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Viet Nam: The Year of the Turning Point (1972)

NGUYEN HOANG

I When history repeats itself

In an article he called "Vietnam Negotiations" Henry Kissinger aimed a thrust at Johnson and Westmoreland by recalling their presumptuous claims — made just before the 1968 Têt offensive by the popular forces — of US "successes" in military operations and in the sphere of "pacification".

The article appeared in the January 1969 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Its author did not foresee that, three years later, history would repeat itself.

It was in early 1972, in the third year of "Vietnamization". In his message delivered on February 9, 1972, President Nixon, with superb self-confidence, proclaimed that, thanks to his new policy, "the day when the South Vietnamese can take over their own defence is in sight." Responsibility for ground operations had been transferred to the Saigon army and in 1971 the number of US air sorties had decreased by 90%

over South Viet Nam and by 70% over the whole of Indochina as compared with 1969. The miraculous success of "pacification" could be shown by the following figures: 73% of the population lived in rural areas controlled by the Saigon administration, 24% lived in contested areas and only 3% lived in NFL area. If the urban population of 6 million was also taken into account, the total population under Thieu's control would reach a proportion as high as 80%.

More detailed information was given by Defense Secretary Melvin Laird in an interview published in *US News and World Report* of March 27, 1972: the first stage of "Vietnamization" — the transfer of responsibility for ground combat — and the second stage — transfer of responsibility for logistics, artillery and air support — had surpassed all predictions; as a result it had been possible to make a considerable cut in the US air forces engaged in the war and to enter the third stage, which aimed at a reduction of US military advisers, ahead of schedule.

Viet Nam had ceased to divert his attention from the problems of world diplomacy, said President Nixon with satisfaction, feigning to ignore the new seven-point proposal of the PRG. The announcement of his forthcoming trip to Peking, he believed, would allow him to evade the Viet Nam problem. On July 20, 1971, however, *Nhan Dan*, the central organ of the Viet Nam Workers' Party, had served this warning: "Finding himself in a fix, Nixon moves heaven and earth for a way out. But he has gone to the wrong place. Though the exit door (represented by the July 1, 1971

seven points of the PRG — Ed), now stands open he is rushing blindly down a cul-de-sac."

On February 21, 1972, Nixon visited the Chinese People's Republic. "Vietnamization" and diplomacy on a world scale: these indeed were what the US considered as the two complementary elements which would suffice to bring the Viet Nam problem towards a final settlement — as always in the interests of the USA.

In his doctrine Nixon includes three components: US strength, the sharing of responsibility, and willingness to negotiate. For Viet Nam, the first two — whose result is called "Vietnamization" — are far more important than the third. The Nguyen Van Thieu administration, powerfully bolstered up by Washington, should remain the only power in South Viet Nam, and negotiations should only serve to provide the revolutionary and patriotic forces with a face-saving solution to camouflage their entire elimination.

At the beginning of the year 1972, the optimism generated by the progress of "Vietnamization" was such that Washington was quite happy to keep the Paris conference on Viet Nam in a state of half-suspension. At the 140th and 141st sessions (January 15 and 21) the US delegate, William Porter, resorted to a new method of sabotage: With hardly veiled arrogance, he passed the floor to Nguyen Van Thieu's representative, who played over and over again the old US-Saigon "POW" record. The Feb. 17 session was adjourned by the USA, alleging as a pretext the holding in Versailles of the World Assembly for Peace and

the Independence of the Indochinese Peoples. Then, while Nixon was going to China, his bombers sowed death on North Viet Nam right on the occasion of the Tet festival; as a result the DRVN delegation insisted on a new adjournment of the Conference in protest against the criminal raids. The following sessions were boycotted by the USA for such fallacious reasons as "lack of progress in negotiations", "absence of serious proposals on the part of the DRVN and the PRG", etc.

As regards the private talks between Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, on January 25, 1972, President Nixon had taken care to deal them a hard blow, by unilaterally revealing their content while giving of course an untrue account of them. After this breach of the rule of secrecy, the contacts outside the conference room fared no better than the plenary sessions themselves: they were put off indefinitely. Also on January 25, 1972, in order to deceive public opinion and give an appearance of stepping up the negotiations, Nixon put forward a new eight-point peace proposal with, as its main attraction, Nguyen Van Thieu's proposal resignation one month before the holding of presidential elections in South Viet Nam. The manoeuvre was transparent; those elections, to be organized within the framework of the Saigon regime and in accordance with the Saigon constitution (the word "presidential" removing all ambiguity), presupposed the elimination of the PRG, the surrender of the liberation fighters who would be obliged to lay down their weapons, return to the

fold and, under the "protection" of the Saigon army and police, accept the exchange of their guns for ballot papers. Nguyen Van Thieu would simply take a month's holiday to return later after having been triumphantly "re-elected". Besides, even though Nixon's proposal mentioned only the withdrawal of US and satellite troops, it demanded nonetheless that the armed forces of the "four Indochinese countries" stay within their respective frontiers.

A good deal of noisy propaganda was poured out around this "generous" peace offer. Meanwhile the Washington rulers deluded themselves with their rosy vision of the future, while they waited to gather the ripe fruit of "Vietnamization" and of the new Nixonian diplomacy.

II

The Easter offensive and US reaction

Washington's optimism was all the more understandable as the Saigon military apparatus has been considerably strengthened and meticulously prepared for its duty.

There is no denying that the Southern Laos campaign in February-March 1971 had been a particularly severe defeat for the Saigon army now reduced to a defensive posture within the limits of South Vietnamese territory. But what solid defence lines! They appeared so solid that even after learning of the powerful attack by the PLAF in the Quang Tri area, just before Easter, President Nixon continued to

show his confidence by declaring : "The South Vietnamese lines may bend (but) not break." And he added : "If this proved to be the case, it will be the final proof that Vietnamization has succeeded."

The Saigon defence lines, however, were very effectively broken on more than one front. The situation was somewhat similar to that in 1964 in certain respects : without massive intervention by Washington the very survival of the pro-US regime in Saigon would be threatened.

To save "Vietnamization", it became necessary to have a re-Americanization of the war. Consequently the air and naval war took North as well as South Viet Nam as its targets. On May 8, 1972, Nixon went on television and declared : "We now have a clear, hard choice among three courses of action : immediate withdrawal of all American forces ; continued attempts at negotiations ; or decisive military action to end the war." He chose the mining and blockade of DRVN ports, and massive aeronaval intervention — indeed real "decisive military action." And, confident of the success of this operation, he went to the Soviet Union for the second round of his big diplomatic game which he thought would be as determining for the settlement of the Viet Nam problem as his trip to People's China.

The calculations of the White House and the Pentagon, however, proved to be erroneous.

New combat tactics were adopted by the South Viet Nam liberation forces, who continued their offensive.

