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U.S. Embassy Defends Aides in Saigon Spy Case

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 22—The United States Embassy acknowledged today that some of its officers had met periodically with an alleged North Vietnamese spy but asserted that the meetings had been part of a routine monitoring of political opinion in South Vietnam.

The statement followed a news conference yesterday in which South Vietnamese police officials circulated a photograph showing an American talking to several Vietnamese. Among them was Bui Van Sac, identified by the police as a high-ranking North Vietnamese intelligence agent.

In what seemed to be intended as a repudiation of any insinuation that the Americans were dealing secretly with the enemy, the embassy took the unusual step of issuing a special statement today. It identified the American in the picture as Harold F. Colebaugh, a political counselor who served here from January, 1966 to July, 1969.

Statement Read at Briefing

The embassy statement was read at the daily briefing on the war. It said that "As a political reporting officer, Mr. Colebaugh normally met with Vietnamese from many walks of life. This is a classical diplomatic function carried out by officers of all nations around the world. We attach no significance to the photography in terms of mission interests or personnel."

The statement added that other embassy officers had met with Mr. Sac from time to time and that these contacts had

Calls Meetings With Alleged Enemy Agent a Part of Routine Political Work

been "incidental to their activities of gaining local views and attitudes on the current scene in Vietnam."

Privately, sources close to the embassy indicated that officials were annoyed by what they regarded as an attempt by some South Vietnamese authorities to suggest that the Americans were dealing with the North Vietnamese behind the back of Saigon's leadership. The Americans, it was understood, had not been informed in advance that the police news conference would bring up any relations between Mr. Sac and embassy officers.

Other Charges Discussed

The mission had been told that the news conference would deal with charges of enemy activities against student leaders. It was after those charges had been discussed that the police told of cracking a spy ring and of finding the photograph of Mr. Sac and Mr. Colebaugh, apparently in a restaurant.

The affair comes two weeks after the prosecution and imprisonment of Tran Ngoc Chau, an opposition deputy who was charged with pro-Communist activity for having met with his brother, a North Vietnamese intelligence agent. Mr. Chau said he had acted with the knowledge of some key American officials. The case was widely viewed as an attempt by President Nguyen Van Thieu to warn his countrymen against compromise with the enemy.

Mr. Colebaugh, the embassy officer in the Sac case, was generally regarded as a most

astute political counselor. His command of the Vietnamese language has been described as the most perfect ever attained by an American mission officer in South Vietnam. The 31-year-old Foreign Service officer was born in California and was graduated from Whittier College there in 1960. He served in the Army from 1961 to 1965 and joined the State Department that year.

After leaving South Vietnam he served with the American delegation at the Paris peace talks and was scheduled to return to Washington to attend a Thai language school.

Link to Thi Charged

The police officials who held the press conference, Col. Tran Van Hai and Col. Nguyen Mau, said that Mr. Sac had worked closely with Lieut. Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi, now in exile in Washington, in planning two coups against Saigon Governments in 1960 and 1963.

The police officials said that Mr. Sac had occupied the general's quarters in downtown Saigon where he entertained visiting United States Senators and other American officials. The embassy statement today said that officials there had no knowledge of his meetings with the Senators or of allegations that secret American documents had been passed to Mr. Sac.

The statement seemed to be deliberately vague on the question of whether the embassy knew that Mr. Sac was working for the North Vietnamese when Mr. Colebaugh met him. The dates of any meetings were not given.

The South Vietnamese police even left unresolved the question of whether Mr. Sac was in custody.