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THE MONTAGNARD REVOLT IN DARLAC: 9/64

HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR ON MICROFILM

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

AIRGRAM

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FROM : Amembassy SAIGON

DATE: October 16, 1964

SUBJECT: Provincial Reporting: The Montagnard Rebellion in Darlac and Quang Duc Provinces.

REF :

SUMMARY

The rebellion which occurred among Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) troops in several special forces camps in Darlac and Quang Duc Provinces in late September was almost exclusively a Rhade affair, although it was viewed by the Rhade rebels themselves and many other montagnards as a "montagnard" act against Vietnamese repression. The relatively advanced political consciousness of the Rhade tribesmen and their revered leader Y Bham, who was an outspoken exponent of montagnard rights, are undoubtedly two of the important factors in explaining the development of this rebellion. Little is known, however, about the organization behind the revolt and it is not clear what role Y Bham actually played in the affair. There are some unconfirmed reports of possible Viet Cong, French and Cambodian involvement in the rebellion, but there is no definite evidence to confirm that any outside force controlled the organization which lay behind it. CIDG Rhade during the rebellion did, however, threaten to solicit "foreign" support if the United States did not support the montagnards.

While the original plan for the rebellion apparently envisaged a coordinated and simultaneous movement of all the affected CIDG camps, the execution of the revolt failed largely from lack of direction and adequate communications and in some cases from the strong intercession of U.S. Special Forces in the camps. Another glaring weakness of the rebel organization was the absence of a definite program of goals.

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During the rebellion no leader came forth to present the government with the demands of the rebels, although several leaders from the Buon Eneo training camp discussed montagnard demands with the II Corps Commander on the first day of the revolt. During and since the rebellion the CIDG leadership and rank-and-file soldiers in the affected camps have indicated their desire for the establishment of a separate montagnard president with subordinate ministries and a montagnard army.

Many Vietnamese officials have placed a good part of the blame for the rebellion on the American programs in the highlands, and in particular on those special forces camps where the USSF until recently have exercised de facto (although not de jure) command. While assembling a large number of well-armed montagnards as in the special forces camp did present extremely fertile ground for anyone wishing to sow rebellious ideas, there is no evidence that the presence of the USSF or their relationship with the Vietnamese actually contributed to the revolt.

There are plans to bring the CIDG groups under stricter military discipline and more direct ARVN control. However, unless steps are taken at the same time to change the feelings of the individual montagnard soldier toward the Vietnamese, further restiveness remains a distinct possibility even under new command arrangements.

The referenced Embassy telegram briefly summarized some of the basic causes of the Vietnamese-Montagnard antagonism which provided the motive force behind the recent montagnard rebellion in Darlac and Quang Duc Provinces three weeks ago. The purpose of this airgram is to analyze this rebellion in somewhat more detail to determine to the extent possible with the sketchy information available why the longstanding montagnard resentment against real and imagined Vietnamese persecutions erupted into this shortlived, but bloody, rebellion when and where it did. An attempt will also be made to suggest some of the implications this rebellion has had and will continue to have on Vietnamese-montagnard relations in the highlands.

1. Dramatis Personae

a. Rhade Rebellion

The most obvious but nonetheless important characteristic of the recent rebellion was the fact that it was essentially a Rhade exercise. The vast majority of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) forces in the affected special forces camps and the trainees in the Buon Eneo special training camp are from the Rhade tribe, the principal montagnard group in Darlac province. (There were a few M'Nong and Djarai tribesmen in several of the camps.) There has been no evidence which has come to light which suggests that there were any efforts made to recruit the support of members of montagnards in other provinces or other tribes for the rebellion. What is important to realize, however, that while it was a Rhade rebellion, the average Rhade involved in it said, and probably believed, he was acting on behalf of all the montagnards in their struggle against Vietnamese oppression. Similarly,

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there is already evidence available which indicates that montagnards in other provinces and in other tribes are looking upon the event in the same light (though many might not entirely agree with the manner the rebellion was carried out). While the GVN initially looked upon the rebellion as an isolated event involving only one group, it has fortunately come around to a more enlightened view that at least in part the rebellion was a manifestation of more universal montagnard grievances.