In the cities the impact of military events had an immediate effect on the economic and political life, shaking the Nguyen Van Thieu regime in its very foundations; its only recourse was in the institution of an all-out fascist dictatorship. In North Viet Nam, neither the systematic bombing of cities, nor the attempts at asphyxiation by sea blockade, nor even the attacks against dykes succeeded in bending the will of the people, resolved to fight and to fulfil their obligations towards their Southern brothers (1). The French journalist Jean Lacouture described what he saw in North Viet Nam (in *Le Nouvel observateur* of Oct. 23, 1972): "In fifteen days of continuous travel and after five months of the blockade, I noticed no sign of any fuel shortage; along the roads motor vehicles were rolling endlessly, and everywhere housewives could buy an unlimited quantity of kerosene."

In Laos and Cambodia the situation was also far from bright for the American aggressors. In both countries the initiative was in the hands of the patriotic forces. Phnom Penh, like Vientiane, was confronted with serious economic difficulties: shortage of food-stuffs and fuel and rocketing prices. Discontent spread among broad sections of the people. The various pro-US clans were in open conflict with one another; the Sananikone clique against the Luang Prabang group in Laos; Sirik Matak, In Tam and others versus Lon Nol in Cambodia.

(1) Washington's attempts at economic subversion went to the length of using aircraft to scatter forged banknotes on North Vietnamese territory.

Throughout the world as well as in the United States everywhere rallies and demonstrations took place against the American bombings in Indochina, especially against the attacks on the dykes. Protests by Jane Fonda, Ramsey Clark, who were eye-witnesses of US crimes in Viet Nam, joined those of thousands of other personalities throughout the world. 600 scientists sent an open letter to Nixon asking him to stop the war. The "Trade Unions for Peace" movement was born in the USA on June 26, 1972. The World Conference of Christians for Peace met in Ottawa on October 9. Sixty-four non-aligned nations meeting in Georgetown in August recognized the resistance governments in South Viet Nam and Cambodia as full members of their organization.

The US presidential elections were in full swing, Nixon had declared to Hedley Donovan, the chief editor of *Time* magazine, at the beginning of the year that "Viet Nam will not be an issue in the campaign" (*Time*, Jan. 2, 1972). However after April there was a complete change in the situation. The rise of the "McGovern phenomenon" was significant for many reasons. The Senator from Dakota, nominated presidential candidate at the first ballot to the surprise of the Democratic Party itself, was well known most of all for his radical opposition to the Viet Nam war policy. Together with economic problems which grew more acute as hostilities were prolonged, the Viet Nam problem was the central preoccupation of the electorate. An end to the war, repatriation of GIs on active duty or captured — such were the unanimous

wishes of the American electors, reflected in the many anti-war resolutions adopted by Congress.

III

Hanoi's red carpet

President Nixon came gradually to realize that the Viet Nam problem could be settled only with the representatives of the Vietnamese people. On June 29 he declared that the US delegation would return to the Paris Conference. This, however, did not mean that the US negotiating stand was to be softened. Meanwhile the rainy season passed without any major accident in North Viet Nam: the dykes were strongly reinforced by the population and the 1972 floods were not very high.

On September 11, the PRG made public an important statement, stressing that any solution to the South Viet Nam problem must spring from the actual existence in South Viet Nam of two administrations, two armies and other political forces, and that a provisional government of national concord should be formed with three components in equal strength and on an equal footing. The PRG was prepared to reach agreement with the US government to the effect that neither a Communist regime nor a US-controlled stooge regime should be imposed on South Viet Nam.

US propaganda had always proclaimed that the Resistance wanted to impose a Communist government

on the South Vietnamese at any cost. However the US proposal on the holding of presidential elections within the framework of the Saigon constitution and under the supervision of the Saigon military and police apparatus would entail the forced acceptance by the population of the US-Nguyen Van Thieu regime. A fair solution to the problem of political power in South Viet Nam required in fact the recognition of two parallel governments and of political forces which, though aligned with neither of them, had the right to send their representatives to a provisional government whose task it was to organize free and democratic general elections.

The PRG proposal, a realistic and just one, was welcomed with the greatest sympathy in South and North Viet Nam and all over the world.

On October 8, in a private meeting with Kissinger, the DRVN plenipotentiaries Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy put forward a new and extremely important initiative. It was no longer a question of principles and general ideas, but a draft agreement — the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet Nam. The essential content of this draft Agreement consisted in the reiteration of several previous proposals by the PRG and the DRVN :

- a cease-fire in South Viet Nam and cessation of all US military involvement in Viet Nam ;
- total withdrawal of US and allied troops and return of all captured and detained personnel belonging to the parties concerned ;

— during the period between the enforcement of the cease-fire and the installation of the government formed after free and democratic general elections, the two present administrations in South Viet Nam shall remain in existence with their respective domestic and external functions. They shall immediately hold consultations whose main aim will be the formation of a three-segment administration of national concord. The two South Vietnamese parties shall settle the internal matters of South Viet Nam together.

The new proposal by the DRVN was acceptable to the men in Washington because it was no longer directed against Nguyen Van Thieu personally, and so it deprived them of the chance to make their usual fraudulent propaganda statements according to which Hanoi was demanding that the Americans contribute to the overthrow of the present "government" in Saigon before any settlement could be negotiated. Another new point : the Viet Nam problem was to be settled in two stages in accordance with the oft-expressed desire of the American side. But it would be a mistake to say, as some people did, that Hanoi had agreed to separate the political problems from the military ones in accordance with President Nixon's May 8, 1972 proposal ; the first stage would indeed include a cessation of the war in Viet Nam, a cease-fire in South Viet Nam and a cessation of the US military involvement in South Viet Nam, but it also included an agreement on the principles for the exercise of the South Vietnamese people's.

right to self-determination, which was an essentially political problem; the second stage concerned the settlement of the internal problems of South Viet Nam, among them the question of the Vietnamese armed forces in South Viet Nam, which was a military problem.

IV

The US volte-face and the powerlessness of the B.52s

The October 8 proposal provided the United States with a real prospect of "peace with honour".

A brutal refusal coupled with continuation of the war would certainly lead the United States and Nixon personally to disaster for reasons which weighed heavily in mid-October 1972: military defeat and political fiasco in all the three Indo-chinese countries, opposition all over the world, division and protests in America. The Viet Nam war had greatly undermined the international position of the United States and a refusal of any peaceful solution would enormously damage Nixon's electoral chances.

In this situation, the period after October 8, 1972, saw the Paris negotiations moving forward very quickly. By October 20, the wording of the Agreement could be considered as having been completed. Its signing was expected to take place on October 31. Although no official information had been leaked

to the public on the imminent achievement of peace, all newspapers in the United States and the world were commenting on it. Nixon could appear before US opinion as having already accepted peace. His re-election was assured. Quibbling over details or the time of signing no longer had any importance in the eyes of the US voters.

However, anyone who thought that the US was going simply to pull out of Viet Nam showed a very mistaken idea of the nature of American imperialism. Washington wanted to withdraw while staying behind. US troops would be withdrawn, but the neo-colonialist regime would stay behind. To ensure the survival of this regime represented by Nguyen Van Thieu, a time for preparation was necessary: "Difficulties encountered in Saigon" were invoked to ask for a revision of the agreed text of October 20.

The DRVN government denounced this volte face and revealed the content of the Agreement. Washington tried, nonetheless, its usual loud-mouthed propaganda about its "peaceful" intentions. "Peace is at hand", said Kissinger, and this contributed to Nixon's re-election.

