

Moderates Are Silent In Viet Peace Debate

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SAIGON, March 2 — The question of peace in Vietnam was raised for virtually the first time today in the Constituent Assembly. Delegates agreed, after a short and one-sided debate, to support a resolution basically favoring the status quo.

The debate was ordered on the motion of 41 delegates regarded as supporters either of the government or of conservative Catholic groups. Moderates in the Assembly, including Chairman Phan Khac Suu, attempted to close off debate but were unsuccessful.

The delegates agreed to support a resolution "to accept only a just peace, in freedom, honor and happiness" and to oppose strongly any peace "harmful to the Vietnamese people." In the political short-

hand here, this is read to mean a condemnation of efforts at negotiation with the National Liberation Front or the Hanoi regime.

The debate was of great interest here both for the fact of its being held at all, and for the utter lack of opposition. Delegates known to support the cause of negotiation with the National Liberation Front sat silent, and permitted the hawks to carry the day.

The rise of support for the cause of negotiation was not seen here as a reflection of neutralist sentiment, but as an indication that important political figures here reckon the South is now strong enough to bring a reasonable end to the conflict. This judgment, it ought to be added, is by no means universal, even among moderates.

Vietnamese sources said the motion to debate the question of peace in Vietnam was supported by the government and by Catholic groups opposed to negotiations. The move was seen here as another of the government's moves to tamp down pro-negotiation, "neutralist" sentiment.

There was no coercion of what are now called the moderates. One of the best informed among them said that the "time was not yet ripe" to speak of peace, and openly support the path of negotiations rather than a wider and longer war.

The debate today was conducted almost entirely in Vietnamese euphemisms.

Supporters of the resolution
See SAIGON, A12, Col. 1

SAIGON—From Page A1

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declared that "after 20 years of war, every Vietnamese wants peace. But what peace? Peace in freedom, or in slavery? We do not accept peace in slavery."

Another supporter declared that "before taking any decisions (with regard to negotiations) we should be careful. We do not want to make a hasty decision." A colleague added, "To discuss peace now is premature. There is no document from any government, just rumors, we must oppose a false peace."

Opponents of the debate argued that the job of the Constituent Assembly was to write a constitution. Questions of negotiations were not appropriate. Chairman Suu at first refused to chair the discussion, then relented.

Informed sources in the Assembly, who today were silent, said that in fact a majority of the delegates privately support a negotiated solution to the war. But they argued they were unable to publicly voice their sentiments for fear of being branded Vietcong sympathizers.

At least one newspaper has asked the Ministry of Information for permission to publish articles on the possibility of negotiations, and the prospects for peace. THE REQUEST HAS SO FAR GONE UNANSWERED.

The inhibitions of the moderates appear to be due less to over threats by the government than the style of Vietnamese politics, which places a premium on caution and circumspection. Nothing prevented negotiation-minded delegates from voicing their views today, yet some of the most prominent among them declared that the time was not yet ripe.

Delegates are puzzled over the recent actions of the government, particularly the

anti-French demonstrations, which ended Tuesday despite persistent rumors that more were in the works, and the unexplained government announcement of a neutralist government in exile supported by the de Gaulle government and the Vietcong.

These moves are thought to be designed to put pressure on those groups now agitating for a negotiated solution to the war. The agitation is underground, almost clandestine, but reliable sources here contend its strength is great and growing, particularly among southern political blocs opposing the northern-dominated government of Nguyen Cao Ky.

There were some ominous overtones to today's debate on negotiations. Delegate Nguyen Thanh Vinh, a supporter of the government, asked: "Before discussing it, we should know who the supporters and promoters of the false peace are, so we can know whom we are opposed to."

In the Vietnamese political vernacular, "supporters of the false peace" are those in favor of negotiations. "False peace," in most contexts, is a peace that contemplates a coalition government with the National Liberation Front.

But for the most part today, delegates contended themselves with cautious expressions for the people's welfare and a vigilant attitude toward those who would disturb the status quo of the war. But as one well-informed analyst put it tonight, the political genie is out of the bottle in South Vietnam. There are groups in favor of a negotiated settlement, and sooner or later those groups will be heard. But, as today's debate showed, the political dialogue in Vietnam is still the sound of one hand clapping.