

U.S. Denies Saigon Rumor A Cease-Fire May Be Near

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 21—Reports from Saigon that the United States and South Vietnam might announce a unilateral cease-fire in Vietnam before the end of the month drew a categorical denial today from the White House.

According to the Saigon Reports, President Nguyen van Thieu has instructed his commanders in the four military regions and provincial governors and town mayors to provide maximum security in preparation for such a cease-fire.

The reports were based almost entirely on President Thieu's call for a meeting this weekend with his principal military and civilian aides at Vuntau, near Saigon, supposedly to study the consequences of a cease-fire.

No U.S. Announcement planned

But the White House Press Secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, commenting on the reports that an allied cease-fire may be announced, said: "We plan no announcement beyond the ones we already have made on Vietnam."

"We do not plan to announce any further initiatives," he said.

Mr. Ziegler added that the United States believed that negotiations were "the quickest way to gain a peace in Vietnam and Indochina and that is the path we are pursuing."

While the public denial by the White House of unilateral cease-fire plans was privately affirmed by qualified Administration sources, speculation rapidly developed among many officials that some form of "understanding" might soon be sought in a new round of secret talks in Paris to provide a basis for ending the hostilities in the foreseeable future.

Senior officials insisted that only an "understanding" could lead to a truce, even though they acknowledged that the meeting called by President Thieu was "extraordinary" and that it may relate to new hopes for fresh diplomatic efforts in Paris.

Nixon to Meet Gromyko

The question of a general cease-fire in place, proposed by President Nixon, is expected to arise when he meets here tomorrow with the Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei A. Gromyko, even though Moscow has taken a hostile view of the latest American peace plan.

While both allied and Communist negotiators at the stalled peace talks in Paris have indicated their willingness in principle to begin a new round of secret conversations, Administration spokesmen in Washington were reluctant to say whether they might start.

In the past, notably during

the initial phase of the private meetings that led to the halt of United States bombing of North Vietnam on Nov. 1, 1968 both sides have been often silent about secret discussions.

In the present situation, secret talks would presumably center on President Nixon's five-point program of Oct. 7, calling for a mutual cease-fire in place and the eight-point plan presented last month by the Vietcong, demanding an American withdrawal at a specified date and a coalition government in Saigon.

A Guarantee Is Sought

But spokesmen of the Administration have ruled out a unilateral cease-fire before or after the Nov. 3 elections in the United States in the absence of some acceptable understanding guaranteeing that a truce by the Americans and South Vietnamese would not be used by the Communists to improve their military position.

Some diplomatic observers have noted similarities between the present situation and that prevailing in Paris just two years ago, also a pre-election period in the United States.

Meanwhile, the Administration continued to take the official position that the Communist criticism of the Nixon peace plan should not be considered a final rejection and that, sooner or later, secret talks that may lead to a mutual cease-fire are bound to develop.

Officials here recalled that during the 1968 secret talks, the Communist delegations publicly attacked the United States proposals for a bombing halt while the private negotiations proceeded.

The 1968 "understanding," though the Communists still deny its existence, reportedly provided for a bombing halt and the admission of the Vietcong delegates to peace talks in exchange for North Vietnamese refrain from moving large numbers of troops through the demilitarized zone and from the large-scale shelling of South Vietnamese towns.

Officials repeated today that the Communists had not significantly violated the agreement.