The Rhade tribesmen in general have attained higher literacy and educational levels than most of the other montagnard groups in South Vietnam. With these the Rhade seem to have acquired a more advanced political consciousness and the Rhade tribe provided a nucleus for the montagnard autonomy movement in 1957-58. Another important factor which may help explain why it was the Rhade among all the other tribal groups which took it upon themselves to act unilaterally against the GVN is the character of their leadership. The Rhade of Darlac have in the person of Y Bham, the former deputy province chief of montagnard affairs, a highly respected and revered hereditary leader who is an outspoken exponent of montagnard rights. For his role as one of the leaders in the 1957-58 montagnard autonomy movement, Y Bham spent over five years in Diem prisons. His release from prison after the governmental reshuffle of January 30, 1964 and his subsequent appointment as deputy province chief in his home province of Darlac, however, seemed to have done little to temper his radical views on montagnard self-government and montagnard control of the highlands. In private conversations with Americans Y Bham openly discussed his desire for a separate montagnard government and montagnard army and asked for support from the United States. (As an example, see memorandum of conversation contained in A-637 of May 6, 1964.) It seemed clear that Y Bham was at least keeping the ideas of montagnard autonomy alive among his fellow Rhade tribesmen.

Y Bham's role in the rebellion is somewhat more obscure. A close friend of Y Bham, Y Ton, a leader at the Buon Enao training camp, recently informed an American that the rebellion had been fomented by more radical elements among the Rhade who thereby upset the negotiations Y Bham had been carrying out with the government on behalf of the montagnards (FVS-10,828 of September 29, 1964). On the other hand, two CIDG at one of the camps involved in the rebellion informed the reporting officer that Y Bham had in fact organized the rebellion. (See Embassy's A-258 of October 5, 1964 for other conflicting evidence regarding Y Bham's role in the rebellion.) What is perhaps most important in this regard is the fact that the vast majority of the Rhade involved in the rebellion looked and still look upon Y Bham as their leader. And because of Y Bham's prominent role in the Rhade tribe it is hardly likely the rebellion could have been organized without the support or at least the strong sympathy of this leader.

In addition to Y Bham, several other Rhade civil servants from Darlac province disappeared during the rebellion and apparently took part in it. Another former leader of autonomy movement leader, Y Ju Ebam, a USOM interpreter until the rebellion, also turned up missing during the period of the rebellion and is believed to be one of the leaders in the organization behind it. Except for the several civil servants from Ban Me Thuot and the district headquarters of Darlac province, however, there were apparently few Rhade outside the CIDG camps and Buon Enao who were directly involved in the rebellion. To date no evidence has come to light which

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would indicate that any plans had been laid for the involvement of montagnard hamlets or montagnard civil guard or self-defense corps units in the rebellion. In answer to a question of the reporting officer, a company commander at Ban Don described that lack of involvement of the montagnard hamlets as an "organizational mistake," adding that many mistakes had been made during the rebellion. During the rebellion province officials in Darlac pointed to the fact that the provincial forces and the montagnard hamlets did not give support to the rebels, which indicated that they did not have the sympathies of the Rhade in general. This is clearly a rather dubious assumption, as there are unquestionably few differences of opinion between the Rhade in the hamlets and those now in the CIDG, particularly on questions involving montagnard-Vietnamese relations. The montagnards in the hamlets, most of whom are unarmed, would of course be less likely to move until it was clear they had at least a good chance of success.

b. Viet Cong Involvement

GVN officials in general conclude that the Viet Cong were behind the montagnard rebellion in Darlac and Quang Duc, an assumption which is partially based on the feeling that the montagnards are incapable of organizing a large, coordinated operation. (This of course completely overlooks the fact that the rebellion failed in many important respects largely because of inadequate organization and communications.)

