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SOVIET VISITOR REPORTS ON PLAF SITUATION

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[I Shchedrov Article: "Fifty Kilometers from Saigon"]

[Text] "In this reportage from the scene of events a Soviet journalist gives his impressions of the qualitative and quantitative growth of the People's Armed Forces for Liberation of South Vietnam. The three major offensives at the end of January and the new series of concentrated strikes against enemy strongholds at the beginning of May are evidence of this growth, behind which is the enormous prestige of the NFLSV Central Committee and the all-national hatred for the American interveners."

The explosions of bombs and shells can be heard quite near, and then move off in the distance. Pillars of smoke appear after the regular raid of American fighter-bombers over the jungle. They rise against the background of the grey cloudless sky like fantastic and unbelievably large tree trunks, which have burned until black. The still, scorching air burns the body. We are standing on a stretch of the neutral border line between South Vietnam and Cambodia. Only one step separates us from the war. Nearby, on the road blocked by a striped barrier pole, there is a laconic sign: "75 kilometers to Saigon." On a straight line it is even less--some 50 kilometers altogether. On both sides of the road there are several lines of barbed wire obstacles and behind them, observation trenches. We can see a soldier in the uniform of the Saigon troops clinging to the machinegun in the guard tower. The machinegun is aimed at us, at the Cambodian post. Above the soldier there is a light cloth cover. On the road itself there is a two-story building and a flagpost with a limply hanging yellow cloth, cut by three red stripes--the flag of the Saigon regime.

We had covered a few dozens kilometers along the border and everywhere we were accompanied by the constant sounds of battle. Enormous bomb craters and jungles cut down by shells and bomb splinters can already be seen in places on Cambodian territory. The war looms over the frontier province of Svay Rieng from all sides.

"Zone Q":

Mango avenue [translation of the Cambodian name Svay Rieng] extends into a narrow strip in South Vietnamese territory. To the north of the (Davet) area, where we are, is the South Vietnamese Province of Tay Ninh, better known as "Zone C." After the January and February offensive of the patriots the area adjoining Svay Rieng was the scene of fierce battles. It was here that the American command launched at the beginning of the armed aggression a large punitive operation under the code name ("Toan Tkhang") ("Full Victory".)

The most stubborn battles are taking place in "Zone C." We learned this over our transistor radio, on the latest news program from "Liberation" Radio. The Western news agencies, relying on data provided by American intelligence, insist that "Zone C" is the location of the main headquarters of the NFLSV Central Committee, the supreme command of the liberation army, and the "Liberation" Radio station. This area is justifiably called the impregnable fortress of the front.

The calm voice of the "Liberation" Radio announcer reaches us over the noise: "According to latest data, the enemy has suffered heavy losses in Tay Ninh Province. In a number of places the patriotic armed forces have moved on to the counteroffensive. In only three military operations in the south sector of 'Zone C,' more than 600 American soldiers and officers were killed, seven armored vehicles destroyed, four helicopters shot down, and several 105-mm enemy guns put out of action..."

The "Voice of America," broadcasting in Vietnamese from Saigon announces that "Zone C" is the scene of battles second in size only to those near Khe Sanh. Quoting the American command, the "Voice of America" announces that a major formation of NFLSV forces, several divisions, is in that area.

Even here in the border area one can feel the efforts made by the Americans to conquer this springboard. During the mass raids of B-52 bombers of the U.S. Strategic Air Force, which have recently been intensified, light bamboo house walls collapse not only on the South Vietnamese side, but also here. Nevertheless, these blind air strikes "against squares" have not yet brought any success. The enormous bombs very often fall not only on the territory of neutral Cambodia, but also, as the U.S. command was forced to admit, on American positions. During the several weeks prior to our arrival in the areas of (Bau Chai) and (Tan Le) hundreds of American soldiers and officers were killed and wounded by bombs and rockets stamped "Made in USA."

The Svay Rieng border with South Vietnam stretches along more than 200 kilometers. We question the Cambodian border guards who control it on the other side. They spread out their arms. One of the officers explained: "Part of the area has been for many years invariably under the control of the NFLSV, another part is under the control of the American-Saigon troops. Of the remaining areas it is difficult to tell." Another, participating in our talk, added: "I think not even the Americans themselves know it precisely." Taking pictures of the barrier pole and the rows of barbed wire without overstepping the line which separates peaceful territory from the war territory we went on. We Soviet journalists have no access to the territory of South Vietnam which is occupied by the U.S. armed forces and their mercenaries.

