SUBJECT: LOWER HOUSE INTERPELLATES FOUR MINISTERS ON PHUNG HOANG (PHOENIX) PROGRAM

THU'S PRESENTATION, HOWEVER, INTERIOR MINISTER TRAN THIEN KHIEM ADMITTED THAT SOME INJUSTICES HAD OCCURRED, PARTICULARLY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, AND PLEDGED TO ATTEMPT REMEDY THEM. THE CONCILIATORY RESPONSES BY KHIEM AND THE OTHER MINISTERS MAY HAVE HELPED TO DEFUSE A WIDELY PUBLICIZED AND POTENTIALLY EXPLOSIVE ISSUE. LH WILL DETERMINE STAND ON THE INTERPELLATION AT A LATER, SO FAR UNSCHEDULED, SESSION. END SUMMARY.

ON JUNE 20, INTERIOR MINISTER TRAN THIEN KHIEM, DEFENSE MINISTER NGUYEN VAN VY, JUSTICE MINISTER LE VAN THU AND SECRETARY OF STATE INCHARGE OF RELATIONS WITH THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY VO HUU THU TESTIFIED BEFORE A PLENARY SESSION OF THE LOWER HOUSE ON THE GOVERNMENT'S CONTROVERSIAL PHUNG HOANG PROGRAM. INTERPELLATION HAD BEEN REQUESTED BY 86 DEPUTIES AFTER A LH DELEGATION COMPOSED OF HO NGOC CU, HO NGOC NHUAN AND NGO CONG DU Duc, RESPECTIVELY CHAIRMEN OF THE INTERIOR, RD AND ANTI-CORRUPTION COMMITTEES, RETURNED FROM AN INSPECTION TRIP TO VINH BINH PROVINCE BEARING REPORTS OF ILLEGAL ARRESTS, TORTURE, CORRUPTION AND ABUSES OF AUTHORITY CARRIED OUT IN THE NAME OF THE PHUNG HOANG PROGRAM.

SECRETARY OF STATE THU BEGAN THE PROCEEDINGS BY OUTLINING THE PHUNG HOANG PROGRAM WHICH AIMS AT COORDINATING THE RESOURCES OF THE VARIOUS INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY AGENCIES (BOTH US AND VIETNAMESE) IN AN EFFORT TO ELIMINATE KEY MEMBERS OF THE VIET CONG INFRASTRUCTURE. THU EMPHASIZED
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ON F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 SAIGON 12646

THAT THE PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES OF AMASSING SOLID EVIDENCE AGAINST VC MADE IT NECESSARY TO ARREST INDIVIDUALS SUSPECTED OF BEING VC FOR INTERROGATION AND FURTHER INVESTIGATION. HE POINTED OUT THAT SUSPECTS WHOSE VC FUNCTION WAS DETERMINED BY A PROVINCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE TO FALL WITHIN A CERTAIN LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE COULD BE DETAINED FOR UP TO TWO YEARS WITHOUT BEING ACCUSED OR CONVICTED OF COMMITTING ANY SPECIFIC ACT. THU SAID A SUSPECT ENJOYED CERTAIN LIMITED RIGHTS. FOR EXAMPLE, THE PROVINCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE IS REQUIRED TO DECIDE TO DETAIN OR RELEASE A VC SUSPECT WITHIN ONE MONTH OF HIS ARREST. MOREOVER, WHILE CONCEIVING SOME ABUSES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, MINISTER THU SAID THAT SOPHISTICATED SCIENTIFIC METHODS THAT AVOIDED TORTURE AND FORCE WERE USED TO INTERROGATE VC SUSPECTS. HE ALSO SAID THAT VILLAGE CHIEFS WERE CONSULTED BEFORE SUSPECTS PICKED UP DURING MILITARY OPERATIONS WERE FORMALLY ARRESTED.