While the Embassy has no substantiated evidence that the rebellion was a Viet Cong organized plot, there were some indications that the Viet Cong may have sought to influence its organization. First, in Ben Sar Pa and Bu Prong special forces camps, the CIDG had copies of, and passed out, two declarations of a so-called "High Committee of the United Struggle of the Oppressed Race (FULRO)" which employed several standard Communist phrases such as "genocide," "anti-imperialist," and attacks on SEATO. (Both were alleged signed in the name of Y Bham.) Secondly, two letters which were received at Buon Sar Pa during the rebellion, apparently signed but not written by Y Bham, contained several phrases and an uncompromising attitude which strongly suggested Viet Cong inspiration. Lastly, in at least two of the special forces camps the CIDG rebels informed the USSF personnel that the Viet Cong had agreed not to attack during the rebellion. As it turned out the Viet Cong did not in fact molest or attack any of the camps involved in the rebellion, although there were times when several of them were dangerously vulnerable. This fact, of course, does not necessarily prove Viet Cong complicity in the rebellion, for they may have, as in other political crises in South Vietnam, sat back and left the disintegrating forces go to work.

Hanoi Radio and Liberation Broadcasting Station broadcasts during and since the revolt strongly suggested the Communists viewed the event with mixed feelings. Several propaganda items issued in the name of the montagnard autonomy movement affiliated with National Front for Liberation of South Vietnam (NFLSVN) gave support to the idea of montagnard autonomy. Other items, however, emphasized the unity of the Vietnamese and the montagnards and attacked the U.S.-Khanh attempt to divide the people, suggesting the Viet Cong believe racial friction could hurt their efforts in the highlands. Viet Cong fears that the rebellion might result in government conces-

sions to the montagnards were possibly reflected in other radio broadcasts warning the montagnards not to be fooled by government promises.

During the rebellion a rumor developed in Ban Me Thuot that one of the organizers behind the rebellion was Y Bih a former autonomy movement leader who reportedly joined the ranks of the Viet Cong after the demise of that movement in 1958. The Embassy does not know on what information, if any, this report is based nor can it judge its accuracy.

c. Foreign Involvement

From the very beginning of the revolt many ARVN officers and GVN officials in Ban Me Thuot stated the belief that there had been French and/or Cambodian support given to the montagnard rebels. Again as in the case of the Viet Cong, the Embassy has no evidence to substantiate these assumptions. Prior to the rebellion the province chief privately revealed what he felt to be a French-Cambodian plot to foster neutralism among the montagnards. His revelations however, were based largely on unconfirmed evidence (see FVS-10801 of September 26). The short, and as yet unexplained, meeting between Y Bham, several CIDG rebels from Buon Sar Pa and three Frenchmen just outside Ban Me Thuot on the morning of September 20, helped give rise to the belief that the French were actually involved in the rebellion. The fact that this meeting took place in the presence of a USSF captain from Bon Sar Pa who had been forced to accompany the rebels into Ban Me Thuot, strongly suggests, however, the meeting did not involve an intrigue behind the rebellion. The captain, however, who does not speak or understand French, was able to report only that CIDG seemed to be giving the Frenchmen propaganda leaflets.

Another as yet unsubstantiated report of foreign involvement came from Bu Prang where CIDG informed the USSF personnel that several members of the CIDG had been met across the border in Cambodia by a Cambodian army officer who drove them off in an automobile toward Camp Le Rollard. During the rebellion General Lam informed US advisors that the leaders of the rebellion were located at a village named Bu Nrong (YU 750720) which is located only a few kilometers from Bon Sar Pa special forces camp where Y Bham was last seen. The Embassy has no evidence to confirm either of these reports.

A few other bits of evidence, however, hint at possible Cambodian involvement in the montagnard rebellion. For one thing the declaration of the "United Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Race" was issued in the name of the Kmer Kampuchea Krom (Cambodians in South Vietnam) as well as those of the montagnard tribes and the Chams. Secondly, the declaration was printed verbatim by Neak Cheat Niyum, the semi-official Cambodian government newspaper, and later carried on Phnom Penh radio along with a news report of the montagnard rebellion in Darlac.