Recently this ban has even hit some Western correspondents. They were expelled from Saigon for transmitting "malicious information." Now even flights of the civilian air line "Air France" have been banned and the company has been accused of collecting "intelligence type" data. One Cambodian paper ridiculed this absurd argument: "Is it possible that there are any secrets left which are unknown to the NFLSV about the deployment of the American-Saigonese troops in South Vietnam?" New, strict censorship restrictions have been imposed upon correspondents' reports from Saigon. Nevertheless all these efforts aimed at preventing truthful information on the situation in South Vietnam after the general offensive of the patriotic armed forces are not capable of hiding the true state of affairs.

The Prologue of New Successes:

"How do you assess the situation as it has developed at the beginning of the 'rainy season' in South Vietnam?" I asked one of the prominent figures of the national liberation movement, Nguyen Van Hieu, member of the NFLSV Central Committee. At the beginning of our talk we touched on the question of Washington's and Saigon's assessment of the latest events on the South Vietnam front.

Since March American propaganda has launched an active campaign trying to prove that the situation in South Vietnam has been "normalized" and that the NFLSV has suffered a defeat after withdrawing from the towns in February. The January-February offensive of the patriots against the South Vietnamese towns is presented as a "last desperate attempt" of the NFLSV to attain the complete smashing of the American-Saigonese grouping into which it allegedly threw all the armed and political forces of the front. From this they draw the conclusion of the "failure of the Viet Cong plan" and of favorable prospects for the American-Saigonese grouping for the next few years.

Nguyen Van Hieu said: "I think that Washington itself is probably now looking at the situation, not completely correctly, but in a more serious way. It is apparently for this reason that the departure of Secretary of Defense McNamara was followed by the ouster, by means of a 'promotion,' of another of the main American figures in the Vietnam war--that of General Westmoreland. The new 'peace demarche' of Johnson and his statement refusing candidature in the forthcoming U.S. presidential elections are directly related to events in Vietnam.

"As far as propaganda is concerned it is natural that Washington, having suffered a new serious defeat on the battlefield, is striving to at least cushion its effects with the help of a political campaign. Let us, however, turn to facts. The situation of the American presence in South Vietnam is now more difficult than at any other period since the beginning of the armed U.S. aggression, and all the more so compared with January this year. The position and the authority of the NFLSV has grown considerably stronger. The mighty offensive of the patriotic forces, launched simultaneously with a wave of people's demonstrations in towns and in occupied rural regions, demonstrated once more its strength and popularity among the people's masses.

"On a tremendous territory which has merged into the liberated areas serious changes are taking place which cannot be overestimated. Finally, continuing our offensive operations we have retained our basic forces and even more, have considerably strengthened them. At present we are closer to victory than a year, 6 or 3 months ago. The American propaganda myth on the continuous loss of NFLSV positions, on the weakening of its armed and political forces is unfounded. The winter offensive was only the prologue for bigger operations and the American interventionists will have to learn this more than once.

"As regards the question of with whom the population of South Vietnam is siding, the best demonstration of this was the heroic struggle in the streets of Saigon, Hue, and other towns which will be entered as one of the most moving pages in the history of the struggle of our people for freedom and independence."

Washington and Saigon are already admitting that since February the civilian "pacification" program has been totally stopped in the villages and now the main emphasis is being placed on military efforts. According to their own reports, the American-Saigonese authorities were able, in the fall of last year, with the help of the army, to organize "elections" in only one-third of the villages. The rest were under full or partial control of the NFLSV. According to the most optimistic, obviously inflated figures of the American command, of the more than 11 million peasants no more than 3.5 million were under the control of the interventionists by the beginning of the 1967-68 "dry season."

The tactics of the military command of the NFLSV with its skillful combination of operations of the regular liberation army with a well-organized partisan movement in the rear of the enemy showed its clear superiority over Westmoreland's strategy, which stresses concentrated strikes against major groupings of patriots and the "pacification" of extensive areas.

