

Indochina Monographs

Territorial Forces

Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong



U.S. ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Indochina Monographs

This is one of a series published by the U.S. Army Center of Military History. They were written by officers who held responsible positions in the Cambodian, Laotian, and South Vietnamese armed forces during the war in Indochina. The General Research Corporation provided writing facilities and other necessary support under an Army contract with the Center of Military History. The monographs were not edited or altered and reflect the views of their authors--not necessarily those of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense. The authors were not attempting to write definitive accounts but to set down how they saw the war in Southeast Asia.

Colonel William E. Le Gro, U.S. Army, retired, has written a forthcoming work allied with this series, Vietnam: From Cease-Fire to Capitulation. Another book, The Final Collapse by General Cao Van Vien, the last chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, will be formally published and sold by the Superintendent of Documents.

Taken together these works should provide useful source materials for serious historians pending publication of the more definitive series, the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

JAMES L. COLLINS, JR.
Brigadier General, USA
Chief of Military History

Preface

A significant aspect of the South Vietnamese counter-insurgency effort was the employment of several differently organized military and paramilitary forces, each in a different role. Among them, the Territorial Forces, which made up more than one half of the total RVNAF strength, deserved particular interest because of their vital role in pacification.

Pitted against Communist local force and guerrilla units, the Territorial Forces fought a low-key warfare of their own at the grass roots level far removed from the war's limelight. Their exploits were rarely sung, their shortcomings often unjustly criticized. But without their contributions, pacification could hardly have succeeded as it did.

To evaluate the performance of the Territorial Forces, this monograph seeks to present the Vietnamese point of view on their roles and missions, development, training, employment, and support as they evolved during the war. More emphatically, it also attempts to analyze their problems and to determine if, in their actual condition, the Territorial Forces were effective enough as antithesis to Communist insurgency warfare.

Although I have drawn primarily from my own experience in the preparation of this monograph, several distinguished colleagues of mine have also contributed to it, to whom I want to express my gratitude. I am indebted to General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, and Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, Chief of Staff of the JGS, for their valuable comments and suggestions concerning command, control, and

support of the RF and PF. Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, who served under me for several years as Commander of the 3d ARVN Division and himself Chief of Staff of the RF/PF Command for some time, is appreciated for his thoughtful comments on the RF/PF problems with which he was well familiar. Brigader General Tran Dinh Tho, Assistant Chief of Staff J-3, and Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, Assistant Chief of Staff J-2, of the JGS, each in his own field of expertise and knowledge, also contributed significantly to certain aspects of RF/PF organization, training, and performance.

Finally, I am particularly indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuan Vien and Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Lt. Colonel Vien, the last Army Attache serving at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., has done a highly professional job of translating and editing that helps impart unity and cohesiveness to the manuscript. Ms. Bong, a former Captain in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and also a former member of the Vietnamese Embassy staff, spent long hours typing, editing and in the administrative preparation of my manuscript in final form.

McLean, Virginia
28 July 1978

Ngo Quang Truong
Lieutenant General, ARVN

Contents

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
<i>An Abstract of Communist Insurgency in South Vietnam</i>	1
<i>The RVN's Counter-Insurgency Efforts</i>	4
II. SOUTH VIETNAM'S ORGANIZATION FOR TERRITORIAL DEFENSE	9
<i>The Geographical Environment</i>	9
<i>Military Organization and Control</i>	15
III. THE REGIONAL AND POPULAR FORCES	24
<i>Evolution of a Concept</i>	24
<i>Background and Missions</i>	26
<i>Organization and Force Development</i>	31
<i>Recruitment and Administration</i>	48
<i>Training</i>	54
IV. THE PARA-MILITARY FORCES	60
<i>Rural Development Cadres</i>	61
<i>People's Self-Defense Forces</i>	66
<i>The National Police</i>	72
V. RF-PF EMPLOYMENT AND PERFORMANCE	75
<i>Role and Responsibilities</i>	75
<i>Deployment of Forces</i>	77
<i>Outposts and Strongpoints</i>	80
<i>Village and Hamlet Defense</i>	83
<i>Pacification</i>	89
<i>Dong Khoi Operations</i>	94
<i>Combat Support</i>	96

	Page
VI. EFFORTS TO IMPROVE RF AND PF COMBAT EFFECTIVENESS	101
<i>Morale and Welfare</i>	101
<i>On-The-Spot Training</i>	107
<i>Mobile Advisory Teams</i>	111
<i>Combined Operations</i>	116
VII. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS	125
<i>The Importance of Territorial Security</i>	125
<i>The RF and PF Soldier</i>	127
<i>Evolving Problems</i>	131
<i>Conclusions</i>	136
 Appendix	
A. Insignia of Territorial and Para-Military Forces	139
B. The Viet Cong Infrastructure	144
C. Principles of Territorial Security	149
 GLOSSARY	 153

Table

No.		
1.	Pacification Results, 1968-1969	94
2.	Combat Support for RF/PF, MR-3	99

Charts

1.	RVNAF Organization for Territorial Control	35
2.	Organization, RF Company (Separate)	36
3.	Organization, PF Platoon	37
4.	RF/PF Organization Within a Province/Sector	38
5.	Organization, Headquarters, RF Company Group	39
6.	Organization, Sector ALS Center	41
7.	Organization, Hq. and Hq. Company, RF Battalion	42
8.	Organization, Sector Tactical Headquarters	44
9.	Organization, 59-man RD Cadre Group	62
10.	Village Organization for Defense	84
11.	U.S. Field Advisory System, 1967	112

Maps

1.	South Vietnam General Reference Map	10
2.	South Vietnam, Terrain Configuration	12
3.	South Vietnam, Population Density	14
4.	RVN Military Territorial Organization	18
5.	Location of National Training Centers, Mid-1972	58
6.	Overlay, Typical Village Defense Plan	86
7.	Protective Shield for RF/PF, Northern MR-1	93

Illustrations

	<i>Page</i>
RF Soldiers Patrolling a Village	28
PF Soldiers Awaiting Orders to Move Out	29
RF Soldiers Practiced Crossing a Log "Monkey" Bridge During Training	56
PF Watchtower in Duc Hue District (Hau Nghia Province)	78
A Typical Outpost With Protective Moat	81
A Typical Village Headquarters in Kien Hoa Province	88
RF Soldiers on Patrol in a Strategic Hamlet	91
Combined Action Program Headquarters at Da Nang	108
Refresher Training Class Conducted by MAT Instructor	114
Quang Dien PF loading at 1/502 pad for a one-slick mini-lift . . .	121

CHAPTER I

Introduction

An Abstract of Communist Insurgency in South Vietnam

The end of the First Indochina War in 1954 left the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV or Viet Minh) with a well-developed political and military organization potentially capable of carrying on the fight with combined guerrilla-conventional warfare.

