

New Alarums on Viet's Infernal Triangle

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SAIGON.

South Viet Nam's Buddhist hierarchy has changed its tactics in its political warfare against the government of Premier Tran Van Huong. Instead of directing sporadic guerrilla-type actions, it has shifted to full-scale battle.

Demonstrations and rioting in Saigon, Hue and other cities have hardened the deadlock existing between the American-supported Premier and the Buddhist leaders—with the U. S. policy-makers caught in the middle.

The question is whether the Premier will crack down on the Buddhist monks who are agitating to overthrow his government, or whether the Buddhist leadership will foment so much confusion and decay that the 63-year-old Premier will be forced to step down.

At least part of that decision must be made in Washington. But most of the decision would be made by the South Vietnamese armed forces, of which Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, Mr. Huong's predecessor as Premier, is commander in chief.

To implement a crackdown on the agitating Buddhist leadership, the Premier must have the co-operation and support of the armed forces. Yet a decisive overthrow of Mr. Huong—the Buddhists' objective—would require power that only the armed forces could supply.

The armed forces have appeared to support the Premier, but observers in Saigon were unwilling to speculate whether that support would last for long. In Hue yesterday, troops and police failed to intervene against rioting Buddhist demonstrators.

Many informed observers believe the Buddhist leadership has pro-neutralist tendencies.

During the past month the armed forces had launched their own form of guerrilla warfare against the Huong government. On Dec. 20 the Armed Forces Council toppled the High National Council—the legal basis of the government.

Then, last week, four Vietnamese generals half-heartedly and reluctantly entered Mr. Huong's government, but one day later than officially announced. They had simply telephoned they were too busy to show up at the planned swearing-in—a gesture that undercut the government's prestige.

Now a three-sided power play is in motion—with American policy-makers and Premier Huong in one corner, the Buddhist leadership in direct conflict in another corner, and the police and the armed forces temporarily supporting Mr. Huong but capable of tipping the balance.

The Buddhist demonstration in front of the U. S. Embassy Friday emphasized that unless there is a fast decision to stop the explosive situation—either by the armed forces to overthrow Premier Huong or to support a crackdown on the Buddhist agitators—a marked political deterioration will mushroom that would benefit only the Viet Cong Communists.

The demonstration at the embassy, and the attack on the U. S. Information Service Libraries that followed, do not represent a wave of anti-Americanism. The outburst was a clever tactic of the Buddhists to ignore Mr. Huong, but to embarrass his rear base of support—the American policy-makers.

The Buddhist leadership again proved that it has not only the political strategy and organization but also the political showmanship to capture at least the interest and imagination of the Vietnamese masses.