One of the prominent NFLSV military leaders, explaining to me the partisan tactics in "neutral" and occupied areas resorted to a figure of speech. "General Westmoreland has tactics like this," he said and beat the table with his fist. "We have more flexible and mobile tactics. Look here," he said and spread his fingers and put both hands on the table.

"When it is necessary and when the situation permits we can clench them into a fist and strike blows, and then, to conserve our forces, we again spread the fingers." In other words, the creation of supporting villages for the partisans in "neutral" and occupied areas was as a rule the first step toward establishing, under favorable circumstances, liberated regions in this area. What the American generals considered a weakness proved to be a very tough nut for the interventionists.

The last offensive of the patriotic forces clearly demonstrated this. Simultaneously with the attacks on the towns, which captured the attention of the whole world, the patriots began an equally important operation, also on a scale encompassing all South Vietnam. Pinning down the American command in towns and demoralizing the puppet authorities, the patriots launched, with the active support of the population and of local partisan detachments, a mighty offensive against occupied rural areas. Over 700 villages, compounds, and inhabited localities on the district level, comprising a population of over 1.5 million people, were liberated in January-March.

Saigon in the grip of a vice; "zone C" in deep jungles:

Soldier's hammocks were visible through the trees. We are entering through a narrow path the deployment area of the N Unit of the liberation army. We stop in a grassy hollow. Divided into platoons, the fighters of the glorious battalion in the green uniform of the liberation army greet the representative of general headquarters and the Soviet correspondent. Machineguns and mortars are set up in front of the ranks.

In the evening, officer (Nguen Van Ba) asked me: "well, what is your impression of our assault battalion?" but he corrected himself immediately: "regiment. However, for the present, do not write that the NFLSV already has regiments. Write about it later." This discussion took place just 3 years ago. At that time mortars and machine guns were the most powerful arms of the patriots. They were issued only to elite battalions and regiments, which were only just emerging at that time.

Today, not only regiments but divisions are operating on many of the most important sections of the South Vietnamese front, having passed through their baptism of fire in major offensive operations. This is also openly admitted by the American command. At present the regular liberation army numbers hundreds of thousands of fighters and officers. In some areas its armament already includes antiaircraft means, artillery, and infantry rocket assault weapons. Tanks and armored personnel carriers were used for the first time in February-April to attack enemy posts and repel attacks from the air. Even partisan detachments are now armed with machineguns and automatic weapons.

The American command is forced to admit that some types of weapons which the patriotic forces have, specifically automatic weapons and infantry rocket weapons, are superior to American models in combat performance. The Pentagon also asserts that the NFLSV is at least four-fifths equipped with weapons delivered to it by socialist countries, primarily by the Soviet Union.

Local detachments of patriots figure in the reports of the NFLSV supreme command and of the foreign agencies under the name "partisans." This means not only detachments operating in the rear of the enemy but all armed forces formed on the spot to defend their villages and communities--be it in liberated, "neutral," or occupied territory. In periods of calm the fighters of the rural people's detachments pursue usual peasant affairs. There are hundreds of thousands of such partisans in South Vietnam. They are a firm support and give on-the-spot assistance to the assault forces of the regular liberation army. Usually, not even during major punitive operations of the interventionists, do the partisans abandon their area but temporarily disperse among the population, which actively supports them. In the course of the offensive, which began in January, the ranks of the partisans were considerably strengthened by volunteers and soldiers and officers of the puppet army who went over to the side of the liberation front. This enabled the command of the patriotic forces to replace losses suffered during most violent battles.

In its press releases the Pentagon estimates the number of armed forces of the patriots at 300,000 to 400,000 men. This is, however, by no means true. According to most approximate estimates, on the basis of the data which I have, by the end of last year the liberation army, territorial units, partisan detachments, and diversionist groups of patriots operating in the rear of the enemy numbered no less than 1 million fighters and commanders.

There Is One More Important Aspect:

Since the beginning of this year it is no longer a partisan war but a genuine positional war being fought on many sections of the front south of the 17th Parallel. The names of such individual sectors of bitter fighting as Con Thien, Khe Sanh, (?Quang Tri) and Hue have for many months figured in the daily battle reports. In this area and the approaches to it--a relatively small area--are concentrated some 130,000 American soldiers including a 90,000-man-strong Marine Corps, and also 60,000 to 70,000 soldiers and officers of the puppet army. Despite all this, the patriots, during the winter battles, liberated rural areas with a population of over 10,000 inhabitants and established control over a 45-kilometer section of a strategic highway. For months several encircled groupings of American troops maintained communications with their bases solely by air.