In the South, this organization consisted of about 90,000 troops who controlled several war zones (chien khu) and guerrilla bases (l^om). After the partition, the majority of this force was regrouped and evacuated to north of the 17th parallel in accordance with the Geneva Accords. In the process, the Viet Minh left behind an estimated five to ten thousand men, mostly selected from among well-trained, disciplined, and loyal party members. This fifth column was ordered to put away weapons and ammunition in secret storage, mostly in areas of difficult access along the border or in the Mekong Delta. They and other political elements were to mix in the stream of normal life and wait for orders to resume action. It was these men who made up the initial nucleus of insurgency after the South Vietnamese government refused to take part in the 1956 reunification elections.

During 1956 and 1957, the Viet Minh spent most of their efforts recruiting and reactivating former base areas. In the meantime, those who had regrouped to the North and received insurgency training there began to reinfiltrate into the South. This movement of Communist insurgency was thus building up force in earnest while South Vietnam complacently went about its task of nation-building. Gradually, the underground Viet Minh forces gained in strength and organization, ready to exploit the unsettled conditions which characterized the first few years of the Republic of Vietnam. By the end of 1957, a campaign of terror

and assassination was in progress and the first signs of security deterioration began to manifest in rural areas.

Insurgency as a concerted effort did not begin until 1959. By this time, subversive activities by the Communist Viet Minh, now known as Viet Cong, had taken on alarming proportions, especially in the Mekong Delta, and soon spread all over the country. Infiltration from North Vietnam through lower Laos and the DMZ, and from the sea also increased by the month, and in time became an established pattern for the years ahead.

North Vietnam's design for the South, which was decided during the 3d Congress of the Communist Party in September 1960, was to concentrate every effort on what it called "the primary strategic mission to prosecute a revolution for national liberation" in South Vietnam. As Hanoi leaders saw it, this mission was going to be a tough and protracted process requiring several different forms of struggle, from the lowest to the highest. The objective was to build, consolidate, and develop a popular front in the South which would appear as if the South Vietnamese population was revolting to overthrow their own government. This was how the National Liberation Front (NLF) for South Vietnam came into being when its creation was officially proclaimed on 20 December 1960. In early 1962, Hanoi took a further step toward full control of the insurgency war when it upgraded its southern Political Commissariat into the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), *The Party's Politbureau in the South*.

In its conduct of the war, Hanoi adopted the strategy of people's warfare which was to progress through three steps or phases: (1) Laying the infrastructure; (2) Holding; and, (3) Counterattacking. The first step consisted of secretly establishing control over the rural population through propaganda and terror, then gradually eliminating governmental authority through the assassination of local officials, and eventually building a political and military infrastructure among the population. The VC propaganda campaign promised the people land reform, local autonomy for minorities, universal education and a bright future, free from colonialism and based upon socialism. When this was done, the next step called for organizing armed forces to fight a guerrilla war with the objective of destroying governmental forces and structure in outlying areas and

expanding control over the rural areas. The third or final step consisted of building up sufficient military strength to attack and destroy governmental forces and progressing toward total control of the population.

These rules of Communist insurgency — as had been known for a long time — were patterned after Mao Tse Tung's theory of people's war, and with some modifications, had been put into application in Malaysia, Greece, the Philippines, Cuba, and Laos. The only difference as it applied to Vietnam was that one half of the country served as an immune sanctuary supplying men and weapons for the subversion of the other.

With large infusions of men and weapons from North Vietnam, the Viet Cong were therefore able to upgrade their terrorist activities to full-fledged guerrilla warfare. During 1960, the first battalion-size attacks were initiated against outlying towns and outposts, to include a few conducted against ARVN forces. Most significant were the attacks in early 1960 against an element of the 32d Regiment in the Mekong Delta and the Headquarters, 12th Light Division in Tay Ninh Province, which created quite a tremor across the country. Soon, these attacks gained in tempo and reached multi-battalion size during 1961; as a result, several outlying areas succumbed under Communist control.¹ In the meantime, the flow of infiltration from the North kept increasing in size and local recruiting efforts by the VC also became more successful as enemy control expanded.

By 1962, the Viet Cong guerrilla force structure had increased to over 75,000. This force consisted of three categories: full-time guerrillas, part-time guerrillas, and rural support elements. Full-time guerrillas were estimated at 18,000 and organized into companies and battalions which operated at the provincial level; they were considered the VC military. Part-time guerrillas, estimated at about 40,000, were organized at the district level into platoons and companies. Summarily trained they were equipped with small weapons, grenades, mines, and

¹The first two VC regimental-size units were activated during 1961.

explosives. The rural support elements numbered about 17,000 and constituted a reserve force at the village level. During the day-time, they went about their normal business but at night participated in activities under the local guerrilla chief's orders. Usually equipped with knives or machetes, they sometimes operated with firearms. These support elements played an important role in guerrilla operations, providing new recruits, supplying food, and collecting information concerning village defense, local government officials, and security forces.

From these three categories of guerrilla forces, the VC eventually built up their main, local, and guerrilla units which all increased in size and structure to keep up with intensified war efforts. By the end of 1963, the VC main force had reached a level of 35,000, a figure which kept expanding every year with the flow of weapons infiltrated from the North, especially those supplied by Russia and Red China.

As their forces grew in strength, the VC stepped up attacks, terror, and sabotage despite governmental counter-measures. Between 1963 and 1965, the level of armed conflict in South Vietnam grew to alarming proportions. The VC also benefited from the domestic political difficulties faced by the GVN during this period, which they exploited to their advantage by expanding the range and scale of their activities. During 1964 alone, they assassinated 436 hamlet chiefs or other officials, and abducted 1,131 others. More than 1,350 civilians were killed by VC mines or terrorist activities and at least 8,400 were kidnapped. This level of activity continued into 1965.

With their growing military posture, during 1964-1965, the VC gradually expanded their control over rural areas and upgraded their force structure to division size. From all indications, it was apparent that they were evolving into the final or mobile warfare phase.

The RVN's Counter-Insurgency Efforts

Born amidst tumultuous political events that marked the aftermath of the 1954 Geneva Accords, the Republic of Vietnam endeavored to develop a free, democratic, fully sovereign country that could resist Communist aggression from the North.