Interestingly, in one or two of the special forces camps, CIDG rebels informed the USSF personnel that if the United States didn't help the montagnards in the fight against the Vietnamese, they would get support from other (unspecified) foreign countries. While this was probably an idle threat it reveals a feeling prevalent among many montagnards they still have a special relationship with the French. Perhaps a further indication of this belief is the fact that since the conclusion of the rebellion a rumor has been circulating among montagnards in Darlac and other

provinces that Y Bham has gone to France.

2. Organization

What the montagnard rebellion had in daring, it quite obviously lacked in organization. The original plan for the rebellion apparently envisaged the CIDG troops from five special camps in Quang Duc and Darlac province seizing control of the camps and moving in to take over Ban Me Thuot and certain district headquarters in those two provinces. As it actually turned out, after the initial phase of the rebellion during which the rebels seized control in at least three of the camps and troops from three camps moved toward Ban Me Thuot, it seemed to die on the vine from an apparent lack of direction (and undoubtedly also in part from direct U.S. discouragement and opposition).

Very little is known as yet about the organization behind the rebellion or the circumstances in which it was formed. A USSF officer in one of the camps has stated that on the basis of some remarks made to him by some CIDG back in August, he now feels the rebellion had been originally planned for late August and was postponed for some reason. The remarks of several CIDG soldiers from several camps to the reporting officer suggested that while there were those in each camp who obviously knew of the plans for the rebellion long before September 19, many of the CIDG were informed only at the time of the event. A CIDG in Bu Prang stated the rebel commander informed them of the revolt only an hour before they tried to take over the camp. In this camp the USSF personnel were able to reestablish control of that camp after the rebel leader left with some of the CIDG troops during the night of September 19 and 20. The other CIDG, while in sympathy with the rebels, were quite obviously left without leadership or instructions. A CIDG in Ban Don stated that in the middle of the night September 19-20 he was awakened and told they were moving on Ban Me Thuot, without a reason being given. It was only later, he said, that he found out the purpose of the move. In Buon Brieng where the USSF never lost control of the situation, the preparations for the rebellion quite obviously went awry. The Battalion Commander there refused to move the CIDG out of the camp and apparently there were no other rebel leaders strong enough to force the rebellion forward in the camp. The rebels from Ban Don were willing to move back to their camp after they realized Buon Brieng had not joined the revolt.

Lack of communications severely handicapped the rebels after the morning of September 20. Although the original plan evidently made provision for the camps to maintain communication by voice-radio, contact between certain camps was apparently never made. USSF personnel at Ban Don report that although a radio operator from Buon Sar Pa came to Ban Don at the time of the rebellion, communications between those two camps were not established. Voice communication between Ban Don and Buon Brieng were, however, maintained. Montagnards at the Buon Enao training camp also stated they were not in contact with Y Bham or other rebel leaders.

Perhaps the most glaring deficiency of the rebellion was the fact that from the very start it seemed to lack a definite program of goals. On the morning of

September 20 the CIDG from Buon Sar Pa informed Americans in Ban Me Thuot that they wanted to have a montagnard president, montagnard army and complete montagnard autonomy in the highlands. The declaration of the "United Front" passed out by the CIDG rebels from Buon Sar Pa, however, merely called for a struggle against the American and Vietnamese "imperialists" and made no specific demands. (The montagnard leaders in most of the camps seemed to pay little attention to the existence of the "United Front" and did not seem to place much importance in it. Many of the rank-and-file CIDG troops quite obviously have never heard of it even now.)

On the evening of September 20 montagnard leaders from Buon Enao training camp met with General Co, II Corps commander, and presented him with the following demands:

- 1) Montagnard representation at various levels of government.
- 2) Assignment of montagnard personnel in the armed forces in the highlands only.
- 3) Equality for montagnards in government.
- 4) The withdrawal of Vietnamese special forces from the CIDG and their replacement by trained montagnard officers.
- 5) Better education for the montagnards and the teaching of the montagnard languages in the schools of the highlands.

