THE PHUNG HOANG FIASCIO (v)

R. W. Koner, 30 July 1970

(C) In my view, the continued lack of an adequate effort to neutralize
the clandestine Vietnamese politico-administrative apparatus is one of the
greater VN and U.S. failures of the entire Vietnam war.

(C) Since 1955 or earlier this VC infrastructure (VCI for short) of ex-
perienced hard core cadres has been recognized as central to VC ability

to mount a rural rebellion. Yet, despite the realization of this fact
by many perceptive VN and U.S. officials, no concerted large-scale attack
on the VCI was even begun until mid-1967. The chequered history of the Phung
Hoang Program since that time is dismal. It was not even tentatively
accepted by the VN until end-1967, and was not the subject of top-level
GNV push until after the Tet Mau Than shock in mid-1968. Since that time
the GVN, pushed by a small U.S. advisory effort, has been trying manfully
to breathe life into a program which still largely exists on paper, and
has been only marginally effective in practice.

(C) Hence I spent more time looking into Phung Hoang on my 7-19 July 1970
visit than into anything else. My observations are based on talks with
Vietnamese and U.S. officials in almost a score of provinces, all four
regions, and Saigon. I visited, albeit hastily, a dozen PIOCCs, half
dozens BTOCCs, and two or three VIOCCs (these latter exist mostly in name
only); talked with the GVN and U.S. Phung Hoang staffs in Saigon; my
friend Colonel Phuoc (the chief Phung Hoang officer in IV Corps); and
Thieu, Phuc, National Police Chief Hai, Coleby, Jacobsen, Magee, and his
deputy Colonel Hoang in Saigon; plus numerous province and district chiefs
and advisers. So what I say is based on a current reading as well as on
my previous 2-1/2 years running our pacification advisory effort in Vietnam.

(C) Nor do I wish to be unduly critical. My deliberate focus is more
on what's wrong than on what's right. After all, the U.S. did more over
the last two or three years to get a systematic attack launched on the
VCI than in the previous thirteen. At least the critical importance of
this mission is now widely recognized, procedures have been laid down,
measurement systems established, and some kind of inter-agency GVN
management structure built where literally none existed before. But this
is far from good enough!

(C) I deeply believe that as the military war winds down, and the con-

cflict assumes more of a politico-subversive character, a much more intensive
and sophisticated effort to destroy the VCI becomes well-nigh indispensable
to a satisfactory outcome. While it must be primarily a GVN effort, the
U.S. must press to give it highest priority and provide whatever help is
necessary to this end. The cost to us would be wholly trifling — if we
quadrupled our support it would still cost us less annually than 1 day
of the military war. How to jack up this vital program is the subject
of this report.

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ARNOLD H. DADIAN

CPLF AID/CEA

Date: MAY 21, 1980
I. THE VCI THREAT

(C) One need hardly restate these days the key role played in the Vietnam War by the highly structured VC-politico-administrative apparatus. Staffed mostly by experienced, long-time cadre, it provides political direction, recruiting, proselytizing, propaganda, administration, finance and taxing, and logistic support for the VC. It also plays a military role, frequently directing guerrillas and local forces at least up to province level. Many VCI double in brass as military commanders. Last but not least, the VCI conducts the highly effective terror campaign against GVN officials and population at all levels.

(c) For years we had no good fix whatsoever on the real strength of the VCI. As late as 1963 the best MACV or CIA could do was to produce T/O-based estimates of how large a fully fleshed out VCI structure would be. Even those varied widely because of differences over what categories should be included. As a rough guess VCI strength at its apex in 1965-66 may have been as high as 120,000-150,000. But there was no way of measuring either the degree of inevitable attrition (if only as by-product of military and pacification operations) or at what rate the VCI could fill these gaps by now recruiting.