In Khe Sanh, a 6,000-man grouping of American marines was held for 77 days in a close ring of encirclement. Even major reinforcements of the interventionists, supported by the U.S. Strategic Air Force, artillery, and armored units, were unable to break through this encirclement. Only in April, following orders from general headquarters, when the liberation army units withdrew to earlier prepared positions was the American command able to send the first airborne division into this area to replace the exhausted regiments of marines.

On many other sectors of the northern front the war also acquired the character of pure positional warfare with a whole system of trenches, mine fields, barbed wire obstacles, daily mortar and artillery duels, and violent fighting frequently ending in hand-to-hand and bayonet combat. According to data of the NFISV general headquarters, on the northern section of the front alone, some 6,000 of the American-Saigonese grouping were killed in January-April, half of which were U.S. Marines, and some 300 aircraft and helicopters were downed. This is more than half of the total losses the French expedition corps suffered in the spring of 1954 in the famous battle of Dien Bien Phu. Even the American Command admits the initiative on the northern section of the front is in the hands of the patriots. The situation here grows more threatening for the interventionists every day.

The country's granary, the Mekong delta, and Saigon are encircled by major fortified bases of the patriotic forces. I had the opportunity to visit some of them. The American command knows of their existence and frequently calls them by names adopted by the patriots in its reports on air raids and battles on the approaches to these areas. This means that they cannot do anything about it.

Some 80 to 100 kilometers southwest of Saigon, on the border with Cambodia, is another inaccessible bastion of the patriots--Sugar Cane Valley. Covered with dense jungle, the extensive flat area has been a support base of the patriots since the years of struggle against the French colonialists. Starting with 1959 the American-Saigonese troops have never succeeded in taking this important strategic area. Some 180 to 200 kilometers south of Saigon there is another patriot base on the Ca Mau Peninsula.

In the course of the recent attacks of the patriotic forces, liberated areas in the lower reaches of the Mekong have also been expanded. A new deployment area of patriotic forces has appeared here, a mere 40 to 50 kilometers from Saigon. Some 70 to 80 kilometers north of Saigon is the broad strip of "Zone D" running from west to east. This most important stronghold of the patriotic forces is subjected to almost incessant attacks by major punitive units of the American-Saigonese grouping, to most violent bombing and shelling. But during the past 8 years it has never been occupied by the interventionists.

The Failure of "Complete Victory":

During the spring offensive all these key NFISV bases turned into something like a second frontline while the forces in the liberated and partisan areas approached, like a dense wall, Saigon and other towns and enemy military bases. This is why the American command, somewhat recovered from their defeat in the towns, directed its first major punitive operation against the five provinces surrounding Saigon.

It began on 11 March and received the code name (Kuet Tkhang) meaning "Decisive Victory." A 50,000-man corps of American-Saigonese troops participated. After a month, however, without having won a "decisive victory," the U.S. command was forced to throw into this operation an additional 50,000 soldiers and officers, including Australian, New Zealand, and Thai troops, naming the second stage of the operation (Toan Tkhand) meaning "Complete Victory." The 100,000-strong grouping of punitive troops was supported by police and local units of the puppet army in 11 provinces bordering on Saigon.

Air force, artillery, and armored tank troops participated in this biggest punitive operation since the beginning of the "dirty war." In the rural areas directly bordering on Saigon the punitive units failed to come to grips with the elusive regiments of the regular army of the patriots. At the approaches to "Zone C" and other strongholds of the NFLSV they encountered a mighty, insurmountable barrier.

At the beginning of May the patriotic armed forces performed new mighty attacks on all fronts. According to the AFP correspondent in Saigon, the Americans suffered cruel losses during the week ending 11 May, bigger than the losses during the week in February which had been their most difficult period. A total of 562 American servicemen were killed and 2,225 wounded. According to AFP, the total of American interventionist losses from January 1961 to 11 May 1968 amounted to almost 23,000 killed and over 141,000 wounded.