The time gained by Washington was to be used for a threefold purpose :

- to consolidate the Nguyen Van Thieu regime politically and militarily;
- to weaken the potential of the DRVN;
- on this basis, to impose major concessions on the Vietnamese negotiators, forcing them to make a

settlement which would conform to the requirements of Yankee neo-colonialism.

The consolidation of the Nguyen Van Thieu regime was achieved in the first place through increasing still more the fascist nature of his regime while he waged a frantic campaign against the imminent peace. Repression of the opposition was intensified and projects were drawn up for the liquidation of political prisoners.

To strengthen the Saigon military potential, from November onward the Pentagon authorities began to put their plan into effect by supplying a massive quantity of areoplanes, ships and other war material to the puppet army. C.130 planes, some of them taken from US reserves, were sent by the Tactical Air Command to airports in South Viet Nam nine months ahead of schedule. Chinook helicopters and F5 jet bombers were transferred to Thieu from the South Korean, Taiwanese and Iranian armies. In a matter of only a few days, 600 planes were added to the Saigon air force, which now could boast 2,100 aircraft and was ranked third in the world (*Reuter*, November 20). US officers, disguised as civilians, crowded into Saigon in order to instruct the mercenary troops on how to handle this newly-introduced war material; their number totalled more than 10,000.

On the other hand, American strategists were themselves rushing headlong into a new military adventure against the DRVN. For twelve days from December

18 to 29, 1972, the whole US air armada in South-East Asia, both strategic and tactical, consisting especially of B.52s, was hurled into massive attacks against Hanoi and Haiphong. Everyone knows the result of this action which in Nixon's calculation was to have been even more decisive than the mining and blockade of ports in the North. The B.52 losses surpassed all Pentagon forecasts and were especially devastating for US military prestige: the myth of USAF superiority was definitively buried.

Moreover, immeasurable moral damage had been done to the United States. Apart from the British government and some Asian administrations living on US alms, there was not a single government in the world that failed on that occasion to voice its condemnation of the US crimes, which were rightly compared by some to the actions of Hitler's Germany. A powerful movement of solidarity with the Vietnamese people was initiated in all continents: six countries disputed the honour of re-building the Hanoi Bach Mai hospital destroyed by B-52s.

Far from generating a position of strength for the team of US negotiators in Paris, the B.52 blitz against Hanoi and Haiphong had driven American diplomacy into a completely unenviable position.

V

The end of the Viet Nam war

For several weeks, while the war was escalated against North Viet Nam and Nguyen Van Thieu's

military potential was being considerably strengthened in the South, the US representatives at the Paris talks made the opposition of the Saigon dictator a pretext to demand a total revision of the agreement accepted on October 20. 126 amendments were proposed to it; in fact, they aimed at :

- putting the aggressors and the victims of aggression on an equal footing by demanding the departure of at least part of the so-called North Vietnamese armed forces ;

- repudiating the principle of a standstill ceasefire by demanding the establishment of zones of regroupment where the liberation armed forces would be concentrated ;

- transforming the provisional demarcation line into a political frontier between the two Vietnamese states in the North and the South — which would mean a permanent partition of the country ;

- eluding the principle of a tripartite composition for the National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord, the sole principle capable of bringing about a fair solution to the current problems of South Viet Nam, since it is a faithful reflection of the present realities ;

- turning the International Commission of Control and Supervision into a tool for interfering in the internal affairs of South Viet Nam and infringing her sovereignty.

The B.52 fiasco overturned all those pretensions. On December 29, Washington found itself forced to order

the cessation of the bombing north of the 20th parallel. Private talks between the DRVN and the USA were resumed on January 8, 1973, and in less than a week all the difficulties had been ironed out. On January 23, 1973, the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet Nam was initialled, and on January 27 it was formally signed by the Foreign Ministers of the DRVN, the PRG of the RSVN, the Saigon administration, and the American Secretary of State.

On February 26 an international conference in which representatives of twelve governments participated in the presence of the UNO Secretary General was held in Paris to take note of the Agreement.

The Paris Agreement on Viet Nam in fact acknowledged the truth of Henry Kissinger's words (in *Viet Nam Negotiations*): "The guerilla wins if he does not lose, the conventional army loses if it does not win."

The text of the signed Agreement was essentially the same as the agreed text of October 20, 1972. The B-52s were powerless to bring the alterations desired by Washington.

The document opened with a provision that the United States was bound to respect the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Viet Nam, put an end to its war of aggression, its military involvement and its intervention in the internal affairs of South Viet Nam. All attempts to insert any confirmation of the US myth of North Viet Nam's aggression against the South had utterly failed.

On March 29 the last GI left South Viet Nam in conformity with the Agreement. For the first time in 115 years, not a single foreign soldier was garrisoned on Vietnamese land.

The Appeal of the Central Committee of the Viet Nam Workers' Party and the DRVN government, issued on the day following the signing of the Paris Agreement, stressed that this was the "great victory of the most glorious war of resistance in the history of our people's struggle against foreign aggression," a victory that "has brought about a new turning point in the Vietnamese revolution" and "will be followed by the most resplendent period of development of our nation." It constitutes "a basis from which our people will continue to march forward and win new victories and complete the national democratic revolution throughout the country."

Development of the Military Situation in 1972

NGOC TUAN

The setbacks suffered in 1971 by the US expeditionary corps and the Saigon, Vientiane and Phnom Penh troops posed many problems for the White House and the Pentagon. The collapse of the Saigon troops in operation "Lam Son 719" (in Southern Laos) and "Toan Thang 1-71" (in northeast Cambodia) proved that they could not act as expeditionary troops to spearhead or support the Lao and Cambodian mercenaries.

However, the Pentagon still harboured illusions: Melvin Laird, the US Defence Secretary declared to a NBC correspondent, that the South Vietnamese troops had made a good showing and that the "Vietnamization" program had been carried out according to plan. Intelligence specialists, he added, said there was no sign the enemy was preparing a big offensive in the near future or was capable of launching a protracted campaign.

Washington hoped that an important victory would allow them to settle the Viet Nam problem in 1972. Relying on the following line of reasoning, they believed that this hope could be realized: In South Viet Nam, the main theatre of operations, the US had a strong mercenary army equipped with up-to-date armaments and co-operating directly with the US combat troops. The reason why the Saigon army had been beaten in Laos and Cambodia was because they had to operate outside South Viet Nam, on unfamiliar terrain, with hastily set up field-works, stretched out communication and supply lines, and inadequate fire support. This was not the case in South Viet Nam where they fought on their own soil. There, a complete system of well-built bases was at their disposal, forming concentric belts, set up since long according to a carefully-prepared plan and defended by strong forces. They benefited from much better transport and communications, supply and mobility. The support by and operational co-ordination with the US troops (especially the USAF and Navy) showed maximum effectiveness.

Furthermore, the Pentagon estimated that the invasion of Cambodia in 1970 and of Southern Laos in 1971 had allowed them to destroy the Viet Cong's "sanctuaries", cut off their main supply sources, push the war out of South Viet Nam and weaken the offensive capacity of the PLAF, especially that of their regular units.

