

The Vietnam Agreement: Invitation to Mischief?

THE VIETNAM ceasefire has begun with every possible sign of uncertainty as to its long-term survival. Since the peace agreements were signed in Paris last Saturday, profound reservations about the effectiveness of the truce have been expressed by the South Vietnamese, on whose behalf the Americans had negotiated so hard, and by the Canadians who are helping to monitor the fragile new peace.

Under the Paris agreement, the ceasefire is to be supervised by a four-nation International Commission of Control and Supervision composed of 1,160

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Canadians, Indonesians, Poles and Hungarians. Even assuming that South Vietnam and the Communists ostensibly propose to proceed in good faith—President Nixon himself noted in his speech to the nation that this was the quintessence of the whole agreement—the prospects for efficient control by so few inspectors of a vast battle-ravaged territory filled with North Vietnamese and Vietcong units cannot be too promising.

Senior U.S. intelligence officers report that as of yesterday, North Vietnamese troops, tanks and artillery were still moving south through the Ho Chi Minh complex of trails in Laos. These officers said that U.S. bombardment of the trails after the cease fire, which does not apply to Laos, is predicted on the likelihood of infiltration into South Vietnam through areas under Communist control and so far free of international supervision.

PRESIDENT Thieu, who obviously fears Hanoi's future actions now that the Paris accord in effect sanctions North Vietnamese military presence in his country, made no bones about his feelings when he said last Thursday that "we cannot rely too much on international treaties, for the Communists do not respect them . . . nor can we rely too much on the international ceasefire commission.

The Canadian External Affairs Minister, Mitchell Sharp, expressed his government's pessimism about the task Canada had so reluctantly agreed to perform when he warned that his contingent would act as "observers" and not "peace-keepers." The immediate

peace-keeping responsibility is in the hands of a temporary military commission formed by the four ex-belligerents. After informing all parties that Canada, which has had 19 years of unhappy peace-keeping experiences in Indo-China after the Geneva agreements, reserved her right to quit the new commission within 60 days (when the U.S. will have completed the withdrawal of its troops), Sharp remarked that it should be evident to one and all why "we have serious doubts about what we are being asked to undertake."

To be sure there are many reasons for such uncertainty and pessimism. But perhaps the most crucial of all is the fact that South and North Vietnam are entering into the ceasefire in relatively powerful military positions at a time when none of their basic political objectives have been met by the Paris agreement.

LESS THAN a week before the initiating of the Paris agreement, the Vietcong announced over their radio that the struggle was far from ended and that, indeed, a new period was about to open. President Thieu for his part has made no secret of his hopes of fighting back and, if needed, of initiating military operations he may deem warranted.

Ironically, the ceasefire finds both the South and the North in infinitely stronger military posture than they were last October 26, when Kissinger announced that "peace was at hand." Inasmuch as the October texts have

not been made public (and there is a difference in opinion between him and Le Duc Tho as to whether substantial changes were made in the present text), it is impossible to judge what, if anything, the U.S. has won for Saigon during the intervening period.

But it is evident that both sides have achieved major military build-ups since October.

Under a crash program of deliveries, Washington provided the South Vietnamese with 750 new aircraft, including helicopters, as well as tanks and heavy artillery.

According to current reports in the top-secret daily Operational Summaries issued by the Pentagon's National Military Command Center, North Vietnam launched early in December an extensive resupply operation moving

thousands of men, at least one hundred 122mm and 130mm long-range guns, "several hundred tanks," and quantities of fuel and food through the demilitarized zone and the Ho Chi Minh complex of trails.

The present count is that North Vietnam has close to 160,000 men in the South — rather than the 145,000 men estimated a month ago — due to the entry of some 30,000 fresh troops to replenish the units that took heavy losses during the 1972 offensive.

Under the Paris accords, only replacements on a one-to-one basis will be permitted. In 1965, when the U.S. launched its buildup, there were virtually no North Vietnamese main-force units in South Vietnam.

The principal concentrations of new men and material, intelligence officers say, are in the north in the Quang Tri-Hue-Danang area; in the Central Highlands and coastal plains of Military Region II; in the "Saigon corridor" northwest of the capital; and in the upper Mekong River Delta.

Intelligence reports immediately before the ceasefire spoke of the Communists "preparing battlefields" and establishing important fuel and food and ammunition caches.

THE BELIEF here is that the Communists will not break the ceasefire immediately through massive offensive actions. Instead, intelligence experts predicted early last week, the Communists will use the "initial days of confusion" to capture road and waterway junctions, high ground, and "small but important towns."

Less than 100 international inspectors were in place at the moment of the ceasefire — it will be several weeks before all of them are available — and these "days of confusion" may be vital to the Communists to firm up key positions. In the "leopard spots" situation prevailing in much of South Vietnam, their gains may even go unnoticed for a while in the post-truce chaos.

Some intelligence officers also believe that the Communists may reach out during this period for one or more South Vietnamese district capitals to set up a "capital" for the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government and for other political centers.

Tay Ninh, 55 miles west of Saigon near the Cambodian border was believed by American intelligence officers to be the most likely spot the Vietcong would select for a "capital," judging from the military activity in recent days.

This would create for the Vietcong a rival political structure in South Vietnam in preparation for the approaching political contest with Saigon.

PRIVATELY, intelligence officers dismiss the claim that the U.S. has agreed to let Hanoi keep its troops in the South to protect Vietcong "enclaves." They say that the existing enclaves are mostly formed by North Vietnamese mainforce units which are intended to shore up the Vietcong political position in the battle for power in Saigon.