4. THU'S PAT EXPLANATION OF THE PROCEDURES OF ARREST, INTERROGATION AND PROSECUTION OF SUSPECTS DREW IMMEDIATE AND HEATED REJOINDERS FROM NUMEROUS DEPUTIES OF ALL POLITICAL PERSUASIONS WHO CITED CASES IN THEIR OWN PROVINCES WHERE THERE HAD BEEN SERIOUS ABUSES. NGO CONG Duc, ONE
OF THE DEPUTIES FROM VINH BINH, CHARGED THAT THE POLICE CHIEF OF HIS PROVINCE HAD KNOWINGLY ARRESTED INNOCENT PEOPLE FOR THE PURPOSE OF EXORTION. DEPUTY TRUONG NGOC THU, A BUDDHIST FROM THUA THIEN, ALONG WITH SEVERAL OTHER DEPUTIES ALLEGED THAT SUSPECTS WERE OFTEN DETAINED FOR SIX TO EIGHT MONTHS (INSTEAD OF THE ONE MONTH MAXIMUM) BEFORE THEIR CASES WERE CONSIDERED BY THE PROVINCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE AND THAT SUSPECTS WERE FREQUENTLY TORTURED TO EXTRACT CONFESSIONS. SHE ADDED THAT THE PEOPLE HATED THE GOVERNMENT AFTER THE INITIATION OF THE PHUNG HOANG PROGRAM. SEVERAL DEPUTIES STRONGLY PROTESTED INSTANCES IN WHICH AMERICAN TROOPS DETAINED SUSPECTS DURING MILITARY OPERATIONS WITHOUT THE PRESENCE OF VIETNAMESE AUTHORITIES (WHICH IS ILLEGAL) AND DID NOT IMMEDIATELY TURN THEM OVER TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES. DEPUTY HO NGOC NHUAN, A SAIGON CATHOLIC, CHARGED THAT VILLAGE CHIEFS WERE NOT CONSULTED BEFORE VC SUSPECTS WERE ARRESTED DURING MILITARY OPERATIONS AS MINISTERS THU AND KHIEM HAD ALLEGED.

MINISTER KHIEM, WHO EARLIER HAD ADMITTED BEFORE A MEETING OF THE LH INTERIOR COMMITTEE THAT THERE HAD BEEN SOME INDISCRIMINATE ARRESTS AND DETentions IN THE PROVINCES, CONCEDED THAT SOME OF THE DEPUTIES' CHARGES WERE TRUE AND PROMISED TO INVESTIGATE AND TAKE ACTION AGAINST OFFENDING OFFICIALS. HE SAID THAT THE JOINT GENERAL STAFF HAD ALREADY INTERVENED WITH THE AMERICANS TO PREVENT UNILATERAL AMERICAN ARRESTS OF SUSPECTS DURING MILITARY OPERATIONS (VC CAUGHT IN GLAGRANTE DELICTO BEING AN EXCEPTION) AND THAT SUCH INCIDENTS HAD BEEN REDUCED. KHIEM PREDICTED THAT AS MORE VILLAGE OFFICIALS WERE ELECTED, THE SEPARATION OF POWER AT THE LOCAL LEVEL WOULD BE REINFORCED AND CONSEQUENTLY THE ABUSES BY SECURITY AGENCIES WOULD DIMINISH. KHIEM CONCLUDED BY EMPHASIZING THAT, CONSIDERING THE DAMAGE CAUSED BY VC TERROR, THE BENEFITS DERIVED FROM THE PHOENIX PROGRAM FAR OUTWEIGHED THE ABUSES.

THE LONG SESSION ENDED AFTER ATTENDANCE HAD DROPPED FROM THE INITIAL NINETY-FIVE DEPUTIES TO THIRTY AND IT WAS DECIDED TO REQUEST THE MINISTERS TO RESPOND IN WRITING TO MANY STILL UNANSWERED QUESTIONS. THE LH WILL DETERMINE ITS STAND ON THE INTERPELLATION AT ANOTHER SESSION.

COMMENT: THE PHUNG HOANG PROGRAM IS A CONTROVERSIAL ONE
AND UNDENIABLY, SOME INJUSTICES HAVE BEEN COMMITTED IN ITS NAME. HOWEVER, PRESS REPORTS OF THE DEPUTIES' FINDINGS IN VINH BINH HAVE KEPT THE ISSUE BEFORE THE PUBLIC. HOWEVER, THE MINISTERS' SYMPATHETIC AND REASONABLE RESPONSES DURING THE INTERPELLATION, AS WELL AS MINISTER KHIEM'S PREVIOUS ADMISSION OF ABUSES AND PROMISE TO ATTEMPT TO REMEDY THEM, MAY HAVE DEFUSED THE ISSUE TO A CONSIDERABLE EXTENT.

RUNKER