I The PLAF's Strategic Offensive in South Viet Nam

1. The Pentagon's surmise

At the end of 1971, applying the "mobile defence" tactics, the US launched "a week of a thousand air missions" against North Viet Nam. From December 26, US planes based in Thailand or on aircraft-carriers of the 7th Fleet launched ever more violent and systematic attacks on the DRVN (about 250 sorties per day) with a view to showing off US "strength", destroying the Vietnamese military potential and nipping in the bud all eventual offensives by the patriotic forces in South Viet Nam while Washington was being forced to repatriate its troops and at the same time had to save its puppets in Laos and Cambodia from collapse.

In South Viet Nam, Thieu's 11 regular divisions (three of them newly set up) were reorganized. With regard to his strategic general reserves, the "marines" were mostly engaged in supporting the 3rd infantry division in Quang Tri province; two paratroop brigades were sent to the Tay Nguyen Highlands and the rest were in charge of defending Saigon.

The defence network were composed of three lines:

The first, called a "steel shell", was defended by fortifications and artillery bases which could support each other by the fire of their 105-, 155- and 175-mm guns. In the northern part, this peripheral line was made up of the famous "McNamara line" extending

from the 17th parallel down to road 9 in Quang Tri province. Further south were the mountainous region west of Hue, then that of Dak To-Tan Canh in the northern part of the Highlands and facing the so-called area of the "three frontiers" where the territories of Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia touch. Closer to Saigon was the frontier sector of Loc Ninh-Bu Dop, about 120km from Thieu's capital.

The second line consisted of the Dong Ha-Quang Tri sector in the south, Kontum-Pleiku in the centre and An Loc-Tay Ninh in the Saigon region.

The last line was situated in the vicinity of Saigon and other great towns.

The forces in charge of defending this triple perimeter were composed of about 1,100,000 puppet regular and regional troops, armed and equipped by the Pentagon (the "most up-to-date army in South-East Asia," boasted the US press). They were supported by a powerful air force comprising 2,000 planes (ranking second in the capitalist world, after the US) and reinforced by 650 US tactical planes and 90 B.52 "super fortresses" of the Strategic Air Command as well as two aircraft-carriers of the 7th Fleet cruising off the Vietnamese coast.

From January to March 1972, B.52s bombed regions supposed to be "V.C. bases" and vast areas in Laos and Cambodia. A series of operations for reconnaissance and destruction of bases were carried out, particularly in the western part of Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, by the 1st and 3rd infantry divisions; in the "three-frontier" region by the 22nd

infantry division as well as in eight out of 11 provinces northwest of Saigon and in Cambodia by the 5th, 9th, 18th and 25th regular infantry divisions.

According to the Pentagon's calculations the PLAF could at best throw three infantry divisions into an offensive against the Kontum-Pleiku region and Road 19 aimed at cutting South Viet Nam into two parts. This eventual attack was considered by many Saigon and Washington officials as a desperate act aimed at getting a few spectacular results and some banner headlines in the newspapers (*Time*, May 8, 1972).

But February passed without any major development. Reconnaissance operations, which often found only empty places, reassured the US and Saigon officers even more. Abrams, before flying to Bangkok to meet his wife, cabled to the White House: "The VC certainly had not given up their intention to launch offensives, but in any event the South Vietnamese defence line could only be distended but not broken up."

For his part, Thieu boasted: "The Viet Cong, having returned to guerilla warfare, are incapable of launching great battles. Large-scale operations could take place only in July or September."

2. The PLAF's smashing blows

The US-Saigon intelligence services, however, revealed that the patriots were mustering forces, and that new roads and traces of armoured car tracks etc. had appeared in the Tay Nguyen Highlands. In order

to prevent an offensive in this sector, the US Command dispatched a paratroop brigade from Bien Hoa to Kontum.

On March 30, while the enemy's eyes were turned to Tay Nguyen, a great offensive was launched by the patriotic forces on the northern front, in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. The enemy defence network on Road 9, which stretched like a great crescent from the Lao frontier to the sea, was shaken by an unprecedented artillery pounding.

But the US Command was still not clear about its enemy's intention. They thought that it was a "passing thrust" aimed at "deceiving the US and its allies" whereas the main theatre of operations remained in the Tay Nguyen Highlands.

Within the space of five days, the whole system of well-built bases north and south of Road 9 was pulverized. Two regiments of the 3rd infantry division and the 147th Saigon marine brigade were wiped out or whittled down (the 56th regiment crossed over to the PLAF side). From Cua Viet to Mai Loc a big chunk of the "pacification" system in the two districts of Gio Linh and Cam Lo was hit. Abrams hurriedly returned to Saigon to follow closely a situation which he thought was "very dramatic". Nixon, judging it to be "very serious", left Camp David for the White House where, according to the Western press "his desk was cleared of all dossiers except that of Viet Nam."

Saigon was hard pressed. The last "marine" contingents withdrawn from Cambodia and "rangers"

were sent to reinforce the Dong Ha Quang Tri sector. Hundreds of US planes and dozens of US warships were thrown into action to support the Saigon troops. Dong Ha and Quang Tri towns were within range of the artillery of the patriotic forces.

In the meantime, another wave of offensives was launched by the patriotic forces in western Nam Bo in the triangle formed by Road 13 (Binh Long province), Road 22 (Tay Ninh province) and the Cambodian frontier.

The attack on Loc Ninh started a few hours after the Rangers left for Quang Tri. Loc Ninh was liberated; the Saigon 49th, 9th and 52nd tactical groups, the 1st and the 10th armoured regiments as well as many other battalions were wiped out by the PLAF. The 10th armoured regiment including its colonel commander surrendered. An important part of the Saigon regular units was shattered, its defence line in western Nam Bo from Road 13 to Road 22 thrown into disorder. The PLAF attack was heading southward, menacing Chon Thanh, 70 km from Saigon. An Loc town, where remnants of Saigon units were concentrated, was encircled.

Its strategic reserves being scattered from Quang Tri-Thua Thien to the Highlands, the US-Saigon command moved the 21st infantry division in the 4th military region (Mekong delta) and the paratroop brigade guarding Thien's palace in Saigon to the Long Binh front. But these units were stopped on Road 13 in the Lai Khe-Chon Thanh sector and could not come to the rescue of elements of the

Saigon 5th infantry division encircled in An Loc. A few weeks of fighting was enough to prove that the peripheral defence line could not stand up to the PLAF forces, now equipped with tanks, a powerful artillery, and great A.A. fire power. It was a real modern war the scope of which was beyond the US command's anticipation. The future of "Vietnamization" with the Saigon army as its backbone was endangered. The situation was similar in certain respects to that of 1964-65, when the very survival of the pro-US Saigon regime was threatened short of massive intervention by Washington.

Starting on April 6, 1972, Nixon increased the number of US tactical planes in Indochina from 600 to 1,000 then 1,200; that of B-52s from 90 to 200 and that of aircraft-carriers from 2 to 5. Thus, 40 per cent of US tactical planes and 60 per cent of US strategic planes were thrown into the war. This air force exceeded that of any country in the world except the Soviet Union. All aircraft engaged were of the most up-to-date types: new-model F.4s, swing-wing F.111s and the most "sophisticated" and powerful armaments: bombs guided by laser beams and television, 7-ton bombs. The air war was launched by the US against both South and North Viet Nam.

