

U.S.-Trained Viet Tribe in Open Revolt

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SAIGON.

A company of mountain tribesmen, trained, equipped and supervised by the elite United States Army Special Forces, revolted yesterday and seized a government radio station in the provincial capital of Banmethuot. They broadcast appeals for tribal autonomy for nine hours before withdrawing.

At the same time, another tribal unit organized to fight the Communist Viet Cong took over the district headquarters town of Duc Lap, three miles from the Cambodian border, in Quang Duc Province.

The Saigon government sent an airborne battalion to recapture the town, but it was reported still in the rebel tribesmen's hands late yesterday.

The mountaineer uprisings, first of their kind reported during the anti-Communist war in South Viet Nam, were regarded with utmost seriousness in Saigon. Reliable sources said they indicated extensive penetration by the Viet Cong into the multi-million-dollar, American-backed program to win the loyalty of the mountain tribes and train and arm them to fight the Reds.

Viet Cong agents were presumed to have inspired at least the revolt at Banmethuot, where the rebels waved a red flag with three gold stars, reminiscent of the Viet Cong's red-and-blue banner with one gold star. The Viet Cong has long tried to stir up the tribes against the government by promising them national autonomy.

THE SCENE

Banmethuot, 180 miles northeast of Saigon, is the capital of Darlac Province in mountainous central South Viet Nam. Quang Duc, scene of the other "montagnard" (mountaineer) uprising, borders Darlac on the south.

These uplands are inhabited by roughly one million montagnards, a conglomeration of primitive tribes of varying ethnic origin and speaking different dialects. Some live under almost Stone Age conditions. Farmers and hunters, they live in huts or thatched longhouses, and their weapon is the crossbow. They are traditionally antagonistic to the lowland Vietnamese, who in turn look down on them as savages.

Early in 1962, however, crack American Special Forces teams began moving into the montagnards' "high plateau," where Viet Cong infiltration was already widespread, to win the countaineers as allies and train them in the use of modern weapons and guerrilla war.

The program, known as Civilian Irregular Defense Groups, or CIDG, was designed to check Viet Cong infiltration across the Laotian and Cambodian borders and over the high plateau. It has had both signal successes and setbacks.

The participants in yesterday's revolt at Banmethuot were about 500 members of the Rhade tribe who were being

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trained in Special Forces camps around the provincial capital. While some seized the radio station, a platoon of the rebels took up positions on a bridge leading into Banmethuot to prevent interference.

They then began broadcasting appeals to other tribesmen to ignore the administration of the Saigon government, charging that government officials had mistreated montagnards and taken away their lands to give to colonizers from the lowlands.

Premier Nguyen Khanh, who only a year ago was corps commander in the Banmethuot area, hurriedly left his week-end residence and flew to the corps headquarters, where he broadcast appeals to the tribesmen to go back to their camps. American officers in the area, who have had considerable success in winning the confidence of the montagnards, also urged the rebels to withdraw. After nine hours, they did so.

American Special Forces officers have known for some time that Viet Cong agents were planted among their tribal trainees. The Viet Cong have staged a number of heavy attacks on the camps where the montagnards are trained, sometimes helped by traitors inside the installations. In some cases, the camps have been overrun while in others the attackers have been held off in bloody fighting.

The desertion rate from the CIDG also has been high. But yesterday's was the first incident in which montagnard troops openly rebelled in the cause of tribal autonomy, with which the Reds have sought to woo them.

The montagnard training program is slated for expansion. Forty U. S. Special Forces teams of 12 men each are now working with the minority groups, but the number is expected to rise to 50 under the current 5,000-man buildup of U. S. military advisers in South Viet Nam.