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While these were the most specific demands presented to the GVN throughout the rebellion, it was never clear whether or not these montagnards were actually talking on behalf of the Rhade leadership. Despite efforts of the government throughout the rebellion to contact Y Bham, who was considered to be the principal spokesman for the montagnards, no one came forth to negotiate. No indication was ever received from the rebel leadership that it was actually willing to negotiate with the government, though one rather mysterious letter signed but apparently not written by Y Bham laid down a demand for the evacuation of ARVN from Ban Me Thuot as a prerequisite to any negotiations.

Conversations that the reporting officer recently had with CIDG in two of the camps suggest many of them still feel strongly about the institution of a montagnard president and a montagnard army. Several CIDG stated that they would continue the rebellion if the government did not fulfill these demands. It appeared, however, that the CIDG had lost contact with the Rhade leadership at least for the time being and it is doubtful they would move again without definite orders from those leaders.

3. The CIDG Program and the Rebellion

When the montagnard rebellion broke out in the Special Forces camps of Darlac and Quang Duc provinces many Vietnamese army officers and GVN officials were quick to lay the blame squarely at the feet of the Americans. While it is doubtful that responsible GVN officials actually believed that the United States organized the rebellion (though some actually accused the Americans of doing just this), many maintained and still maintain that the rebellion is a direct result of American-sponsored programs in the highlands. The American programs of training and arming of montagnard hamlet militia began in 1961 and development of the special forces camp network in the highlands have long been viewed with a wary eye by many

Vietnamese, who feared a rebirth of montagnard demands for autonomy.

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Particularly galling to many Vietnamese have been the special forces camps which although nominally under the control of the Vietnamese special forces units, have in the majority of cases been under the real control of the USSF personnel. In control of the finances and of the intelligence nets, and in most camps, being the actual decision-makers and planners, the USSF have been up until recently the real commanders of the CIDG camps, in any meaningful definition of the word "command". There are many reasons for the development of this arrangement with the two most important being the understandable desire of the USSF personnel to get a job done and the below average quality of the Vietnamese special forces officers in the CIDG camps.

But while it must be admitted that USSF were in actual command of most special forces camps, it does not necessarily follow that this arrangement contributed to the rebellion. The very presence of the Americans, who generally treated the montagnards very well, sharply contrasted, in the eyes of the montagnards, with that of the Vietnamese who often mistreated and occasionally robbed them. (For example, in one of the camps in the revolt, the Vietnamese Special Forces commander is known to have been exacting pay from the CIDG.) It is also probably safe to say that in some cases it has been the presence of the Americans in many camps which has actually prevented further Vietnamese-montagnard friction from developing.

It, of course, must be admitted that the assembling of large number of well-armed montagnards provided fertile ground for those who wished to propagate rebellious ideas. But it is somewhat dangerous to place the blame for the rebellion on the CIDG program in the highlands as some Vietnamese officials do, and to believe that the solution lies simply in a transformation of the CIDG forces into a different type of military unit under more direct control of the ARVN command structure (a plan presently being considered by the GVN). Unless the feelings of the individual montagnard soldiers are changed by one means or other, any large aggregation of montagnard troops will offer an opportunity for rebellion to develop.

The GVN has already moved to satisfy one of the montagnard demands voiced before and during the recent rebellion, the demand to have their own montagnard officers. Montagnard ARVN officers have been assigned to the CIDG camps which took part in the rebellion and plans are apparently underway to increase the number of montagnard special forces in the other camps of II Corps. While this is obviously the most practiceable solution to this knotty problem, it should clearly not be viewed as a panacea. During the recent rebellion, in two of the camps whose members carried out violence against the Vietnamese the principal rebel leaders were montagnard members of the Vietnamese special forces, there is certainly no guarantee that something along the same line could not happen again in the future. If, however, the montagnards are given their own leaders, hopefully this will remove one of their important grievances against the Vietnamese government.

For the Ambassador:

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