But the patriotic forces' offensive went on.

When the situation appeared stable on the Quang Tri and Binh Long fronts, other offensives and uprisings broke out in the provinces of the Mekong delta: My Tho, Ben Tre, Kien Tuong, Ca Mau, Rach Gia, Can Tho, Soc Trang, Vinh Long, etc.

Many Saigon infantry and marine battalions were wiped out. The 32nd and 33rd regiments of the 21st infantry division and one armoured regiment were decimated, many posts and military subsector CPs destroyed.

The people's offensives and uprisings also broke out in the coastal region of Central Trung Bo, especially in Binh Dinh province. Within three weeks, the 40th and 41st regiments of the Saigon 22nd infantry division were wiped out or disbanded, and the three districts of Hoai Nhon, Hoai An and Bong Son liberated.

The Saigon army had to cope with the patriots in all four military regions. The US command estimated that western Nam Bo was the "hottest point" because here the PLAF were tightening their grip on Saigon. So it moved the paratroops from the Tay Nguyen Highlands to Saigon and replaced them with three ranger battalions taken from the northern front.

But then lightning attacks took place in Dacto-Tan Canh where the Saigon 22nd infantry division together with its advanced HQ were overwhelmed, and its staff captured. One more chunk of the US outer defence line was broken up. Kontum town was assaulted.

Washington and Saigon were still uncertain about the main direction of the patriots' offensives. To gloss over their losses, their propaganda and psychological warfare machinery clamoured that the regions fallen into the PLAF hands in the two provinces of Quang Tri and Binh Long and in the Highlands were of no strategic value! The Pentagon affirmed that

"the enemy has committed a tactical error", "has suffered heavy losses" and that the offensive "has been stopped and is drawing to an end."

Before those lenitive stories had been able to prop up the badly-shaken morale of the Saigon troops, a second wave of offensives, ten times more violent, broke out against the system of bases stretching from Dong Ha, Ai Tu, La Vang, Quang Tri, Tan Dien to Dong Chiem Giong defended by 6 Saigon infantry and marine regiments and 4 armoured regiments.

After five days of fighting, from April 27 to May 1, the PLAF put out of action the 3rd infantry division, badly mauled the marine division, wiped out 4 infantry regiments and 4 armoured regiments, destroyed the Quang Tri military sector and its five military subsectors, and liberated the whole province with 300,000 inhabitants. The Dong Ha-Quang Tri defence network, the symbol of the military strength of "Vietnamization" had collapsed.

Within a single month, the situation in the South Viet Nam battlefield had developed rapidly and the belligerents' respective positions had changed radically.

The Pentagon hastily tried to make good the losses suffered by the Saigon troops. Giant C-5A Galaxy transport planes brought heavy guns and M.48 tanks still bearing US Navy markings from Japan to Da Nang and Tan Son Nhat. Missiles so far reserved for the US and NATO troops were now dispatched to South Viet Nam. By order of Washington, Thieu intensified pressganging. Adolescents, quinquagenarians, students, Buddhist monks, sentenced and disabled

soldiers -- all were taken into the army. From May 8 onward, the US used its planes to massively attack North Viet Nam and give maximum support to the Saigon troops.

In Washington, the National Security Council held meeting after meeting.

3. Developments on the various fronts

The air war against North Viet Nam, the scale and the violence of which were unprecedented, used methods and tactics that Johnson had never dared to employ: B-52s bombed big cities and populated areas, systematically attacked the dyke system, mined the North's territorial waters, ports and waterways. US warships shelled coastal regions from Do Son, near Haiphong, to South Viet Nam.

In South Viet Nam, US planes including B-52s played the role of a shock force in defence as well as in counter attacks against not only the PLAF but also the people's uprisings in the plains.

Those war efforts combined with US diplomatic manoeuvrings put the Vietnamese revolution to a hard test. US officials watched the DRVN for the slightest sign of "panting", "exhaustion" or "change of attitude". US strategists predicted that the blockade would exert great influence on the war in South Viet Nam... and that if the US would continue the bombing and the Saigon troops could check the enemy's offensive, the latter would soon be exhausted. Washington publicly affirmed that under its "pressure"

the patriotic forces' offensive could not last beyond July 1, 1972.

Once again Washington made a wrong calculation.

On the Quang Tri front, an operation following the "hit and run" tactics was launched by the Saigon troops along the My Chanh line against the neighbouring regions controlled by the patriotic forces. Then it was Operation "Lam Son 72", mobilizing all available forces in an attempt to retake Quang Tri town and "hoist the Saigon flag on the citadel by June 19 at the latest." But it was only started in late June.

The forces fielded by the US-Saigon command were composed of all its general strategic reserves—a marine and a paratroop division, the best units of the Saigon army—the 1st ranger tactical group and four armoured regiments. But the real striking forces were the US navy and air force with hundreds of tactical planes, one hundred B-52s and 20 destroyers and cruisers of the 7th Fleet. The bombing intensity was unprecedented in the history of wars: a quantity of explosives equivalent to 7 Hiroshima A bombs was dropped on an area 20km square. Each day on an average there were 300 missions of tactical planes, 100 of strategic planes and dozens of thousands of shells hurled by US ground and naval artillery (1).

(1) In three months Quang Tri town was subjected to 1,600 B-52 sorties and 17,000 tactical bomber sorties dropping 100,000 tons of bombs. For the sake of comparison, let us recall that during the three years of the Korean war the US used 630,000 tons of bombs.

The aim was to destroy all lives, and "clear the ground for the Saigon troops to reoccupy it."

But the operation was costly and yielded only poor results. The Saigon troops spent 82 days to cover the 16 kilometres separating My Chanh from Quang Tri town. They lost 300 men each day on an average in order to advance 200 metres, and eventually occupied only a heap of ruins.

The Quang Tri front was a fixing abscess aimed at annihilating the enemy's forces: 24,000 Saigon mercenaries were wiped out, and 2 brigades and 11 battalions among the most seasoned units decimated.

The US-puppet forces' passivity and immobilization was as clear as daylight. The US tactics of "counter attacking in order to prevent or break up the enemy's offensives" proved to be ineffective. While an important part of those forces was hard pressed in this sector, the PLAF launched offensives in other theatres of operations, especially in the Mekong delta.

The Road 13 and An Loc front was another typical battlefield. After the first attacks, which broke up the enemy's outer defence belt in western Nam Bo about 40 kilometres along the frontier with Cambodia, the patriotic forces tightened their grip around the Saigon 5th infantry division encircled in the An Loc "hell". Three other infantry divisions (the 21st, 25th and 18th), with massive support from US planes, tried in turn to relieve the place, recapture Loc Ninh and push the PLAF across the Cambodian frontier, but they were pinned down on Road 13. The PLAF

were not pushed back one single step. While continuing the siege of An Loc, the PLAF launched flank attacks on enemy reinforcements, and intercepted them on Road 13 north and south of Chon Thanh.