(C) We now have a much better, though still not solid, fix via the painful but essential process of building up name by name files on known or suspected VCI. MACV Phoenix staff's estimate as of May 1970 is 71,673 VCI (about 50 percent of T/O strength), of whom some 44,000 have been identified. Phoenix staff thinks that July VCI strength will be down around 67,000 -- largely because we've been carrying GVN at some 11,000 whereas captured documents now reveal its whole T/O as only 2,223. GVN figures are much higher, but in June a joint neutralization report will be instigated as a means of reconciling this disparity. John Vann in IV Corps favors removing from the O/E rolls all VCI on whom the latest info is more than a year old; I strongly doubt, however, that the fact that our feeble Phung Haung apparatus had nothing on them for a year is indicative of much. Moreover, until we find better means of identification (photos and fingerprints), we may have as many as 10-12 dossiers on the same men (he may have several AKAs, operate in several districts and provinces, have several different VCI jobs).

(C) Of great significance, well over half the estimated VCI are concentrated in only eight hard-core provinces -- 19,000 in the Delta provinces of Kien Hoa, Vinh Long, Vinh Dinh, and Dien Tho; 15,172 in the three southern provinces of I Corps; and 3,688 in Binh Dinh. Incidentally, only in Binh Dinh did I find a Phung Haung program worthy of the name. This suggests that concentrating GVN/V.US. priority efforts in these eight provinces -- instead of distributing them in true bureaucratic style over all 44 -- would pay high dividends.

II. PERFORMANCE TO DATE

(C) I quite agree with Bill Colby that we are vastly underestimating the VCI better than we realized! But we are far from having a good enough fix on
who they are to tell how much better. As usual, our order of battle
estimates are probably too high — both because of the natural tendency
of intelligence officers to overstate for safety's sake and because of
the inevitable time lag in getting confirmed data on results.

(C) Though VCI neutralization criteria keep changing (to weed out lower-
level marginal categories), the Phung Hoang reporting system claims
15,776 killed, captured, or rallied in 1968. This went up to 19,334 in
1969, despite the fact that the lowest "C" category was no longer ad-
missible. In 1970 criteria were further tightened to allow only those
actually sentenced rather than just captured, some 7,194 had been neu-
ralized by 25 May. Even if the figures are being fudged somewhat,
diapositive of 30-50,000 VCI in 1968-70 would seem a creditable performance.
Even if they were largely replaced, the quality of the replacements can
hardly be as high. Reports that some 100 North Vietnamese cadre are
being infiltrated per month also suggest that the VCI are meeting diffi-
culties. Lastly, whatever the figures on neutralizations, many more VCI
must have gone deeper underground or been harassed and had their per-
formance degraded by the Phung Hoang campaign. One VC document called
it the highest priority threat to the VC.

(C) But there is another side to this coin. Judging from the incredibly
poor dossiers at most FIOCCs and DIOCCs I visited, there is all too little
prior evidence available in most cases as to whether a man killed, cap-
tured, or rallied really is a VCI. Fingerprints are rarely used to
establish identification, and photos almost as little. Presumably more
evidence is gathered in post-capture interrogation, but I have my doubts.
Next, we still have little idea how many of the VCI who were captured
or rallied may have been released and gone back into business. Lastly,
the number of high-level cadre (district and above) neutralized is still
very small, though growing. They averaged only 31 per month in 1969.

(C) Indeed, the most important point is not that we are slowly attriting
the VCI but that this is mostly a bit-by-bit result of other factors
(gunning, artillery, regular military operations) rather than the result
of targeted police-type Phung Hoang operations. The direct contribu-
tion of Phung Hoang is probably modest indeed. Let me illustrate. According
to our Phung Hoang people, almost 50 percent of all VCI neutralizations
through May 1970 were by ARVN, RE/PF, or other military forces; this
strongly suggests they were a by-product of military operations. John
Yen points out that around 30-40 percent of all VCI neutralizations in
IV Corps provinces are killed — to him this clearly means talking; he
thinks half the kills are falsely listed as VCI due to lack of Phung Hoang
goals, and the rest are the product of ex post facto identification after
normal military operations.