The threat of a military conquest by North Vietnam was genuine, especially after 1956. South Vietnam's leaders estimated then that this conquest could materialize either under the forms of a subversive war waged by Hanoi-directed Communist elements remaining in the South or through an outright invasion from the North conducted by NVA regular forces.

In the face of this double threat, South Vietnam planned its defense structure to cope with either or both possibilities. This, in essence, consisted of defending the national territory against a possible invasion from across the borders and eliminating subversive activities within the national boundaries. The objective was to ensure territorial integrity and pacify the whole country.

Toward that objective, the force structure of South Vietnam was organized into two principal components: the regular forces and the territorial forces. Regular forces consisted of infantry, airborne, marine, ranger units, etc., which were for the most part conventionally organized into divisions with organic support elements similar to U.S. counterparts, and whose primary mission was to destroy the enemy through combat operations and to defend the national borders. Territorial forces were made up of the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces, formerly known as the Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Corps respectively. Their organization was local in nature, being kept mostly at the small unit level, (platoon and company), lightly equipped, and tasked for pacification and the maintenance of territorial security.

The first significant pacification effort made under the First Republic to counter Communist insurgency was the Agrovillage program. Launched by President Ngo Dinh Diem in July 1959 after the Communists began to step up disruptive activities, the program was designed to assemble those rural people who lived in scattered isolation into farming agglomerations for better governmental control and protection. Called "agrovilles," these farming agglomerations were to serve a double purpose: maintenance of local security and socio-economical development. Despite sound planning and a promising start, the few pilot agrovilles carved out of the Mekong Delta's wilderness did not live up to expectations.

Too large for effective defense, they proved to be vulnerable and unrealistic.

Drawing from this unsuccessful experiment, the Diem administration worked on another pacification concept and put it to test in a few areas during 1961. The concept, which became known as the Strategic Hamlet, was officially declared a national policy in March 1962.

Considered the most important pacification effort under the First Republic, the Strategic Hamlet program was essentially based on the British counter-insurgency experience in Malaya. Designed to counter Communist people's war and neutralize its frontless effect, the guiding concept of the program was to turn each individual hamlet, the natural geographic and demographic unit of South Vietnam, into a defense fortification. Hamlet defense was deemed basic, and easier to organize and control than the village, the administrative unit. Under the vision of Mr. Nhu, who devised the concept to neutralize the effect of a war without frontlines, we had to create interconnected lines of defense. These lines of defense were to be made up of strategic hamlets linked together in a mutual support system and when interconnected, would create large secure areas which made it easier to detect the enemy and facilitated mutual security support among the hamlets.

The initial plans established priority areas which the central government classified as strategically important, depending on the local security situation, so as to devote all efforts to those considered more important. The plans also set forth a policy of self-defense whereby the rural people living in hamlets would be trained and equipped to defend themselves against VC intruders.

When implemented, the Strategic Hamlet program revealed certain intrinsic weaknesses. A major weakness, which derived basically from the initial concept, was the forced displacement of a substantial number of farmers, which eventually generated an undercurrent of discontent. In addition to uprooting them from their lands and ancestral graveyards to which they felt intimately attached by tradition, the transplanting of farming people to an unfamiliar environment also tended to make their living standards somewhat lower.

Another basic difficulty was physical protection. Although in theory, the strategic hamlets should receive support not only among themselves but also from territorial and regular forces, there was seldom close coordination in local defense plans. Many hamlets under attack, therefore, found themselves isolated with no one to depend on for support but their own people.

As for training and equipment, they proved totally inadequate for the purposes intended. The VC in fact, encountered no significant difficulties when they mounted attacks against strategic hamlets of which a good number were destroyed. By the end of 1963, the program fell into disfavor and neglect after President Diem was overthrown.

The new military government which took over did not have any plans nor was any significant effort made to pacify the rural areas. The objective then was simply to destroy the VC. After General Nguyen Khanh came to power, in March 1964, the government initiated the "Victory Plan," the essential of which was to pacify the countryside on the "oil stain" concept. Pacification was to progress slowly but firmly gaining ground from secure areas and expanding outward as it proceeded.

Despite the comprehensiveness of the Victory Plan which sought to implement pacification in several aspects and required close military-civilian cooperation, in reality, it turned out to be primarily a military campaign endeavoring not so much to obtain the lasting results of pacification as to destroy the enemy. Therefore, South Vietnam's pacification efforts to counter Communist insurgency up to that time achieved very little indeed. It was possible that each attempt had been undermined by unfavorable circumstances prevailing in that particular period. But basically, these efforts still fell far short of the objective intended which was to bring about and maintain local security, a prerequisite of pacification.

During that period, the RVNAF were still progressing through a developing stage and constantly committed to operational activities. Support for pacification efforts, therefore, remained extremely limited. The territorial forces — Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps — also in the same developing process, did not have the capabilities to play their

role effectively at the grassroots level. Command and control throughout the RVNAF hierarchy suffered seriously from power intrigues which rocked national unity in the wake of Mr. Diem's death. The morale of combat units declined steadily while the security situation across the country deteriorated with every passing day.

To save South Vietnam from the danger of collapse and to stop Communist aggression, the U.S. introduced combat troops in 1965. The next period saw the war intensified by U.S.-conducted large-scale operations which achieved substantial results. Enemy forces were soundly defeated and their combat potential markedly reduced. All important populous centers were successively cleared from enemy pressure and the situation improved remarkably as a result.

All of these achievements, however, in spite of their magnitude, represented temporary success rather than lasting progress. The key issue in territorial security remained unsolved as long as the VC guerrilla and local forces with the support of their political infrastructure were still intact. Experience indicated that pacification would not produce lasting results until these elements were discovered and eliminated.

Therefore, the efforts to fight the insurgency war in South Vietnam were twofold. In addition to destroying enemy main force units and defending the borders against infiltration, the government had also to deal with the VC infrastructure and guerrillas, the enemy's insurgent component. This was precisely the role to be performed by the territorial forces.