In April the NFLSV published an important document. Among other things it states specifically that "at the present time the struggle of the South Vietnamese people has entered a new stage--the stage of general offensive and universal uprising." In this situation, the document continues, the NFLSV has worked out a number of concrete measures with regard to those serving in the puppet administration and the Saigon army to help patriotically inclined people select the correct road at this decisive moment.

With the establishment of the Vietnamese Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces, which has proclaimed its solidarity with the NFLSV, ever broader strata of the population, particularly in towns, have joined the active struggle against the interventionists. On 5 May a committee of the Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces was established for the Saigon-Cholon-Gia Dinh area. Prominent public figures, representatives of the intelligentsia, students, writers, artists, journalists, industrialists, merchants, officials, and officers of the Saigon army fully approved the April manifesto of the Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces (see LIFE ABROAD, Issue No 21) and turned to the population of the Saigon-Cholon-Gia Dinh area with the appeal to actively cooperate with the Alliance in order to strengthen and further expand the united front against the American aggression.

Countries of the socialist community and all peace-loving forces are rendering increasing support to the NFLSV. Even many governments of Western countries have openly disassociated themselves from the Vietnamese adventure of the United States. On the peninsula of Indochina, of the 120 million inhabitants which Washington has allegedly taken under its protection "against communist aggression," only the Thai authorities are following the course of American policy. The remaining governments are for a peaceful settlement of the Vietnamese question and for granting the Vietnamese people the right to decide their fate themselves. Sooner or later the United States will be forced to withdraw from Vietnam. Neither the leaders of the NFLSV nor the fighters of the rank-and-file with whom I talked had any doubts about this.

RADIO CONDEMNS THAI ENCROACHMENTS IN CAMBODIA

Hanoi VNA International Service in English 0545 GMT 21 Jun 68 B

[Text] Hanoi, 20 June--Liberation Radio, in a recent commentary, strongly condemned the Thai reactionary authorities for introducing troops into the Cambodian territory on 30 May and intercepting the Cambodian armed forces at Kala Post, Battambang Province, killing or wounding 18 Cambodian officers and men and snatching away a quantity of weapons and military equipment.

The official organ of the South Vietnam National Front for Liberation pointed out: This is an extremely serious provocation by the Thai ruling circles, who brazenly encroach upon the territory and sovereignty of Cambodia, trampling underfoot the elementary principles of international law. By so doing, the Thanom-Prapbat reactionaries have piled up their crimes against the Cambodian people and the Indochinese people as a whole, the radio added.

It denounced the repeated attacks by the reactionary Thanom-Prapbat clique against Cambodia and their war acts against Vietnam and Laos, and pointed out that by taking such impudent acts they have unmasked themselves as loyal stooges of the U.S. imperialists. LIBERATION PRESS AGENCY [as received] stressed: The South Vietnamese people and NFL, a good neighbor of the Kingdom of Cambodia, fully and resolutely support the just stand of Cambodian Head of State Norodom Sihanouk, the Royal Government of Cambodia, and the Khmer people to unswervingly resist the U.S. imperialists and their henchmen, the Thanom-Prapbat clique, as expounded in the note of 6 June 1968 of the Cambodian Foreign Ministry.

It demanded that the reactionary Thanom-Prapbat clique stop immediately all their provocative acts against Cambodia.

It concluded by voicing the South Vietnamese people's militant solidarity with the Khmer people and the Royal Government of Cambodia in the fight against the common enemy--the U.S. imperialists and their Saigon-Bangkok henchmen.

NFLSV ENVOY SAYS ALL VIETNAM CAN FIGHT U.S.

Budapest Domestic Service in Hungarian 1900 GMT 19 Jun 68 L

[Text] Dinh Ba Thi, permanent representative of the NFLSV in Budapest, held a press conference today. He said that it is the right of the Vietnamese people as a whole to fight against the enemy with united forces. The South Vietnamese people are primarily relying on their own strength, but at the same time they are receiving all-round assistance from their brothers in the north. The NFLSV fully supports the DRV Government's position at the Paris talks. Hoang Luong, North Vietnamese ambassador to Budapest, stressed that his country is supporting the southern patriots' fight against the enemy.