(C) It is not that we have been sowing our oats any more since I left in
November 1969. Every district Key Leader report provided a FIOCC,
and about a year ago the Vietnamese started setting up VICOAs at village level (coincidental with the putting of National Police in the villages) Each region now has a GWN Phung Hoang school modelled on one started in IV Corps in October 1969. With great U.S. help, a new SOP for operations and reporting has been published, data on the VCI structure and categories (A, B, and C) widely disseminated. A new tracking system for following a VCI through every phase till he is put away is presumably now being put into use, though I saw no signs of it in the field. The all-important dossiers on each VCI are now being standardized. A major step forward was when Prime Minister Khiem stopped treating Phung Hoang as a classified operation (it never was, in my view) and started a publicity campaign to get popular support, and thus information. Posters and radio/TV coverage of specific VCI have produced some good individual results. But like most GWN publicity programs, it doesn't yet amount to much.

(C) The U.S. advisory effort has increased in number if not in quality, though it is still a peanut effort compared to our other investments in Vietnam. It is 95% military, the CIA having relinquished its joint participation in May 1969 (though it still makes some contributions) There are now 441 U.S. officers (plus a handful of civilians) assigned to Phoenix at district and above. In September we will start receiving the first 30 of 227 U.S. intelligence NCOs for the DIOCCs. Since our Phoenix advisers had to be trained from the bottom up for this atypical endeavor, we've run some 1,560 U.S. advisers through a course at Vung Tau since November 1968.

(C) Perhaps the most important development since mid-1969 is Prime Minister Khiem's recent May 1970 action transferring the GWN's tiny Central PH Office (CPhO) from his own staff to become a "bloc" (Directorate) in National Police Headquarters directly under Colonel Hai, its chief. This was done, I was told, to reinforce the police role as the chief PH action arm, and to find an organizational "home" for the CPhO. I have mixed feelings about this move. No matter what Khiem says, GWN officials will inevitably regard it as a downgrading of Phung Hoang for it to be under the National Police Chief, a colonel, rather than the Prime Minister. Second, stressing the police role cannot but result in lessening the already limited interest in Phung Hoang on the part of other RNAP and GWN agencies. It contradicts the original PH concept — that it would be essentially a management system to pull together the anti-VCI efforts of all GWN agencies. Third, the PH "bloc" is completely separate from the Key Special Branch "bloc" (and so are its U.S. advisers). So is the Police Field Force "bloc." Even if it makes sense to make the police the chief executors of Phung Hoang, this is a critical flaw.

(C) Moreover, there is a case where one of the most crucial of all current GWN priority missions — neutralizing the VCI — is given to one of the weakest and least effective GWN agencies, the National Police (see below).

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Date: MAY 21, 1980
III. WHY AREN'T WE DOING BETTER?

I looked mostly into just this question, and found quite a consensus.

(C) A. The haggard lack in vigorous high-level operational CVN leadership at the center. Thieu and Khanh seem genuinely behind Phung Hoang, and plug it on every occasion. But the President and Prime Minister can't run operational programs. In reality the senior full-time MI officer in LTC Thieu (his incompetent boss Colonel Song is apparently being kicked upstairs). Thieu works for the Director General of Police, himself only a Colonel. As I put it baldly to Thieu and Khanh: "There are 65 generals in RVNAF; how come only a Lieutenant Colonel to run Phung Hoang? How can he have clout with corps commanders?" What is needed is a hard-driving, bright, senior major general like Tran Tru Phong (new RD Minister and having it) selected as Minister of Interior or Vice Premier with across-the-board, full-time responsibility for Phung Hoang.