CHAPTER II

South Vietnam's Organization for Territorial Defense

The Geographical Environment

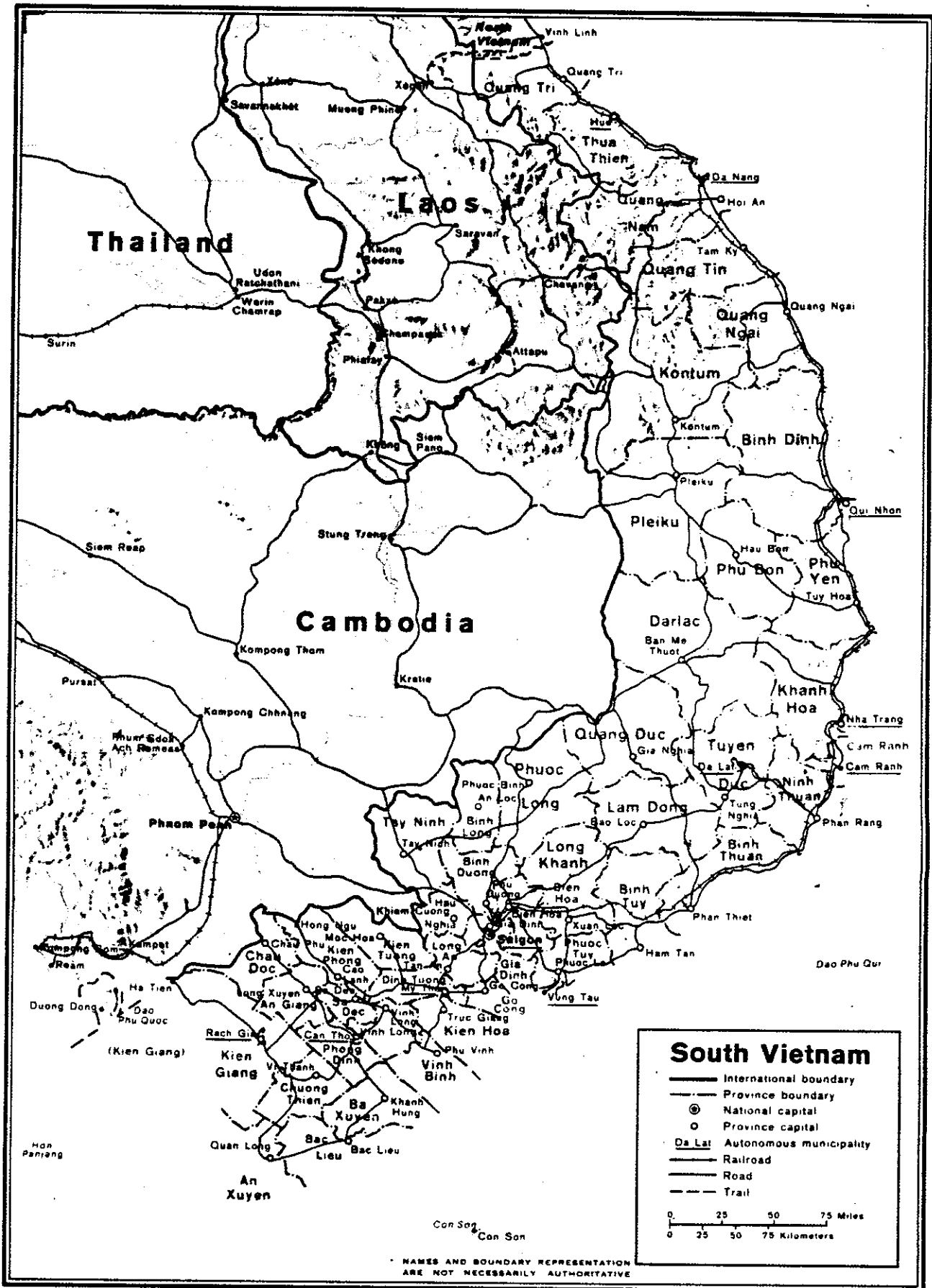
South Vietnam covered a crescent-shaped area of approximately 67,000 square miles flanked on one side by a 1,500-mile coastline facing the South China Sea, and on the other by a 950-mile border which is shared with Cambodia and lower Laos.

While the long coastline, which ran from the DMZ at the 17th parallel to the Gulf of Siam, was generally uncluttered and flat, the western border was, for the most part, lost in a maze of jungle and mountains and usually remained undefinable. Because of this terrain configuration, South Vietnam lent itself to easy infiltration through innumerable accesses both from the sea and the border areas. (*Map 1*)

South Vietnam's climate is tropical; hot and humid, it is under the influence of alternating monsoons. There are, therefore, only two seasons: the dry season and the rainy season. The monthly mean temperature is 85°F. September and October are the period of heavy rain throughout the country with occasional cyclones whose eyes usually move into the Gulf of Tonkin. Heavy rains, cyclones and floods which frequently occur along the coastal lowlands affect the lives of people living in these areas to a considerable extent.

The topography of South Vietnam is highly diverse. In general, three geographic regions can be distinguished: the Central Highlands, the Coastal Lowlands, and the Mekong Delta. The sparsely-populated Central Highlands, which occupies about two-fifths of South Vietnam's total area, is made up of jungle-covered high plateaux with elevations ranging from 3,000 to a maximum of 8,366 feet. Its terrain offers excellent concealment for troop cantonments and movements. A long and

Map 1 - South Vietnam General Reference Map






narrow plain, from 10 to 25 miles wide, forms the coastal lowlands which run from Phan Rang northward to the 17th parallel, hemmed in from the west by the foothills of the Truong Son range. The coastal lowlands was extensively cultivated and had a high population density. The remainder of South Vietnam, approximately two-fifths of the total area, is the delta region formed primarily by the Mekong River and other lesser rivers. This is the most densely populated area in which the South Vietnamese distinguished two regions separated by the Vam Co East River: the Eastern region heavily covered with vegetation and rain forests, and the Western region, or the Mekong Delta proper, with its crisscrossing canal system.

