, or who held positions in the GVN need your assistance and protection to survive."

The morale of the Armed Forces and people is very low, he said. The 300 million dollars worth of U.S. equipment now, will not be enough to stimulate the will to take back the lost territory. What is needed now, he said, is some strong action by the United States and a strong, clear line of action by the GVN.

At the last Cabinet Meeting on Saturday, April 29, Minister Nay Luett said, all the Ministers complained that important decisions affecting the surrender of the Highlands had been taken without any discussion with the Cabinet. The Prime Minister himself complained that he had not been consulted. The General's Council, too, had been ignored, he said. No one knew what the Government was going to do, why it had done what it had done, nor who was making the decisions. The Buddhists, Catholics and the Upper House had called on the President to resign. There was no response, no positive explanation, no direction to the people, he said.

The Minister then said that he would like Mr. Jacobson's advice on what he should do to assist those Montagnards now in enemy held territory. Some were now on the beaches in the coastal provinces, others were in the jungle and some were along the roads. He was confident they would respond to radio broadcasts by the Minister, or to leaflets signed by all those leaders present. Should he encourage the Montagnards to make their way to Saigon by all possible means and join in the defense of the city and the Delta? Should he ask them to stay where they are but to form guerrilla cells to sabotage and harrass the enemy in rear areas? If they did so, would they be supported? Should he tell them to live in the forest until it is safe to return to their villages? In the present vacuum of national policy, he needed informed advice.

Mr. Jacobson said that all our information indicated that the GVN intended to defend Saigon and he was confident they would consolidate their forces to do so. He then said that many of the issues raised by the Minister had serious, even international implications, and he would need time to consider them carefully before responding.

Mr. Jacobson then asked Mr. Prosser to prepare a minute of the meeting and to have it ready for his study, on Saturday, April 5.