(C) B. Most Vietnamese corps commanders and middle-level officials don't pay much attention to Phung Hoang. Few corps commanders or province chiefs would even rate it among their first six priority tasks. As Colonel Than in Hue (probably the best CIVN province chief) told me: "Province and district chiefs are still graded mostly on how many enemy KIA, how many weapons captured, etc. If we want to change their attitude on Phung Hoang, Saigon and corps must give them a real feeling that it is top priority. They must change their whole philosophy as to priorities." He's dead right. Apathy is more prevalent than not. CORPS advisors feel that only Lam in I Corps and Trí in III Corps are really behind Phung Hoang. Lt. Lam in I Corps gives only lip service and his best MI man, Colonel Khanh, just left to become Binh Thuan province chief. N生死 the U.S. advisers in II Corps have much real group of Phung Hoang. According to the CORPS Phoenix staff, fully half the province chiefs don't really support Phung Hoang.

(C) C. Phung Hoang operations at the cutting edge (province and district) are only marginally effective in most cases. I got the distinct impression that most PIOCUs and BIOCUs are just "make work" operations, where groups of unqualified low-level Vietnamese and Americans are doing a duty job of paper pushing. There's no real life in their operation. Partly this is because Phung Hoang has not really succeeded (in most cases) in pulling together the military, police, and other agencies. Instead they pay lip service to Phung Hoang by detailing a few expendables to the BIOCUs and PIOCUs. Phung Hoang personnel also lack the command authority to order operations or even to coordinate effectively the other agencies whose collaboration is essential for effective operations. Files and dossier are not really shared, or information centralized in the MI offices; instead each agency still keeps its own files. Even the National Police are fragmented. For example, Special Branch (and its U.S. adviser) seem to run an almost completely separate operation (usually when I asked MI officers, "where are the Sp. Br. in documents, I was told they were over in the Special Branch in the PIC).
(C) D. There are abnormally few carefully targeted, police-type operations against key VCI. This was the whole concept of Phung Hoang—build up careful dossiers on key suspects, target them individually, pick them up for interrogation and sentencing if guilty. Except for a few Special Branch operations, this is just NOT being done. Only one PIHCC or DIHCC of all I visited was even focused on this technique. Given the pitiful dossiers shown me, I'm not surprised. A few had "ten most wanted VCI" lists, several had posters printed (but not much in evidence), but most PIH centers in the field showed few signs of life.

(C) E. In a war where we spend billions on high technology like sensors to locate enemy forces, we put hardly any effort into tried and tested police techniques used for decades. A comparison of our Phung Hoang effort with what the British did 1946-60 in Malaya makes one want to cry. So far as I can tell, fingerprints and photos are hardly even used (I found no fingerprint kits and few cameras in PIHCC/DIHCCs). We now have a fancy National Identification Records Center in Saigon with 5,446,000 prints filed, but I could not find a province where they had sent in a suspect's prints for checking against the central files. The new national ID card program has taken 4.7 million prints to date and has 2,795,000 cards issued, but these are being used mostly to detect draft dodgers, illegal residents and the like; card checks not only a few VCI. Fingerprinting and using every suspect, querying the central files, and then using the files religiously would at the least be a major deterrent to the VCI.

(C) F. While it may be sound in theory to give the National Police the main operational responsibility for Phung Hoang, they are not currently up to the job. Despite a 10-12 year U.S. effort, the 89,000 PIH in general still lack status, competence, adequate structure, effective procedures and the like. They've done well in Saigon, Danang, Hue, and a few other major towns, but elsewhere they're very thin and only marginally effective. Though Colonel Hai told me proudly that 46 percent of his men were now at district level or below (3500 of these in 1750 village police stations), the police are spread far too thin to be very effective, and the push down to village level may make them even more so. I have already commented on the poor quality and maldeployment of the PIH. Yet others say the 15-16,000 Special Branch police are greatly overstaffed with poor quality recruits. It speaks volumes that 88 percent of the 111 in II Corps are on a daily wage basis rather than having career status. Look at the results. Out of 4200 old VCI captured in 1970 (through 25 May), we credit only about 1300 to the police, excluding the PRUs. The 15,000 Police Field Force (whose primary target is supposed to be the VCI) captured only 223 of these 1800, less than half the 511 picked up by the 4000 old PRUs (one quarter the PFF's size). Our chief Public Safety advisor says that still only 50 percent of the PFF are being properly used; the rest are largely palace guards or urban riot police. So PFF is a fizzle as the action arm of Phung Hoang.