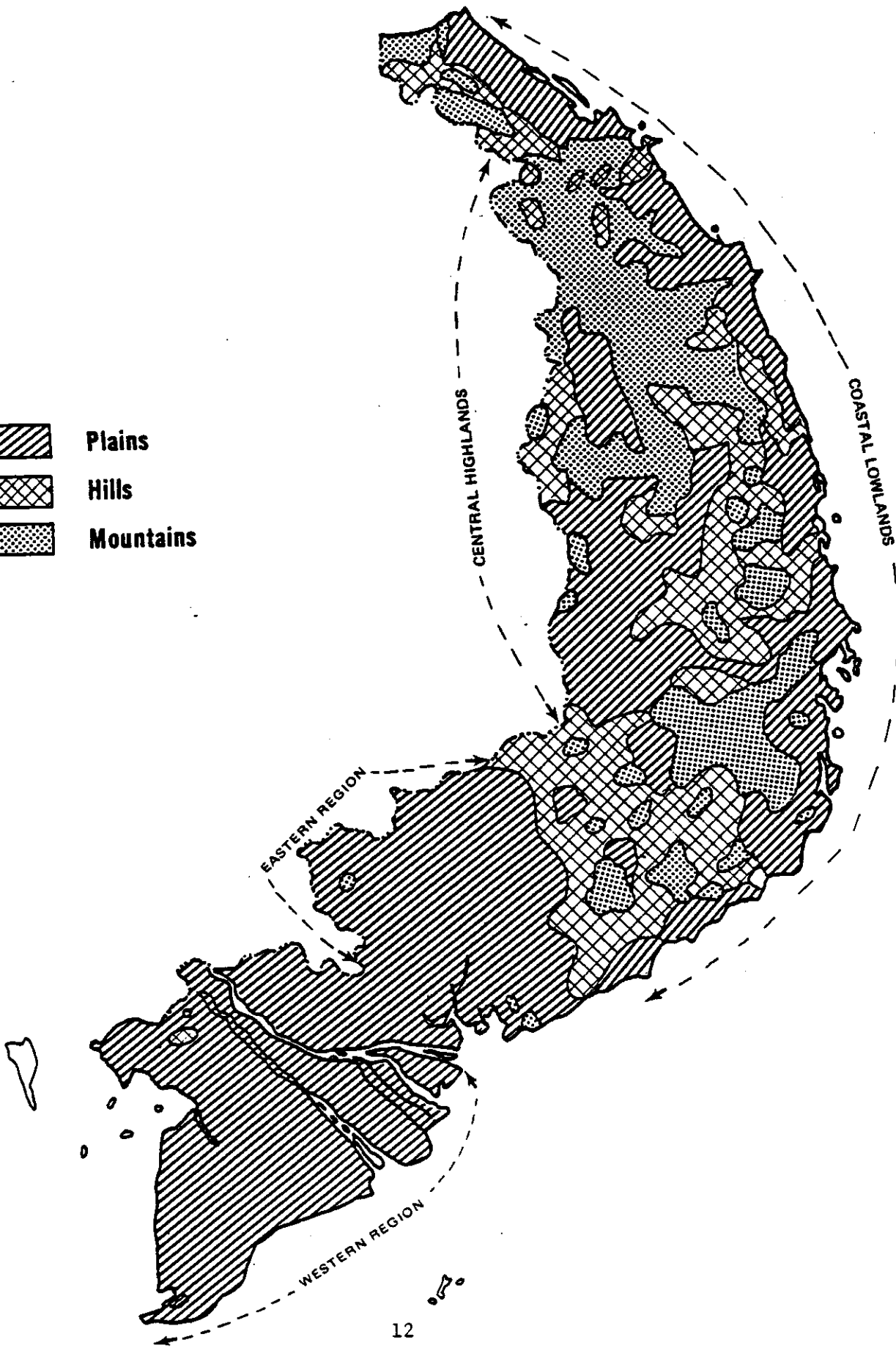
(Map 2)

Lines of communications were few and in poor condition. Aside from major roads which connected big cities and provincial capitals, there were very few secondary roads; most of them narrow, requiring constant maintenance to keep them trafficable, especially during the season of heavy rains and floods. In addition to natural causes of debilitation, lines of communication were frequently interdicted by the VC. Great numbers of bridges, culverts, and mountain passes offered the enemy the ability to use ambush or blocking tactics to his advantage. Outside of the road system, movement was difficult particularly in the jungle-covered high plateaux and in swampy areas. To reach outlying places where outposts and fire support bases were usually installed, movement by air was essential and sometimes remained the only means of communication. In time, because of difficulties in communication and enemy activities, many remote rural areas became isolated from central control, physically and psychologically. This in time facilitated the enemy's efforts to gain control over the population and impeded the government's ability to intervene quickly in case of heavy enemy threat.

On the other hand, the terrain of South Vietnam seemed to favor movement by foot because there were myriad pathways and trails through jungles and mountains and these were especially practicable during the dry season. In the Mekong Delta, the extensive canal system facilitated

Map 2 - South Vietnam, Terrain Configuration

-  Plains
-  Hills
-  Mountains



communication by small boats and during the rainy season, large flooded areas made it possible to reach other areas outside the normal waterways. Control of enemy movements during the rainy season was therefore nearly impossible.