The Road 13-An Loc front became a trap where the patriots fixed the Saigon forces, inflicted heavy casualties on them and posed a constant threat to Saigon. The Saigon 5th infantry division was wiped out. The 18th and 21st lost half of their strength, the 25th and 9th one-third. The 1st paratroop brigade suffered serious losses.

As regards troop concentration, this 20-kilometre-long sector surpassed all other fronts: five out of a total of 13 infantry divisions, two paratroop brigades and three armoured regiments. Nothing could better demonstrate the failure of "Vietnamization" on which Nixon had pinned so much hope. Thieu boasted that he had "recaptured Loc Ninh twice" and would "clear Road 13 before June 19." (The pnppt armed forces' day) and promised 10 million piastres' reward to any units which would succeed in breaking up the siege of An Loc. But he only exposed his powerlessness.

The Road 13-An Loc front was, as an AP correspondent remarked, a mirror reflecting the weak points and incapacity of the US air force. Here as in Quang Tri, US planes, both tactical and strategic, were frenziedly active day and night and dropped dozens of thousands of tons of bombs. But 250 planes were shot down and 28,000 Saigon troops killed without

the encirclement of An Loc by the PLAF being broken up. The US air force was incapable of saving "Vietnamization".

On the other hand, lightning attacks, harmonious co-ordination among various arms, and new effective tactics testified to the Liberation forces' military talent, resourcefulness, determination and courage. In certain cases, they fought against forces 20, 50 even 100 times superior in number. They were in full control of the conduct of the operations. The permanent fixing of one-third of the enemy's regular forces in one sector favoured offensives and uprisings in other regions.

On the Tay Nguyen Front, the Saigon troops defending the capital of Kontum province, the rest of which had been liberated, suffered severe losses. In spite of Thieu's exhortations, they could not reoccupy Dak To - Tan Canh. On the contrary they were furiously attacked at Plei Can, Ngoc Trang, Dak Seang and Dak Pet in the northern sector and at Bau Can, Duc Co in the southwest sector of Pleiku where the PLAF broke up the Saigon army defence line.

In the coastal region of central Trung Bo, an operation launched by the Saigon forces in an attempt to retake the northern part of Binh Dinh province was foiled. While the Saigon 22nd infantry division, reorganized after its disaster at Dak To - Tan Canh, tried to hold on to Bong Son, Hoai An, etc, the PLAF broke up the enemy's defence network

southwest of Da Nang, especially at Cam Doi-Que Son and Tien Phuoc (Quang Nam), Binh Son, Son Tinh, Mo Duc and Duc Pho (Quang Ngai), etc. The puppet 2nd infantry division suffered heavy losses. The northern part of Binh Dinh province from then on formed a vast region in one stretch comprising the newly-liberated areas; Ba To district, almost all the districts of Binh Son, Son Tinh, Mo Duc, Duc Pho and the banks of the Tra Bong river (Quang Ngai), Que Son and almost all the districts of Hien Duc, Hiep Duc (Quang Nam). In the meantime the patriotic forces' offensives shifted to the *Mekong Delta*. The PLAF's smashing attacks, closely combined with the people's uprisings, inflicted severe losses upon the three Saigon infantry divisions stationed in the delta, broke up the coercive apparatus and forces painstakingly built by the Saigon regime on this rich and populated region of South Viet Nam. The liberated zone was extended to Kien Trung, Kien Phong, Road 4 in My Tho, Ben Tre, Go Cong, Tra Vinh, Ha Tien, Chau Doc, Rach Gia, Ca Mau, etc.

The struggle of the South Vietnamese people and armed forces thus developed in range and scope. Starting with annihilation battles, the struggle was now unfolding ceaselessly everywhere, first of all in the important strategic regions. By co-ordinating actions of the three categories of forces (regular, regional and guerilla forces) and combining the armed forces' offensives with the people's uprisings, the PLAF wiped out important forces of the enemy and extended the people's power.

4. Bitter results for Washington

In the White House's reckoning, the year 1972 was to be marked with the success of "Vietnamization". The Saigon troops would take over most of the burden of the war on the ground from the GIs, the great majority of whom were to be repatriated, and US aero-naval support would be progressively reduced.

But Washington's calculation was upset by the PLAF's strategic offensive.

The Saigon troops were given a mortal blow. Nixon's strategic objective — a mercenary army capable of holding to South Viet Nam by itself — was unrealizable.

In "Vietnamization", the puppet army's ability to hold out by itself was of essential importance. Yet, three years' efforts of the Nixon administration had recorded but poor results. About half a million Saigon mercenaries had been put out of action, half of them regulars. For the first time, entire Saigon divisions were annihilated or virtually put out of action, which drove the Saigon army into a new grave crisis.

The "*pacification*" program, badly shakened to its roots, was collapsing by chunks. It was the principal strategic means of "Vietnamization". Under the Nixon administration it had shown unprecedented development and atrocity. But with the PLAF's 1972 strategic offensive, the program was vigourosly pushed back. Many district centres and military subsectors

were completely liberated, vast regions freed from Saigon control. Nearly five million inhabitants succeeded in wresting back power. Revolutionary bases, serving as a springboard for attacking the enemy, were not only being maintained but also consolidated and extended. Villages and districts formed whole liberated regions sometimes located deep in the enemy's rear areas, even in sectors of vital importance to him or reputedly "pacified". The strategic apparatus of "Vietnamization" had been dismantled and the revolution in South Viet Nam saw its posture consolidated and improved.

A stable defence system for the "Vietnamization" strategy had been an important objective, an imperative, for Washington. During the last three years, combining great measures on various planes, the US-puppet regime had tried its best to get rid of revolutionary organizations in villages and hamlets, maintain its control on populous regions to prevent guerilla operations, drive the PLAF regular units and the war out of South Viet Nam, set up a system of bases forming a three-line defence network to cope with the PLAF, attack the patriotic forces' strategic supply bases and "sanctuaries" so as to nip in the bud their offensives.

This defence line was shattered. The patriots breached the outer belt in the most vital sectors such as Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Tay Nguyen and western Nam Bo. The inner defence lines were also thrown into disorder or broken through as in the coastal provinces of Central Trung Bo: Quang Nam, Quang

Ngai, Binh Dinh, or in the provinces in the Mekong delta: My Tho, Chuong Thien, Kien Giang, Kien Phong, Kien Tuong, Vinh Long, An Xuyen, etc. The US-puppet forces' deployment was upset. Their strategic reserves were sent to the most critical sectors such as Quang Tri, Thua Thien and the Tay Nguyen Highlands where they were pinned down. Their regular units were encircled or bogged down in certain sectors stretched thin and highly vulnerable in others. Their regional forces composed of *Bao An* (civil guards) and *Dan ve* (militia) were cut to pieces.

The revolutionary war in the South not only drove the enemy back, but spread to important populated regions in the plains. The PLAF's three categories of troops deployed on all battlefields and extended their activities, thereby favouring the development of people's war.