NPFF=58
NPFF=1...
NPFF=2

(C) G. The U.S. advisory effort is fragmented and weak. These guys are trying hard, so I don't want to denigrate the effort. The fact is we Americans have little experience with either a modern police system or counter-insurgency methods. Japonese
be laid at the door of the GVN. But we have three different sets of
U.S. advisers working directly in the Phung Hoang field -- the CORDS
P&D advisory staff, the CORDS Public Safety staff, and the separate U.S.
advisory effort to NP Special Branch. They do not work closely together.
Then, of course, there are the other U.S. intelligence advisers --
J-2, MI5, etc. -- who don't even seem to be on the team.

(C) Our CORDS/AID public safety advisers still are mostly oriented
forward looking, support and training, and have neither background nor
much interest in Phung Hoang. The 95 percent military P&D advisory
staff at each level down to district is simply too untrained and green
at the game. The lieutenants, captains, and majors I met in the field
really didn't have much clue as to what was going on on the GVN side;
in many cases they didn't even have interpreters.

(C) Shifting the U.S. advisory effort from a joint MACV/CIA affair
to a wholly MACV responsibility was costly. One very senior and ex-
perienced U.S. official called it frankly a "disaster." For better
or worse, CIA produced (from my own field experience) the only experienced
hands who were really good at the game (there are some exceptions like
NP Colonel A. T. Escola, who just left as chief P&D adviser in XV Corps).
People told me CIA still participates through the P&D advisors, etc.,
but other people said precisely the opposite. Of course CIA is still
helping out with Special Branch, but this seems to be run as a largely
separate affair.

(C) I can also understand why CIA disengaged from the PRUs and turned
them over to the police. Almost everywhere their effectiveness is
apparently declining heavily. But the PRUs were the most effective
action arm Phung Hoang ever had. They still, in May 1970, produce
better results per man than any other GVN outfit.

(G) H. Detention, trial, and sentencing procedures are still lamentable.
Provincial chiefs and other officials repeatedly ignore GVN directives
requiring prompt and proper processing of suspects. This has been a
major bottleneck, plus introducing manifold opportunities for corruption.
Real procedural safeguards are essential to see that Phung Hoang is not
used to coerce or extract from the innocent, while letting the guilty go
free. But I am convinced that there is less of this than some critics
say, simply because Phung Hoang is so ineffective. Apathy, not corruption,
is the really big problem. Recent command emphasis, including a Saigon
directive that Provincial Security Committees meet monthly, is reducing the
case backlog. They were not meeting more or less regularly in each
province I visited. But the loose and sloppy procedures make an American
used to rule of law shudder. Nor is any real U.S. effort being put into
improving the local legal processing system. Interrogators, doctor
preparers, prosecutors are mostly lacking. It would take only a few
million dollars annually to work radical improvements, and these pilfering
men (plus the HCN personal needs) could easily be cut for other, lower priority programs.

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(A) I. The real level of effort going into Phung Hoang is incredibly
smaller than the program's funding. The GVN is receiving

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been one of our gravest overall failings in Vietnam. Neither we nor
the GVN ever relate resources systematically to priorities. There are
less than 5000 GVN personnel full time in Phung Hoang (all seconded
from police and other services, mostly to staff PLOCC and DIOCC).
They are advised by less than 450 Americans, most of them unqualified.
Not including military salaries, the U.S. dollar allocation to Phung
Hoang for FY 1970 is a piddling $670,00, less than half of which was
apparently spent. Plaster allocations are equally piddling, only 165
million plasters, much of which will also probably not be spent. This
of course excludes salaries of GVN personnel and also whatever support
the U.S. gives to the police Special Branch.