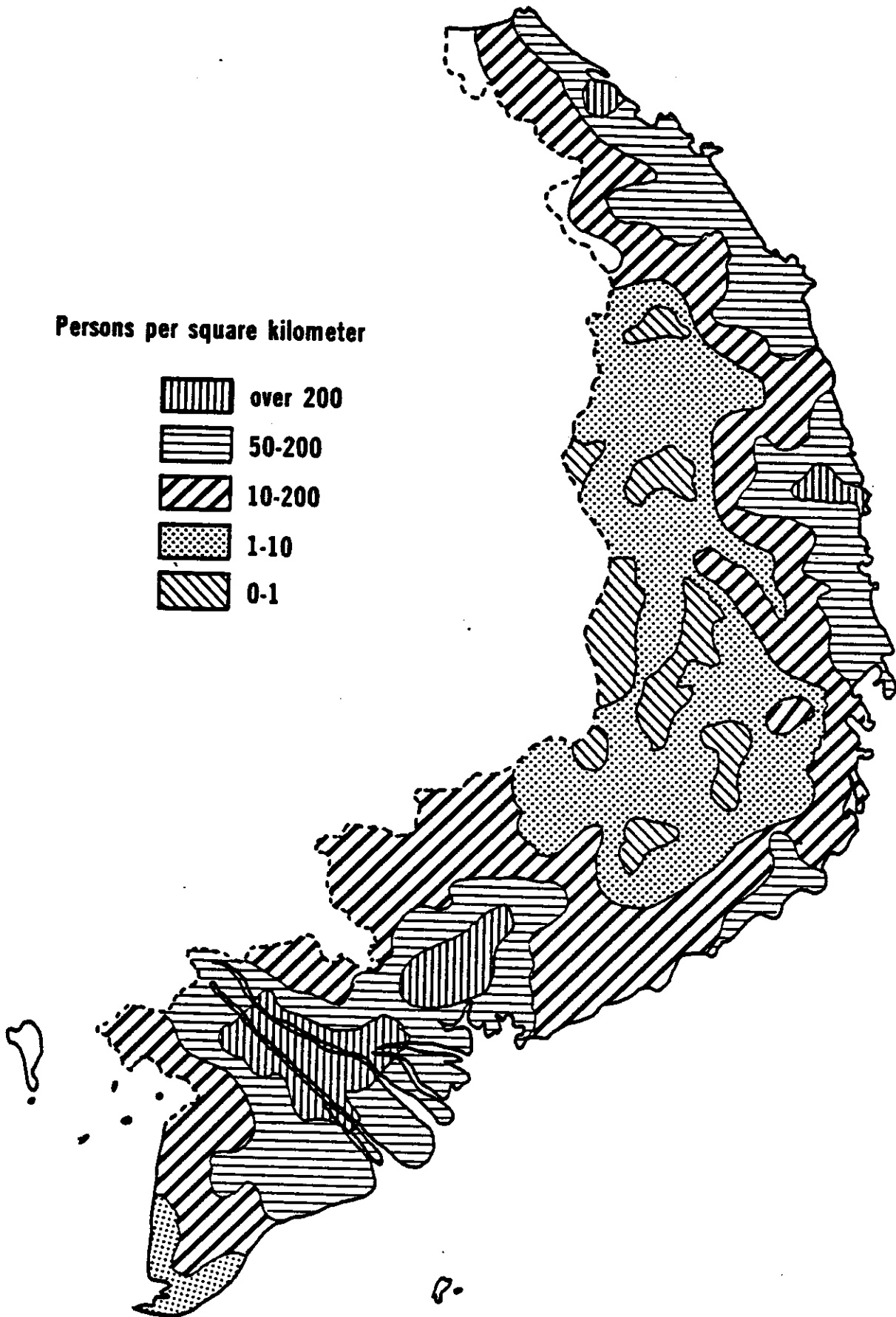
In 1954, the population of South Vietnam was estimated at 14 million; its birth rate was about 2.25% per year. Among the three major geographic areas, the Central Highlands was the most sparsely populated. Most of the South Vietnamese people lived in the plains and lowlands in farming or fishing communities. They were particularly concentrated in areas which favored rice production such as the Mekong Delta and river valleys in the central lowlands. (Map 3)

Vietnamese made up the largest ethnic group living in South Vietnam, about 85% of the total population. Other ethnic minority groups included the Chinese (6%) who played a major economic role, the tribal montagnards (5%) of the Central Highlands, the Khmers of the Mekong Delta and the Chams.

South Vietnam's major religion was Buddhism; about 80% of the population were Buddhists although only a small percentage ritually practiced the religion. Next in importance was Roman Catholicism; about 10% of the population were Catholics. Two local religious sects, the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai, which were founded in the early 20th century, drew a substantial number of followers in the Mekong Delta. Other religious faiths represented in small minorities included Protestantism, Hinduism, Islam, and the Bahai. Competition for influence among the major religions and religious sects sometimes caused tense situations and difficult problems for the government.

The rule of the country was centralized at the national level; all important decisions originated from Saigon, seat of the central government, which also directed major national programs. The President of the Republic was truly the holder of political power as head of government. He was assisted in the development of national policies and programs by a cabinet operating under the direction of the Prime Minister. These programs and policies were executed by the echelons of the civil-military administration which included in descending order the corps tactical zone

Map 3 – South Vietnam, Population Density



(CTZ) the division tactical area (DTA), the province, the district, and the village.

The executive echelon directly below the central government was the corps tactical zone (or military region after 1970). The CTZ or MR commander acted as the government delegate in his area of responsibility. But not all directives from Saigon had to go through the military region and DTA level. Usually, technical and administrative directives originated from various ministries in Saigon went directly to province chiefs for execution. This served to alleviate the administrative burden for military region and division commanders who needed most of their time to look after operational matters.

South Vietnam was administratively divided into 44 provinces and five autonomous municipalities (Saigon, Da Nang, Dalat, Cam Ranh, and Vung Tau). The provinces dated mostly from colonial times but included ten which had been created by the Diem administration. Largely located in areas formerly controlled by the Viet Minh during the First Indochina War (1946-1954), these new provinces included Quang Tin in the I Corps area, Phu Bon and Quang Duc in the II Corps area, Phuoc Long, Binh Long, Phuoc Thanh, and Hau Nghia in the III Corps area, and Kien Tuong, Kien Phong and Chuong Thien in the Mekong Delta.

The next level of administrative organization below the province was the district which in turn was divided into villages. On an average, there were from eight to twelve villages to a district. A village was made up of several hamlets, the hamlet being the basic geographical unit with natural boundaries. Administratively however, the village was a more significant unit since it had a local government responsible for civilian as well as military matters.

Military Organization and Control

Up to 1957, South Vietnam retained its military territorial organization as it had been under French control. There were then only three military regions: MR-1 which comprised the provinces of former Cochinchina and was headquartered at Thu Duc in Gia Dinh Province; MR-2 which encompassed all the provinces of former Central Vietnam and whose

headquarters was located in Hue; MR-4 which was headquartered at Ban Me Thuot and encompassed the Central Highlands.¹ Under the control of military region headquarters, there were sectors, defined by provincial boundaries. During this period, the sector commander served as deputy for security for the province chief who was usually a civilian. Infantry divisions were deployed to military regions as required by defense requirements; they were subordinated to military region headquarters only in matters concerning territorial security.

In late 1958, in keeping with ARVN reorganization trends which saw the activation of field and light infantry divisions, three corps headquarters were created: I Corps at Da Nang; II Corps at Pleiku; and III Corps in Saigon. These corps headquarters were organized with the purpose of controlling infantry divisions assigned to them to fight a hypothetical large-scale invasion by the North Vietnamese Army.

But large-scale or conventional warfare at the division or corps level did not materialize at the outbreak of Communist insurgency. The war began instead at the grassroots level with small VC guerrilla units which, through the use of hit-and-run tactics, gradually gained control in rural areas, especially in former MR-1. To alleviate the territorial-control and combat burdens for MR-1, an area teeming with Communist insurgents who lived either among the popular masses or in the jungle, the government created a new military region, called MR-5, with headquarters in Can Tho.

In 1961, several significant reorganization efforts were made in order to achieve unity of command and place particular emphasis on pacification. South Vietnam was divided into four Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ), each placed under the control of an army corps. Each CTZ was in turn divided into Division Tactical Areas (DTA), for which subordinate infantry divisions were responsible. The 1st CTZ or I Corps area encompassed the five northernmost provinces which made up two DTA's.