II

Failure of the "re-Americanization" of the war

One week after the launching of the strategic offensive by the PLAF, the US command announced on April 6, 1972 the resumption of the bombing against the DRVN. Nixon counted on two trump-cards: the US air and naval forces, to retrieve the situation in South Viet Nam.

A new US "expeditionary corps" was hastily set up: 1,500 fighter aircraft and bombers including 200-

B.52 strategic bombers (i.e. five times the forces in charge of "Vietnamization"), plus about sixty war vessels and 180,000 GIs most of them USAF and US Navy personnel.

This expeditionary corps was entrusted with four strategic missions:

- to smother North Viet Nam, the national rear base of the resistance and break the spirit of her people;

- to stop short PLAF offensives in South Viet Nam;

- to prevent the collapse of the Saigon troops; and

- to create a decisive striking force to win back lost ground and gain a position of strength from which to negotiate.

In North Viet Nam massive air-raids were launched against all targets, particularly cities, populous regions and the system of dykes and water control works. The air and naval war reached its apex with two new strategic measures: the mining of North Vietnamese territorial waters, ports and waterways and the strategic attacks by B.52s against Hanoi and Haiphong.

Whole quarters of these two cities and many villages on their outskirts were razed. Thousands of people, most of them women and children, were killed.

In South Viet Nam US aircraft were massively brought into action with a view to stopping the offensive of the PLAF and annihilate them. In that respect, the Quang Tri front was a typical case.

However, six months passed without Washington attaining any of its strategic objectives.

In North Viet Nam from April to October 1972, 556 aircraft of the USAF and the US Navy were shot down and in 80 cases 7th Fleet ships were damaged by coastal defense forces.

It was then that the Americans threw in their last trump: the B.52 superbombers.

On December 18, at 20.00 hours (local time), Nixon hurled his strato-fortresses against Hanoi and Haiphong. This was a lightning attack, an air campaign of unprecedented strategic importance in wars of aggression. The two chosen targets were two cities of vital importance for the DRVN. The aim of Washington was nothing less than creating a "Hiroshima without atomic weapons", dealing a decisive blow, forcing our people to accept the American diktat, and eluding the clauses of the draft "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet Nam" to which it had subscribed on October 22.

The major part of the three US air forces (the 7th, 8th and 13th) stationed in Southeast Asia and the Pacific was mobilized: 140 B.52s (almost all the planes of this type available in Southeast Asia), 400 tactical aircraft including two squadrons of swing-wing F.111s. The campaign was minutely prepared. The US command ordered a news black-out. It chose the most unexpected hours for its attacks so as to reduce its losses to a minimum and cause the greatest surprise.

It also resorted to subterfuges to lull the DRVN's vigilance, and preliminarily intensified its raids on the southern provinces to attract there her A.A. units.

But once again this proved to be a strategic error leading Nixon to another strategic defeat.

During the twelve days of the campaign the number of downed B.52s was as follows: 3 on December 18, 2 on Dec. 19, 4 on Dec. 20, 3 on Dec. 21, 3 on Dec. 22, 2 on Dec. 23, 1 on Dec. 24 (December 25, Christmas truce), 9 on Dec. 26, 4 on Dec. 27, 2 on Dec. 28 and 1 on Dec. 29. All told, 81 US airplanes including 34 B.52s and 5 F.111s were brought down. These losses were proportionally much heavier than in any other air war. American observers remarked that if they were to go on at this rate the US would have lost all of its strategic aircraft stationed in Southeast Asia by the end of April 1973. The setback on both the military and political planes in Viet Nam and the indignation of American and world opinion forced Nixon to put an end to the blitz.

North Viet Nam had defeated the US strategic air force and Nixon's strategic offensive. The deterrence strategy of the Nixon doctrine had gone bankrupt. The last trump-card of the Americans in their aggression against Viet Nam having proved to be ineffective, the myth of the invincibility of the USAF was exploded. The "re-Americanization" of the war had proved ineffective.

III**On the other fronts of Indochina**

With their armed struggle in 1972 the Vietnamese people had contributed to the common victory of the three Indochinese peoples. A new step forward had been made in their resistance against American aggression and in the Indochinese revolution.

**I. What about the situation of the
US "special war" in Laos?**

It should be recalled that on the Plain of Jars-Muong Soui front, the Lao patriots had annihilated or dispersed 20 enemy battalions including 10 (out of 11) Thai battalions in the last days of 1971. They had seized back the major part of the Plain of Jars, the strategic importance of which was well known, and had driven the enemy into a critical situation. The military position of the rightist forces, which had always been weak, was deteriorating still more rapidly.

The great Samthong - Longcheng base of the "special forces" was isolated and menaced.

In the first days of 1972, fired by their victory, the Lao patriots tightened their grip around Samthong - Longcheng. Having suffered great losses, the enemy's special forces had to withdraw to other positions. The most powerful American-puppet bolt in Upper Laos had been broken.

The victories of the Lao armed forces and people in the Plain of Jars and Samthong-Longcheng were of strategic importance. They marked a new setback of the US "special war" in Laos. The loss of the

powerful Samthong-Longcheng fortified system, set up in rugged terrain and commanded by the Americans, was a severe warning to the Americans and their puppets. The annihilation within a month of the "special forces", equipped, armed, trained, paid and commanded by the Americans, a prototype of the indigenous mercenary forces that Washington intended to set up to serve its "special war", again called in question the organization of forces for this kind of war. The Thai troops to whom the "Nixon doctrine" assigned an important role in Southeast Asia, were dealt a mortal blow. The formula of the Nixon doctrine: "US airpower + Vientiane rightist forces + Vang Pao's special forces + Thai mercenaries" proved to be ineffective.

While Washington and Vientiane strove to save their troops in northern Laos, the Lao PLAF launched a large-scale offensive in southern Laos in May. Within a few days they liberated Khong Se Done provincial capital and Phia Pay district centre and cut Road 13, the only one linking southern to northern Laos. Paksé, the largest town in southern Laos was threatened, while other fierce attacks were launched along Road 9 in Phalane, Dong Hene, Na Lau, Seno, etc. On a front about a hundred kilometres long, stretching from Saravane to Paksé, the rightist troops lost 2,000 men; one tactical combat group was put out of action. The Bolovens Plateau, another sector of great strategic importance of southern Laos, was wholly liberated.

Those victories of the Lao PLAF in the Bolovens Plateau region created a new situation not only in

the Lao theatre of operations but also in favour of the resistance of the three Indochinese peoples. The liberated zone of southern Laos touching those of the Tay Nguyen Highlands in south Viet Nam and of northeastern Cambodia, a vast base in one piece was set up for the Indochinese revolutionary forces, this favouring their alliance and mutual assistance.

The Pentagon reacted by moving in Thai units from northern Laos and from Thailand to reinforce the defence of Paksé and try to seize back Khong Se Done and the Bolovens Plateau.

But in northern Laos, far from stopping at Sam thong-Longcheng, the Lao liberation forces pushed on to Luang Prabang. They attacked a series of eight enemy positions in Pak Hou and Xieng Ngan (north-east and northwest of Luang Prabang) as well as the commandos' training centre in Phou Khao Khoai, Vientiane province.

