

Reds Aren't Sole Problem in Viet

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SAIGON.

High Vietnamese officers fear an American political take-over in the strategic plateau bordering Laos following the recent arrival of the 15,000 1st Air Cavalry Division.

As the Americans dramatically expanded their military power in the strategic highland area, the military contest immediately was set between the division, supported by Vietnamese government forces, and the Communist Viet Cong who use the jungled highlands as military bases and infiltration routes from North Viet Nam.

However, a third paramilitary force exists—the indigenous Montagnards, who have been trained, equipped and financed by the American Special Forces.

A year ago some of these Montagnard tribesmen mutinied in five military camps against their Vietnamese superiors, massacred 31 Vietnamese and established a dissident political movement called the Unified Front for the Liberation of the Oppressed Race.

Vietnamese officials threatened to bomb their own tribal troops, and the dissident movement was temporarily quiet until last month, when two Vietnamese Marine Battalions encircled 300 of the armed Montagnard dissidents and forced their surrender. Two of the dissident units, however, evaded encirclement and are still at large.

This year, the name of the dissident movement was changed from the Liberation of the Oppressed Race—a Communist-sounding name—to Struggle for the Oppressed Race.

U. S. POWER

The question arose whether the Americans would expand their political power as well as military—to gain increasing control over the Montagnards.

Vietnamese officials during the past year have charged that the Americans are trying to seize political control of the Montagnards and military command of the highlands, squeezing the Saigon government off the plateau and shrinking the authority of the Vietnamese commanders.

The Montagnards, who for years have hated the Vietnamese, are friendly to the American troops and the French plantation owners and Catholic missionaries, who wield a great deal of French cultural and economic influence over the primitive tribesmen.

The Vietnamese government charges, dating back to last year's rebellion, indicated that the Americans and the French are inciting the movement to increase its demands upon the Vietnamese government, such as appointment of Montagnard commanders for Montagnard irregular units. It also asks for Montagnard province chiefs and wants a high-ranking Montagnard to be included in the Saigon administration.

The Americans, speaking officially, hotly deny this; a few, speaking in private, admit they eventually will take direct control of the Montagnards because the Vietnamese government is unwilling or unable to meet their demands

and is forcing the Montagnards into the hands of the Communists.

The Montagnards have been a sore point between the Vietnamese government and American officials since the Americans first proposed training and equipping them in 1962.

President Ngo Dinh Diem refused to allow the arming of the Montagnards, even to fight the Communists coming across the Ho Chi Minh infiltration routes, fearing that one day the Montagnards would rebel against his central government. Eventually he reluctantly allowed the American Special Forces to train them, but kept personal watch on the program and his Vietnamese Special Forces commanders, working with the Americans, reported directly to him. Less than a year after President Diem's fall and murder in November, 1963, the Montagnard rebel movement he feared was already revolting against the new Saigon government.

POLITICS

Reliable observers indicate that the introduction of the elite, mobile American division into the highlands is not enough. Without adequate political controls, the American combat division might defeat the Viet Cong hard-core battalions and regiments and then lose the tribal population to the Communists because of dissatisfaction with the Vietnamese government.

In a move to increase its control in the highlands, the U. S. military command in Saigon announced in August the formation of Task Force Alpha, which has since been made a corps headquarters and renamed headquarters, Field Forces. It would command American military operations while the Vietnamese corps commander in the area would command Vietnamese operations. According to reliable sources, part of the plan also calls for the Vietnamese commander, Brig. Gen. Vinh Loc, to move his headquarters from the highlands to the coastal plains. He has refused to do so, privately charging that the Americans are grabbing control of his area.

OPIUM

The highlands are a famous rout for opium smuggling, which has traditionally provided sizable chunks of illegal income for a number of Vietnamese government and military officials. If Vietnamese officials are pushed off the highlands they will lose this source of income.

One Vietnamese government official, speaking privately, admitted the Vietnamese government has taken inadequate steps to satisfy the demands of the Montagnard population, but insisted that the Americans should work through the Saigon government, rather than seizing direct political control.

Reliable observers indicate that the short-term interests of the Americans and the French run parallel in having the Communists as a momentary common enemy for the American troops would protect the French economic interests in the highlands as the Viet Cong were pushed back. The French would no longer have to pay taxes to the Viet Cong. And some of the French who have fled the insecure highlands would be able to return to manage their plantations.