¹This division was part of the pre-Geneva territorial organization. The mission MR-3 happened to be North Vietnam minus the provinces of the panhandle. Its headquarters was in Hanoi.

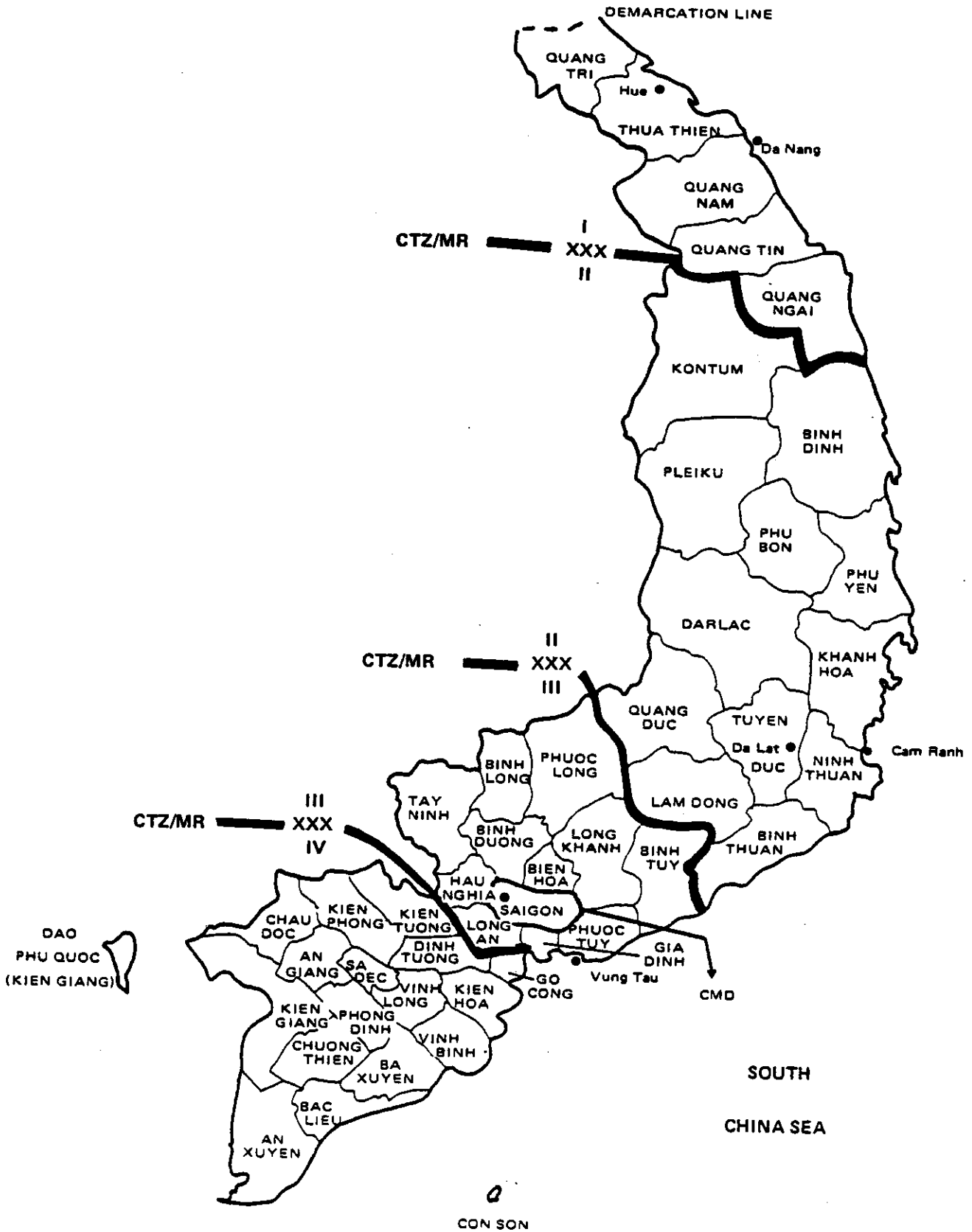
The 2d CTZ or II Corps area included twelve provinces of the central highlands and coastal lowlands which were distributed between two DTA's. The 3d CTZ or III Corps area comprised the ten provinces that surrounded Saigon and the Capital Military District (CMD) which encompassed Saigon City and Gia Dinh Province. The 4th CTZ or IV Corps area was divided into three DTA's and included all sixteen provinces of the Mekong Delta.

To achieve unity of command, the three former military region headquarters were deactivated and a new IV Corps Headquarters was activated at Can Tho. Corps commanders were also CTZ commanders, likewise, division commanders were also DTA commanders. Both the CTZ and DTA were responsible not only for mobile operations but also for territorial security in their zones and areas of responsibility. At the same time, civilian province chiefs were gradually replaced by military officers, especially in those areas where security deteriorated. When a military officer was appointed province chief, he also served as sector commander at the same time. This practice soon became firmly established and eventually all province chiefs were military officers, especially following the overthrow of Mr. Diem.² It was believed that in a country at war, a military province chief was better suited to the task of pacification since he could coordinate military and civilian activities. This practice also applied to district chiefs who served as subsector commanders at the same time. (Map 4)

In 1970, in order to provide more combat forces for mobile operations in replacement of U.S. units, the formal DTA's were disbanded, theoretically freeing infantry divisions from their territorial responsibilities. Divisions were assigned informal areas of tactical responsibility instead, whose configurations depended on the local security situation. South Vietnam was still divided in four corps areas which retained former boundaries but were called military regions in place of CTZ. Corps commanders, as military region commanders, exercised direct control over

²Before the inauguration of the Second Republic in September 1967, a few civilians were still appointed as mayors and province chiefs (Dalat, Da Nang, Quang Nam, etc.) for local politics reasons.

Map 4 - RVN Military Territorial Organization



sectors as far as territorial security was concerned. Sectors remained the same as did subsectors.

This organization was maintained until late 1973. In early 1974, to improve the maintenance of security at the grassroots level and in preparation for a political contest with the Communists, South Vietnam's military territorial organization was extended to the village level through the activation of sub-subsector headquarters. A sub-subsector commander, usually a junior officer, performed the role of assistant village chief for security, responsible for the control and coordination of village security forces, to include Popular Forces, People's Self Defense Forces and the National Police. This was the last effort to improve territorial command and control made by the GVN.