The Americans and their puppets placed their hope on the rainy season which had started. As in the past years, they expected to seize back ground lost in the dry season because the rain would have rendered all communications impossible in the mountain regions except by air, and they were the only ones to have aircraft.

As early as June, at the beginning of the season, they launched Operation "Black Lion" in the Khong Se Donc region with 7,000 troops supported by US airplanes and commanded by Kouprasith, deputy C-in-C of the Vientiane forces. But it was rapidly checked. The spirit of the badly-shaken

mercenaries was broken. The enemy command called in reinforcements: several regiments from the 3rd and 4th military regions (southern Laos) and some Thai battalions, and efforts were made to take back the Bolovens Plateau. But, stopped in Lao Ngam region, the mercenary troops had to fall back and finally dug in at Paksé.

In mid-August, after replenishing the decimated units by pressganging even young adolescents, the enemy command mobilized 50 battalions of Vang Pao's "special forces" and Thai regular troops in an effort to seize back the Plain of Jars and the Xieng Khouang region and relieve pressure on the Samthong-Longcheng defence system.

In spite of their minute preparations the enemy troops met with unpleasant surprises. Landing on a place 20 kilometres from the centre of the Plain of Jars, 8 MGs (mobile groups, each equivalent to a regiment) and several battalions grouped themselves into four great entrenched camps. But before they could organize an offensive, the Lao patriots dealt them a heavy blow, breaking up the 21st and 26th MGs in the northeastern sector of the Plain. In the north-western sector, the 24th and 27th MGs suffered the same fate in Bouam Long. From the southern Lao front, the 30th MG came to reinforce the 15th, 22nd, 23rd MGs and several Thai battalions. None of them escaped the blows of the Lao patriots: the 22nd and 30th MGs were hit in Nam Pit, the 15th and 23rd in Ban Phone and Ban Hai. After forty days of fighting the Lao PLAF broke up the four points of

attack by the MGs, thus foiling the great rainy season counter-offensive of Vientiane.

Meanwhile, in southern Laos, they attacked the enemy in Lao Ngam, Ban Nhik and Dong Hene and frustrated his attempt to encroach on the liberated zones of the Bolovens Plateau.

Thus in the 1971-1972 dry season and the 1972 rainy season, they had won victories of strategic importance. An important part of the enemy's forces — 11 MGs and 17 battalions — had been annihilated. All the three components of Washington's mercenary forces were beaten hollow. The Vang Pao "special forces" weakened and threatened with disintegration, could no longer play the role of a spearhead in the "special war" in Laos; the weak Vientiane troops had proved to be incapable not only of launching any offensive but even of fulfilling a defence mission. The Thai mercenaries whom the enemy had wanted to turn into the backbone of the local puppet forces, could not serve as mainstay for the rightist troops.

The US air force had failed to fulfil the mission assigned to it by the "Nixon doctrine".

The US "special war" had sustained a new and heavy setback.

Everywhere the Americans and their puppets had been repulsed, their defence lines had been broken through in both north and south. Their encroachment operations against the liberated zones had been foiled. While they wanted to move eastward, they were pushed back farther west. They wished to broaden the occupied zone but it was more badly cut up and

whittled down than ever before. On the contrary the liberated zone, a vast zone running without a break from north to south, comprised towns and sectors of great strategic importance.

The Lao PLAF had considerably grown in strength and had matured. Having built up great fighting efficiency, they were now capable of launching battles of annihilation. Guerilla forces were developing even in the zones still under enemy control.

2. The failure of Khmerization

Cambodia, "the brightest expression of the Nixon doctrine" in the words of the American President himself was, however, the source of bitter disappointment for him in 1972.

In the last months of the 1971 dry season and in early 1972, after having foiled successive operations of the "offensive campaign" of the pro-American forces ("Prasat" and "Toan Thang 2" in the east, and "Peang Lovéa" and "Kriangchek" in the southwest of the country) the Khmer national liberation armed forces frustrated the notorious Operation "Chenla II."

Of a scale never known before in Cambodia and mobilizing 19 brigades, i.e. more than 20,000 men, Operation "Chenla II" marked a climax in the efforts exerted by the Pentagon and the Lon Nol clique. The objectives pursued were ambitious: to encroach on the liberated zone under the control of the National Union Royal Government of Kampuchea, drive the revolutionary forces out of an important strategic sector, put to the test the "Khmerization of the war"

in which the Lon Nol troops were to operate without the help of the Saigon ground troops whom the Pentagon intended to withdraw from Cambodia in anticipation of PLAF offensives in South Viet Nam.

But none of those objectives was attained. Moreover Lon Nol lost more than half the forces fielded. In all, 5 brigades and 30 battalions were annihilated or badly mauled. Lon Nol's armed forces would never recover from this first test of "Khmerization". Having failed to encroach on the liberated regions, their passivity worsened and the zone under their control shrank.

After "Chenla II" the situation on the Cambodian battlefield changed radically. Now holding the initiative the Khmer liberation armed forces switched on to the offensive and extended their activities to the zones under enemy control including the towns, even Phnom Penh. Such important centres as Prey Veng, Kompong Chnang, Takeo, Kompong Trach were surrounded and attacked. Unable to support the Lon Nol troops the Saigon troops were themselves beaten on Road 15 linking Prey Veng to Neak Luong.

The attacks against the system of strong points defending the town of Kompong Thom, the most important ones being Pramat Dei, Rokkar, etc., resulted in the wiping out of elite mobile units of Lon Nol, composed of "Khmer Krom" (1) and "Khmer Srei" (2) trained and commanded by the CIA.

(1) Khmers Krom are Khmers living in South Viet Nam pressed into the Saigon army and brought to Cambodia by Son Ngoc Thanh after the March 18, 1970, putsch.

(2) Khmers Srei are commandos created, armed, equipped and commanded by the CIA.

In late March, the Khmer patriotic forces attacked Phnom Penh. Among the targets hit were the Defence Ministry, the HQ of the Phnom Penh special region, that of the Police, the Pochentong airfield, the Radio station, etc. To the great surprise of world opinion, the revolutionary war was penetrating into the Khmer capital, the last lair of Lon Nol. An *AFP* correspondent remarked that Operation "Chenla II" which had ended in a rout before the counter-offensive of the "Khmer rouges" had dealt a severe blow at the Lon Nol army. It was now Phnom Penh's turn to be attacked.

The US command and Lon Nol were thrown into still greater confusion as the attack against Phnom Penh was simultaneous with other offensives launched by the Khmer National Liberation Armed Forces (KNLAF) in the northwest, east and southeast of the country.

The 1972 dry season ended with KNLAF victories in the Prey Veng and Swairieng sectors. A series of enemy positions on Road I were wiped out. A 10-kilometre stretch of this road came under the patriots' control. The KNLAF also wiped out an enemy brigade in Kompong Trabek and liberated this town. The beaten Lon Nol forces had to fall back to the towns. The revolutionary forces extended their control over 80 per cent of the territory including the particularly important sector west of Phnom Penh.

In the following rainy season, now completely on the defensive, the Saigon and Lon Nol troops were no longer able to launch strategic campaigns on the