IV. HOW TO MAKE PHUNG HOANG WORK BETTER

(C) In making the following recommendations, I am well aware that
Rena cannot be built in a day. Indeed, our dismal experience in the
years since a few Americans started designing a belated GVN attack on
the VC suggests that real progress will remain painfully slow and hard
to come by. But all my experience in getting the GVN to move tells me
that one--as we Americans address a key problem with great sense of
urgency, find talented advisors to push our GVN friends to the hilt,
lavish money and resources on it, get people fired and better ones put
in--not much happens in Vietnam. Moreover, our time may be short,
so we'd better get things if we are not to win militarily (at great
cost) only to lose politically.

(C) 1. Press the GVN to upgrade its top level PH operating leadership.

Get the best young, hard-driving major general to be found (Phung or Minh
of CMD) and make him Minister or Vice Minister of Interior to give him
status.

(C) 2. Give Phung Hoang real top priority. This means leadership,
money, resources across the board. Be wasteful in such a small program.
If we doubled and tripled U.S. support to this critical PH program across
the board, we would still be investing only a fraction of one percent
of what the U.S. is still spending in and on Vietnam.

(C) 3. If the National Police are to be the chief Phung Hoang operating
arm, then clearly substantial improvement of the police is urgent and
innovative. I will say flatly that they cannot now do the job. The
GVN's top PH official should have directly under him the Special Branch
and PFE as well as CMFO. The U.S. should design an action program to
this end, and push it on the GVN with financial support as the incentive.

(C) 4. This is basically a matter of impressing National Police quality
rather than quantity. Instead of going for a 122,000 man force level
(however desirable) let's switch the resources into upgrading the existing
11,000. All Special Branch men should be 850 in officer level. Show
us district and province police chiefs -- get really good men. Most of
the police should be given better pay and career status. Forces through a
new police statute to this end. National Police urgently ad interim.
(C) 5. The U.S. advisory effort must be pulled together more effectively. I realize how much pain it would cause, but if I couldn't think of a better solution, I'd transfer one or two white businesses to GIA. This is no reflection on Bill Colby; it's just that he's more than busy enough on other things. But the U.S. military assets should be transferred too. Don't destroy an even marginal advisory effort and then have to start again from scratch. Jack up the PFF and Special Branch advisory efforts.

(C) 6. Give special priority to the Phung Hoang effort in the eight key provinces which have over half the estimated VC. Give them more resources, money, the best police and special branch chiefs, the works. Make Saigon-level inspection of each province each month — and then make special reports to Thieu and Khanh.

(C) 7. Give top priority to targeted operations against individual VC. This requires constant command emphasis and U.S. advisor checking. The Long An system of targeting on the five best donors (rather than the "ten most wanted") might be worth imitating nationwide.

(C) 8. Greatly increase reward money, especially in the eight key provinces. It's ridiculously cheap at the price. Pay off only for arrest and sentencing — divide the reward between informers and arresting officers. The Phung Hoang staff told me that the reward system was still a serious problem, that the maximum GVNN reward was only 10,000 dollars, and that some Americans say we don't want to encourage the business of bounty hunting. Good Lord, there's a war on and lots of good Americans and Vietnamese are getting killed by these people.

(C) 9. Jack up the publicity campaign — on radio/TV, by poster, and in the press. GVNN inspectors and U.S. advisors should check on how many posters are actually put up.

(C) 10. Last but not least, reverse the wholly inadequate stress on the court system bottleneck, require action on preparation of defendants for province security committee, better and more equitable standard trial procedures, more frequent courts or tribunals. Fund this through counterpart plasters at the expense of lower priority programs.

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