In spite of complexities and shortcomings which inevitably came as a result of several changes in territorial organization and control, the efforts made by the GVN in that direction represented perhaps the best compromise between dictates of the growing politico-military war and available resources. South Vietnam's organization for territorial control was also a compromise between centralization and efforts of decentralization which were made during the later stages of the war.

At the corps/military region level, the most serious shortcoming was undoubtedly the fact that the corps commander and his staff were constantly overburdened by innumerable tasks and responsibilities. The span of control was simply too much for a corps headquarters to handle, such as in the case of MR-2 and MR-3 each of which consisted of more than ten provinces. In the extreme case of MR-4 which encompassed sixteen provinces, obviously every basic principle of command and control was seriously violated. MR-1 was relatively better off with only five provinces but here I Corps had to shoulder heavier combat responsibilities occasioned by large-scale threats and attacks by the majority of NVA divisions.

Some ideas had been proposed during the war in an effort to remedy our shortcomings in organization and control. In general, these ideas advocated realigning South Vietnam's territorial organization into at least six military regions instead of four. This realignment would

surely benefit MR-2, MR-3 and MR-4 in particular by reducing their spans of control. Each military region, the same concept advocated, should have its own headquarters, separate from corps, responsible for the control and administration of territorial forces and the maintenance of territorial security. This would permit corps headquarters, which then should be reduced to three, to exercise better command and control over infantry divisions now entirely devoted to mobile combat operations. Each corps would not be bound to any permanent area of responsibility but would be assigned an area of operation selected by the Joint General Staff depending on the military situation or the primary effort to be conducted.

South Vietnamese military authorities seemed to agree that this arrangement for command and control would make the conduct of the war more efficient and effective. They believed that the most appropriate time for this reorganization was during 1970, after the U.S. had irreversibly decided to disengage from the war. This would have been an excellent way to implement Vietnamization since it would yield more effective combat forces to replace departing U.S. units and better prepare the RVNAF for the increasingly conventional outlook of the war. In retrospect, 1970 was no doubt the time to implement this reorganization since not only was the overall situation improving but the capability of enemy forces had been greatly reduced. In this contemplated realignment, the six military region headquarters would assume the functions of the four corps in fighting the small war at the grassroots level with territorial security and pacification. Then, ARVN corps would be completely free to conduct operations in search of enemy main forces in their base areas and sanctuaries, in other words, fighting the bigger war.

Such an approach for conducting the war appeared sound and logical in principle because it would provide better tactical and territorial control, thus ensuring improved territorial security. But apart from additional personnel and equipment required by the creation of separate military region headquarters which was the biggest problem to solve, there was also the possibility that the existence of such parallel commands

might not be conducive to effective coordination and cooperation. This possibility was fully explored and weighed during the process of reorganizing South Vietnam's defense structure which took place in October 1970. Both alternatives, combining or separating corps and military region headquarters were discussed and debated but the former solution gained more weight because although it placed additional burdens on one commander, it certainly provided unity of command and made it possible to concentrate every effort and resource on territorial security. In any event, the corps commander could always delegate some of his responsibilities to his two deputies, the Deputy for Operations and the Deputy for Territorial Security, thereby reducing the problems caused by the magnitude of his span of control.

The abolition of DTA's, on the other hand, did not bring about any of the desired results. Whether DTA's now became tactical areas of Interest (TAOI), tactical areas of responsibility (TAOR) or areas of operation (AO), the ARVN infantry divisions continued to be bound by territorial responsibilities. The primary reason why they could not be extricated from their territorial security mission was that the military region headquarters could not militarily control the territory for which it was responsible. Besides, the evolving security situation in certain areas did not allow the redeployment of divisional units if security was to be maintained.

When the presidential decree abolishing DTA's went into effect, Mr. John Paul Vann, senior CORDS adviser for MR-4, proposed to me, as IV Corps commander, that four sectors adjacent to corps headquarters, Phong Dinh, An Giang, Sadec, and Vinh Long be placed under direct corps control. After discussing it at length with him and my staff, I found his recommendation impractical. For one thing, as far as security was concerned, the separation of all sixteen sectors of MR-4 from divisional control would be impossible. Placing just a few sectors under direct control would only complicate the chain of command, causing it to lose its unity. But the essential thing was to keep infantry divisions from interfering into or upsetting the sector's pacification plans, which was the one practice that caused concern to CORDS advisers. As IV Corps

commander then, I made sure that this did not happen but it was a different problem.

To be sure, I found it impossible to extricate infantry divisions from territorial missions because they were the primary forces that kept territorial security from deteriorating. Aside from their resources which could be used to effectively support territorial activities, infantry divisions also performed certain critically needed services such as inspecting and supervising fixed installations, the defense of outposts and bridges, especially in outlying areas, services that required highly professional expertise. The role played by infantry divisions therefore became indispensable for the maintenance of territorial security. This indicates why our eleven ARVN infantry divisions were never entirely mobile in a true sense regardless of their efforts. The only exception came during the 1972 Easter Offensive when the 21st and 23d Divisions were temporarily extracted from territorial missions but then it was just a case of force majeure. To be freed from territorial responsibilities in order to conduct mobile operations -- like the Airborne and Marine Divisions -- was a major desire of division commanders. Unfortunately, they were never able to escape the tedious chores demanded by territorial security.

At the province or sector level, the fact that the province chief doubled as a military commander also caused many problems. A province chief usually found himself overburdened by military and civilian duties. As a military commander, he was in charge of a territorial force whose strength might be the equivalent of two divisions, such as in the case of Dinh Tuong and Binh Dinh, two of the largest provinces. In addition, as province chief, he had to direct and supervise his provincial administration, including those activities originated by ministries of the central government. But his role was an integrated one and even though overburdened, he could operate much more effectively than if his responsibilities were divided as during the First Republic. For the task of pacification implied that every effort should be an integration or detailed coordination of military-civilian activities, and this requirement could not be achieved by having a province chief looking after administrative

affairs while a sector commander was solely responsible for military operations. For the purposes of unity of command and pacification, the dual role of the province chief was essential. After all, like the corps commander, he could always delegate authority to his deputy for administration and deputy sector commander.

In general, South Vietnam had gone through several trials and errors in the quest for the best approach to fighting a war which was devoid of conventional frontlines and rear areas. Under such circumstances and given the environment of South Vietnam, it was hard indeed to find any simple solution which would be better than the prevailing arrangement for territorial command and control.