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IV CORPS HEADQUARTERS, CANTRU, South Viet Nam--The foundation of the military effort in the crucial southern third of Viet Nam--the multi-million-dollar strategic hamlet and village militia program--has craved in/ and the war is now being lost there.

The vital question is whether the new military government, administrators and unit commanders can reverse the ~~downward~~ trend. Few observers here believe the war against the Viet Cong Communist guerrillas can be won without an effective strategic hamlet program.

Strategic hamlet experts in the field believe the U. S.-supported Vietnamese government has lost at least six months in the fight against the Communist guerrillas. They predict it will be mid-1964 before the government can rebuild the hamlet program to its former position.

The strategic hamlets--~~small~~ villages fortified with bamboo stakes and barbed wire and defended by volunteer militiamen--were devised in an attempt to separate the Viet Cong guerrillas from population, food and intelligence information. The program has succeeded tolerably well in the mountainous two-thirds of the country, where military experts believe the government is holding its own.

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However, in the 13 provinces of the southern third of the country--popularly called the Mekong Delta--the ~~government~~ food is in abundance in the richest part of the country and the population is widely scattered, making ~~it almost impossible~~ almost impossible the ~~any~~ denial of food and information to the guerrilla.

Under consistent Viet Cong barrages during the past six months, thousands of the hamlets have been attacked. Many of the persons thought to be government supporters have been ~~driven~~ driven from them; houses have been burned; ~~government functionaries~~ government functionaries driven off.

The government is now ~~abandoning~~ abandoning hundreds of outposts, hamlets and watchtowers which they had once defended. In the 13 provinces south of Saigon, "big shifts" are ~~now~~ expected in the numbers of strategic hamlets actually held by the government and those carried on the books.

For example, An Huyen province, a Viet Cong stronghold area at the southernmost tip of the peninsula, only five per cent of ~~the~~ the sixtyfive hamlets once listed as government controlled are now considered viable. ~~Further north~~ Further north in Chuong Thien province, only twenty percent of the ~~170 completed hamlets~~ 170 completed hamlets and now considered secure.

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The situation is no less disheartening in the provinces forming the ~~the~~ Saigon perimeter. In Binh Thuan province, the government retains control of only 45 of the 200 hamlets they once thought it controlled. In Long An province, which begins only 15 miles south of Saigon, the government has lost about 75 per cent of its hamlets, many of which secured Highway No. 4 connecting the rice-rich delta with the capital city. Amba ambushes ~~xxxx~~ are now regularly laid on the outskirts of Big Saigon.

"We control ~~1~~ 200 yards ~~sig~~ either side of Highway No. 4 during the day," said one American working in that province. "And we don't even control that in the ~~day~~ nighttime. We now hold the provincial capital and six district capitals at night...and we're ~~luna~~ lucky to do that."

As the hamlet program ~~x~~ crumbled, so did the armed volunteer militia that defended them. In one province alone, the fighting strength of the village militia is fifty per cent of what it had been. Many fought bravely in defense of their homes and families. Others simply deserted their hamlets, some joining the Viet Cong, some "running into the bush." In June, some of them began turning their weapons back to the government officials and refused to cooperate with the program. Other weapons lost provided an arsenal of shotguns and carbines for the enemy. The capabilities of the Viet Cong in weapons, supplies, personnel and training has increased dramatically in the delta in the past six months.

In addition to the partial collapse of the strategic hamlet program, the government is now withdrawing troops from outposts and watchtowers which had once defended some of the hamlets, bridges, canals and roads. In the nine provinces of IV Corps, 200 ~~ha~~ outposts and watchtowers have been withdrawn. Unit strength withdrawn ranged from 30-man platoons to 100-man companies.

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Newly-appointed province chiefs in the delta are now taking a "new look" at the hamlet program, re-evaluating how many are viable, and how to rebuild the others, which ones to withdraw troops from. The official word for this is "consolidation," but it must be considered a retreat from the land and people the government once said it held.

The situation is now considered so critical that U. S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge has called in some provincial advisors for special briefings. He rushed his assistant to Long An province to make an on-the-spot check and then dispatched there a task force of U. S. information and economic aid experts.

Why did the strategic hamlet program ~~initially~~ deteriorate so badly?

They popular version is "we h'vent too far too fast"--that under intense pressure from Saigon, province and district chiefs strung barbed wire fences faster than Macy's could hang Christmas tree lights. The hamlets ~~by~~ then became a shambles without ~~enough~~ adequately trained and motivated armed defenders. They became "paper hamlets."

~~However~~, the former regime under President Ngo Dinh Diem refused to withdraw from indefensible ~~positions~~ posts and hamlets because "it meant withdrawing the prestige of his government."

However, in a report which hit desk of Ambassador ~~in~~ Lodge ~~was~~ forwarded it to Washington, reasons for ~~deterioration~~ hamlet deterioration was that the villagers were promised security from regular forces and reinforcements during night attacks. But when a village called for ~~and~~ reinforcements, government officials sent flareships and artillery. They seldom sent troops to meet the Viet Cong where they were--on the ground.

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Better trained troops that were in theory supposed to patrol outside the strategic hamlets at night to ward off Viet Cong attacks. ~~unsuccessful~~ But they never did. They were tied down to static positions in other outposts and watchtowers and hamlets. The hamlet militia soon realized they were "sitting ducks" ~~and~~ and began pulling out of the program.

Military advisors agree that one of the key prog problems is that there has consistently been two ~~ways~~ parallel wars that seldom met. One was the war of the daytime, where elite government units ~~within~~ launched operations with helicopters and armored cars. Second was the war of the night, where the Viet Cong roamed at will, seldom endangered by government night patrols.

While the strategic hamlet is disheartening, it is not hopeless, provincial advisors believe. They believe the concept is valid if properly implement with enough military strength and aggressiveness. They point out examples of ~~them~~ such as Thanh Duc district in Long An province. ~~There~~ More than 1000- army regular soldiers secured the district and helped villagers build their hamlets in one and half months. And once the regulars moved out, ~~was~~ the aggressive district chief ~~personnel~~ personally led night reinforcements to aid a village under attack.

~~But the biggest argument the advisors mention is that the hamlet program will succeed because it must. There is no other alternative to it.~~